Australia’s
Youth Matters
Young people talk about what’s important to them
October 2013
Acknowledgements

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of survey respondents or AYAC and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government.

Please note that some of the remarks attributed to young people who responded to the survey have been edited for grammatical clarity. Their original intent remains unchanged.
Introduction

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) believes that young people are experts in their own lives and their own experiences. In August 2013, AYAC partnered with The Australia Institute to conduct a quantitative survey of young Australians aged 17-24 years to discover what issues they cared about and wanted the government to take action on over the next three years. AYAC conducted a complimentary survey of young people to gather qualitative feedback on what lies beneath – what they’ve heard about the issue, their experiences and why they think that the government should be doing more to address these concerns.

This report presents the top issues identified by our survey, and direct commentary from young Australians on why these issues are important to them.

AYAC believes all decision makers should be listening and speaking directly to young people about their needs and aspirations, as well as what they can contribute to the nation today and into the future in all areas of Australian life. It is hoped that this report will support that important conversation.

About the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is Australia’s national peak body representing young people (12 - 25 years) and the sector that supports them. We undertake a range of activities, including research and policy development, policy advice, youth sector development, and youth engagement.

In all of our work we aim to:

- Represent the rights and interests of young people, and the sector which supports them, at national and international levels
- Promote the wellbeing of young Australians
- Advance the participation of young people in the community
- Support best practice in youth participation
- Offer policy advice to government and other organisations on issues that affect young people and the youth sector
- Take a leadership role within the youth sector
- Encourage and support coordination and cooperation within the sector

AYAC is funded as part of the Australian Youth Forum Initiative by the Australian Government Department of Education.

For more information please visit www.ayac.org.au
In August 2013, AYAC partnered with The Australia Institute to conduct an online survey on issues that affect young Australians. The respondent sample was representative of the Australian population in the relevant age group, with results post weighted by age and gender based on the ABS profile of the adult population. It was sourced from MyOpinions, a reputable independent online survey service that provides reward incentives for participation.

Two questions were posed to respondents. In the first, respondents aged 17-24 years (n=968) were presented with a list of 14 issues that affect many young people and asked to rank their top 5 issues in response to the question “Thinking about these issues, which would you like to see politicians taking action on?”

Their top 5 youth issues were:
- Housing affordability and availability
- Youth unemployment
- High cost of tertiary education
- Improving the quality of primary and secondary education
- Binge drinking and alcohol fueled violence

The second question was asked of a wider sample of various ages across the adult Australian population (aged from 17 years, n=1436). Respondents were presented with 15 issues that Australians are passionate about and asked, “Thinking about these issues, which would you like to see politicians taking action on?”

There was no overlap in the lists of issues respondents chose between. The survey questions are provided in the appendix.

For the purposes of this report, responses from the 17-24 year age group (n=202) have been drawn out, and comparisons made with the overall population surveyed from all age groups.

The top 6 broader community issues for the 17-24 year age group were:
- Improving health care, disability and mental health access
- Government spending
- Marriage equality
- Immigration policy
- Economic growth & development
- Gender equality and the rights of women

In addition, AYAC conducted a complimentary survey of young people, to gather further qualitative feedback on each of these issues (n=184). Respondents were sourced through AYAC networks, including youth development organisations and services, youth-led organisations and state and territory youth peak bodies.

Respondents were asked to identify the five youth issues and the five community issues they care about most and then asked, “Why do these issues matter to you? You may want to tell us a little about your experience with the issue, what you’ve heard about it and/or why you think the government should be doing more things about it.”

The top issues identified in this survey affirmed the validity of the results of the primary survey, and the qualitative responses allow us to understand better why these issues matter to young people in Australia today.

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1 Small variations in sample size can occur from rounding errors as a result of the weighting process.

2 Because these six issues formed a clear cluster of priority issues, this report will consider all six rather than only the top five.
Section 1:
Top Five Youth Issues from the Australia’s Youth Matters Survey

This section provides information about each of the five top ranked issues that affect young people from the Australia’s Youth Matters quantitative survey. The 968 respondents were aged 17-24 years. It provides sample responses from young people in the AYAC qualitative survey, explaining why the issue matters to them. All figures are rounded to the nearest percent.

Youth Issue: Housing Affordability and Availability

65% of respondents in the quantitative survey ranked housing affordability and availability as one of their top five issues, with 17% of respondents listing this as the most important youth issue.

Many of the young people that responded to AYAC’s qualitative survey reported a strong desire to live independently, yet barriers including high market rental costs made this desire unattainable for many.

“Housing prices seem so high at the moment, and costs only appear to be growing. I worried about whether or not I will be able to take care of myself once I leave home.” - Krystal, New South Wales

“Finding affordable, quality housing, in a reasonable location, is extremely difficult. The first place my partner and I rented didn’t even have enough space for a table and chairs or private outdoor space, but it still cost about $200 p/w. - Hayley, South Australia

“As a student living away from home I have borderered on homelessness because I am unable to afford housing. This is because I’m having difficulty getting employed because I study full-time.” - Sarah, South Australia

“Overpriced housing puts undue burden on younger generations. Young people nowadays should have access to what our parents had - reasonably priced housing near schools, jobs, and in good and growing communities.” - Wayne, New South Wales

Youth Issue: Youth Unemployment

55% of respondents to the quantitative survey ranked this issue in their top five, with 17% of young people aged 17-24 listing this as their most important issue.

Many young people that responded to AYAC’s qualitative survey reported a strong desire to work. However many expressed a sense of frustration at how difficult it was for them to enter the labour market - especially those that studied full time or had limited job experience. Beyond a means to income, young people looked at employment for a sense of identity and purpose.

“This issue is important to me because time and time again employers hire those that have at least one to two years previous experience. How is youth able to get that experience in the first place if workplaces are seeking experienced employees.” - Sarah, South Australia

“Without employment, it is difficult for us to take the burden of our cost of living away from our parents and take responsibility for our own lives” - Crystal, New South Wales

“This issue is important to me because work gives me and other young people a sense of purpose and security.” - Tom, New South Wales

Youth Issue: High Cost of Tertiary Education

54% of quantitative survey respondents ranked this issue in their top five, with 13% of young people aged 17-24 listing this as their most important issue.

“The cost of living is rising and the chance of my ever being able to purchase my own home and be mortgage free and very slim. I believe lowering the cost of tertiary education would help to ease the pressure faced by my generation. Further education should be available to everyone and the high cost of uni prevents underprivileged kids from attending.” - Cassandra, Western Australia

“For those of us whose parents are not wealthy enough to pay our way through university, it becomes a very expensive experience. When you finally do complete your undergrad, then study a Masters, and beyond, the debt incurred is huge.” - Olivia, Western Australia

“Coming from a rural town I am limited in what areas of study I can choose if I go to Central Queensland University - this is because the university lacks the qualified teaching staff to offer a broad variety of degrees. Yet I can’t afford to move to the major cities such as Brisbane, let alone afford Universities like The University of Queensland, where more courses are offered” - Laura, Queensland

Youth Issue: High Cost of Tertiary Education

AYAC’s employment policy can be found at www.ayac.org.au/news/166/67/Employment.html

AYAC’s education policy can be found at www.ayac.org.au/news/165/67/Education.html
Youth Issue: Improving the Quality of Primary & Secondary Education

48% of quantitative survey respondents ranked this issue in their top five, with 8% of young people aged 17-24 listing this as their most important issue.

Many of the young people that responded to AYAC’s qualitative survey were recent high school graduates. They spoke about the shortcomings of their experiences in primary and secondary school. They also expressed a great deal of optimism looking into future about the opportunities that improving education could present for new students.

“Education is important to me as it illuminates the future, shows the way forward and gives us hope and the ability to tackle any challenges presented to us” - Liam, New South Wales

“Living in a rural town, and despite going to a private primary and secondary school, we still lacked a number of subject specific qualified teachers that metropolitan schools offer. This makes it difficult for country kids to study the subjects they need for their OP scores and QTAC entrance into University.” - Laura, Queensland

“As someone who has just emerged from secondary school, I can see that teachers are so concerned about fitting in all the syllabus dot points that they don’t have time to actually teach us anything. Also, we need to learn more Australian history, not just about the Aboriginals and the Dreaming, not just about American in WW2. Good, solid, Australian history, geography, a component of General Studies and Commerce introduced as a compulsory subject. Also, more ethics in Religion classes and less intricate details about Christianity and its denominations.” - Crystal, New South Wales

- AYAC’s education policy can be found at www.ayac.org.au/news/165/67/Education.html
Youth Issue: Binge Drinking and Alcohol Fueled Violence

46% of quantitative survey respondents ranked this issue in their top five, with 9% of young people aged 17-24 listing this as their most important issue.

Many young people that responded to AYAC’s qualitative survey showed a sense of pragmatism around the issue of binge drinking and alcohol fuelled violence. They accepted that alcohol is a part of youth culture and Australian society, but would like Government to take steps to moderate the negative effects caused by young people drinking to excess.

“To be honest there is no way that alcohol will ever be removed from our society but the ridiculous levels of binging that goes on every single week amongst young people is ridiculous. As a 20 year old coaching 15 year old rugby players, hearing about them drinking this was an eye opener. Maybe the issue of alcohol becoming taboo will only add fuel to an already raging fire, but either way something other than an ‘alcho-pops’ tax needs to be introduced in order to possibly get some change.” - Nicholas, Queensland

“Many of my former friends have destroyed their lives through excessive drinking (and drug use). While it is their personal choice to do so, it is pervasive in youth culture. Not consuming alcohol is considered uncool in many circles and there is significant peer pressure on people to partake in it. Why this is eludes me, but it is an issue, again pressing because there seems to be no simple solution.” - Alex, Victoria

“Everyone knows someone who has been affected by drunken violence or has done something they later regretted under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Preventing this kind of behaviour in young people should be a priority of the government.” - Cassandra, Western Australia.

Section 2: Top Six General Community Issues from the Australia’s Youth Matters Survey

This section discusses the six top-ranking community issues in second section of the quantitative survey, looking specifically as the responses of those aged 17-24, and provides sample quotes from young people in the AYAC qualitative survey about why the issue matters to them.

In total, 1,436 responses were received to this survey question across all age groups (i.e. 17 years or older). Comparisons between the youth population (n=202) and the combined general population (n=1,436) are provided. All figures are rounded to the nearest percent.

Community Issue: Improving Health Care, Disability and Mental Health Services

66% of respondents aged 17-24 years listed this issue as one of their top five community issues, which compares to 77% of total respondents sampled across all age groups.

“I come from a rural background and the disparity between metropolitan and city areas is shocking. There a shortage of mental health services, and regular medical check-ups also involve travelling long distances. It takes me one and a half hours to get to an orthodontist, it’s a huge health barrier.” - Crystal, New South Wales

“Despite the fact that I am a supporter of the Liberal National Party, I believe the NDIS is a highly important service which protects those Australians who cannot always protect themselves.” - Zac, Queensland

“This issue is important to me because as a diabetic uni student, I know firsthand the costs that even something as seemingly ‘easy to deal with’ as diabetes has, both financially and to my health. We need a medical health care system that is able to assist people like me to access treatments and cures so that we can have normal lives and stop worrying that when we go to sleep one night, we’re not going to wake up the next morning.” - Jessica, Queensland

Community Issue: Government Spending

49% of young respondents aged 17-24 years listed this issue in their top five community issues, which compares to 59% of total respondents sampled across all age groups.

The young people that responded to AYAC’s qualitative survey were concerned about a number of different issues surrounding Government spending. They were concerned that high levels of intergenerational debt created by government spending would leave them worse off. They also cared about returning the budget to a surplus and were worried about the effects economic instability would have on their futures. Finally, they cared about the way money was being spent, and wanted a Government that invests strongly in the future.

“This issue is important to me because it is my generation who will be having to pay off the enormous debt that the previous government has run up. If the spending does not ease off, it’s my generation who will bear the consequences of that.” - Jessica, Queensland

“This issue is important to me because the government is subsidising fossil fuel industries with tens of billions of dollars, then crying poor when it comes to investment in renewable energies, education and healthcare. The government needs to stop spending money on helping the few well off Australians in start supporting the majority.” - Imogen, Queensland

• AYAC’s education policy can be found at www.ayac.org.au/news/165/67/Education.html
• AYAC’s employment policy can be found at www.ayac.org.au/news/166/67/Employment.html
• AYAC’s income support policy can be found at www.ayac.org.au/news/170/67/Income-Support.html

Community Issue: Marriage Equality

45% of respondents aged 17-24 years listed this issue in their top five community issues, which compares to only 22% of total respondents sampled across all age groups.

Most respondents to the qualitative survey expressed support for marriage equality.

“They deserve the same rights as the rest of us. I’m a Christian, and I’m sick and tired of the homophobia in Australia. We really need to sort out this whole equality business.” - Bethany, Victoria

“I think it is ridiculous that this stigma still exists. I have many gay friends and it sickens me that we are not all viewed equally in the eyes of the law.” - Latoya, New South Wales
Though this view enjoyed a clear majority of support, it was not unanimous, with some young people arguing passionately in favour of preserving the traditional definition of marriage.

“This issue is important to me because as a Presbyterian Christian, I believe that marriage is one man and one woman, full stop. This was instigated at the beginning of time, and remains the only acceptable definition of marriage. While I cannot stop homosexual couples from being together, I can ask for politicians who respect the heterosexual nature and sacredness of marriage, as it has existed for the past 6000-odd years since time began.” - Jessica, Queensland


**Community Issue: Immigration Policy**

42% of respondents aged 17-24 years listed this issue in their top five community issues, which compares to 52% of total respondents sampled across all age groups.

Despite this strong interest in immigration policy, there was no clear consensus or majority position articulated on the issue - with some respondents arguing in favour of more liberal approaches to immigration and others arguing on stricter standards towards boat arrivals.

“How we treat others is a reflection on our nation and the degree to which we accept or do not accept those who need our help is integral to our international and domestic image. If we are not able to look after those in need, how can we expect other nations to look after us and the people of Australia to look after each other.” - Miriam, Victoria

“Return all illegal immigrants to their homeland at their governments expense or keep them here in a goal-like environment. The definition of illegal is an act contrary to or forbidden by law, if an Australia arrived by boat and attempted illegal immigration into another country they would suffer much harsher penalties than what’s given out in Australia! You do an illegal act you should be put before the court and sentenced to punishment. It would be expensive the first few times Australia does it but it will soon cost $0.00 because it will deter illegals and what could turn out to be potentially harmful behaviour - aka. terrorism toward the Australian population” - Laura, Queensland

• AYAC’s policy concerning young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can be found at www.ayac.org.au/news/174/67/Young-People-from-Culturally-and-Linguistically-Diverse-Backgrounds.html
Community Issue: Economic Growth and Development

Economic growth, development and prosperity are issues that young people recognised as important to all Australians.

53% of respondents aged 17-24 years listed this issue among their top five community issues, which compares to 74% of total respondents sampled across all age groups.

“This issue is important to me because we need to be a productive country in the face of Asian competition to make Australia bigger and better.” – Riley, Queensland

“Without economic growth and development, the youth of today will not have access to the opportunities of past generations.” – Wayne, New South Wales

“This issue is important to me because...Without economic growth and development opportunity does not exist.” – Tom, New South Wales

“Despite whatever short term costs there may be, the government must do what it can to ensure continuous economic growth in the long run so that Australia can continue to be one of the best countries in the world.” – Zac, Queensland

Community Issue: Gender Equality and the Rights of Women

35% of respondents aged 17-24 years listed this issue in their top five community issues, which compares to only 19% of total respondents sampled across all age groups.

The young people that responded to the qualitative survey described equality as something that will benefit all Australian’s - and identified providing women with safety, stability, economic independence and the ability to enjoy a healthy work-life balance as core to achieving this.

“This issue is important to me because women are treated with lower standard in society. Just look at low pay rates, high levels domestic violence and the rights we are still missing out on in the workplace. It is shown that improving the situation for women is of benefit to the nation. How women are treated is the real measure of a country’s success - we need to set a positive example for the rest of the world that shows that Australia appreciates all the people who live here.” - Amanda, Victoria

“There is no logical reason for gender inequality to exist. The girl effect works.” - Josh, New South Wales
Appendix:
Survey Questions

Question 1 – Below is a list of issues that affect many young people. Thinking about these issues, which would you like to see politicians taking action on?

- Binge drinking and alcohol fueled violence
- Body image
- Bullying
- Drug decriminalization
- High cost of tertiary education
- Housing affordability and availability
- Improving quality of primary and secondary education
- Improving quality of tertiary education
- Insufficient youth allowance & newstart payments
- Juvenile justice reform
- Poor workplace conditions
- Sexual health
- Youth engagement in politics
- Youth unemployment
- Other

Question 2 – Below is a list of issues that many Australians feel passionate about. Thinking about these issues, which would you like to see politicians taking action on?

- Animal welfare
- Climate change
- Closing the Gap and Indigenous reconciliation
- Coal seam gas
- Defence spending
- Development in regional and remote areas
- Economic growth & development
- Foreign aid
- Gender equality and the rights of women
- Government spending
- Immigration policy
- Improving healthcare, disability and mental health services
- Infrastructure development & the NBN
- Marriage equality
- Technology & innovation
- Other