Brotherhood
of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

The Brotherhood's Social Barometer

Challenges facing Australian youth

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August 2006

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

The youth transition is one of the key phases in the life cycle. It encompasses the transition from childhood to adulthood, from school to work. It involves developing responsibilities and choosing pathways and carries particular opportunities and risks.

The life transition referred to as 'youth' involves very different experiences for young men and young women and for diverse ethnic and cultural groups, partly due to different roles and responsibilities ascribed to young people. The concept only has meaning in relation to specific social, political and economic contexts (Wyn & White 1997). The predominant Western understanding of youth as a universal stage of transition between childhood and adulthood has been increasingly challenged, especially in a cross-cultural context. The understanding of young people as persons on the verge of moving out of home, becoming more independent and making autonomous decisions is not necessarily true for different migrant, refugee or indigenous communities, for whom 'growing up' might stand for increasing interdependence within the family. Furthermore, young refugees often face a delayed or suspended adolescence due to the impact of the refugee experience and the time spent in refugee camps or in second countries, and often carry additional responsibilities such as financial assistance and advocacy and care for other family members (Coventry et al. 2002; CMYI 2005).

Research and public discourse on youth and adolescence have for a long time concentrated on problem behaviours of young people, portraying them as generally deviant from society's expectations and a 'social problem' that needed fixing (Vromen 2006). A contrary popular perspective today is that young people have never had so many opportunities for their development. In short, youth tend to be divided into 'achievers/winners' or 'at risk/troublemakers' (Wyn & White 1997). Focusing on young people's capacities and well-being instead promises an alternative, more fruitful perspective, since it allows addressing the challenges and disadvantages that some young people face more than others.

Longitudinal research confirms a strong relationship between the well-being of young people and their social situation. This works both ways in that well-being has also been found to contribute to positive outcomes for young people (Marks & Fleming 1999). Eckersley, Wierenga & Wyn (2006) have recently pointed out that data on ill health dominates research on youth, while understandings and measures of pathways to success and well-being are less well developed. They argue that a better understanding of health and well-being involves four dimensions of young people's life: the individual, the social (broader social, economic and environmental factors, social inequalities and risks associated with them), the cultural and the spiritual. Due to the available quantitative data, this report will focus on the individual and the social dimensions, but access to cultural resources and participation will also be considered.

Young people's increasing resilience and 'capacity to cope or adapt' to changing social conditions, which is suggested by recent research, should not distract from the effects of social change on human health and potential (Eckersley, Wierenga & Wyn 2006). We need to look beyond the optimism young people tend to express in the face of challenges such as the decrease in full time employment, increase in casual work and the difficulty of finding places in tertiary education (Dwyer & Wyn 2001) in order to better understand and address these challenges, while building on young people's strengths and capacities.

Costs of social change are not carried by one particular group of young Australians, nor are they carried equally by all. Eckersley, Wierenga and Wyn (2006) argue that most people will at some point face difficulties, for example unemployment or depression, and suggest addressing well-being across all groups rather than only particularly disadvantaged groups. However, some sections of Australian youth are more likely to experience these difficulties or less likely to cope with them.

Socioeconomic status impacts negatively on several domains of well-being and Indigenous youth are disadvantaged across most domains.

There is no single definition that delineates youth from children and adults. While physical and mental maturity are important, it is the legal ascription of rights such as the right to vote or to drive and of responsibilities for one's actions which is clearly linked to age, albeit differently in different states. Furthermore, the age range of 'youth' often overlaps with that of children. While the ABS, which has no standard definition for youth, often uses mutually exclusive age groups for children (0 to 14-year-olds) and youth (15 to 24-year-olds), the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare often refers to children as 0 to 14 years of age and youth as 12 to 24-year-olds. Economic independence is widely considered as marking the end of youth, which is usually set no later than 24. Internationally, youth is often defined by the legal employment age set at 15 years (e.g. by the International Labour Organization (ILO)).

In June 2004, 2.8 million people were aged between 15 and 24 years in Australia, representing 14 per cent of the population. A little over 3 per cent of Australian young people in June 2001 were Indigenous, making up 18 per cent of the estimated Indigenous population (AIHW 2006a). These young people are the subject of this report.

The Brotherhood's Social Barometer

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is particularly concerned that Australia lacks agreed standards for action on social problems. We also see the need for social policies that respond to the changing environment of deregulated labour markets and a knowledge-based economy as well as new family models and life transitions. To inform the development of such policies we have established the Brotherhood's Social Barometer. It will be a regular report and deal with the key phases in people's life cycle: the early years, the transition from school to work, periods in and out of work and finally, ageing and retirement. *Challenges facing Australian youth* is the second report in the Social Barometer series (after *Monitoring children's chances*, Scutella & Smyth 2005).

The Brotherhood's research has been influenced by international trends in poverty definition and measurement: the social inclusion approach of British and European social policy and Sen's 'capabilities' framework originating in the development literature. Both propose multidimensional measures of disadvantage and interestingly they deliver similar social indicators. These approaches, in particular Sen's, have also influenced the Melbourne Institute's work on poverty and the Cape York Institute's adaptation of the framework to the very different circumstances of Indigenous people (see Headey 2006 and Cape York Institute 2005).

The Brotherhood has advocated and provided services for disadvantaged young people and conducted research on the youth transition for some time (see, for example, BSL 1993, 1997; MacDonald 1999; McClelland & MacDonald 1999; Jope & Beaumont 2003; Tresize-Brown 2004; Bedson & Perkins 2006; Perkins 2006). It is encouraging to see that the youth transition has been added to the agenda of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in its recently adopted human capital indicator framework (COAG 2006).

The second Social Barometer aims to show how well equipped Australian youth are (or are not) to negotiate this transition successfully. It draws attention to important issues in the lives of young Australians, particularly those who are socially disadvantaged.

The barometer considers the situation of young Australians aged 12 to 24. Due to difficulties in obtaining the relevant data, in practice the age group examined in most of the report is young people aged 15 to 24 years. We recognise that differences within the youth population relate to many factors such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and location (metropolitan, rural) and we acknowledge that presented data is limited to some of these factors. Furthermore, the data

presented concentrates on the national level, so the possible impact of different state policies (e.g. in education) is outside its scope.

Seven key youth dimensions

The barometer presents indicators of young people's capabilities covering seven key dimensions of life from physical and mental health to education and employment (see Figure 1.1). As with the earlier children's barometer (Scutella & Smyth 2005), the choice of indicators is shaped by the availability of recent reliable data (especially reflecting change over time) and by the relative importance of different factors in shaping young people's opportunities to lead full and rewarding lives.

Figure 1.1 Indicators of youth capability and disadvantage

Physical health	Mental health	Housing	Education training and employment	Physical safety	Economic resources	Social and civic participation
Body mass index Smoking and substance use	Mental health problems Youth suicide	Homelessness	Literacy and numeracy Secondary school completion Post year 12 destination Employment and unemployment	Victims of crime Bullying and racism Perception of crime and safety	Income poverty	Computer and internet access Volunteering Political engagement

The barometer pays particular attention to young people with socioeconomically disadvantaged, refugee and Indigenous backgrounds.

Case studies

Stories of young people are woven throughout the report. These young people have either attended a BSL service or participated in the BSL's longitudinal Life Chances research project, which is currently studying the situations of young people as 15 and 16-year-olds. Pseudonyms are used to protect their privacy. These stories highlight the multiple dimensions of disadvantage and the direct effects on young people and their families.

Socioeconomically disadvantaged young people

Where possible this report considers literature discussing relationships between the indicator and socioeconomic disadvantage. Where socioeconomically disadvantaged *areas* are mentioned, these are based on the Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage (IRSD), one of the Socioeconomic Indexes For Areas (SEIFA) derived by the ABS using the relevant Population and Housing Census results for each collection district. Where the focus is on the young person or their family, the term socioeconomic disadvantage usually refers to families characterised by low income, low education level and/or low occupational status.

Indigenous youth

'Indigenous' in ABS data refers to people who identified themselves as of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin. Indigenous people represent 2.4 per cent of the Australian population. The Indigenous population is relatively young, with a median age of 21 years compared with 36 years for the non-Indigenous population. We acknowledge that caution is needed when interpreting capacities and disadvantage in cross-cultural settings (Taylor 2006).

Young refugees and asylum seekers, newly arrived and CALD youth

Refugees are people who have fled their country due to persecution on the basis of their 'race', religion, nationality, membership of a social group or political opinion, and are unable to be protected by that country. 'Asylum seekers' tends now to be used to describe people who arrive onshore or nearby and put in a claim to be recognised as refugees and granted asylum in Australia. In 2002 there were an estimated 16,000 to 20,000 young people with refugee experience living in Australia (Coventry et al. 2002). In this report 'refugees' denotes young people with refugee experience, regardless of their legal status.

CALD stands for 'culturally and linguistically diverse' and has largely replaced the previous category 'non English speaking background' (NESB) to denote persons who have either themselves migrated to Australia or are children of migrants.[1] 'Newly arrived' is defined by the federal government as someone who has been in Australia for 5 years or less , though other definitions allow different time spans.

Between 1996 and 2001, young people aged between 16 and 24 years formed almost one-third of the total intake under Australia's humanitarian migration program since 1996, with Victoria settling almost one-third of the youth (Ransley & Drummond 2001).

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[1] NESB is retained in this report where used in the referred source.

2 Physical health

> **John's story**
>
> John, aged 15, goes to a school for children with special needs. He has limited speech and does not write or read. His mother describes his behaviour as challenging, in part due to the hormonal changes he is undergoing without understanding them. John experiences health problems such as allergies and needs to take medication to help him settle. While he loves school, John does not see his friends outside school.
>
> The high costs of John's care in the school holidays and of respite care (so his mother can have a holiday) are a significant problem for his single mother who works for a relatively low wage: a carer costs $20 per hour and $150 per day in holidays. John also had to miss out on a special camp that cost $1000.
>
> As John will not be able to live independently, John's mother hopes that in the future he will get into group housing (but 'the waiting list is phenomenal') and be able to do some sort of part-time job and find inner peace.

While most young Australians are in good health and rate their own health positively, some young people such as John have major health problems and disabilities. The proportion of young people with a disability is estimated to be about 9 per cent, with intellectual and other mental disorders the most commonly reported condition (AIHW 2003a). Young people who are socially disadvantaged, who live in rural and regional areas or who are Indigenous show worse health results. Areas of concern regarding the health of young people overall are the increase in obesity and alcohol abuse (AIHW 2006a).

The relationship between socioeconomic status and health is well established. Findings from the three last National Health Surveys (1989–90, 1995 and 2001) suggest that socioeconomically disadvantaged groups experienced more ill health, and were more likely to engage in behaviours risky to their health. Socioeconomic inequalities for many of the health-related indicators were found for both males and females in the 15–24 age group, irrespective of how socioeconomic position was measured. In 2001, those in the lowest income households had, for example, significantly higher rates of food insecurity (males and females) and smoking (females) than those in the highest income households. Location accounted for significant differences in health-related behaviours (Turrell et al. 2006).

Key findings discussed in this section are that:

- The rate of overweight youth aged 18 to 24 years has risen over the last ten years.
- The rate of obesity among Indigenous youth is twice as high as among non-Indigenous youth.
- Young people living in the most disadvantaged areas of Australia show significantly higher rates of obesity than those in the least disadvantaged areas (based on the Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage see page 3).
- Risky alcohol consumption has increased, particularly among young men over the last ten years, while smoking has decreased over the last decade except among Indigenous youth.

Obesity

Being overweight or obese increases the risk of suffering from a range of conditions, including coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers. In 1996 problems associated with overweight or obesity accounted for 4 per cent of the burden of disease in Australia (ABS 2006c).

It is therefore concerning that young people are more likely to be overweight or obese than they were ten years ago. This can be seen in Figure 2.1, which shows the changes in the body mass index (a standard measure used to identify obesity and overweight) of 18 to 24-year-olds for men and women between 1995 and 2004–05. The rate of overweight men in this age group has risen from 22 per cent in 1995 to 26.7 per cent in 2004–05; the increase of overweight women is even more marked (11.6 per cent in 1995, 17.5 per cent in 2004–05). In the same period, the obesity rate for 18 to 24-year-old men has risen from 5.2 to 7.7 per cent, for women from 4.5 to 7.3 per cent.

Figure 2.1 Body mass index groups of 18 to 24-year-olds by gender, 1995 to 2004–05
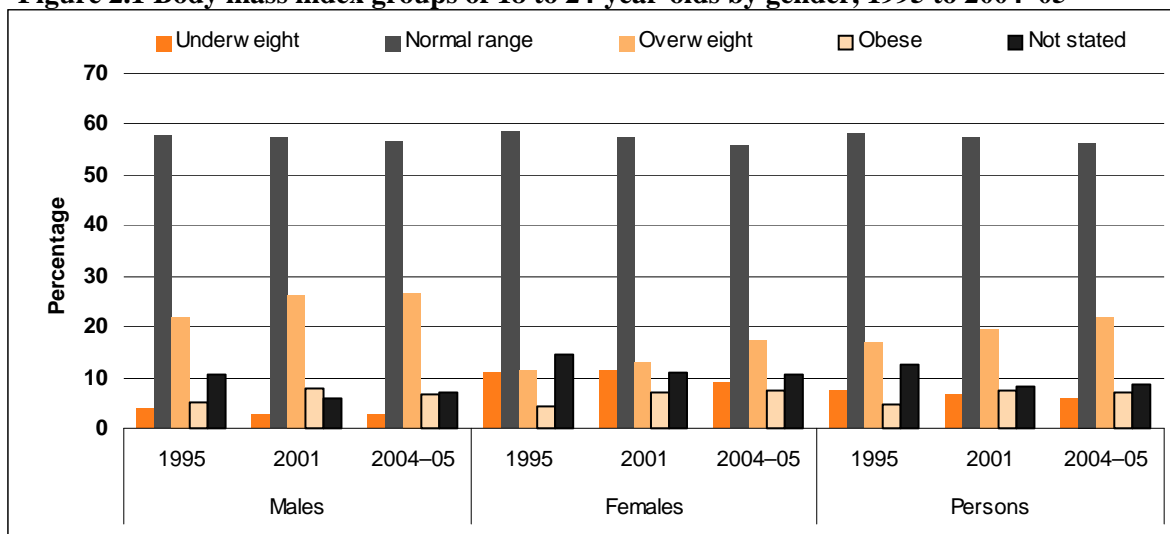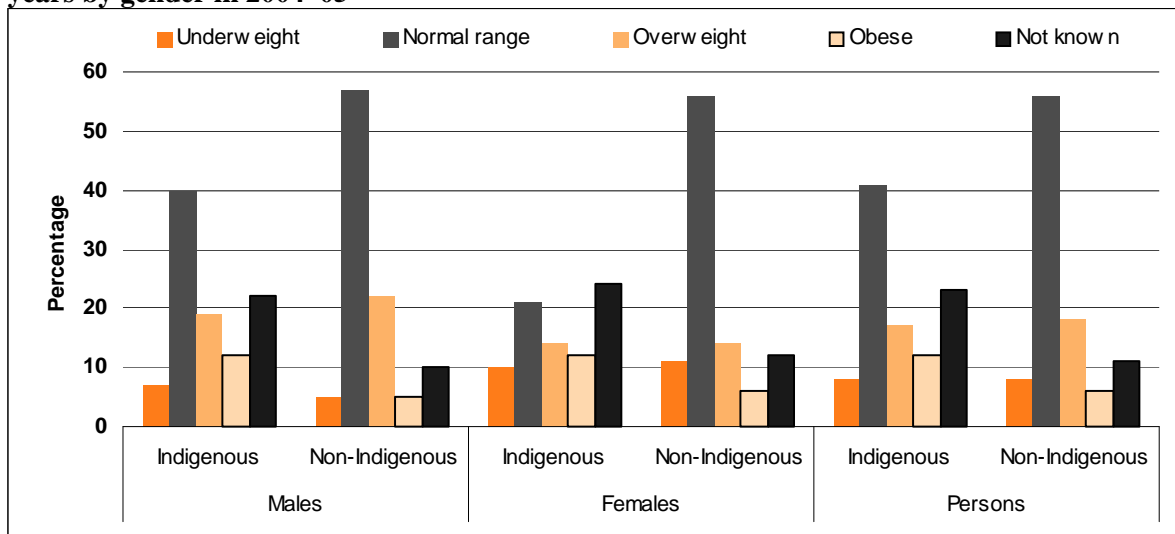

Source: ABS (2006e), Table 25

Compared with young persons living in the least disadvantaged areas of Australia, young males and females living in the most disadvantaged areas show significantly higher rates of obesity (Turrell et al. 2006).

The obesity rate among Indigenous youth aged 15 to 24 in 2004–05 was twice as high as among non-Indigenous youth (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Body mass index groups of Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons aged 15 to 24 years by gender in 2004–05

Source: ABS (2006d), Table 21

Smoking and substance use

Smoking is the risk factor associated with the greatest disease burden in Australia (AIHW 2003b) and recognised as the single most preventable cause of death in Australia (ABS 2006c). Recent ABS data shows a decrease in smokers among 18 to 24-year-olds, especially young women (Figure 2.3). For young people aged 12 to 14 years, smoking rates almost halved between 1984 and 2002, from 17 per cent to 9 per cent (AIHW 2006a).

Figure 2.3 Incidence of smoking among 18 to 24-year-olds by gender, 1995 to 2004–05
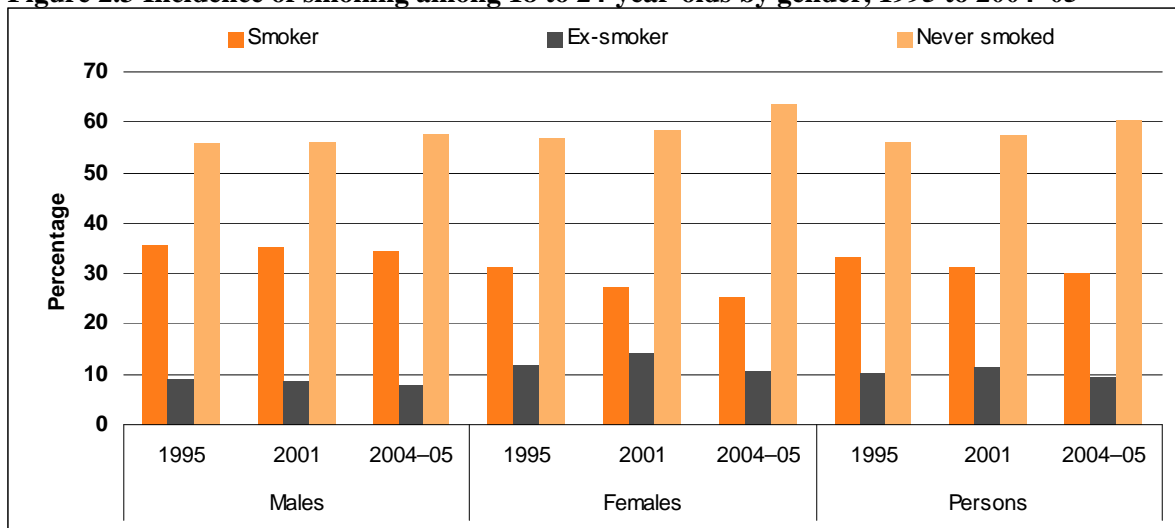
Source: ABS (2006e), Table 21

However, compared with young persons living in the least disadvantaged areas of Australia, young males and females living in the most disadvantaged areas had significantly higher rates of smoking (males in 1989–90 and 1995, females also in 2001) and also of alcohol risk (males in 1995 and 2001, females in 1995) (Turrell et al. 2006).

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) showed no significant changes in cigarette smoking among Indigenous 15 to 24-years-olds between 1994 and 2002 (above 45 per cent in both years). Only providing data on Indigenous people, the survey did

not allow for direct comparisons with non-Indigenous persons, but showed that in 2002, 51 per cent of the Indigenous population aged 15 or over were cigarette smokers (ABS 2004b).

In contrast to smoking, risky alcohol consumption (drinking heavily over a short period of time) is on the increase among 18 to 24-year-olds in the past 10 years, as Figure 2.4 shows. In 2002, Indigenous persons in the same age group showed higher levels of risky to high risk consumption both for men and less markedly for women (ABS 2006d). Data from the Australian Secondary Students Alcohol and Drug Survey (ASSAD) shows furthermore that most children have drunk alcohol at least once by the time they are 12 years of age. Levels of risky drinking in the 12 to 14 age group (defined as five or more drinks in a row) fluctuated between 3 per cent and 5 per cent over the period 1984 to 2002 (AIHW 2003b).

Figure 2.4 Incidence of risky to high risk consumption of alcohol in 18 to 24-year-olds by gender, 1995 to 2004–05
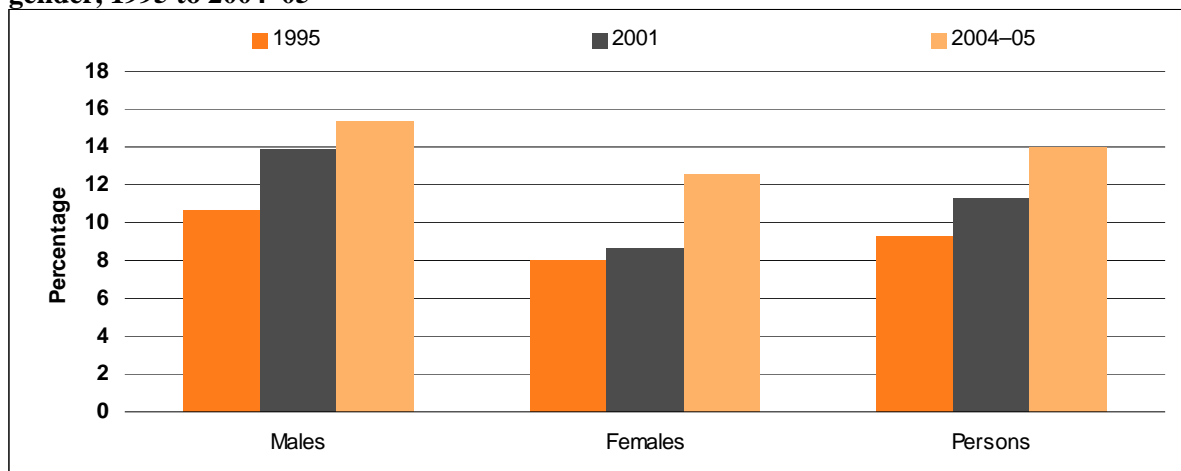
Source: ABS (2006e), Table 22

Illicit drug use is a contributing factor to a range of illnesses and diseases, accidents and injuries, violence and crime, family and social disruption, and workplace problems. According to the 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS), 7.6 per cent of the population aged 12 to 15 had used an illicit drug (predominantly marijuana) in the previous year. Those aged 18–19 years showed the highest incidence of illicit drug use (30.8 per cent, compared with 20.9 per cent in the group aged 16 to 17 years) (AIHW 2006a).

The NDSHS in 2001 showed that Indigenous respondents aged 14 years or over were 1.5 times more likely to have tried illicit substances and nearly twice as likely to have used them in the last year. More recent information on illicit substance use within the Indigenous population is limited to people living in non-remote areas. It shows that substance use peaked among the 15–24 age group, with marijuana the most frequently used drug (ABS 2005b).

3 Mental health

Limca's story

Limca and his family arrived as refugees from Kosovo when he was 13, escaping civil unrest and emotional and physical violence. As soon as they settled in Victoria, all family members were referred to the Victoria Foundation for Survivors of Torture for counselling; and Limca was referred to EMC's Refugee Youth Program when he was 17.

Recovery from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has been a long process for Limca. It has taken years to slowly recover from the more immediate physical and psychological symptoms (flashbacks, nightmares, anger, frustration problems) and to be able to start to concentrate on his educational and employment options.

Limca's family relationships have been permanently affected by their experiences. Limca has struggled to comprehend complicated immigration processes, and has been the buffer between the immigration system and his parents. His physical and mental health got worse when he was dealing with anxiety and depression about returning to a violent and dangerous environment in Kosovo, due to uncertainty about the family's residency status.

Despite these difficulties, Limca has been trying very hard to work on his career goals as a means of creating stability. He sees employment as a key to his future as a young Australian, and his recovery from trauma.

The WHO describes mental health as more than the absence of mental illness, as 'a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community' (WHO 2001, p.1). Poor mental health affects people's ability to participate in schooling, working and socialising. It can lead to increased substance abuse, poor relationships, increased delinquency, poor self-esteem, unemployment, poor health, family breakdown and is therefore a key contributor to social exclusion (AIHW 2003a).

Adolescence and young adulthood are the peak periods for the onset of conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse disorders and psychotic illnesses like schizophrenia. Over 75 per cent of serious mental health problems commence before the age of 25 (Kessler et al. 2005).

While risk factors for mental illness include both biological factors and adverse psychosocial experiences during childhood, a genetic vulnerability to certain disorders is unlikely to develop in the absence of other risk factors (AIHW 2003a). The authors of a recent US study conclude that prevention or early treatment should be focused on youth (Kessler 2005a).

Key findings discussed in this section are that:

- Young women and men aged 18 to 24 years are the group with the highest levels of psychological distress (anxiety, depression and worry).
- In 1999, mental disorders and related substance abuse disorders were identified as the single most important youth health issue, accounting for 60 per cent of the non-fatal burden of disease for 15 to 24-year-olds.
- Refugee youth often experience ongoing trauma following their flight from persecution, sometimes compounded by detention and the insecurity of stay in Australia.
- Although declining in recent years, suicide rates for young Australian males remain high. Young people from poor, Indigenous and rural communities are more likely to commit suicide.

Mental health problems

In 2001 and 2004–05, the National Health Survey included questions covering people's feelings of distress (anxiety, depression and worry) over the preceding four weeks. The prevalence of long-term mental or behavioural problems was estimated at 9.4 per cent for those aged 15 to 17 years (AIHW 2006a). Among women, the age group reporting the greatest high or very high distress was aged 18 to 24 (19 per cent). Among men, the same age group stood out, with 12 per cent reporting high or very high distress (ABS 2006c).

More specific data on young Australians' mental health comes from the National Survey of Mental Health, conducted in 1998 (AIHW 2006a), which showed that around 14 per cent of young people aged 12 to 17 and around 27 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 experienced a mental disorder in any 12-month period; anxiety disorders affected 8 per cent of males and 14 per cent of females; depression and dysthymia (chronic mild depression) affected 3 per cent of males and 11 per cent of females; and psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder affected 2 to 3 per cent of the population (Sawyer et al. 2000; Andrews et al. 1999). In 1999, mental disorders and related substance abuse disorders accounted for 60 per cent of the non-fatal burden of disease for the age group 15 to 24 years and were therefore considered the single most important health issue affecting young people (Mathers et al. 1999).

The ABS's 2001 National Health Survey found that high levels of psychological distress in young people were more likely to be associated with poor educational and employment outcomes. It has also been suggested that many people with mental health problems are at great risk of developing alcohol or other substance abuse disorders. Unfortunately, many of the persons with coexisting mental health and substance abuse problems are picked up by the criminal justice system rather than mental health services (MHCA 2005).

Self-harm, defined as deliberate and voluntary physical self-injury (e.g. through cutting, hitting, biting, bonebreaking or eating disorders) without any conscious suicidal intent, typically originates and evolves in adolescence. While it has evoked increasing public interest, there is still little empirical data on its prevalence (Laye-Gindhu & Schonert-Reichl 2005).

Young refugees and asylum seekers

Refugees and asylum seekers have a wide range of experiences that may affect their mental health. Trauma and loss in particular have ongoing effects, and prolonged detention has been shown to have harmful effects on the mental health and development of children and adolescents (HREOC 1998; Steel & Silove 2001). Further concern is caused by the effects of temporary protection visas on the mental health of children who are living with parents who are 'functionally impaired because of depression, anxiety or other mental health problems relating to the stresses and uncertainties of being a temporary visa holder' (Minas & Sawyer 2002, p.404).

Consistent with growing international attention, the cultural dimensions of mental disorder and of mental health service design and the specific needs of refugees and immigrants are increasingly recognised in Australia, and reflected in funding for state-based transcultural mental health units and centres for the treatment and support of torture and trauma survivors. While analysis of particular refugee groups does not show a higher prevalence of psychiatric disorders than for the general population (e.g. McKelvey et al. 2002), young people from migrant families have been found to have more difficulties accessing mental health services. Furthermore their mental health problems such as depression or anxiety often go unnoticed by doctors.
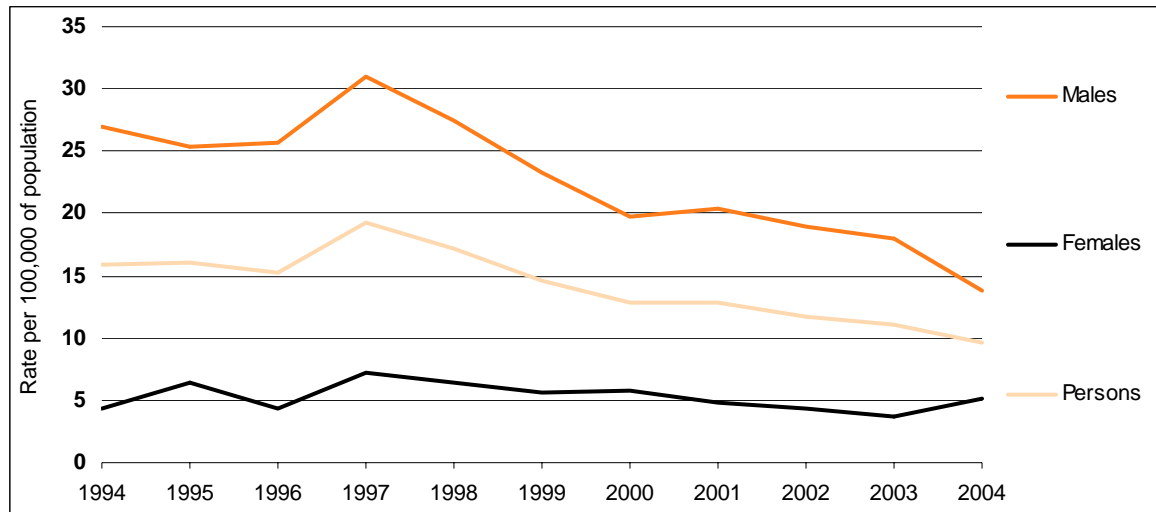
Youth suicide

Youth suicide has long been a serious public health concern, particularly with the worrying rise in suicide among young males since the 1970s. By the late 1990s, this led the Australian Government to implement the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, and later the National Suicide

Prevention Strategy. Research has demonstrated strong associations between suicide and unemployment, low socioeconomic status and low occupational status, although causal relationships are yet to be determined (Department of Health and Aged Care 1999, Taylor et al. 2005).

In 2004, suicide rates in the 15–19 year age group were 7.5 per 100,000 males and 4.8 per 100,000 females; and in the 20–24 year age group 20.0 per 100,000 males and 5.5 per 100,000females (ABS 2006f). As Figure 3.1 shows there has been a downward trend since the late 1990s.

Figure 3.1 Youth suicide rates, 15 to 24 years, 1994 to 2004

Source: ABS (2006f)

Although youth suicide rates have been falling in Australia, in 2001 the rate of youth suicides was still quite high by international standards (OECD 2005).

The decline in youth suicide rates needs to be read in the context of increasing hospitalisations of young people (AIHW 2003a), which suggests that while more young people are seeking and getting medical support, their need for help still exists (Eckersley, Wierenga & Wyn 2006).

Indigenous youth

Suicide and self-harm occur more frequently in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities than among other Australians and are more concentrated in the earlier adult years than for other Australians (Thomson et al. 2004). The suicide rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males was highest in the 15–34 year age group in recent years, while females showed the highest rate in the 15–24 year age group.

CALD and refugee youth

Research on suicide in different countries has shown higher suicide rates among immigrants, compared both with their country of origin and the native-born in the host country. This has been related for example to social disruption and isolation as well as changes in lifestyle. Youth-specific data for Australia is scarce, but one study in New South Wales found that young male migrants in non-metropolitan areas showed significantly higher suicide rates than Australian-born males, suggesting a link between the closer social cohesion of small communities and the greater exclusion of those not considered to be part of the community (Morell et al. 1999).

4 Housing

> **Troy's story**
>
> Troy is 16. From an early age he lacked family support, with his mother leaving, his father dying from a heroin overdose when he was four and his grandmother dying when he was 13. Following these losses, Troy withdrew into himself and entered a challenging transition without receiving adequate support for several years.
>
> He began abusing alcohol and drugs, and developed difficult behaviour which eventually led to his expulsion from school at 15. He attempted to return to school but with these issues remaining unaddressed, was expelled again soon for violent behaviour. His aunt, who had accommodated him after his grandmother's death, could not cope any longer with his behaviour and increasing use of drugs and alcohol and Troy became homeless. For a year, he had no contact with his relatives. He spent many nights living on the streets and, whenever possible, staying at friends' houses for a night or two.
>
> At 16, Troy tried to get his life together. Different services supported him in addressing his alcohol and drug issues, lack of accommodation and family support and his disengagement from education or employment. After being placed in foster care and beginning a VCAL course, he received drug and alcohol counselling, then moved to a transitional house. He has now entered the Brotherhood's Job Placement Employment and training (JPET) program, with whose help he has enrolled in a TAFE course. His need for safe, stable and affordable accommodation remains to be met.

Adequate housing is an internationally recognised human right, essential for a person's well-being and development. The extreme form of inadequate housing is homelessness. [2]

Without a place to live in security, peace and dignity, homeless young Australians are likely to experience worsening mental health, reduced employment opportunities, discrimination and social exclusion (Jones 2005). Homeless young people are particularly vulnerable to a wide range of physical and mental health problems, lack of access to basic needs such as food and clothing, and a multitude of dangers including sexual exploitation and violence.

While we report indicators of homelessness, it is important to recognise that adequate housing is more than just shelter. Youth can also face problems in overcrowded, unsafe, unhygienic housing, or due to insecure tenure or family difficulties paying rent. Unsatisfactory housing can contribute to poor health, family violence and poor educational outcomes.

Key findings discussed in this section are that:

- Young people aged 12 to 24 made up an estimated 36 per cent of all homeless people in Australia on census night in 2001.
- The largest client group in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) are 15 to 19-year-olds, followed by 20 to 24-year-olds.
- Young refugees face a considerably higher risk of homelessness than other school-age youth.

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[2] In the Australian context, a cultural definition of homelessness, developed by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1992), is generally used. It identifies three categories of homelessness: primary homelessness (the same as literal homelessness or 'rooflessness'); secondary homelessness (staying in any form of temporary accommodation, with no secure housing elsewhere); and tertiary homelessness (long-term occupancy of single rooms in private boarding houses).

Youth homelessness

Young people raised without a secure home face barriers to higher educational achievement and later job security, and may themselves raise families who in turn become homeless. Homeless teenagers who drop out of the education system become unemployed and some make the transition to chronic homelessness (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2003b, 2005).

The reasons why young people become homeless are complex. Family conflict and breakdown is generally identified as central to a young person's pathway to homelessness (Mallett, Rosenthal & Keys 2005). While physical and emotional abuse or conflicted relationships often precede the decision to leave the parental home (Hyde 2005), some young people lose their home together with parts of their family due to domestic violence or to inability to keep up rent payments.

It is difficult to get an accurate count of the homeless population. In 2001 it was estimated that 26,060 children between 12 and 18 years and a further 10,113 young adults between 19 and 24 years were homeless on Census night (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2003a). These estimates suggest that young people aged 12 to 24 years make up 36 per cent of all homeless people in Australia.

Estimates by state (see Table 4.1) suggest that homelessness among the young is most prevalent in the Northern Territory, with high rates also in Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia. New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT have the lowest rates of homeless young people.

Table 4.1 Estimated number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18 and rate of homelessness per 1000 of the youth population, by state and territory, 2001[1]

	NSW	Vic	ACT	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	Australia
Number	6242	4663	400	6381	2394	3508	1008	1464	26,060
Rate per 1,000	10	10	12.5	18	17	18	21	69	14

[1] Note that these estimates include children accompanying their parents to homeless services.
Source: Chamberlain & MacKenzie (2002) Table 4.3. Data from the Census of Population and Housing (2001); SAAP Client Collection (2001) and the National Census of Homeless School Students (2001).

Since 1995, youth homelessness policies have been implemented at all levels of government, with an early intervention focus in schools and local communities. While these initiatives appear to have improved the situation for many young people, their long-term impact is unclear and homelessness among young people remains a problem (Chamberlain 2003).

In 2004–05, 15 to 19-year-olds formed the largest client group (17 per cent) in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), Australia's main assistance for homeless people, followed by the 20 to 24-year-olds group (15 per cent). While many homeless young people were unaccompanied, others were with families. Among children accompanying their parents, 10 per cent were in the age group 13 to 15 and 4 per cent were aged 16 to 17 (AIHW 2006b). About two-thirds of SAAP clients aged 12 to 18 are also unemployed; some have substance abuse, others mental health issues (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2005).

Indigenous youth

According to an estimate from 2001, Indigenous people made up a disproportionate share of SAAP clients nationally (16.7 per cent compared with 1.9 per cent of the overall population aged over 10 years) and particularly in Queensland (23.7 per cent compared with 3.1 per) and West Australia (33.2 per cent compared with 3.2 per cent) (Creswell 2003).

Refugees and CALD youth

Most young refugees have already experienced homelessness before coming to Australia, either as internally displaced people in their country of origin, in refugee camps or as illegal immigrants in other countries. Upon arrival in Australia, refugees and also young migrants are at an estimated risk six to ten times higher than other school-aged youth of being homeless again. However an older

estimate of young people from CALD backgrounds among SAAP clients suggested that they under-used these services, which was explained by their lacking knowledge of such services (Coventry et al. 2002).

An early experience of homelessness is often caused by a family conflict or breakdown in the difficult period of resettlement and can lead to chronic homelessness. Young people of refugee background generally lack the economic resources and social networks to help them find housing, and frequently meet racist discrimination in the private rental market. Accessing public housing is harder for them due to communication difficulties, a lack of knowledge of the service system and difficulties associated with negotiating the waiting list. Furthermore most public housing is unsuitable for larger or extended families. The scarcity of housing options puts refugee and migrant youth at higher risk of leaving school early and makes it more difficult for them to participate in education and training (Ransley & Drummond 2001).

5 Education, training and employment

Zara's story

When Zara was in Year 6, she wanted to be a doctor. However, by the time she was 15 she had left school (early in Year 9) and moved interstate to live with relatives. Her parents, refugees with little formal education, had separated. Zara is a bit unclear why she moved. She says she liked school and cannot think of anything she did not like there. She enjoyed having friends at school, but she did not participate in extra activities.

Zara had thought she would go to school in her new location. However she could not afford to contribute to her living costs at her aunt's, so she found work instead in a fast food shop. She works 4½ hours three days a week on an hourly rate of $8, and finds it very tiring. Her pay is mainly spent on food and household bills. She says work is the most important thing for her now because she needs the money to stay where she is. She would prefer to work in a clothes shop, but it is hard to find such a job. She says she is now not really interested in continuing her studies because she feels she cannot remember anything she learned at school. Zara dreams of a better job, but she has no idea which one.

The transition process from school to work has become more complex, starts later and lasts longer. While the completion of secondary education and participation in post-compulsory education has become the norm, it has also become normal for youth to enter a flexible, unstable, labour market where casual, part-time and short-term employment prevail (Dwyer & Wyn 2001). It has become increasingly common for young people to combine study and part time work from an earlier age and there is much more mobility between different patterns of employment. Overall there has been a large shift from full-time to part-time work (more markedly for young women) and a significant increase in casual employment.

Socioeconomic background is still an important factor in school achievement and in the transition to post compulsory education; and indigenous students fare significantly worse in both areas.

Key findings discussed in this section are that:

- Students from poorer communities typically attain lower achievement results at every level of schooling and are far less likely to go on to tertiary study.
- In the 2003 international PISA study, Australian Indigenous students were over-represented in the lowest categories of mathematics proficiency and also scored poorly on problem solving, reading and scientific literacy.
- Students who do not complete Year 12 are at much higher risk of labour market exclusion.
- Only about 40 per cent of Indigenous students who commence secondary school complete year 12, compared with nearly 80 per cent of non-Indigenous students.
- Young people most at risk are those unemployed and not in full-time education, amounting to 15 per cent of young people aged 15 to 19 in June 2006.
- A broader group of young people at risk are those who leave full-time education but do not enter full-time employment. In March 2005, around 16 per cent of 15 to 19-year-olds (18 per cent of young women and 14 per cent of young men) were in neither full-time study nor full-time work.
- Indigenous young people have significantly lower rates of full-time work and full-time education than non-Indigenous young people.

Literacy and numeracy

Young people with literacy and numeracy problems have severely limited opportunities, and are more likely not to complete secondary school or move into further education, and to face periods of unemployment later in life as well as longer term economic disadvantage (Lamb 1997).

Socioeconomic status has been linked with achievement in literacy and numeracy (Lokan, Greenwood & Cresswell 2001; Thomson, Cresswell & Bortoli 2004; Rothman & McMillan 2003). The international PISA study[3] found that in Australia, while the relationship between socioeconomic background and performance in mathematical literacy was less strong than for the OECD on average, students with higher socioeconomic backgrounds had a distinct advantage. School factors (including educational resources, the disciplinary climate and rapport with teachers) have also been found to play a key role in literacy and numeracy achievement. This has important policy implications. While schools cannot alter students' socioeconomic backgrounds, they can introduce policies to counteract the effects of disadvantage, and there is much work to be done in this area (Thomson, Cresswell & Bortoli 2004).

Figure 5.1 compares the mathematical literacy of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian 15-year-old students and the OECD average, assessed in the last PISA study.

Figure 5.1 Proficiency levels on the overall mathematical literacy scale for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, 2003
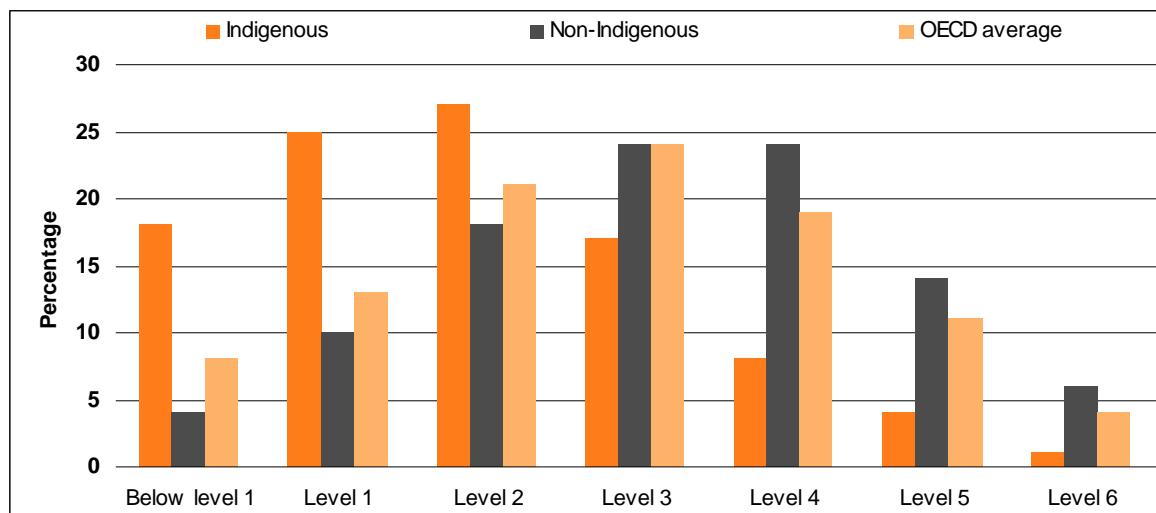
Source: Thomson, Cresswell & Bortoli (2004), from Figure 3.5

Compared with non-Indigenous students, the 815 Indigenous students were over-represented in the lowest categories (up to level 2) of mathematical proficiency and under-represented in higher categories. However, 30 per cent demonstrated skills at least at proficiency Level 3, and around one per cent demonstrated skills at the highest level (Thomson, Cresswell & Bortoli 2004). The disadvantage Indigenous students face was also evident from poor scores for reading and scientific literacy and for problem solving.

Year 7/8 to Year 12 apparent retention rate

People with lower levels of school attainment have greatest difficulty in the transition from school to work, facing a higher risk of unemployment and socioeconomic disadvantage (OECD & Canadian Policy Research Networks 2005). Students from poorer communities typically attain

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[3] The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a large-scale, nationally representative study of 15-year-olds across 43 countries, including Australia.

lower achievement results at every level of schooling and are far more likely not to go on to tertiary study (Teese & Polesel 2003). For instance, Vinson (2004) found that in Victoria and New South Wales 25 per cent of all early school leavers came from just 5 per cent of postcodes; and these postcodes also had high rates of other disadvantage.

Findings from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) indicate that young people obtaining a year 12 qualification are more likely to continue their involvement in further education and training, have better employment prospects and enjoy other social advantages (McMillan & Marks 2003).

While the apparent retention rates for Indigenous people increased from under 30 per cent in 1996 to 40 per cent in 2005, Indigenous students were still half as likely to continue to year 12 as non-Indigenous students, who had a 77 per cent apparent retention rate in 2005 (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2 Year 7/8 to Year 12 apparent school retention rate by gender and (non-)Indigenous status, 1994 to 2005[4]
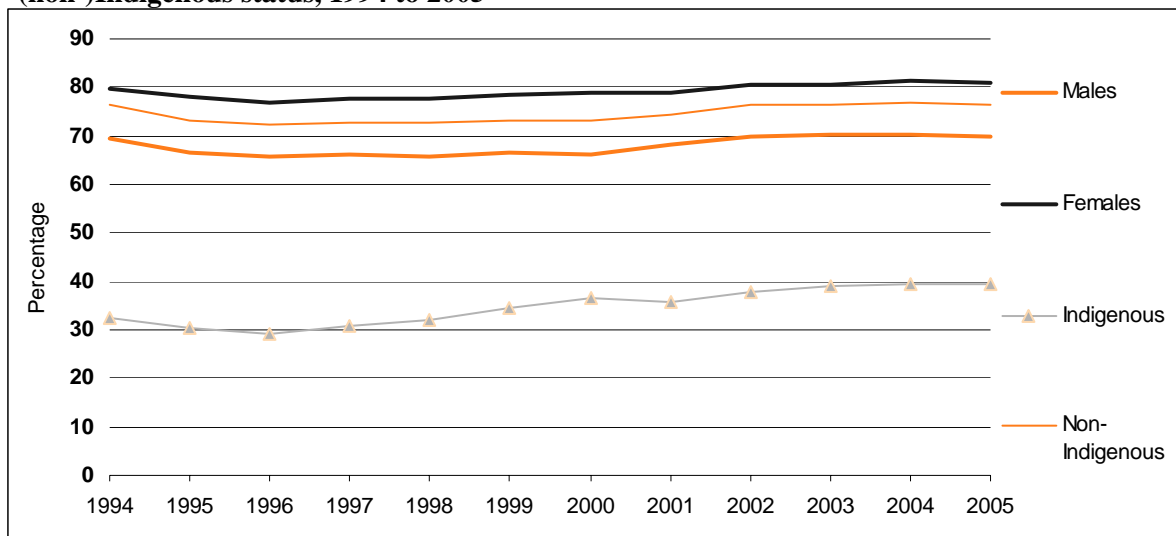

Source: ABS (2005a and 2006a)

Certainly alternatives such as reasonable job openings, traineeships and apprenticeships should not be ignored for the sake of accumulating years of schooling. Alternative pathways and institutional arrangements need to be available to meet the varying needs, abilities and preferences of all young people, as well as the information they require to make informed decisions on what is optimal for them (Dockery 2005).

Post secondary school destinations

For students completing secondary school, socioeconomic status also clearly plays a part in their transition. Though recent national data are not readily available, Figure 5.3 presents the destinations of Victorian students completing their secondary studies by socioeconomic status. Those with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to become unemployed and less likely to go on to university than school completers with higher socioeconomic backgrounds. This is particularly evident for females.

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[4] Apparent school retention rate is the number of full-time students in Year 12 divided by the number of full-time students in the first year of secondary school (Year 7 in NSW, the ACT, Victoria and Tasmania; Year 8 in Qld, SA, the NT and WA) when the Year 12 cohort began secondary school. Care should be taken in interpreting apparent retention rates as they do not account for students repeating a year or migrating into or out of the relevant school student population. This is currently under review by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Figure 5.3 Total education, training and workforce transition of year 12 completers in Victoria, by quartile of socioeconomic status and gender (%), 2005
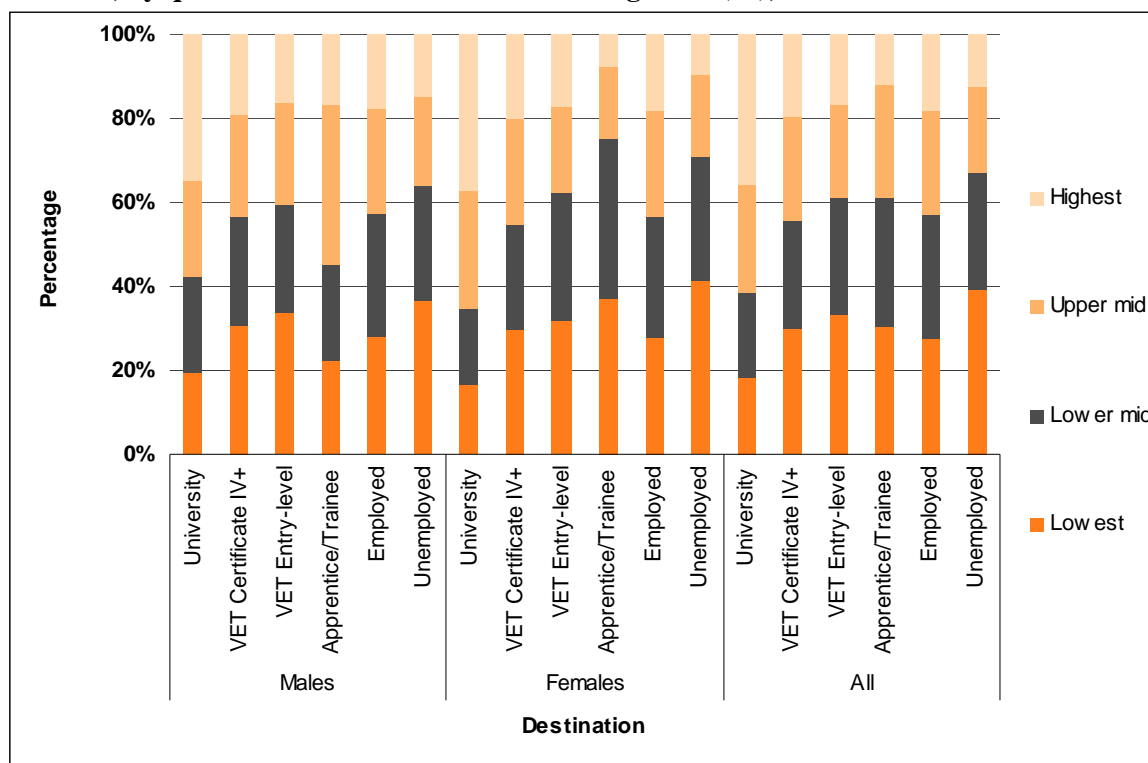

Source: Teese et al. (2005), from Table 8

Young people at risk of labour market exclusion

Being unable to find employment not only has immediate economic consequences but can also lead to psychological distress, family breakdown and longer term poverty and disadvantage. For young people there is evidence of the 'scarring' effects of unemployment spells in these crucial transition years (Marks, Hillman & Beavis 2003). Countries that suffer from high unemployment among young people report growing poverty among young people. These countries also tend to have growing numbers of young workers in casual or part-time employment (Schumann & Thode 2006).

The unemployment rate for young people aged 15 to 19 years has gradually fallen since the early 1990s recession. Recent figures show a rate around 15 per cent of young people in the labour force in mid 2006 (ABS 2006b, Table 13). The unemployment rate for young women not in full-time education appears to be on a slight upward trend since mid 2005 (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4 Unemployment rate for 15 to 19-year-olds not in full-time education, 1987 to 2006
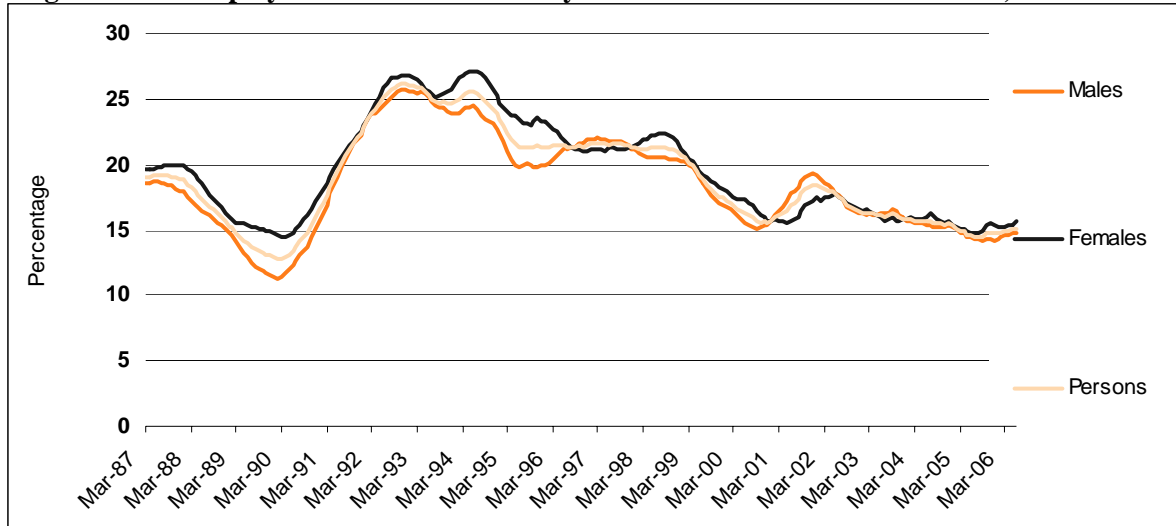
Source: ABS (2006b), Table 15, 12-month moving average

Lack of full-time engagement in either education or employment is also viewed as a risk. These young people face a higher level of risk in the labour market over the long term than their peers who are fully engaged in education or training (Long 2005; Marks 2006; McClelland, Macdonald & MacDonald 1998). Social and financial stresses, reduced physical mobility and less virtual mobility, being a victim of a physical crime and fear of crime are also more prevalent among those not in full-time work or study (Long unpubl. 2006). Figure 5.5 therefore presents the trend in the rate of 15 to 19-year-olds in neither full-time employment nor full-time education.

Figure 5.5 Youth 15 to 19 years not in full-time employment or full-time education, 1987 to 2006
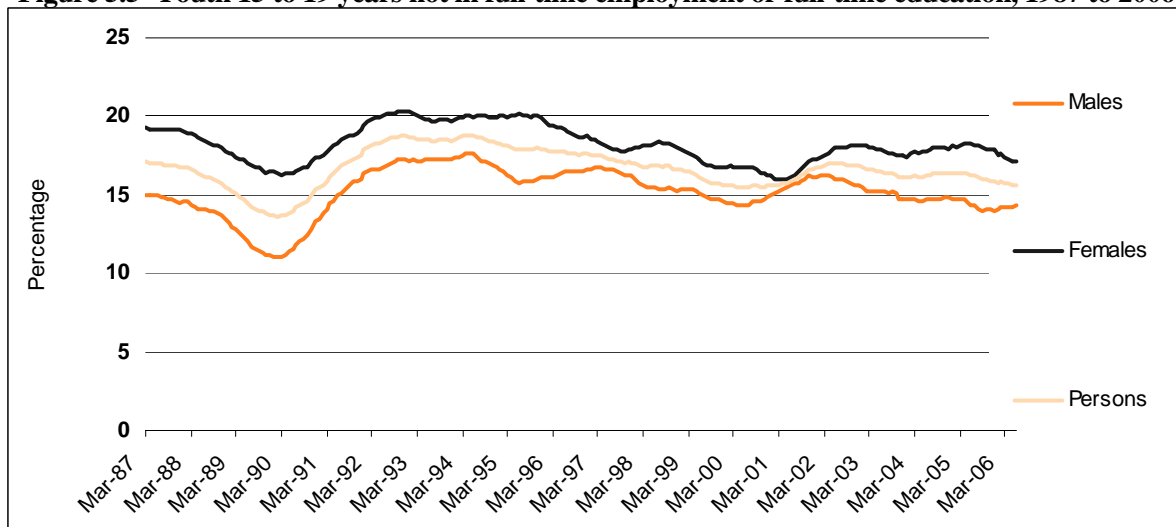
Source: ABS (2006b), Table 15, 12-month moving average

In contrast to youth unemployment figures, the rate of 15 to 19-year-olds not in full-time employment or education has not fallen much since the early 1990s economic recovery. Incidentally, including young people in both part-time work and part-time study makes relatively little difference to the proportion not in full-time education or work or both (Long 2005).

Not all of this group out of work and education are necessarily 'at risk', as this group also includes those who have taken time out for travel or other activities. Additional analysis is needed to determine whether the patterns discussed here are a cause for concern.

Further examination of the data shows that while youth unemployment has decreased, this has been largely offset by a substantial growth in those in part-time employment, particularly for females (Figure 5.6). This is consistent with the findings of Long (2005) that there is a shift within the 'at risk' group of young people out of unemployment to part-time employment.

Figure 5.6 Youth 15 to 19 years in part-time employment not in full-time education, 1987 to 2006
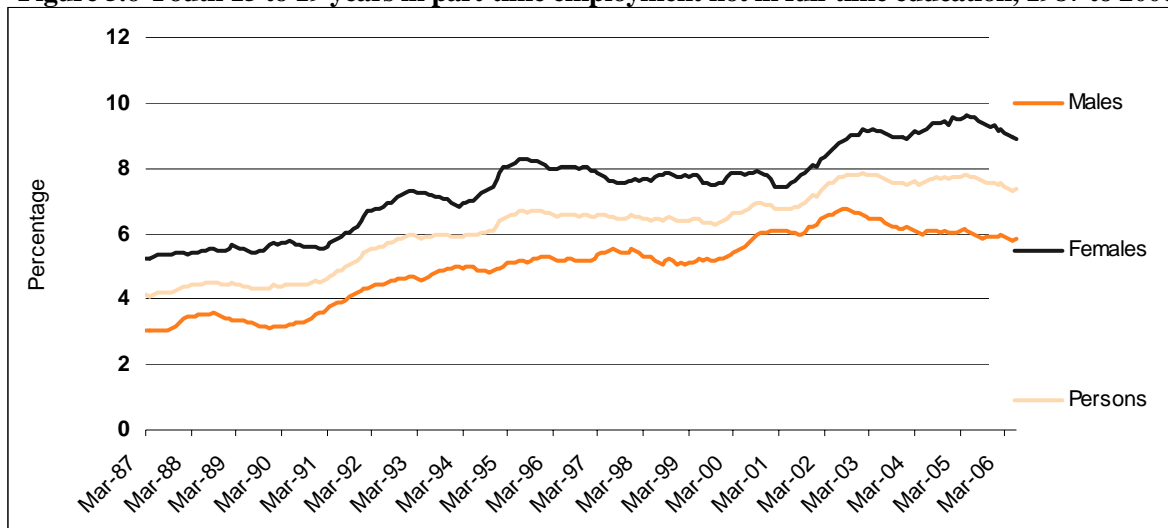
Source: ABS (2006b) Table 15, 12-month moving average

Longitudinal analysis suggests that these part-time workers, as a group, are not as disadvantaged as the unemployed. For instance, in an analysis of the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) Marks (2006) found that many young people who left school to work part time were quite mobile over time, with a large group moving into full-time employment within a year.

Young people in part-time work, however, did not experience the same advantages as full-time workers, with smaller increases in status and earnings over time; and substantially fewer part-time workers see their job as a career and many would prefer to be working full time. Increasing rates of part-time employment are therefore of some concern.

Marks also found that the unemployed were more likely to face further difficulties in finding employment in following years and were clearly the most disadvantaged group.

Indigenous youth

Comparison of the education and labour market status of Indigenous and non-Indigenous 15 to 19 year-olds shows considerably lower full-time participation by Indigenous young people (Figure 5.7).

Figure 5.7 Education and labour market status of young people 15 to 19 years by Indigenous status and sex, 2001
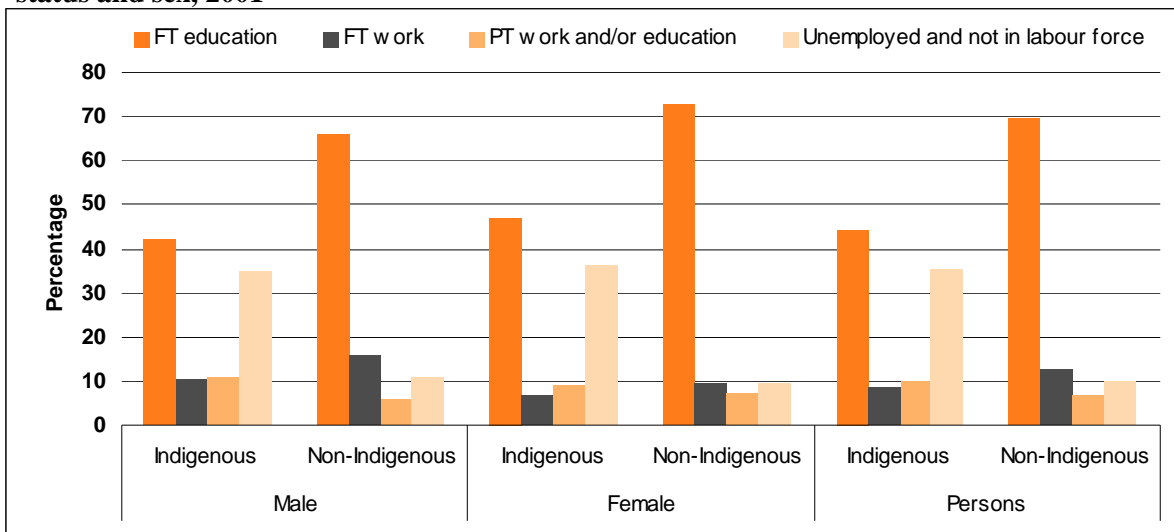
Source: ATSIS (2003), Table 2

CALD and refugee youth

Young refugees arriving in Australia have diverse educational experiences and attainments. Some have had no formal schooling, others have had disrupted education due to long stays in refugee camps or on flight and have limited numeracy and literacy skills in their first language, still others have had schooling but not in their first language (CMYI 2001, Multicultural Affairs Queensland 2001, Ransley & Drummond 2001). Many young refugees from African countries recently arrived in Victoria have completed fewer years of schooling than young people from Asia or Europe. Young people from Muslim countries, especially from the Middle East and Afghanistan, encounter discrimination in the labour market. Age at arrival plays a significant role in the resettlement of young refugees, with late adolescents (aged 15+) facing additional pressures compared with younger adolescents and children, especially in relation to educational achievement and family responsibilities (CMYI 2005).

The parents of young refugees often have unrealistic career aspirations for their children, which impose additional pressure. On the other hand unaccompanied minors who lack parent support are also at a disadvantage when entering the Australian education and labour market.

The unemployment rate for refugee and newly arrived young people is disproportionately high, with refugees having the highest rate (Ransley & Drummond 2001). Research has identified a number of barriers in accessing employment specific to refugees: English language problems, lack of access to timely information regarding employment and training options, unfamiliarity with Australian systems, lack of relevant Australian work experience and referees, vulnerability once employed and negative experiences in seeking employment, professional recognition and or training. Further barriers for young refugees are the lack of support services in their first language while they are at school, lack of qualifications and often their experience of family separation (Multicultural Affairs Queensland 2001, Ransley & Drummond 2001).

6 Physical safety

Lucy's story

Lucy is one of four children. Her mother has held a full-time job for the last 12 months and her father is about to start casual process work, but the family finds items such as school uniforms hard to afford. There was a school excursion to the USA, but this would clearly have exceeded Lucy's family's budget, so she had to miss out.

At school Lucy does lots of activities. She says she has 'always loved school', loves helping people and gets along with the people in her year. However bullying is an issue at the school. Lucy fights sometimes with other kids, which led to her having to do a 6-month anger management course. Some time ago she punched a girl in the face and cut her eye. She described another fight:

A girl started picking on me and I actually picked up a chair and threw it … I kind of went nuts apparently. Like I've had my fair share of fights and everything. Everyone does.

Many young people experience violence in some form, whether as perpetrator like Lucy or as victim. Young men and indigenous people in general are in a particular high risk group of becoming victim to a personal crime. When interpreting the available data on reported crimes it is important to consider the factors that influence reporting practices, especially that young people are less likely to report crimes than the older population.

Racism and bullying have a highly negative impact on young people's well-being. While there is no national data available on these two forms of violence, they demand attention both for the sake of the victims and the perpetrators and for the wider community.

Key findings discussed in this section are that:

- The most common reported offences carried out against young people are assaults, sexual assaults and robberies.
- Reported instances of physical assault and sexual assault have been increasing, particularly among 15 to 19-year-olds.
- Feeling unsafe is associated with being younger, speaking a language other than English at home, identifying as Indigenous, and being the victim of a crime.

Victims of crime

In 2004, the likelihood of being a victim of personal crime was higher for individuals who were unmarried, had relatively higher income; resided at the current postcode for less than one year; were unemployed; or had an active lifestyle outside the home in the evenings. These factors also increased the likelihood of being an assault or threat victim. In addition, Indigenous people and those speaking only English at home were more likely to experience assaults and threats (Johnson 2005).

The remainder of this section relies on information from reported crimes collected by the ABS. It should be interpreted with care, as many crimes are not reported to the police, with evidence suggesting that young people are less likely to report crimes than older people (Johnson 2005). Changes in recorded crimes may reflect changes in community attitudes to reporting crime, policing resources and strategies, and/or crime recording systems, rather than changes in the incidence of criminal behaviour (ABS 2006c).

The most commonly reported offences carried out against young people are assaults, sexual assaults and robberies. These offence categories are therefore the focus below.

Victims of assault

Figure 6.1 shows the trend in reported rates of assault for young people aged 15 to 19. All reported rates have been increasing since 1999. Boys aged 15 to 19 are much more likely to be the victim of assault than girls in the same age group.

Figure 6.1 Rates of victims of assault per 100,000 of population by age and gender, 1999 to 2003
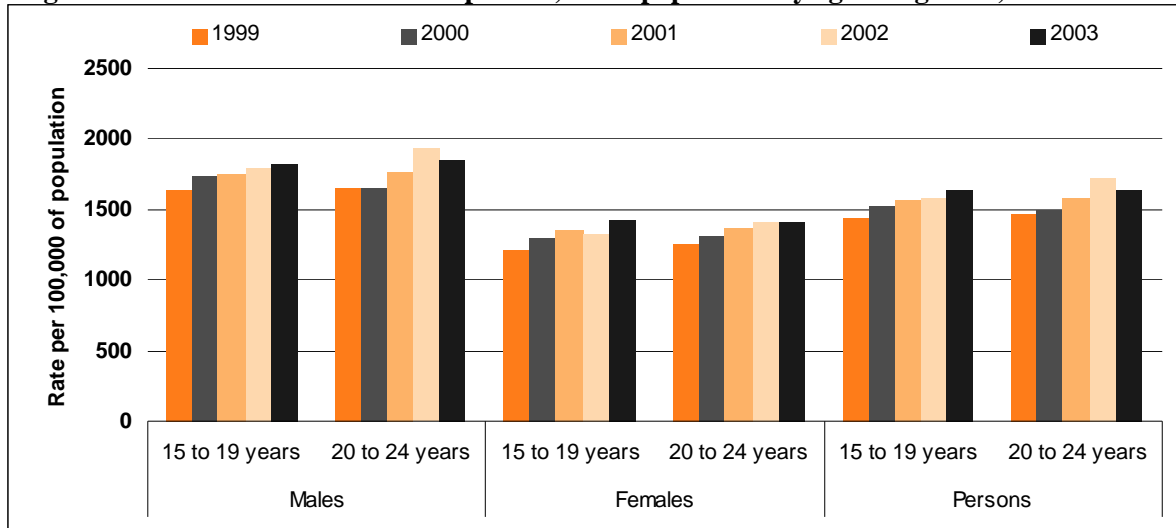
Source: ABS (various years), *Recorded crimes*

Figure 6.2 shows the trend in reported rates of sexual assault for the same age group. As with reported rates of general assault, these cases have also increased over recent years. Girls, particularly aged 15 to19, are very much more likely to report cases of sexual assault.
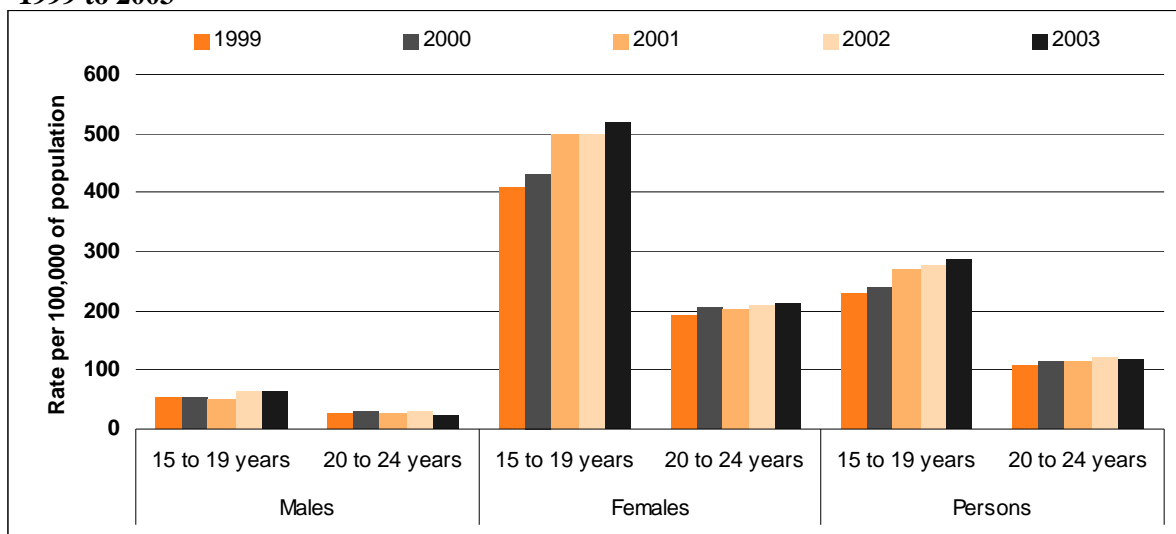
Figure 6.2 Rates of victims of sexual assault per 100,000 of population by age and gender, 1999 to 2003

Source: ABS (various years), *Recorded crimes*

For reasons already indicated, it is difficult to know whether there has actually been an increase in rates of assault and sexual assault on young people.

Indigenous youth

Data from NATSISS 2002 show that 33 per cent of 15 to 24-year-old Indigenous Australians (36 per cent of young men, 30 per cent of young women) reported being the victim of physical or threatened violence in the previous 12 months.' This was the highest reported incidence of violence among all age-groups (ABS 2004b).

Bullying and racism

Bullying has been described as 'the most pervasive form of aggression in schools' (Greene 2006, p.63). It is defined as 'for example, when another student or students say nasty and unpleasant things, or call somebody names; ignore or exclude somebody, like not allowing him or her to participate in play; … push or shove another student around …' (Olweus 1999, quoted in Fekkes et al. 2006, 1569).

Research shows that student involvement in bullying has long-term negative consequences for both victim and perpetrator. For the victims, repeated bullying can undermine health and well-being; for the perpetrator, it can lead to depression and later to a higher likelihood of acting violently in the home and workplace. People who are both bullies and victims are at a higher risk of mental illness (Rigby 2003). A recent US-based study identified frequent harassment in middle school was as predictor for problem behaviour in high school (Rusby et al. 2005). Suicidal thoughts were found to be more prevalent among bullied children who had little social support. Some psychosocial health symptoms such as depression and anxiety were found to precede becoming a victim. Furthermore, the subgroup of gay and lesbian youth was identified to be at a higher risk of victimisation (Fekkes et al. 2006).

Racism is often underrated or unacknowledged, especially in its more recent form of cultural and not biological racism. While racism has long been faced by many young people from CALD backgrounds in Australia, it has become more prevalent in the course of the 'war on terrorism' and claims of the threat posed by asylum seekers (Coventry et al. 2002). An investigation of Australian Arabs' and Muslims' experiences of post-September 11 racism showed that racism, abuse or violence had sharply increased. Just over a quarter of survey respondents experienced some of these forms of violence at schools, colleges or universities. Taking into account the percentage of

full-time students in the sample, this indicates a very high incidence of racism at these sites. Over two-thirds of Muslims experienced racism in these sites, compared with 19 per cent of non-Muslims (Poynting & Noble 2004). In general, young men of CALD backgrounds are at a high risk of being wrongly viewed as 'gangs', when they appear in groups (CMYI 2005).

Perceptions of crime and safety

Fear of crime can result in serious curtailment of everyday activities, lost opportunity, and reduced quality of life (Johnson 1996). If fear becomes extreme and residents retreat from public spaces, this in turn can lead to increased disorder and crime (Skogan 1990).

Analysis of the findings of International Crime Victimisation Survey (ICVS), reported in Johnson (2005), shows that perceptions of safety differ across the population, with feeling unsafe associated with being younger, speaking a language other than English at home, Indigenous status, and being the victim of a crime. There had been an overall decline in the percentage of Australians feeling unsafe since the last ICVS in 2000.

The ABS General Social Survey 2002 found that 10 per cent of young people aged 18 to 24 felt unsafe at home alone after dark, with a much higher rate of young women (19 per cent) feeling unsafe than young men (2 per cent), which did not match the actual experience of physical or threatened violence in these groups (ABS 2003).

A recent consultation with young people of CALD backgrounds in Victoria about what is important to them showed that safety concerns were a central theme, with many of them not feeling safe on public transport, on the streets and even at school (CMYI 2006).

7 Economic resources

Andy's story

Andy, aged 15, is the son of refugees who fled to Australia from south-east Asia 18 years ago. His father is unemployed and looking for work and his mother, who has no schooling, cares for the youngest of her five children.

Andy finds class work and homework a bit challenging. His mother isn't sure how he's going at school because she can't read his report; she takes the children to parent–teacher interviews to interpret for her. Her main concern is that she can't afford a tutor for Andy, who struggles in maths. Andy says he has missed out on swimming and excursions. He explains the problem:

Like after you go on camp you've got to do an assessment task on it, and you don't know because you didn't go to the camp. So sometimes you get a really bad mark.

Asked whether his family has enough money for their needs, he says:

I don't think we have enough money 'cos like we've got big family and like electricity, gas, bills ... We don't even have a home phone.

New textbooks place more strain on the budget:

Since we had all those bills, like during Christmas, we have to buy text books and stuff. And the higher the grade the more the books cost. And since they changed all the books, it's going to cost more. So yeah, I think we'll be struggling this year. 'Cos my brother's going to be in Year 9 and they changed the books so he can't use mine ... I can't use my sister's books since she finished Year 12.

Andy would like a new computer because the family's is old and slow. Sometimes he feels left out because he cannot afford to go out into the city with his friends.

Andy says 'if you don't finish year 12 it's gonna be hard to find a job', so he wants to go to uni later or, if not, to start an apprenticeship.

While the economic resources of the family are not perfect indications of a young person's material resources, since resource distribution within families varies, they are important. The link between the socioeconomic status of families and other dimensions of young people's well-being—such as physical health, housing, mental health—has been discussed throughout this report. Low-income households are more likely to struggle to pay for educational items such as textbooks and excursions (typically more expensive for this age-group), for transport and for leisure activities. Furthermore, adolescents with physical or mental health problems have additional needs that can put additional financial pressure on the family. In this section, we therefore examine indicators relating to youth poverty based on family incomes.

Key findings discussed in this section are that:

- Income poverty rates for young people were similar in 2000 to 1990, with around 16 per cent of young people in poverty, measured by the half-average income poverty line.
- Indigenous young people are much more concentrated towards the lower end of the income distribution, reflecting a large proportion of the Indigenous population not in employment.

Income poverty

Income poverty measures are widely used as one indicator of disadvantage. Such measures compare family or household income with an income threshold, or 'poverty line', that represents a sufficient standard of living in the wider society. One of the few studies that attempted to identify young people's income poverty is that by Harding, Lloyd and Greenwell (2001) who estimated income poverty rates for the Australian population for the period 1990–2000 based on the half-average family income poverty line.[5] Their estimates of 15 to 24-year-olds in poverty over the period are shown in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1 **Estimates of Australians aged 15 to 24 years in poverty, 1990 to 2000[1]**
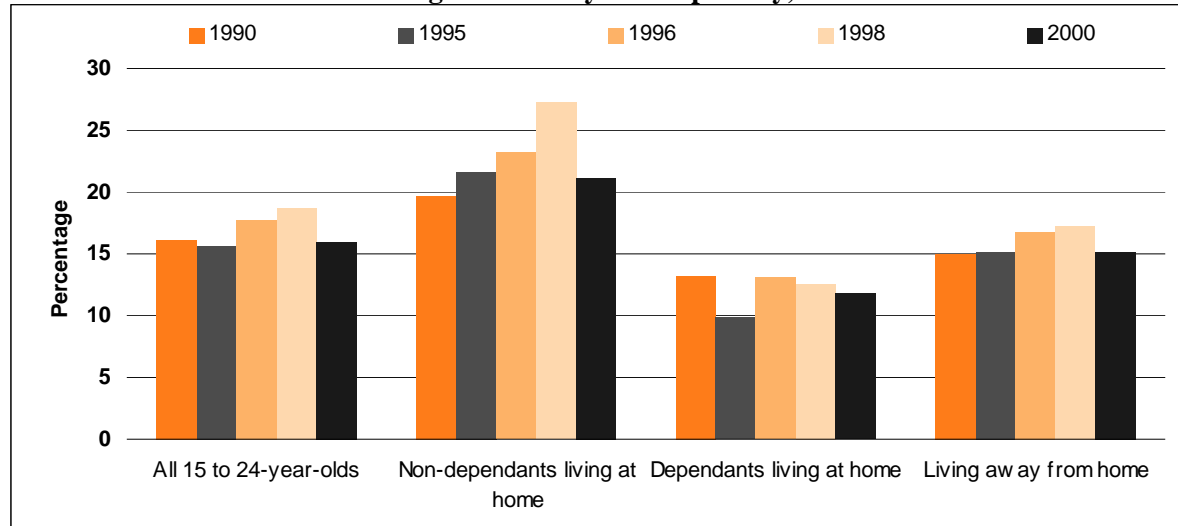
[1] Using the before-housing half average (mean) income poverty line (Henderson equivalence scale) based on the income unit's income
Source: Harding, Lloyd & Greenwell (2001)

The overall proportion of young people in poverty did not change significantly over the decade, with around 16 per cent of young people with incomes below the poverty line in 1990 and 2000. As noted by Harding, Lloyd and Greenwell (2001), the high poverty rate among all 15 to 24-year-olds needs to be interpreted with caution. The analysis assumes that dependent young people within the income unit share resources, and that non-dependants do not. However, young people may rely on parental support even if they are considered to be independent, whether living at home or away from it. This may be through income transfers, or may be limited to the provision of free or cheap accommodation, access to motor vehicles, and the like (ABS 2004a). The assumption that non-dependent young people living at home do not share parents' resources partly explains why they appear to have the highest poverty rates among young people.

Distribution of incomes by selected groups

While family income is a better indicator of the living standards of young people, individual income is an indicator of the earning capacity of young people, if they are employed, or a reflection of eligibility for government income support payments such as Youth Allowance for those not employed (ABS 2004a).

Not surprisingly, young people tend to have lower individual incomes than the overall population (ABS 2004a). This is shown in Figure 7.2, which presents the distribution of the individual weekly incomes of persons aged 15 to 24 by selected cultural groups. Young Indigenous people are much

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[5] Poverty rate estimates using other poverty lines are presented in the study, but not for the population group of interest here, i.e. young people aged 15 to 24 years.

more concentrated towards the lower end of the income distribution. This reflects the large proportion of the Indigenous population not in employment. The spike in the percentage of Indigenous young people with incomes of $120–$199 a week reflects higher rates of eligibility for government income support payments, such as ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance, relative to non-Indigenous youth. A larger proportion of young people in the general population have very low income or none at all, reflecting a group that rely largely on financial support from their parents. This reliance is more apparent for persons born overseas in non-main English speaking countries (NMESC), who are also less likely to have high incomes than the general population, with Indigenous youth the least likely to have high incomes.

Figure 7.2 Distribution of individual weekly incomes of 15 to 24-year-olds by selected groups, 2001
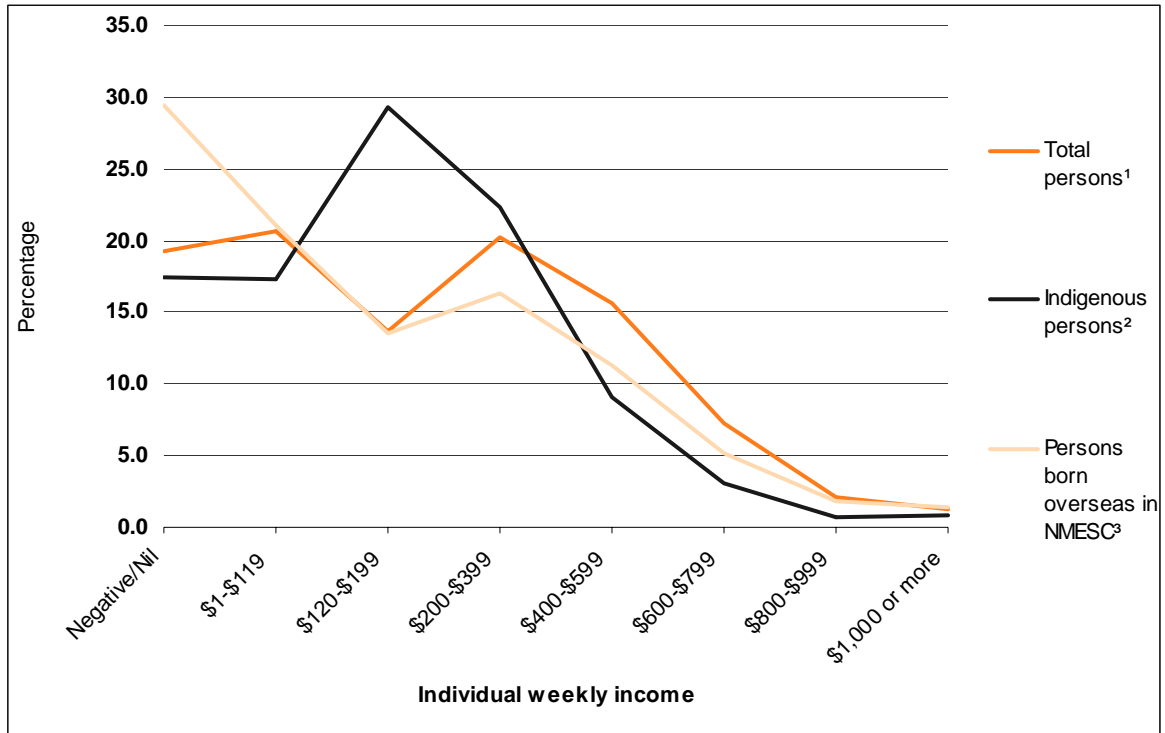
Sources: [1] ABS (2002a), Table B13
[2] ABS (2002b), Table I08
[3] ABS (2004a) Table 5.11.
NMESC=Non-main English speaking countries, which includes all countries other than Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Republic of Ireland, South Africa, United Kingdom and USA.

Young people from refugee backgrounds often face the additional financial burden of sending remittances to relatives in refugee camps overseas or supporting family members in Australia who do not receive any benefits (Ransley & Drummond 2001).

8 Social and civic participation

Tim's story

Tim rarely looks forward to school or does homework on time. He found going to senior school 'pretty intimidating' at first and does not really feel welcome. He often feels left out, seldom enjoys sport, often smokes and drinks. In Year 10 he was bored and challenged teachers; they got angry, he started wagging and got into trouble. Last year he missed 30 days of school. However, he says he wants to finish year 12 and do an IT apprenticeship.

Tim feels the family doesn't have enough money for things such as phone bills and electricity. His mother, a sole parent, says she finds it hard to afford everyday clothes, entertainment and pocket money; and that as Tim grows up, 'he is more expensive to provide for' and 'food prices have skyrocketed'. He mentions that he has missed out on school photos two years in a row. At 16 he will receive an Austudy payment and his mother will go 'on the dole'. He has not had paid work yet, because his one or two attempts at cold canvassing failed. Tim would like to go overseas on a student group cultural exchange but it costs too much. It's also uncertain whether he can go on the forthcoming art camp. He explains:

This year there'll be a national art camp, I'm not sure that I'll be able to go on that. Even some of the ones where they take you down to the art galleries and stuff in the city some days, they're expensive. Sometimes they ask you for like $30 or $40 and then you have to buy your own lunch and stuff down there. It's not very fair.

When asked whether others in his school are in the same position, Tim says:

Lots of them, lots of kids just don't bother going, like they just don't go to school.

Recreational activities are vital for personal fulfilment and physical and emotional development, and can offer alternatives to anti-social behaviour (Bentley et al. 1999). Social and cultural resources are hence significant for young people 'making a life'. Access to these resources is influenced by location, gender, socioeconomic status (as for Tim) and ethnicity (Eckersley, Wierenga & Wyn 2006).

Increasing individualisation, more insecurity in choosing pathways (Beck 1992), growing demands on managing one's identity and being personally responsible for one's situation (see, for example, Giddens 1991; Easthope & White 2006) mark the context in which young people are growing up today. This makes social relations and social connectedness particularly important. Furthermore, young people have been shown to draw help only from trusted sources (Eckersley, Wierenga & Wyn 2006).

Australia's young people are popularly constructed as 'apathetic community members', who are individualistic, selfish and unconcerned with community issues. However, this undervalues young people's engagement in informal, alternative or more grassroots activities such as environmentalism and anti-racism (Vromen 2003, 2006).

Key findings discussed in this section are that:

- Lower rates of computer ownership and internet access in low socioeconomic households suggest that computer access for young people in these households is lower.
- While young people are less likely to be enrolled to vote that older groups, volunteering among young people increased more markedly than among other age groups between 1995 and 2000.

Computer and internet access

Computers are an essential tool in modern society. Apart from their direct use in the classroom, computers can be beneficial to young people's educational development, with studies showing that literacy levels can be significantly influenced by whether students have computer resources in the home (Thomson, Cresswell & Bortoli 2004). Therefore young people who do not have access to a computer at home and outside school hours can be quite disadvantaged in their education, and subsequently in the labour market.

Young people's access to information and communication technology has been linked to socioeconomic status. Muir et al. (2003) found lower rates of computer ownership and internet access among low socioeconomic families (32 per cent compared with 58 per cent of all Australian households). While this research did not distinguish between the computer and internet access of families with teenagers and of those with younger children, it suggests that computer access for young people in low socioeconomic households is likely to be lower. As well as affecting educational achievement, lack of access to ICT may affect young people's opportunities to participate in social networks via email and chatrooms, to have their say on political issues through internet forums or blogging, and to access relevant information including leisure or training opportunities.

Figure 8.1 shows the percentage of 15 to 24-year-olds who used computers at home, by their age and cultural background.

Figure 8.1 Home computer users, selected groups, 15 to 24-year-olds, 2001
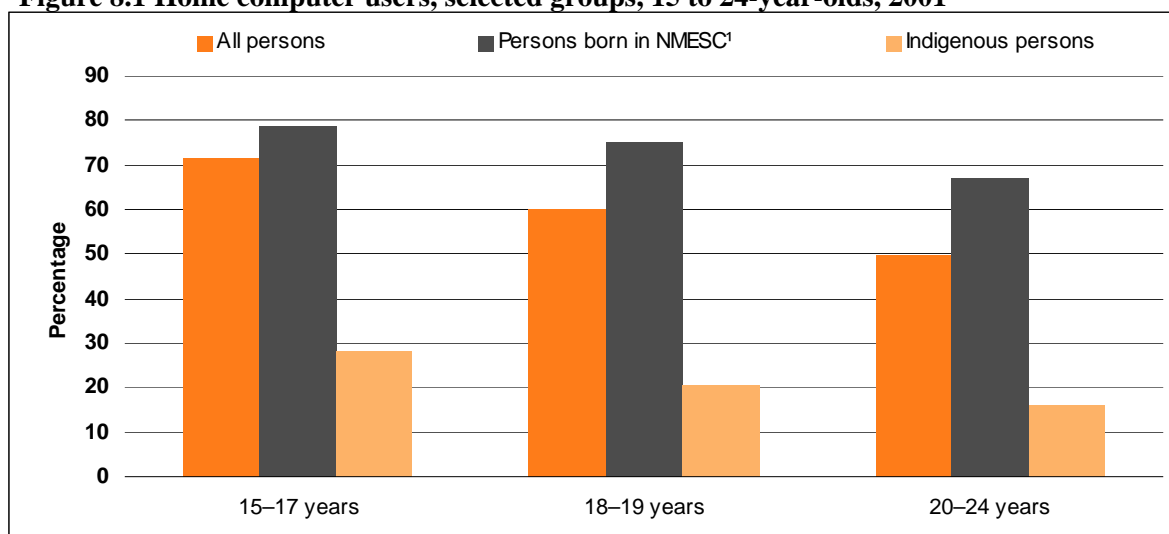
Source: ABS (2004a) Table 6.1
[1] Non-main English speaking countries, which includes all countries other than Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Republic of Ireland, South Africa, United Kingdom and USA.

Less than one-quarter (23 per cent) of Indigenous youth reported accessing the Internet, considerably lower than the proportion for all youth (60 per cent). By contrast, youth born in non-main English speaking countries were more likely to access the Internet (75 per cent) (ABS 2004a).

Volunteering

Volunteering is one way in which young people contribute to their communities, with benefits also for the volunteers themselves through improved self-esteem and increased social networks (POPE 2006, p.10). Volunteering may also mitigate economic disadvantage by connecting people to improved career pathways (Smith 2001). At the local level, Vinson (2004) demonstrated a relationship between higher levels of social capital (including rates of volunteering) and benefits

such as decreased rates of imprisonment. Research suggests furthermore that the habit of volunteering starts at an early age, and reflects access to public knowledge, which is influenced by socioeconomic status. Findings on young volunteers in Australia show that female gender, higher parental socioeconomic status, English as home language, higher reading and smaller size of home community significantly contributed to volunteering activity (Brown et al. 2003). The ABS observed an increase in the rates of volunteering amongst young people between 1995 (17 per cent) and 2000 (27 per cent). Interestingly, although rates of volunteering increased in all age groups in this period, the increase was proportionally higher for young people (ABS 2006a). In 2004, Volunteering Australia's Newspoll survey found an even higher participation by this age group of around 38 per cent (Outer Suburban/ Interface Services & Development Committee 2006).

Volunteering is encouraged by recent government approaches to addressing disadvantage through community strengthening, for example in FaCSIA's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and the Victorian Government's social policy statement *A Fairer Victoria*, though barriers to volunteering (e.g. cost) for low-income individuals (e.g. students, the unemployed, young parents) may be overlooked. These promotional efforts, alongside those to measure community strength, can be expected to increase the data available on the numbers of young volunteers.

Political engagement

Young people in Australia are less likely to be enrolled to vote than older groups (AEC 2005). An estimated 300,000 Australians aged 18 to 25 do not vote in elections because they have not enrolled (Saha, Print & Edwards 2005). It would be useful to track changes in young people's levels of voting enrolment over time, and to identify patterns of participation.

Research reveals the image of youth as 'politically apathetic' as a stereotype. While young people might not be engaged in political parties, many *are* interested in political issues and engaged in informal activities and groups. The challenge is hence to engage young people more effectively to increase their participation in voting and their desire for more direct political participation (Saha, Print & Edwards 2005). The dominant political discourse centres on a particular conception of the 'good' citizen and 'good' forms of community participation. Some types of engagement and participation in the political process are valued while others are denigrated (Vromen 2003). A broader definition of active citizenship would encompass all acts of young people 'forming, maintaining and changing their communities' (Owen 1996, quoted in White & Wyn 2004, p.88). In this connection, a crucial aspect of 'working with and alongside young people' is the accountability of adults to young people and the determination and implementation of decisions by young people themselves (Stacey et al. 2005).

Refugee and CALD youth

Many refugee young people have lost a sense of belonging to a community when they arrive in Australia. If no attention is paid to addressing young people, consultations with refugee communities may focus on the promotion of adult concerns (CMYI 2001).

Several factors impact negatively on refugee youth participation, the latter understood as 'a process of sharing power in which young people are given the chance to exercise their right to decision making' (Singer & Chandra-Shekeran 2006, p.49). Many young refugees face language barriers, are unaware of existing opportunities to participate in decision making activities and have a poor knowledge of Australian systems. Having witnessed political persecution in their home countries can discourage involvement. Another factor is that young refugees often have other priorities related to housing, language learning and financial support. In addition to juggling study and part-time jobs, they very often assist their parents with translating and other responsibilities. Finally, young people of refugee or CALD backgrounds hold diverse understandings about participation in different cultural contexts (Singer & Chandra-Shekeran 2006; CMYI 2001).

9 Concluding comments

The findings presented in this issue of the Social Barometer suggest that not all young Australians are faring as well as popular opinion about young people 'never having had it better' implies. There are improvements in some areas such as youth suicide rates, cigarette smoking or youth unemployment, yet these promising trends largely do not apply to Indigenous youth who remain the most disadvantaged group. Young refugees face particular challenges regarding their mental health, access to education and pathways into employment. Youth from low-income families also experience a high level of disadvantage, particularly in the areas of physical and mental health, literacy and numeracy, school achievement and housing, but also in accessing resources such as textbooks or computers that are vital for their participation in education and leisure activities.

One important finding from this work is the lack of reliable national data monitoring trends in the various dimensions of young people's capabilities and well-being. While a significant body of research has been dedicated to the areas of education and employment, we do not know enough about other areas such as young people's mental health and their social and political participation. There is also a lack of national data on youth with refugee or CALD backgrounds.

State and federal governments in Australia have recognised some important areas in the youth transition, such as school retention and vocational training, and are taking some steps in the right direction. Governments have initiated programs such as the Commonwealth's Youth Pathways program, and at state level On Track Connect, school-based support through Managed Individual Pathways and Local Learning and Employment Networks. The need to monitor young people's outcomes in education and employment has also been recognised with the Australian Government's funding of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY), managed jointly by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

However, to arrive at policies that better address the barriers in youth transitions, we need to better understand the multiple dimensions of disadvantage and the interconnections between young people's capabilities and opportunities in different domains. Such an integrated analysis will help the development of integrated policy solutions. This also means looking beyond the level of individual agency and responsibility, and recognising and addressing structural barriers faced by young people. Socioeconomic status, Aboriginality, ethnicity, gender and location still make a difference and require consideration when devising policy solutions. We suggest therefore expanding the human capital framework recently adopted by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to include housing, income and a general measure of well-being.

Finally, we need to draw on young people themselves when developing policies that affect them. The increasing practice of consulting young people to identify their needs and gain their insights is a positive step taken by government. It is particularly important that the most disadvantaged young people have a real opportunity to contribute their voice in these processes. Research shows that civic participation rises with access to material resources, education and information. To increase young people's engagement requires therefore targeted encouragement and sensibility to differences and inequalities *within* the youth population.

This report of the Brotherhood's Social Barometer suggests that further well-informed investment is needed in Australia's young people to ensure they have the capabilities to negotiate this vital transition successfully and to lead healthy and rewarding lives.

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