



The Brotherhood's Social Barometer

Challenges facing Australian youth

Young people today go through more complex and longer transitions to adulthood and from school to work than previous generations. Pathways are less linear and involve a lot more changes and shifts in direction. Many young Australians have the capabilities to negotiate these challenges and even to draw benefits from the diversity of experiences in this less structured environment. However many others have fewer options or are less well equipped to cope with the demands of secondary education or training, the high level of uncertainty in the labour market and the growing pressures to shape their transition pathway and 'manage' their well-being.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence has a long history of providing services and conducting research involving disadvantaged young people and their transition from school to work. It is particularly concerned about young people who are at higher risk of exclusion because of fewer opportunities and capabilities, less support and more difficulties in accessing the resources they need for a successful transition.

Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to:

- engage in smoking and substance abuse
- develop mental health problems
- fail at or disengage from school
- be unemployed or worse off in the labour market.

The second Social Barometer describes the condition of Australian youth in seven key dimensions of life. Each dimension reflects basic capabilities and opportunities that every young person should enjoy, including good physical and mental health, education, training and employment, freedom from violence and abuse, participation in the community and access to adequate economic resources and housing.

Being young in Australia today can be very tough, as Troy's story illustrates.

Our young people deserve better

Troy's story

Troy is sixteen years old. 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, Troy was chronically homeless and had no contact with his relatives.

At 16, Troy tried to get his life together. Different services supported him in addressing and overcoming the multidimensional adversity of his adolescent life: his substance abuse, 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, and finally entered the Brotherhood's Job Placement, Employment and Training (JPET) program with whose help he enrolled in a TAFE course.

*A pseudonym is used to protect this young person's privacy.

1. Physical health

While most young Australians are in good health and rate their own health positively, young people who are socially disadvantaged, who live in rural and regional areas or who are Indigenous show worse health results. The rise in obesity and alcohol abuse are the most alarming physical health issues among Australian youth today. Research shows:

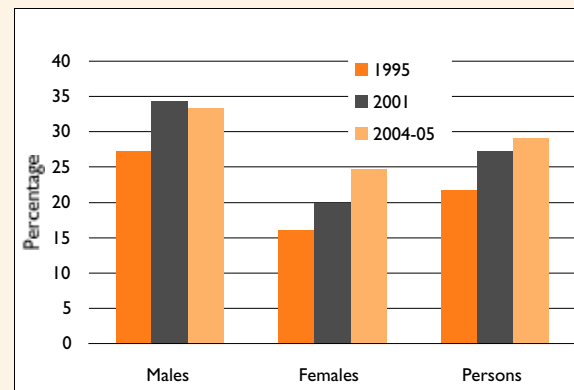
- The rate of overweight youth aged 18 to 24 years has risen over the last ten years (see Figure 1).
- The rate of obesity among Indigenous youth is twice as high as among non-Indigenous youth.
- Young people living in the most disadvantaged areas of Australia show significantly higher rates of obesity than those in the least disadvantaged areas (based on the Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage).
- Risky alcohol consumption has increased, particularly for young men, over the last ten years.

2. Mental health

Good mental health is the base for coping with life, realising one's abilities and participating in society. Mental illness affects school, work and socialising. It can lead to poor physical health, unemployment, social isolation and exclusion. Adolescence and young adulthood are the peak period for the onset of conditions such as depression, disorders following substance abuse and psychotic illnesses. Young people experience higher rates of mental health problems than other age groups. Evidence shows that:

- Young women and men aged 18 to 24 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 insecurity of stay.
- 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.

Figure 1. Overweight and obesity among 18 to 24-year-olds, 1995 to 2004–05



Source: ABS 2006, *National Health Survey: summary of results*

3. Housing

Access to adequate housing is an internationally recognised human right and a vital precondition for fulfilling personal aspirations. Without a place to live in security and dignity, homeless young people are likely to experience worsening mental health, reduced education and employment opportunities, discrimination and social exclusion. The most extreme form of inadequate housing is homelessness, which includes having to rely on temporary accommodation. Research shows that:

- Young people aged 12 to 24 years 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.

4. Education, training and employment

Education and training are crucial foundations for a young person's life chances. Socioeconomic background still influences school achievement and the transition to post-compulsory education; and Indigenous students fare worse in both areas. While an increasing number of Australian youth complete Year 12, young people's

position in the labour market has become more precarious. Casual, part-time and short-term employment prevails. The number of full-time jobs has stagnated for 15 to 19-year-olds and has actually declined for 20 to 24-year-olds. The shift from full-time to part-time work is even more marked for young women. Research tells us that:

- Students who do not complete Year 12 are at much higher risk of labour market exclusion.
- 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 (see Figure 2).
- 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.
- 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.

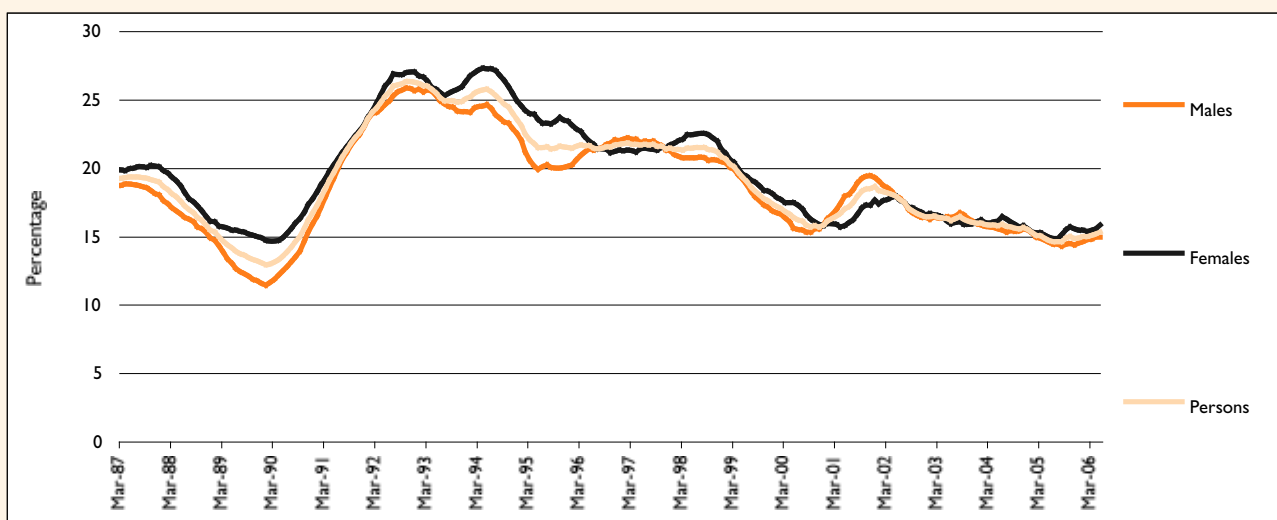
- Only about 40 per cent of Indigenous students who commence secondary school complete year 12, compared with nearly 80 per cent of non-Indigenous students.
- Indigenous young people have significantly lower rates of full-time work and full-time education than non-Indigenous young people.

5. Physical safety

Many young people experience violence in some form. Young men and Indigenous youth are groups at particularly high risk of becoming victim to a personal crime. Racism and bullying also have a highly negative impact on young people's well-being. While no national data is 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. In Australia over recent years:

- The most common reported offences 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.

Figure 2. Unemployment rate for 15 to 19-year-olds not in full-time education, 1987 to 2006



Source: ABS 2005, *Labour force Australia*, Table 15 (12 month moving average)

6. Economic resources

Material well-being influences mental and physical health, housing and educational achievement. 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. Low-income households are more likely to struggle to pay for educational items such as textbooks and excursions, for transport and for leisure activities. In addition, adolescents with physical or mental health problems have additional needs that can put additional financial pressure on the family. Research shows:

- 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.

7. Social and civic engagement

Young people today face increasing individualisation and uncertainty regarding their pathways, which render social connectedness and trusting relationships even more important. Activities outside education, training and work are vital means for their personal fulfilment and development. However, access to social and cultural resources is not equal for all young people, putting those with fewer resources even further behind. Young people's civic engagement includes voting and volunteering but also participation in informal and alternative political activities such as environmentalism and anti-racism. Research shows:

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

What we must do

The evidence shows that in spite of Australia's relative prosperity some of the nation's youth are missing out on key opportunities and resources to develop their capabilities. It is our responsibility to invest in measures to support their successful participation in Australian society.

An important first step has been achieved by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) setting human capital benchmarks for the youth transition. These need to be broadened to include the areas of housing, income and general well-being.

To better understand and address the multidimensional disadvantage many young Australians face, we need to look at the interconnections between different domains of life such as education, employment, health and housing, income and social participation.

Finally, we need to consult young people themselves when devising policies that affect them, ensuring that those who are most disadvantaged have a real opportunity to contribute their voice.

Note

These are highlights from the more detailed report by Martina Boese and Rosanna Scutella, *The Brotherhood's Social Barometer: challenges facing Australian youth*, including data sources and bibliographic references, which is available on the Brotherhood's website <www.bsl.org.au>.

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