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YOUNG & RESILIENT RESEARCH CENTRE

HOPE AND RESILIENCE:

Young Australians' reflections on hope in a complex world.

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About the Young and Resilient Research Centre
westernsydney.edu.au/young-and-resilient

Today's globalised world holds significant prospects, but it can be tough for young people. They face many immediate and long-term challenges, from high costs of living and debt to long-term economic disadvantage, climate change and mental health difficulties. At the same time, technology is playing an increasing role in young people's lives. The Young and Resilient Research Centre, housed within the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University, explores how to enhance young people's resilience in the face of these challenges - and to understand the role that digital technology can play, so that young people live well and participate fully in social and economic life.

About the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS)
crisconsortium.org

CRIS is an independent think-tank involving university and civil society partners, led by the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI) hosted by Deakin University. CRIS undertake research on some of the trickiest challenges that our society is facing – racism, societal division, systemic bias and disadvantage, economic inequities, extremism and discrimination.

About the Alannah & Madeline Foundation
alannahandmadeline.org.au

The Alannah & Madeline Foundation is a national not-for-profit organisation dedicated to keeping children and young people free from violence and trauma wherever they live, learn and play.

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The biggest thanks of all go to the 1,038 young people who participated in the study and shared their insights and experiences.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Young and Resilient Research Centre acknowledges the Burramattagal clan of the Dharug nation and the Bunurong peoples of the Kulin nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which we carried out this research in Western Sydney and Melbourne and pay our respect to their Elders, past, present and future.

Artworks: Created by youth co-researcher Yehansa Dahanayake at the Young and Resilient Research Centre, the artworks included in this report visually interpret how young Australians express and experience what hope means to them. Each piece illustrates key themes from the research, capturing the depth, nuance, and emotional resonance of hope and resilience in young people's lives.

Artist statement: This series of collage zine-style works seeks to capture the views of young people when asked to respond to the question "What would hope as a picture look like?". The "Hope is...?" series is passionate, messy and meaningful, and seeks to represent young people's diverse feelings and experiences with the complexities of hope in an ever changing world.

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YOUNG & RESILIENT RESEARCH CENTRE

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The Young & Resilient Research Centre

Forewords

Sarah Davies AM, Alannah & Madeline Foundation

On behalf of the Alannah & Madeline Foundation, I'm delighted to write this foreword for *Hope and Resilience: Young Australians' reflections on Hope in a Complex World*. Indeed, I'm so grateful to Professor Amanda Third at the Young and Resilient Research Centre, Western Sydney University, for her leadership in undertaking this critical research and in sharing the findings and insights with decision-makers across Australia. The genesis of this report came from the reflection that all we ever seem to hear about young people in the public discourse is what's 'wrong' with them: Never what's right with them; never what's inspiring or exciting about them; or how capable, creative and full of strength and potential they are.

Similarly, adults tend to focus on what sits in our 'worry box' about young people, not necessarily seeking to understand what's in their 'worry box'. Often, this leads to assumptions and possible mis-cues on where to put our care and attention when supporting young people.

This report aims to bridge this gap by showcasing how, why and for what young people hope. It plainly demonstrates the importance of focusing on young people's aspirations and their experiences of hope as we work out, collectively, how to advance their rights and how to be their allies and enablers in securing strong futures for them. Specifically, the futures they envisage and hope for. And I, for one, can't wait to be part of the world they aspire to.

There is so much to explore in this report: a rich insight into a plethora of issues, desires, worries, motivations and aspirations from our young people. It is not surprising to hear from them, again, that climate action is one of their top priorities for the nation and the world; a world they hope can deliver a peaceful, stable and secure future for society.

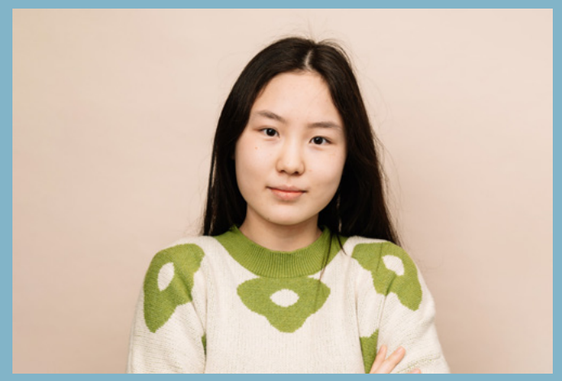
But, if there's one insight that struck me hardest, it's that young people's personal aspirations are "beautifully ordinary". They hope to do well academically, to find meaningful work, to be financially secure, to have positive relationships, and to be happy and well. I figure, as adults, it's our job simply to make sure we create the conditions for this hope to be realised and to transfer the space and power for young people to build it themselves.

Sarah Davies AM
CEO, Alannah & Madeline Foundation

Fiona, Youth co-researcher, Young and Resilient Research Centre

Hope is not passive. It is not simply a word whispered in difficult moments or a feeling that comes and goes with fleeting optimism. Hope is transformative. It is the force that propels young people forward, even when the road ahead is uncertain, even when the weight of the world feels impossibly heavy. As a youth co-researcher on this project, I have seen how deeply young people hold onto hope, not as naivety, but as resilience. Hope allows us to imagine futures beyond the limitations imposed upon us to dream of something better, and to believe in the possibility of change. This research is a testament to that belief: To the ways young people persist, push and demand futures that are shaped by their voices.

Uncertainty seems to be the backdrop of our generation's coming-of-age story. Climate crises threaten the stability of our planet. Political upheavals create divisions that feel impossible to mend. Economic struggles make the future look unattainable for many. But, amidst all this, young people continue to hope: not blindly, not without reason, but because hope is essential. It is the lifeline that allows us to envision something beyond what we have now. This research asked young people about their hopefulness because, in moments like these, it is necessary to listen. It is necessary to hear how young people are navigating these challenges, what fuels their resilience, and what they need to keep moving forward. Their hope is not abstract. It is grounded in the desire for security, justice, opportunity and community. This study is valuable because it does not reduce young people's hopes to simple dreams. It acknowledges them as strategies for survival, as blueprints for action, and it honours young people's real experiences, struggles, and aspirations.



Through the conversations and reflections of this research, it is clear young people want to be heard and involved in decision-making. Hope thrives in spaces where voices matter, where those in power listen, where communities respond, where change is tangible. Too often, decisions about our futures are made without us, by those who do not understand the urgency of our realities. Young people want attention, not as an afterthought, not as a symbolic gesture, but as a genuine commitment to action. We want policymakers to stop making promises and start delivering on them. We want educators to create spaces where learning is more than a system: it is a tool for empowerment. We want mental health to be prioritised, not dismissed. We want access to opportunities that do not feel impossible to reach. We want those shaping the world to recognise that our voices carry wisdom, our perspectives count, and our hopes are not idle fantasies but visions necessary for the future.

And what does that future look like? It looks like possibility. It looks like communities that are interconnected, supportive and willing to uplift young people rather than dismiss them. It looks like a world in which education and jobs are accessible, in which housing does not feel like an impossible luxury, in which climate justice is treated with urgency. It looks like mental health support that is readily available. It looks like political systems that do not exclude or silence us. It looks like futures where joy is not a privilege, but a right.

Am I hopeful that we can come together to realise this future? Yes. But not because it will happen naturally. I am hopeful because young people do not wait for change: We create it. We push, we organise, we speak up, even when it feels like no one is listening. We hold onto hope because we understand its power. We believe in the future because we know it is ours to shape. And I hope, as you read this report, you recognise that too. This research does not simply document young people's thoughts. It is a call to action. It is a demand to listen, to understand and to commit to building a world where hope is not just a distant idea but a shared reality.

Fiona, Youth co-researcher

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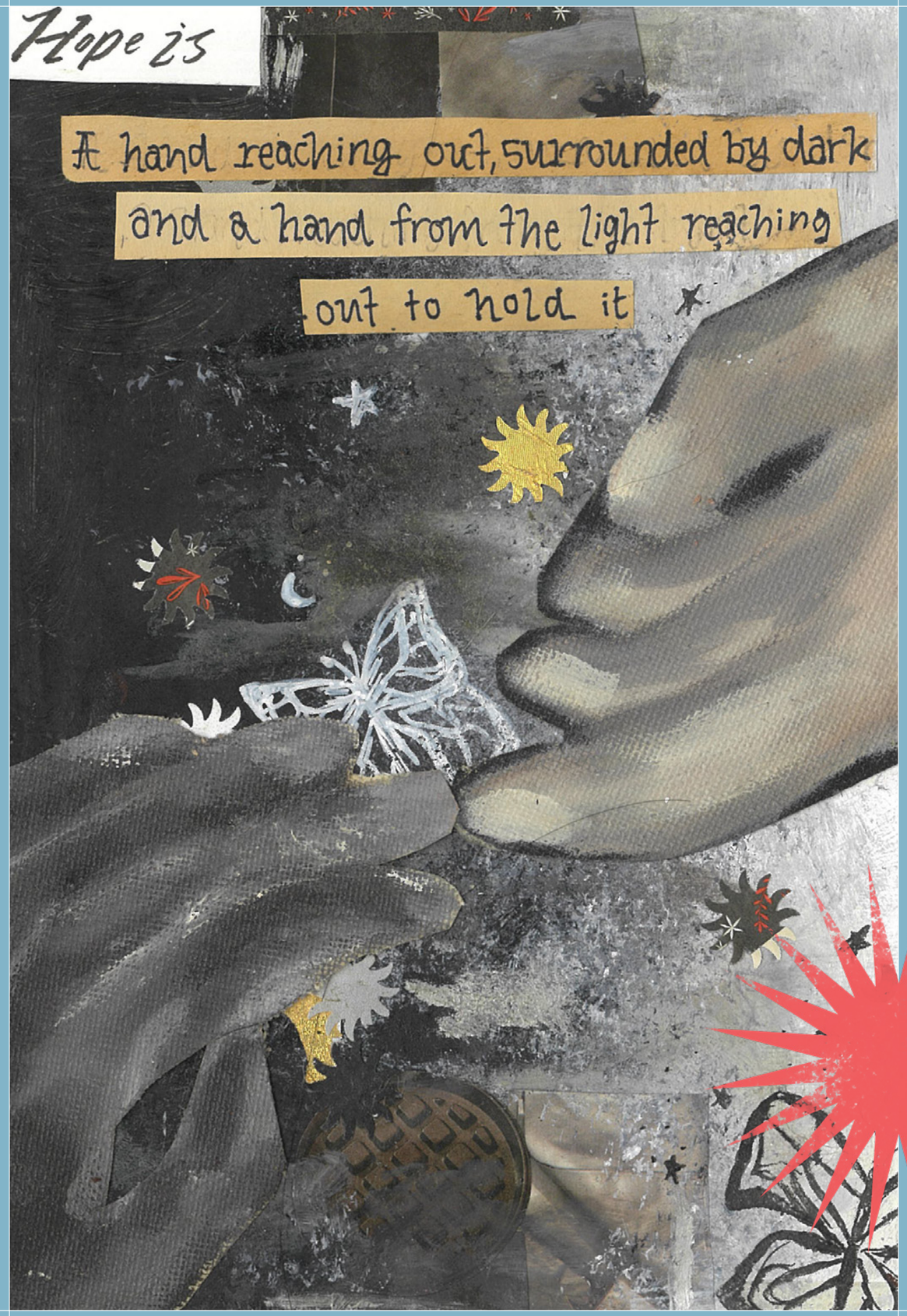
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For young people today, the future is increasingly fraught with challenges. Nevertheless, whilst young people are said to represent the future, they are far too often excluded from having a say in decisions that impact their lives (Australian Human Right Commission, n.d).

Considering the vital role of hope in sustaining and supporting young people's mental health, wellbeing and resilience (Snyder et al., 2002; Valle, Huebner & Suldo, 2006; Gallagher & Lopez, 2009; Counted & Newheiser, 2024), it is critical to understand the influences that shape young Australians' hopes and what actions can be taken to ensure younger generations remain hopeful, now and into the future. Bringing young people into the conversation about their futures will enable better understandings of their hopes and how they can be best supported to achieve them.

This report presents the key findings triangulated from a national survey of 1,002 young people aged 12 to 18 and 15 in-depth interviews, and a participatory workshop with 21 young people aged 16 to 19. The research investigated young Australians' hopes and aspirations for the long- and short-term future, addressing the following key research questions:

- How hopeful are young people?
- What future possibilities do young people hope for?
- What enhances and undermines young people's sense of hope?
- What do young people need to foster hopefulness?



Key Findings

01

Hope is critical for young people's wellbeing and resilience.

Hope fuels young people's agency, momentum and purpose, and supports their mental health, wellbeing and resilience. Young people's sense of hope fluctuates as they navigate different contexts, relationships, exchanges and eventualities, and many young people experience occasional feelings of hopelessness. Moreover, the capacity to hope is not equally accessible to all young Australians and targeted efforts are required to bolster the hopes of young people who face heightened disadvantage or who are experiencing mental health challenges. Young people experience hope most intensely when they encounter adversity and they feel agency to transform the conditions or effects of that adversity. While enduring hardship can negatively impact young people's sense of hope, it can also be impetus for young people to identify what matters to them most and, over time, overcoming adversity can fortify their hope and build their resilience.

02

Young people are cautiously optimistic about the future.

Despite the challenges their generation face, young Australians feel relatively hopeful. However, their sense of hope is cautious, tempered by their sense of instability, unpredictability and uncertainty about the future, which stems from living with rapid change and a range of pressing social, political and environmental challenges. Young people are optimistic about achieving their personal goals in the future, but they generally feel less hopeful about the future of society. Many young Australians experience a tension between hoping for positive change and feeling a strong sense of responsibility to enable change, without the means or agency to do so. When young people feel disconnected from the possibility of positive change, it can lead to disillusionment with institutions and political systems, poor wellbeing, scepticism, and anxiety about the future.

03

Young people crave stability in the future. Their ideal future is secure, peaceful, beautifully ordinary and achievable.

Political and economic instability and international conflicts cause young Australians stress, uncertainty and pessimism about the future. Young people are concerned that those in power make decisions that go against the best interests of society, perpetuating conflict and heightening global unrest. In response, young people hope for a peaceful, stable and secure social, political and economic future for society. Addressing the cost-of-living crisis and ensuring access to secure and affordable housing are key policy issues that will enhance young Australians' hope. Young people's personal aspirations are achievable: they hope to do well academically, find meaningful work, be financially secure, have positive relationships, and be happy and well.

04

Young people want to live in a society that is just, kind, supportive and inclusive.

Young people hope for just futures in which the rights of all individuals, regardless of their background, are respected, protected and fulfilled. They hope to live in communities that are kind and supportive, and which have community structures and services in place to ensure that all community members can access the support they need. Witnessing or experiencing social injustice and violations of human rights negatively affects young people's sense of hope. By contrast, acts of kindness – such as individuals supporting one another, being kind, welcoming and inclusive – greatly enhance young people's hope. Young people highlight the need to promote intergenerational understanding and forms of support and care. Seeing their peers participate in social movements and action for positive change online profoundly and positively influences young people's sense of hope, as they encourage collective agency and inspire positive change.

05

Young people hope for urgent climate change and environmental protection.

Many young Australians are distressed by perceived inaction on climate change and believe that, by not taking climate change action seriously enough, the older generations are endangering the viability of their futures. Young people hope to live in a sustainable environment, supported by global cooperation, accountability and care from society and its international, national and community leaders. Australian young people view climate action and environmental protection as a top priority for the nation, and for enhancing young people's hopefulness about the future. Despite perceived inaction, young people continue to hope that action on climate change will be forthcoming. Action to arrest and reverse climate change, ideally formulated and enacted in partnership with young people, is an urgent priority if Australia is to cultivate a society in which young people feel optimistic and secure about the future, and able to realise their hopes.

06

Technology use and development are both a source of optimism and anxiety for young people.

Australian young people recognise the enormous impact of technology use and development in their lives. They hope for an exponential increase in sustainable and ethical technology in their lifetime. Yet, young people are also concerned that rapid technological development is unfolding beyond public scrutiny, and worry that this may result in unintended consequences. The rapid and unregulated development of artificial intelligence is a source of particular anxiety for many young Australians, with many fearing that the careers they aspire to may be replaced by AI. Social media use enables young people to connect with others, to access information, to organise and to take action on issues they care about. It also exposes young people to inspiring examples of perseverance and resilience that foster their hope. However, young people also recognise the ways in which social media sometimes influences negative behaviour and undermines their sense of hope.

07

Social relationships, community groups and hobbies bolster hope in young people.

Hope is deeply relational. Relationships with family and friends have the greatest positive impact on young people's sense of hope. Yet, these relationships can both increase and decrease hope. Efforts to build positive and supportive relationships are essential to young people's thriving. Participation in community groups are essential for belonging and greatly impacts young people's optimism for the future. Increasing avenues for social participation and belonging is essential for young people's wellbeing. Personal hobbies and interests give young people an outlet for creative self-expression, productivity, increased mindfulness and wellbeing. They enable young people to set and achieve goals, fostering self-efficacy, and create opportunities for connection with others, which is essential for supporting hope.

08

Young people feel disillusioned with and disconnected from politics. They want government to take action and include them in decision-making.

Australian young people believe in the values of democracy, but they feel increasingly disillusioned with and let down by political leaders, who they perceive as lacking a long-term vision that accounts for their collective hopes. They also believe political leaders are not taking the necessary action to secure the nation's, or their generation's, long-term best interests. Young people's hope hinges on decisive and effective governmental action on the key social, civic, political, economic and environmental issues they care about. Young people feel deeply undervalued and want to be included in political decision-making. To foster hope in the younger generation, it is critical that governments listen to and act on the perspectives of young people. Political leaders can strengthen young people's sense of hope and inclusion in decision-making significantly by communicating with them transparently and routinely; addressing the issues they care about, strengthening mechanisms for diverse young people to participate in decision-making processes; and improving government accountability to young people.

Recommendations

POLICY

Youth engagement and representation

- Embed genuine, ongoing youth engagement in policy development through co-designed, innovative, and digital approaches.
- Set national benchmarks for youth representation in decision-making, in collaboration with young people and advocacy bodies.
- Activate human rights instruments, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and accompanying implementation guidance at all levels of decision-making.
- Create youth-targeted platforms to involve young people in policymaking and communicate progress.
- Ensure two-way, transparent communication with young people and consistent dialogue.
- Fund long-term and intergenerational policy labs that support co-design between young people and government.
- Support and collaborate with youth-led organisations advocating on social and environmental issues.
- Routinely reflect on how government communicates with and engages young people and implement accountability mechanisms to track impacts.

Equity, inclusion and justice

- Embed inclusion and justice in every stage of policy and program design.
- Encourage diverse young people to participate in decision-making through schools, digital platforms and other outlets they regularly use.
- Collaborate long-term with youth organisations that support diverse and/or marginalised young people to enhance their participation.
- Prioritise policies that strengthen community connections and empower marginalised groups, and which reflect young people's desire for stability, visibility and fairness.

Social and economic security

- Support programs and policies that address financial insecurity, insecure employment and housing affordability.
- Support educators and youth-focused organisations to deliver accessible, free, social and recreational programs and activities.

Climate and environmental protection

- Recognise young people as key stakeholders in climate legislation and programmatic initiatives.
- Support a duty of care bill to protect young people's futures and demonstrate a long-term commitment to reversing climate change.
- Act decisively, and in partnership with young people, on their climate concerns.

Funding and investment

- Invest in youth mental health and wellbeing services with equitable access to digital and non-digital offerings.
- Boost grants and programs that foster hope and equip young people with skills to achieve their goals.

PRACTICE

Programs, services and resources

- Provide accessible resources and tools for young people navigating financial hardship.
- Create safe digital and physical spaces for young people to engage in purposeful activities with peers, family, and community.
- Resource programs to support young people to visualise future goals and build the confidence and agency to achieve them.
- Equip parents and caregivers to have supportive conversations about young people's hopes, goals, and future pathways.
- Invest in co-designed programs and tools with diverse and marginalised young people to foster hope and wellbeing.
- Support ongoing efforts to research, understand and act on young people's insights and experiences.
- Develop community initiatives that respond to young people's priorities.
- Role model positive change by sharing stories of resilience, hope, and perseverance.

Education and advocacy

- Support youth-led advocacy programs and digital campaigns addressing social injustice and inequality.
- Provide education on environmental issues, civic and political processes, advocacy skills, and peer-to-peer learning opportunities.
- Prepare young people for a technology-oriented workforce by equipping teachers with high-quality resources and ongoing training.

Digital technology use, safety and literacy

- Ensure digital platforms and services implement and are held accountable to youth-informed, rights-based principles.
- Develop co-designed online safety, digital literacy, and critical media literacy resources for young people and families.
- Strengthen young people's use of digital technologies to organise and take action on the issues they care about.

RESEARCH

Hope, wellbeing and resilience

- Continue measuring hopefulness in young Australians and its relationship with wellbeing and resilience.
- Explore how young people sustain hope during uncertain times and in response to emerging challenges.

Digital lives and belonging

- Investigate how young people find community and belonging, including through digital means.
- Conduct collaborative research with diverse young people to understand the interconnected issues affecting young people's lives.

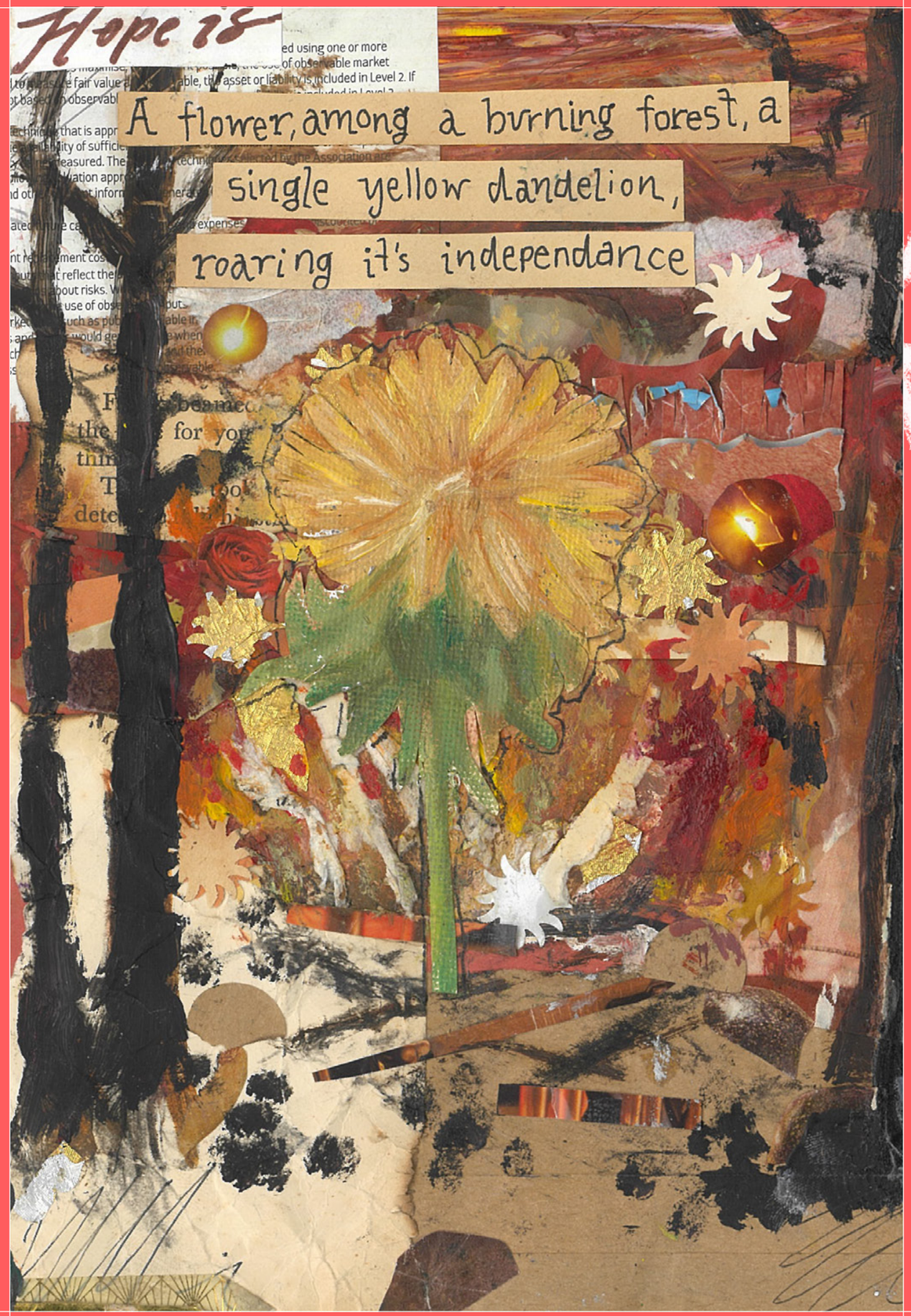
Translation for evidence-informed policies

- Prioritise synthesising existing evidence and develop tools for rapid translation to guide policy and practice.
- Trial mechanisms to weigh evidence and assess the pros and cons of (in)action with interdisciplinary experts.

01

INTRODUCTION

The future is a powerful construct that shapes how different social actors conceive, plan for and respond to both challenges and opportunities here and now.



Introduction

But for young people today, the idea of the future is increasingly fraught and uncertain: how does growing up in times characterised by pandemics, artificial intelligence, climate change, a youth mental health epidemic, under- and un-employment, the rising cost of living, and political polarisation affect young people's sense of the future? And how, in turn, do diverse ideas about the future shape young people's hope, resilience and wellbeing?

Young people's hopefulness and optimism about their future plays a crucial role in supporting them to face challenges with greater resilience (Snyder et al., 2002; Counted & Newheiser, 2024). Hope also plays a moderating role in shaping their short-term and long-term wellbeing (Valle, Huebner & Suldo, 2006). Indeed, hope has been linked with positive attitudes and mental health (Gallagher & Lopez, 2009); life satisfaction; positive health practices; and a sense of purpose in young people (Esteves et al., 2012). Conversely, lower levels of hope are often associated with compromised wellbeing, correlating with increased risk for depression and stress (Snyder et al., 1997; Yarcheski et al., 2011). It is crucial, therefore, to consider the influences that shape hope in young Australians and to better understand how decision-makers, educators, civil society organisations, and parents and caregivers can create the conditions in which the younger generation's hopes can flourish, now and into the future.

This report presents the key findings of a project, which worked with diverse young Australians aged 12 to 19, to explore their perceptions and experiences of hope via 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews; a national survey with 1,002 respondents; and a workshop that used creative and participatory methods with 21 young people to validate the findings and recommendations.

This research investigated young Australians' hopes and aspirations for the future, in relation to the key domains of technology, employment, financial possibilities and pressures, education, health, family, relationships and friendships, and the natural environment. It also explored the implications of young people's imaginings of the future for their wellbeing and resilience.

The research addressed four key questions:

1. How hopeful are young people?
2. What future possibilities do young people hope for?
3. What enhances and undermines young people's sense of hope?
4. What do young people need to foster hopefulness?

Throughout this report we refer to the research participants as young people, aligning with their preferences.[1]

At the end of each key finding, a set of provocations is intended to guide decision-makers to reflect on the implications of this research and to explore practical ways to enhance policy and practice that strengthens and sustains young people's hope.

This report provides recommendations for decision-makers, including governments, policymakers, educators, civil society organisations, parents and caregivers, and researchers, to strengthen young people's hope and agency to build resilient and sustainable futures in which they can realise their aspirations.

[1] We recognise the various definitions of "youth". The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a "child" as below the age of eighteen years. The United Nations defines "youth" as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. The World Health Organization (WHO) more specifically defines an adolescent as any person between ages 10 and 19 (World Health Organization, n.d.). Recent research suggests under 18-year-olds prefer to be referred to as 'young people' (Minus18 Foundation, 2025).

02

METHODS

This project adopted a mixed-methods research design to investigate young people's hope and resilience, the futures young people imagine, and what can support and sustain their hope.

Research Design

The research design comprised a primarily quantitative survey, administered with young people nationwide; semi-structured interviews; and a workshop with young people to interpret and validate the findings and recommendations. This section outlines each of these components in detail.

Taking a youth-centred, co-research approach, the Young and Resilient Research Centre team collaborated with three youth co-researchers to undertake research design, data collection, analysis and reporting. Young people were provided with research training sessions, guidance and mentoring to build their skills in interview techniques, ethical research, thematic analysis and communication of research findings. These youth co-researchers reflect on the process of being involved in this project at the end of this chapter.

01 | INTERVIEWS

15

interviews with 12 - 18 year olds

02 | SURVEY

1,002

responses from 12 - 18s living in Australia

03 | WORKSHOP

21

young people aged 16 - 19 involved in one participatory research workshop in Sydney

01 | Interviews

The research team conducted 15 in-depth, semi-structured online interviews with young people aged 12 to 18 between August and December 2024 (see here for interview guide).

Participants were recruited through the Young and Resilient Research Centre's partner networks, social media advertisements, and prior expressions of interest collected from participants in recent projects. Interviewees came from regional and urban areas of New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia. Eight females, five males, and two non-binary young people took part.

Interviews were conducted by two researchers, one leading and one notetaking, and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Youth co-researchers observed interviews with senior researchers and then subsequently led interviews, with support from a senior researcher.

Prior to each interview, participants were asked to provide a visual – an image, video or photo – that represents their hopes for the future or what helps them to be hopeful. Photo-elicitation techniques were used at the beginning of each interview to set the scene for the discussion and to support young people to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and understandings of hope. Interviews explored young people's short-term and long-term hopes for the future, including their personal hopes and collective hopes for society. Interviews also surfaced young people's concerns about the future, what they feel pessimistic about, and what constrains their sense of hope.

Interviews generated rich qualitative data and were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers and youth co-researchers collaboratively identified and refined key themes. Insights from the interviews informed the design of the survey, to ensure that questions were relevant, youth-centred and engaging. Qualitative insights from the interviews supplemented the interpretation of the survey data.

INTERVIEWS

August - December, 2024

- In-depth
- Semi-structured
- 60 minutes
- Online, via zoom
- One researcher
- One youth co-researcher

8 Female

5 Male

2 Non-binary

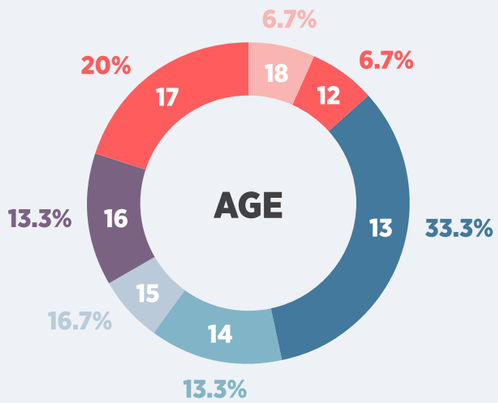


Figure 1:
Age distribution of interview participants.

02 | Survey

A 15-minute online survey hosted on Qualtrics was distributed by StudentEdge, an Australian student advocacy service with over one million student members, between 21st March and 17th April 2025. 1,002 young people aged 12 to 18 from all states and territories across Australia completed the survey.

SURVEY SAMPLE

March - April, 2025

The survey asked...

- How hopeful do young people feel about their future across the domains of health, employment, environment, politics, and technology?
- How can hope be enhanced in young people?
- What are young people's hope for the future?
- What are young people feeling optimistic and pessimistic about?

The survey aimed to...

- Measure young people's hopefulness, wellbeing and resilience using validated scales;
- Identify factors that impact young people's hope, both positively and negatively;
- Identify young people's short-term and long-term, personal and collective hopes;
- Identify what young people prioritise in order to feel more hopeful; and
- Identify priority actions that young people believe may enhance young Australians' hope.

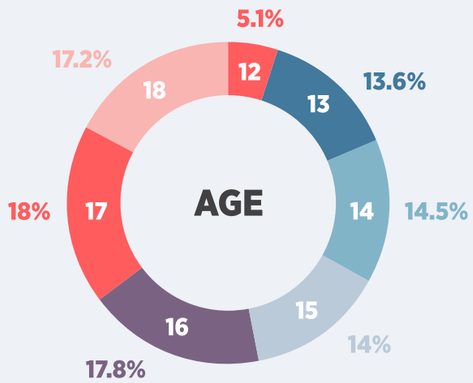


Figure 2:
Age distribution of survey participants.

53% Female

46% Male

1% Non-binary/ other

Drawing on a literature review and insights from interview participants, and youth co-researchers, the survey measures included:

- Three validated self-report psychometric measures:
  - The Kessler-6 scale of Psychological Distress (Kessler et al., 2003);
  - The Children's Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1997); and
  - The Child and Youth Resilience Measure – Revised (Jefferies, McGarrigle & Ungar, 2018).
- Custom-designed Likert scale questions;
- Custom-designed, open-ended response questions; and
- Demographic questions (age, state, postcode, gender identification, cultural and Indigenous background, refugee/ migrant background, and education and employment status).

Please see here for survey questions.

Quantitative survey data was entered into Excel and analysed to infer descriptive statistics, including means, medians and frequency distributions. Qualitative survey data from open-ended responses was analysed thematically using NVivo.

Survey sample

1,002 young people aged 12 to 18 completed the survey.

Age

Most respondents were aged 16-18: 17-year-olds (n=180, 18%), 16-year-olds (n=178, 18%) and 18-year-olds (n=172, 17%). The average age was 15.09 years.

Gender

- 53% (n=529) identified as girl/woman/female;
- 46% (n=464) identified as boy/man/male; and
- 1% (n=9) identified as non-binary, used a different term to describe their gender, or preferred not to answer.

State

Young people from all states and territories completed the survey. Comparing the survey sample to estimated data on the distribution of young people across states and territories (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021), young people living in NSW and Western Australia were slightly overrepresented in the survey cohort, whilst young people living in Queensland, Victoria, Northern Territory, and Tasmania were slightly underrepresented (see Table 1). The survey sample for young people in South Australia and the ACT is representative of the national youth population. Given the survey sample is not strictly nationally representative, the findings may not accurately reflect the full range of views or experiences of young people in Australia.

Education and employment status

745 respondents reported being in full-time study (74%). 18% of respondents were working casually, while 9% were working part-time. 6% of respondents were working full-time, while 5% of respondents reported neither working nor studying. 4% were undertaking part-time study.

Languages spoken at home

302 respondents (30%) spoke languages in addition to English, or other than English, at home, including: Hindi (10%), Cantonese (8%), Mandarin (6%), Arabic (5%), Bengali/Bangla (4%), Chinese (3%) and Malayalam (3%).

Refugee and migrant background

22% of the total sample (n=219) identified as migrants. 12 young people identified as refugees, and one identified as asylum seeker.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background

60 respondents (6% of the sample) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples in the 10–18-year-old age group make up 5.9% of the national population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022).

30%
spoke languages other than English at home.

22%
identified as migrant background.

6%
identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

State representation

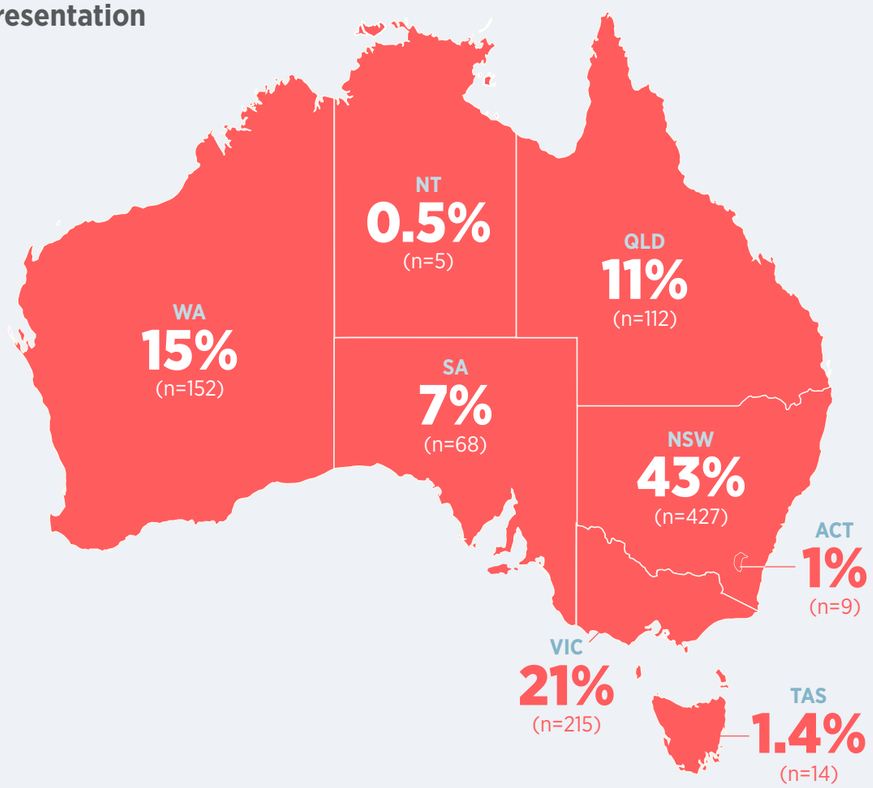
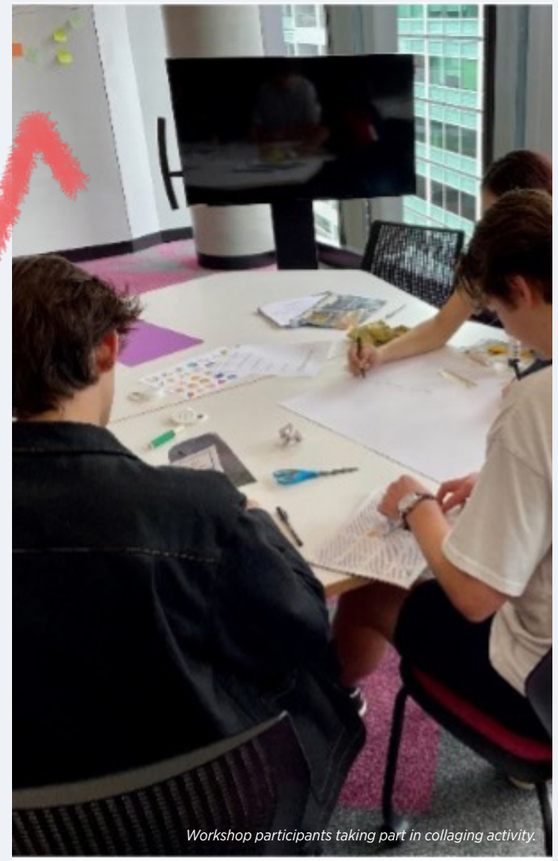


Table 1: Survey sample state/territory distribution

State	Count	Survey sample %	Estimated distribution of youth population % (ABS, 2021)
NSW	427	43%	-31%
VIC	215	21%	-27%
QLD	112	11%	-21%
ACT	9	1.9%	-1.8%
NT	5	0.5%	1.0%
TAS	14	1.4%	-2.0%
WA	152	15%	-10%
SA	68	7%	-6.8%

Participatory workshop

Drawing on creative and participatory methods (Cahill, 2007), one three hour research workshop with 21 young people aged between 16 and 19 was conducted in Parramatta, Western Sydney, after interview and survey data collection had been completed. This workshop further explored young people's hopes, expectations and concerns for the future across key domains: education, employment, environment, health and wellbeing, technology and politics and democracy. Young people were asked to create visual collages of their ideal future scenario in each domain and to discuss the barriers to and enablers of their ideal futures. The research method of collaging engages young people to convey their insights and experiences using visual, verbal and metaphorical language, which generates meaningful data about young people's aspirations (Hosseini, 2024). Findings from the workshop were used to validate preliminary interview and survey insights and draft recommendations.



Workshop participants taking part in collaging activity.

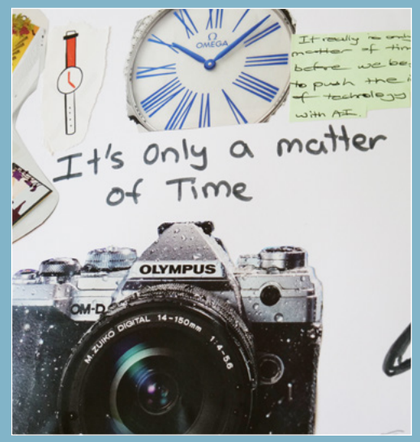
Workshop participants taking part in group discussion.

Youth safeguarding and ethics

This study received approval from Western Sydney University's Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: H15624) and followed the Young and Resilient Research Centre's longstanding Safeguarding Children in Research Policy. Survey data was received anonymously, and no personally identifiable information was collected. The survey, interviews and the workshop were designed in accordance with a strengths-based approach and explored young people's hopes and aspirations for the future, rather than their concerns or experiences of adversity.

The tone of the survey conveyed a sense of care for participant wellbeing and acknowledged the difficult emotions that might surface when asking young people to think about their hopes and the future. The survey provided links to 24/7 youth mental health support services and participants were encouraged to reach out to these services if completing the survey caused them distress. Participants who indicated high levels of distress on the Kessler-6 scale were automatically presented again with these support services. Participants in interviews and workshops were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and they could decline to take part in the workshop or any of the activities at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, along with parental/guardian consent for participants who were under the age of 18.

Collages created by workshop participants representing their ideal futures.



Project on a page

2024

MARCH

Project establishment

- Research aims established.
- Literature review undertaken.
- Ethics application submitted.

JUNE

Youth co-research onboarding

- 3 youth co-researchers recruited and trained.

AUG - DEC

Interview data collection

- Interview guide developed with input from youth co-researchers.
- 15 interview participants aged 12-18 recruited through Y&R networks and consent obtained.
- Youth co-researchers observe and note-take during interviews led by research officers.
- Youth co-researchers lead interviews with support from senior researchers.
- Transcripts generated and cleaned.
- Short video developed outlining findings from interviews and shared back to participants.

2025

MAR-APR

Survey data collection

- Survey instrument refined using insights from interviews and input from youth co-researchers.
- Online survey in field to StudentEdge's online platform of young people. 1,002 responses collected.

MAY

Participatory workshop

- A 3 hour face-to-face creative, participatory workshop held with 21 young people in Parramatta, Western Sydney, facilitated with youth co-researchers.

JAN-MAY

Data analysis

- Youth co-researchers provided with qualitative analysis skills training.
- Qualitative data from workshops and interviews coded and analysed using textual and visual analysis techniques. Qualitative survey data analysed thematically in nVivo.
- Quantitative survey data analysed.
- Co-analysis sessions with team to agree and refine key themes.
- Analysis summaries produced by youth co-researchers.

MAR-JUL

Reporting

- Write up of final report.

Youth co-research: Exploring young people's hope and resilience, with young people

Aliet's reflections

"As a young woman of colour whose community is often underrepresented in research, being a youth co-researcher gives me the opportunity to actively participate in research."

"Being involved in this project has given me more of an appreciation for research and why it is such an important part of policy and decision-making for young people.

As a young woman of colour whose community is often underrepresented in research, being a youth co-researcher gives me the opportunity to actively participate in research. Participating in this project gives me hope that young people like myself can be heard and represented on issues faced by our society.

Being able to initially observe, and take notes for, some of the interviews made me realise how critical it is to be adaptable and flexible, particularly when a participant is more reserved. This approach creates a safe space for the participant and allows them to open up and give rich responses.

I learnt about the ethical considerations involved in research, such as the importance of ensuring that participants understand the purpose of the interview and how their responses will be used in the research project, how to maintain the participant's privacy and protect their personal information.

I am grateful for the team I have worked with and the amount of support and new learning I have been able to gain. It has allowed me to become more confident in this line of work that I did not think was possible for myself.

The critical thinking, adaptability, data analysis, research ethics and communication skills that I have developed throughout the project give me the confidence and hope that I can apply these skills and learnings in any professional work.

My recommendation for researchers would be to continue giving young people the opportunities to be part of research projects."

Fiona's reflections

"The co-research approach emphasises the importance of involving young people not just as participants, but as equal collaborators in the research process, which has made my involvement feel meaningful and impactful."

"As a youth co-researcher in this project, my experience has been both empowering and enlightening. The process of engaging in research alongside academic researchers has allowed me to actively contribute to data collection, analysis, and the overall development of the project.

I gained a deeper understanding of the research process through this approach and further developed communication and problem solving skills. It has allowed me to appreciate the importance of social research in contributing to change, especially when the research is driven by the perspectives and experiences of young people themselves. It has also highlighted the steps we can all take to ensure research is conducted with respect and authenticity to promote the voices of young people, whether during dissemination or data analysis.

The project also has helped me develop a stronger sense of agency and confidence. Working alongside the team enabled me to contribute meaningfully to knowledge production and sharing, and to recognise how youth perspectives can influence research outcomes and objectives. For example, being involved in data analysis allowed me to develop a nuanced understanding of the data and the emerging patterns to uncover what hope means for young people.

Youth co-research is such a valuable experience that empowers young people to think critically and analytically about social issues and take action. It is important to build a respectful environment for this collaboration, and young people should be recognised as equal partners in the research process with their input encouraged during all stages of the project and their contributions taken seriously. This process is a mutual learning experience. As many young people may not have experience in research, providing training sessions on research methods, ethics, and data analysis can equip youth co-researchers with the skills needed to contribute effectively and feel supported in their roles. On the flip side, young people bring fresh perspectives to research and to navigate challenges.

Researchers should be open to new ideas and ways of thinking that may challenge traditional methods or assumptions."

Danya's reflections

"A thought that stuck with me is that hope isn't naivety, but instead strategic, and this enabled me as a young person to understand how hope is the blueprint young people use to build the future they deserve."

"Being a youth co-researcher on this project has been a deeply transformative experience. Over the past few months, the opportunity to lead interviews, interpret data, and contribute to developing key findings allowed me not only to elevate the voices of young people, but to also understand how hope operates as both a personal force and a public necessity. A thought that stuck with me is that hope isn't naivety, but instead strategic, and this enabled me as a young person to understand how hope is the blueprint young people use to build the future they deserve.

This project made clear that social research isn't abstract, but that it shapes the everyday. Whether it's transport access, climate justice, or youth inclusion, the data we collect today becomes the policy that impacts young people's lives tomorrow. To me, this work demonstrates why early, ongoing youth involvement is critical to building systems that reflect the lived realities of diverse communities.

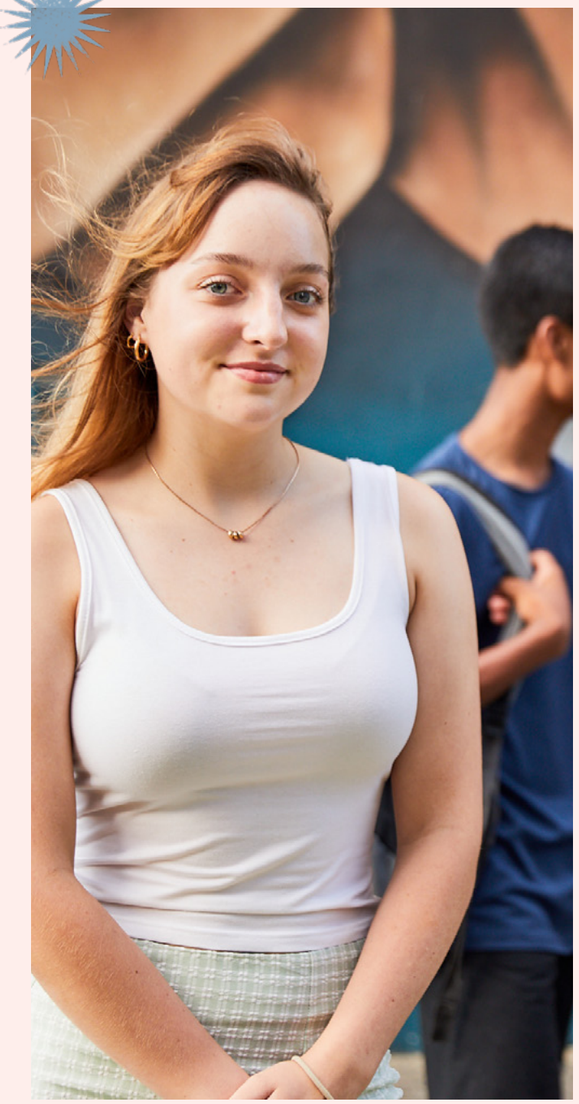
As a student aiming to work in health policy, doing co-research has allowed me to witness evidence-based research as the necessary bridge between lived experience and real change. This study goes beyond understanding what young people are and aren't hopeful about, underlining key drivers that spring these thoughts into young people. Throughout this project, young people offered clear, grounded insights—not because they're idealistic, but because they're already navigating the challenges our systems must learn to address."

03

KEY FINDINGS

KEY FINDING 01

Hope is critical for young people's mental health, wellbeing and resilience.



Reflecting previous research (Valle, Huebner & Suldo, 2006; Gallagher & Lopez, 2009; Esteves et al., 2012), this project found that **hope fuels young people's momentum and purpose and supports their mental health, wellbeing and resilience**. Most survey participants strongly agree or agree (81% combined) that hope inspires them to pursue goals, and the majority strongly agree or agree that hope is important for mental health (78% combined). Those young people who were surveyed acknowledge the important role of hope in building resilience and optimism:

- 82% strongly agree or agree that 'hope helps me to be more resilient'
- 80% strongly agree or agree that 'hope helps me maintain a positive outlook on life'
- 81% strongly agree or agree that 'hope helps me take positive action when I'm facing challenges.'

For young people, a strong sense of hope is a future-oriented, purpose-building powerhouse. Hope drives young people forward with momentum, enabling them to build futures of their own design.

> *"Well, I mean, hopefulness, that's kind of what we're working towards... Hope kind of produces purpose, and without purpose what are we here for? So, I think hope is very important. Hope for a good future, hope for a career, hope for a family. If we can't hope for these things, if we have nothing to hope for, then what's the point of living this life, of going further?"*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 16, WA**

> *"If you're hopeful, if you really think about it, there's so many things that will come into play in the future that will positively impact everyone around us. And it'll be just so beautiful."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 16, VIC**

> *"Humans smiling together... That's what hope feels like for me."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 13, QLD**

81%

of survey respondents strongly agree that hope inspires them to pursue goals.

78%

of survey respondents strongly agree or agree that hope is important for mental health.

82%

of survey respondents strongly agree or agree that hope helps them to be more resilient.

80%

of survey respondents strongly agree or agree that hope helps them maintain a positive outlook on life.

81%

of survey respondents strongly agree or agree that hope helps them take positive action when facing challenges.

Reflection from Aliet, Youth Co-researcher

"Hope is important to me as I view it as a driving force or resource that allows me to have encouragement, a desire, and positive outcome for the future. Hope helps me during times of adversity, stress, or uncertainty in life. Hope often fuels that strong desire for a positive outcome that you cannot see but because I feel it so strongly and can picture it, it often pushes me to not lose sight of the outcome I desire. Therefore, hope is a strong coping mechanism to not lose sight of the future I desire."

At the same time, this research found that **young people's sense of hope is volatile, fluctuating as they navigate different contexts, relationships, exchanges and eventualities**. While they feel a strong sense of hope at times, challenges and personal hardships can dampen young people's sense of hope. If hope gives momentum, losing hope constrains their momentum, and can make young people feel stuck, stagnant or adrift, affecting their sense of purpose and agency, and leaving them feeling like their lives and their futures are outside their control. Indeed, other research has shown that a lack of hope compromises young people's wellbeing (Snyder et al., 1997; Yarcheski & Yarcheski, 2011).

> *"Not being hopeful would mean to me that I've lost purpose, and I've lost the will to live essentially, because I feel, with hope, you will have a quality life. And without hope... it's hard to sustain a will to live, because what is there to look forward to?"*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 16, WA**

The survey found that 20% of young people have a probable serious mental health condition according to Kessler-6 distress scale scores, which is consistent with previous research measuring mental health in young Australians (McHale et al., 2024). For those experiencing mental health challenges, hope is critical in the recovery process (Leamy et al., 2011).

The survey results also show that **many young people experience occasional feelings of hopelessness**. Young people's self-reported scores on the Kessler-6 scale found that 1 in 4 young people report feeling hopeless some of the time over the last 4 weeks, with almost 1 in 3 feeling hopeless a little of the time. Other research has found that specific groups of young people consistently feel less hopeful than others, including those who have had contact with the justice system, those feeling financially insecure and LGBTQIA+ young people (Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, 2022). **These insights suggests that the capacity to hope is not equally accessible to all young Australians (see also Hage, 2003) and that targeted efforts are required to bolster the hopes of young people who face heightened disadvantage or who are experiencing mental health challenges**.

Losing hope fuels young people's feelings of pessimism and anxiety and can significantly affect their mental health and wellbeing. One participant in particular expressed how, when hopelessness descends, their sense of the future recedes.

> *"When you feel not hopeful, it really freezes you in the present... You can only see what's in front of you and what's in the present and/or look back at the past and things that could have changed, but you don't see change as a possible factor... And you feel a sense that all you have is now and you wish you changed things in the past or you should have changed things. But that implies that you have no control over the future, that you don't have that agency to affect change - which is a scary place to be [in] and I think that definitely exacerbates my anxiety... It can spiral and, when you start not feeling hopeful... You start to be more pessimistic and you can struggle and isolate yourself and then be in a position where you were worse than before mentally."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 18, NSW**

This research also foregrounded that **hope is a resource that is experienced most acutely when young people encounter adversity and they simultaneously have some purchase on being able to transform the conditions or effects of that adversity** (see **Figure 3**). In this respect, the strength of young people's hope is indexed to their experiences of adversity. When young people are relatively comfortable and are able to envisage their desired futures playing out, their hopes assume a lesser intensity. By contrast, when young people confront forms of adversity but see no pathways to change, adversity becomes overwhelming and diminishes their hopes. But, when young people experience adversity alongside a sense of agency to enact the necessary change, their hope comes into play at peak intensity.

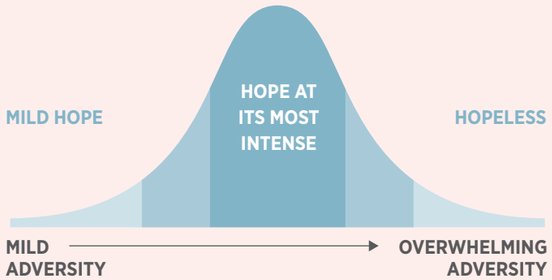


Figure 3:
Hope is experienced most acutely when young people encounter adversity.

Hardships can negatively impact young people's sense of optimism and wellbeing in the present, especially when they perceive that their views are not taken seriously; when they are not connected to decision-making; or when they cannot meaningfully influence outcomes. However, encountering obstacles, challenges, fears or worries may cause young people distress but does not always diminish their hope. Rather, challenging experiences can inspire young people to identify their hopes for positive outcomes or change.

> *"Me and my friends who are girls are worried about Trump getting into office because they could ban abortions in America, which could lead to us having them banned here in Australia... So that's why we have collective hope that Kamala wins, because we're collectively afraid of Trump... Even if the worst case scenario did happen, we would still have hope to fight for our rights back... [All hope wouldn't be lost]. I think you'd have to find it and you'd keep fighting and make sure that those things don't happen here."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 17, NSW**
>
> *"Seeing how the vote went in America, and seeing these videos on social media about how even women were like, 'Women don't deserve to be Presidents' – that was really upsetting, but knowing there could be change is something that I hope for."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 16, VIC**
>
> *"[The future] is a bit daunting, but I'm... excited. The excitement outweighs the fear just a little bit, which is where I think hope comes from."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 18, WA**
>
> *"When everyone [in my family] is together, arguments tend to happen and then I feel miserable, but I also hold hope that one day it won't be like that."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 16, WA**
>
> *"I don't think [the] economy will be that stable in the next 10 years, but I am still hopeful."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 14, SA**

As long as young people can perceive possibilities for transformation, and their anticipation of improvements in the future outweighs their concern about the obstacles, traversing adversity can strengthen their hope. This finding underscores the importance of addressing the issues young people believe are important, and of engaging them in the decision making that affects their everyday experiences (see Key Finding 8).

66.4

was the average score of survey respondents on The Child and Youth Resilience Measure Revised scale, 85 is the highest score, indicating greater resilience. This suggests that overall, our cohort of participants are fairly resilient. One interview participant highlighted Australians' resilience to challenges, such as cost of living pressures, noting how people calibrate their hopes to their changing contexts:

> *"I feel like whether it takes a turn for the better, or whether it takes a turn for the worse, I could imagine many Australians getting used to the new normal, getting used to the new lives that they live. And whether it's an improvement or a decline, I can imagine people surviving and thriving, no matter what conditions are thrown at us... With increasing costs of living, people are surviving, people are still enjoying themselves and finding new ways to enjoy themselves with less money to spare. So, no matter which way Australia turns, financially or socially, I can see Australian people still having hope and still having the capacity to enjoy themselves into the future."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 16, WA**

Participants in this research identified that, **over the long term, successfully enduring and overcoming hardship fortifies their hope and builds their resilience**. Young people reported that experiencing challenges equips them with the knowledge and self-belief they need to enact positive change and to realise their hopes. Young people also noted that navigating uncertainty can support their personal growth, especially when they confront adversity with a positive attitude.

> *"In terms of... my personal experience, experiencing hardships decreases your hopefulness, decreases your optimism, but I think it's the ability to pull through that and... find your way back out of the hardship that increases it again."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 17, VIC**

> *"I think when you go through hardships and you look back on them, you realise that... I survived this. I came out of this so much better than I was before, so anything that comes my way is going to be okay. I think on a personal level you need to struggle to get to hope because... It's so easy to be pessimistic and give up."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 17, NSW**

> *"A positive attitude means I can get through adversity. Having a positive attitude instils me with confidence which gives me hope."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, SA, migrant background**

Insights surfaced in other research demonstrate that hopefulness supports young people to face challenges with greater resilience (Snyder et al., 2002; Counted & Newheiser, 2024). Considering the role of hope in fostering wellbeing and resilience, and conversely, the detrimental impact of hopelessness, **it is incumbent on decision-makers and youth and health services to develop strategies and interventions to support and sustain young Australians' sense of hope, particularly for those who are marginalised or experiencing mental ill-health**.

Key takeaways

01

Hope fuels young people's agency, momentum and purpose, and supports their mental health, wellbeing and resilience. When their capacity to hope is compromised, young people feel stuck, pessimistic and anxious.

02

Young people's sense of hope fluctuates as they navigate different contexts, relationships, exchanges and eventualities, and many young people experience occasional feelings of hopelessness.

03

The capacity to hope is not equally accessible to all young Australians. Targeted efforts are required to bolster the hopes of young people who face heightened disadvantage or who are experiencing mental health challenges.

04

Hope is a resource that is experienced most acutely when young people encounter adversity and they simultaneously have some purchase on being able to transform the conditions or effects of that adversity.

05

Hardships can negatively impact young people's sense of optimism and wellbeing in the present, especially when they perceive that their views are not taken seriously; when they are not connected to decision-making; or when they cannot meaningfully influence outcomes.

06

Experiencing adversity can also provide opportunity for young people to identify their hopes. Over the long term, enduring and overcoming hardship fortifies their hope and builds young people's resilience.

Provocations

- How can educators, parents and caregivers, and civil society organisations support and empower young people to visualise and achieve their goals?
- What programs, initiatives, services and digital supports must government, civil society organisations and businesses seed to support young people's hope and resilience?
- What policies can ensure young people have equitable access to resources and services that support their capacity to hope, and their mental health and wellbeing?
- How can decision-makers best work with young people to implement actions that support young people's sense of purpose?
- What steps can education, wellbeing and healthcare services take to strengthen marginalised or disadvantaged young people's hope and resilience, including those experiencing mental health challenges?

KEY FINDING 02

Young people are cautiously optimistic about the future.

Despite the uncertainty and challenges their generation faces, we found that young Australians feel relatively hopeful. Results from survey responses to the Children's Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1997), which measures an individual's self-reported level of hope based on goal-directed thinking, found that almost half of those surveyed (46%), feel 'slightly hopeful,' and one third (33%) feel 'moderately hopeful' (see **Figure 4**). A smaller proportion surveyed (19%), feel highly hopeful. Encouragingly, very few young people (3%) report complete hopelessness or very low levels of hope. The survey also found the vast majority (78%) feel either very or somewhat hopeful about being 'able to live the life I want to live' in the future. Only a small proportion (5%) do not feel hopeful at all about living a life they want in the future.

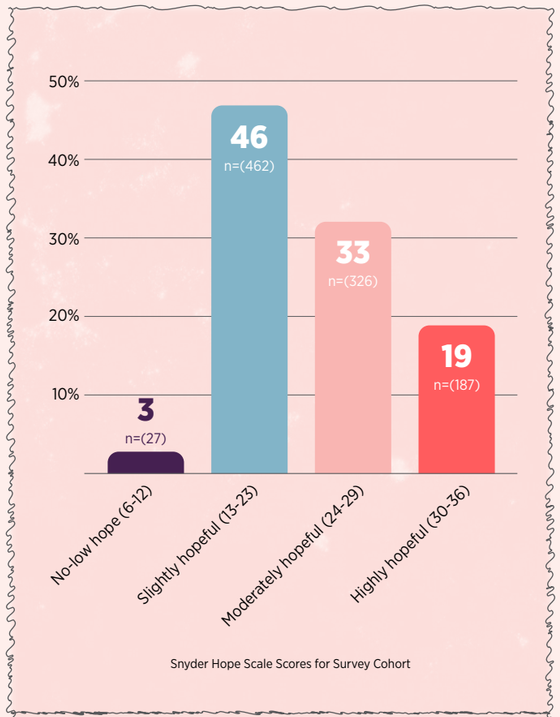


Figure 4:
Survey respondent's Children's Hope Scale Scores (n=1,002).

46%

of survey respondents feel 'slightly hopeful' according to Children's Hope Scale scores.

33%

of survey respondents feel 'moderately hopeful' according to Children's Hope Scale scores.

Our findings suggest that setting goals and self-efficacy greatly enhances young people's hope. Having goals, plans to achieve these, and believing in their abilities, gives young people motivation, confidence and hope that they will succeed. Short-term goals, such as doing well at school, feel within young people's control, giving them a sense of certainty and agency about their personal futures. See more in Key Finding 3.

> *"I think for me, having a little bit of certainty about what my future might look like is helpful. Like having a concrete kind of plan of what I want to do in year 12. What I want to do beyond that. I think it gives me a little bit of hope."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 17, VIC**

> *"The truth is, if you put like your mind and your heart and everything that you have into that thing then slowly, you gain that hope that, 'Yes, I can achieve this and I can do this'. So, even though you find challenges, it's important to keep that hope and that sense of like, 'Yes, I can do this'. And then I think that will help you to achieve that particular goal."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 14, NSW**

Interview participants also conveyed optimism and hope for their futures. They told us they feel excited about new possibilities and future opportunities, which fuels their hope. Similarly, past research surveying young Australians has found many feel optimistic and positive about their future (Maire et al., 2023; McHale et al., 2024).

> *"When I look at the sky, I... think of the different possibilities and impossibilities and... what could be out there. So, it gives me that hope that there's just something out there and I want to find out what it is."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 14, NSW**

> *"I would love to educate those younger than me. And I think that makes me hopeful. That makes me really excited and just... knowing that there's so many things I could do. I have so many opportunities... That makes me really hopeful."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 16, regional VIC**

> *"Yeah, I'm pretty hopeful about [my future in a years' time]... I've just started saving my money, and actually it feels pretty good. And that might, I don't know... contribute towards something in the future... So [I'm] pretty hopeful."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 13, VIC**

The survey and interview findings show young people feel hopeful about achieving their study, employment, social and health goals. Most feel either 'very hopeful' or 'somewhat hopeful' about finding meaningful work, getting a good education, having good friendships and healthy family relationships, and having good physical and mental health in their lifetime (see **Figure 5**).

> *"I think on a personal level, starting year 12 today... I'm feeling kind of hopeful... I feel organised, I'm achieving the things I want to be achieving at this stage in my life."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 17, NSW**

> *"Yeah, I feel hopeful for the next 10 years. I have a plan. I want to be a marine biologist!"*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 12, VIC**

> *"I feel like one of the things I'm quite hopeful for is my career in the future. I feel like I'm setting up my education for a good career. And I feel hopeful for the relationships I'll keep in the future. I feel like I'll have a good support system of friends and family."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 15, VIC**

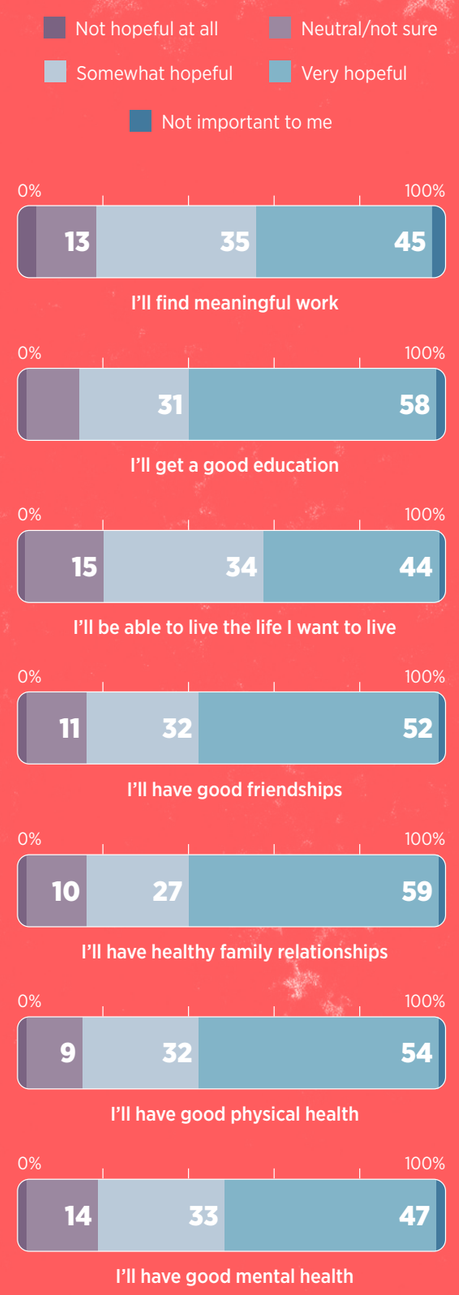


Figure 5:
How hopeful young people feel about achieving personal goals in the future (n=1,002).

The majority of young people also say their goals feel achievable and within their control (see **Figure 6**) and that they are 'somewhat likely' to happen. Feeling in control of one's future contributes to young people's sense of optimism and hope (Snyder, 1994, p. 113). However, fewer young people surveyed believe these achievements are 'extremely likely'. This indicates that, whilst young people are feeling relatively optimistic about the future, their sense of hope is tempered by caution.

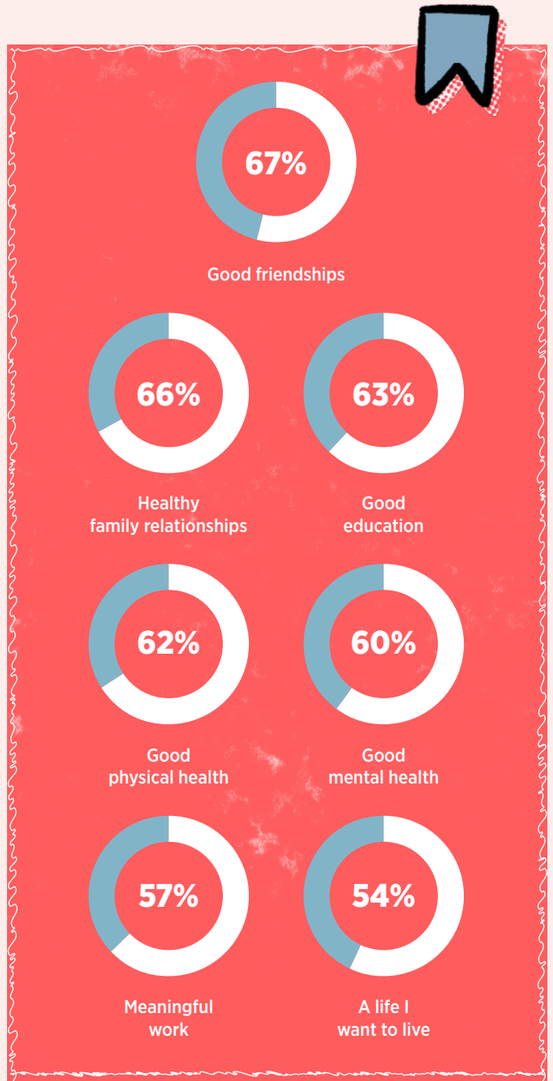


Figure 6:
Proportion of survey respondents who feel like they have a lot or great control over aspects of their personal futures (n=1,002).

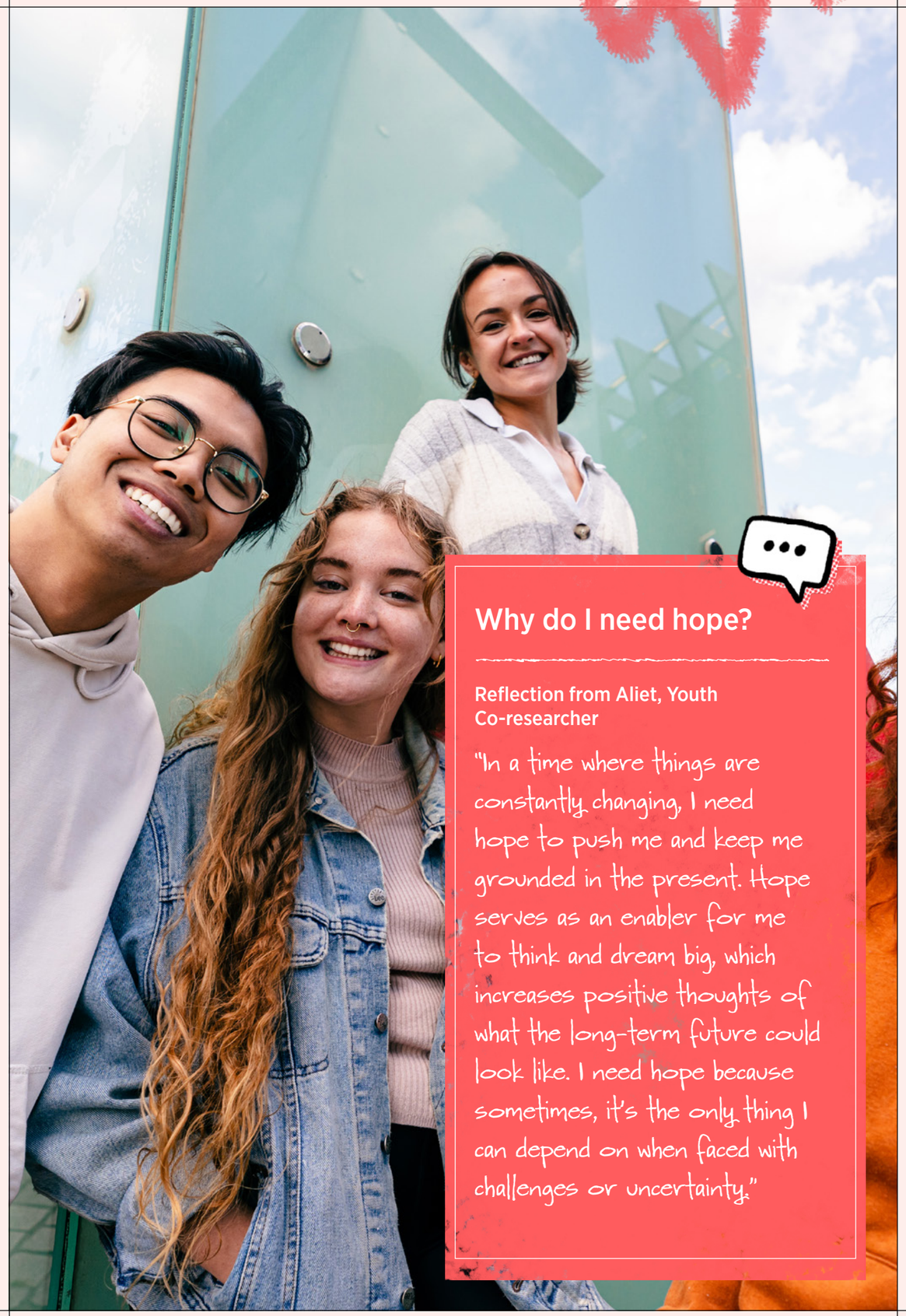
Young people acknowledge that the future, particularly in the long term, is unpredictable, unstable and distant, and attribute this to rapid changes in society and current social, political and environmental challenges. Other research shows that uncertainty hinders young people's ability to feel secure and contributes to poor mental health (Schweizer, Lawson & Blakemore, 2023). Many interview participants indicated that their sense of uncertainty and anxiety co-exists with their sense of optimism.

> *"I'm really happy with my friendships, my connections, where I am, [how] I'm doing with school. But on a large scale, I'm really scared about the global situation."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 17, NSW**

> *"When people ask, "Hey, how hopeful are you about what happens in the future?" I'm just, like, "Oh, I wouldn't really know," because decisions are happening really fast. And things can change really fast... and the government's always just making [quick] decisions."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 13, VIC**

> *"I would like to have a nice house, maybe a nice partner, still have lots of friends, dogs and hobbies and a job that I can enjoy... or tolerate, I guess. In reality, I'm not too sure how that will play out. Yeah, I don't know... I just don't usually think too much about it. It's kind of like I'll just go with whatever's coming... I kind of live in the moment. Yeah, I'm not 100% sure what will happen."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 13, VIC**

> *"I do feel quite hopeful... I [definitely] have concerns... about what my life will actually look like. I have the belief that it will be okay and that we cope and we move on, and that's the spirit of young people in our generation right now. But things like... finding the money to pay for rent, finding a rental, paying for groceries, those sorts of practical, pragmatic issues, I think that's what concerns me and can sometimes dim my hopes a little bit."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 18, WA**



Why do I need hope?

Reflection from Aliet, Youth Co-researcher

"In a time where things are constantly changing, I need hope to push me and keep me grounded in the present. Hope serves as an enabler for me to think and dream big, which increases positive thoughts of what the long-term future could look like. I need hope because sometimes, it's the only thing I can depend on when faced with challenges or uncertainty."

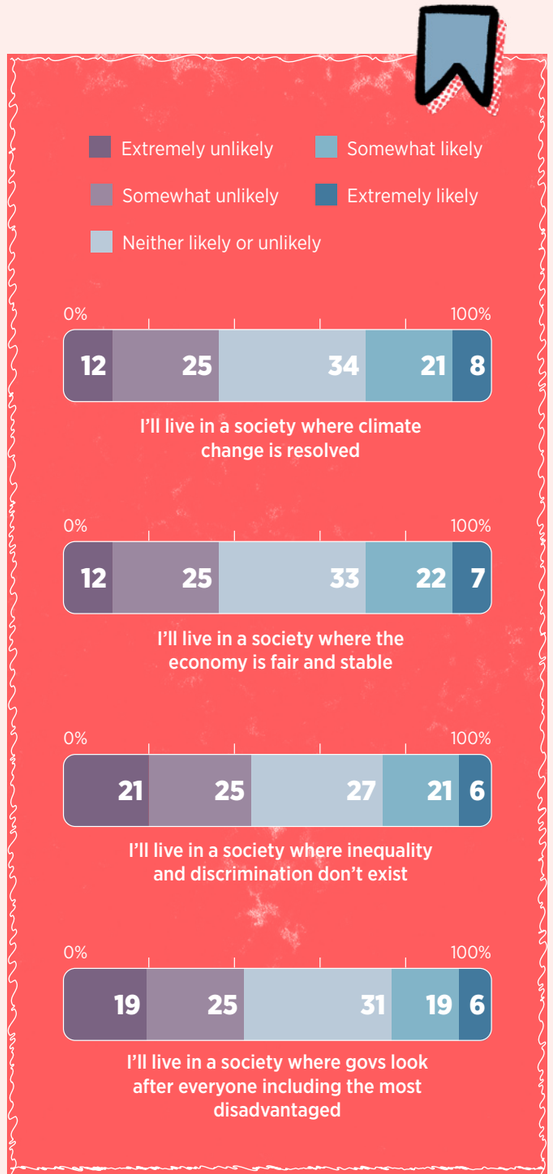


Figure 7:
How likely young people think positive social changes will happen within the next 10 years (n=1,002).

Similarly, recent analysis of 50,345 young Australians' entries to a writing competition found that, between 2010 and 2023, young people expressed increasing concern for the future. Researchers observed "strong sentiments of hope, but also of anxiety and fear" (Collin et al., 2025, p. 45). Additionally, young Australians' positivity about the future appears to be declining. The proportion of young Australians who feel positive about their future has fallen from 71% in 2012 to 56% in 2020 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021).

Whilst young people in this study are fairly positive about their own personal futures, they generally feel less hopeful about the future of society. The survey results found a quarter of young people are pessimistic about the likelihood of positive changes happening in society within the next 10 years. A quarter of young participants think it is somewhat unlikely that they will live in a society where the economy is fair and stable; where climate change is resolved; where inequality and discrimination do not exist; or where political leaders/governments look after everyone, including the most disadvantaged (see **Figure 7**). Other studies have found that 29% of young people are pessimistic about Australia's future and more than half (53%) are pessimistic about the future of the world (Maire et al., 2023). **Young people in this study feel they have less control over positive changes happening in society, in comparison to the sense of control they feel over their personal futures** (see **Figure 8** vs **Figure 6**).

For many young people, there is a tension between hoping for positive change and feeling a strong sense of responsibility to enable change, without the means or agency to do so. This perceived inability to intervene meaningfully can result in disillusionment and frustration with existing systems. Some young people are concerned that societal and environmental challenges will remain unchanged, and their optimism is contingent on whether these structural issues will be addressed. Many young people reported experiencing mixed feelings – of optimism and hope, and of scepticism and frustration – about their future.

"I don't know about climate change... We've been saying we need to do something, and no one's been doing anything."

Interview participant, non-binary, 17, VIC

"[Discrimination] stills exists, the world says we've progressed so much, but we haven't."

Survey participant, 16, female, NSW

"[I hope to see] actual change and progress [on climate change]. I feel like now it's just all talk and no action."

Survey participant, 18, female, NSW

Figure 8:
Proportion of survey respondents who feel like they have a lot or great control over positive societal changes happening (n=1,002).

Key finding 02

Key takeaways

01

Despite the challenges their generation faces, young Australians feel relatively hopeful.

02

Young people express a cautious sense of hope that is tempered by their sense of instability, unpredictability and uncertainty about the future, which stems from living with rapid change and a range of pressing social, political and environmental challenges.

03

Young people are optimistic about achieving their personal goals in the future, but they generally feel less hopeful about the future of society.

04

Many young Australians experience a tension between hoping for positive change and feeling a strong sense of responsibility to enable change, without feeling like they have the means or agency to do so.

Provocations

- How can governments, civil society organisations and businesses best equip young people to manage and navigate uncertainty? What forms of support and guidance do young people most need?
- What resources do policymakers need to allocate to programs that build young people's optimism to persevere through uncertainty?
- How do decision-making processes need to transform to better orient to the needs of young people and to ensure policies and programs build on young people's strengths and support them to realise their aspirations?
- How can governments engage young people as active agents in processes of positive social, economic and environmental change?
- What structures, processes and resources are required for decision-makers to partner with young people to explore and create opportunities for positive change in their lives and communities?
- How can policymakers, parents and caregivers, and businesses role model positive change for young people?
- What further research and consultation with young people is required to understand how they sustain hope during times of uncertainty, and what mechanisms will best facilitate this?

KEY FINDING 03

Young people crave stability. Their ideal future is secure, peaceful, beautifully ordinary and achievable.

Young people are living and growing up against the backdrop of global unrest and conflict. Current wars in the Middle East and Eastern Europe (both escalating during data collection for this project), the unknown impacts of these, and concerns about the threat of future conflicts, cause fear and anxiety for many involved in this study. This **global instability erodes young people's hopefulness**.

> *"And I look at Afghanistan, and I look at the Middle East, and there's so much war, and there's so much hate in this world, and it drives you down, and it doesn't make you hopeful. And it doesn't make you feel like things will go your way."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 16, VIC**

> *"If there's, like, another World War III then that's going to ruin everybody's future... it doesn't give me hope... [That's] something I'm really worried about and not hopeful for."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 14, NSW**

> *"[I'm] not very hopeful [about the future of the world]... All the wars like [in] Ukraine and Russia, that's not going away anytime soon. Israel and Gaza, and all the other[s]."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 13, VIC**

Indeed, many surveyed feel the actions of world leaders are driving international conflicts. **Young people feel that those in power make decisions that go against the best interests of society, perpetuating conflict and heightening global unrest rather than resolving these things**. Global politics and the actions of world leaders have serious consequences for young Australians' sense of hope: 38% of survey respondents say global politics decrease their hope and, for 36%, world leaders decrease their hope.

> *"[When] I see some of the bad things that happen in the world because of politics, it makes me lose hope."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 14, NSW**

> *"Trump is yet again a moron who creates tension between other leaders."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, WA**

> *"There's a lot of world leaders that are clearly causing trouble right now."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, VIC**

Many young people interviewed express concern about the rise of radicalised and/or polarised politics, particularly in reference to President Donald Trump's administration in the United States. Interviews were conducted in the months leading up to the 2024 US election, while the survey was conducted in the months following President Trump's election to office. **Our participants were worried that new political leadership internationally could lead to the infiltration of policy decisions by sexism and misogyny, and policies which diminish the rights of women and immigrants**. For some, these international policy agendas deeply impact their sense of hope, and drive concerns about potential political and social implications for Australia.

> *"This is going to sound very political, but Trump being in the presidential office, that doesn't sound very good for the future."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 13, VIC**

> *"The recent presidential election in the US [has made me feel less hopeful]. That is something that [has] definitely kind of thrown my hope, because, unfortunately, Australia is kind of a follower to American society and American values. And I feel like those values are going to change very drastically with the recent election."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 16, WA**

> *"I see the current political landscape in America... and it's just really upsetting to see all of that. And a part of me worries about that political ideology affecting the politics in Australia... I worry about the world and how the political landscape in the US is just getting worse and worse for women, worse and worse for immigrants, and anyone who's disadvantaged."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 16, VIC**

> *"[Global politics decreases my hope because] Trump's influence is harming the world, especially by leading a global trend of conservatism."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, VIC**

> *"Watching reproductive rights stripped away makes me feel like progress is slipping away."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, QLD, Aboriginal**

Faced with these concerns, **young people hope for a politically stable, peaceful world**. When thinking about their hopes for broader society in the next year, most commonly, those surveyed hope for world peace. They hope for international collaboration, eased tensions, and resolution of war and conflict. They also hope to see the pain and suffering associated with conflicts internationally arrested.

> *"[I hope for the] wars and conflicts in the world going on right now to end."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 13, VIC**

> *"[I hope for] the world [to] take a moment to understand each other and just stop fighting. Act in a civil manner when working with one another and keep their promises."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 17, WA**

> *"I hope things get less politically chaotic in the world."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 18, NSW**

> *"[I'm] hoping for a stable world and hoping the world will have great leaders. No more Trump!"*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 14, NSW**

Young people are also experiencing the effects of economic instability. One third of survey respondents (33%) say the economy decreases their sense of hope. **Many identify rising costs of living and unaffordable housing as key concerns that contribute to their heightened pessimism about the future**. Faced with the ever-rising cost of food and housing, young people worry that they will not be able to live independently, or to support themselves – or their families – in the future. These findings align with recent research revealing that the cost of living is the number one concern for young Australians (McHale et al., 2024), and that young people believe this is one of the most pressing issues facing Australian society (Dockery et al., 2025). Considering that money and housing concerns escalate stress, sleeplessness, lack of motivation and mood changes (ReachOut, 2023), enhancing young people's sense of hope and wellbeing depends on addressing these issues.

"When you don't know when you're going to next be able to buy food or when you're going to be able to afford the bare essentials... that is immediately going to stifle hope and that is incredibly difficult when you don't know what is coming next... The idea of not potentially having somewhere to live and that being the reality for so many people and that they can get kicked out of a rental and... [they] just have to cope, that is quite daunting."

Interview participant, female, 18, WA

"The cost-of-living crisis is something I think about probably too much for a 17 year old. It just seems like growing up has become impossible. Like, getting to be a certain age and have a certain life seems unrealistic now."

Interview participant, female, 17, NSW

"Seeing that the economy is... all over the place – it doesn't give me any hope of getting a stable job or house security."

Survey participant, male, 16, WA

"We are in an economic crisis. I cannot afford food."

Survey participant, female, 17, VIC, refugee background

"Financial struggles and inequality make it hard to see brighter days ahead."

Survey participant, female, 18, QLD, Aboriginal

"The economy is becoming more and more impossible to live in. How am I supposed to buy a home? Or, more specifically, a home big enough for the family I want to have, but might not even be able to afford?"

Survey participant, female, 18, NSW

"I'm so worried that in the next 10 years, like in 5 years, maybe, I won't be able to move out of my mum's house... I'm worried about finding rent."

Interview participant, non-binary, 16, VIC

On top of this, young people are not hopeful about positive economic change. Over one third of young people (37%) surveyed think it is either somewhat or extremely unlikely that they will live in a society where the economy is fair and stable within the next 10 years. **Two thirds of young people also do not feel they can influence economic issues**: 27% believe they have no influence at all, and 30% believe they only have a little influence over efforts to ensure a fair and stable economy.

"In the current world landscape and the threat of war, I don't think that the economy will improve."

Survey participant, male, 18, NSW

"The economy will never be fair and stable. It's just getting worse and worse."

Survey participant, female, 18, QLD

Experiences of adversity give young people cause to identify their hopes (see Key Finding 1). Given current challenges to economic stability and financial security, it is not surprising that these issues dominate young people's hopes for the future. **Economic stability and financial security are survey participants' most common hopes for both Australia and international societies in the next year**. In particular, many hope that costs of living will decrease, particularly those associated with food and housing. They also hope for Australia and the rest of world to have a stronger and more stable economy, with reduced inflation and lower interest rates. **When asked what is the most important factor supporting the hope of young people in Australia, secure and affordable housing was the number one response** (see **Figure 9**).

"I hope prices for anything in Australia have a normal non-exorbitant price."

Survey participant, male, 15, NSW, migrant background

"For Australia, I am hoping that inflation goes down and that house prices go down a lot."

Survey participant, female, 16, NSW, migrant background

"[I hope for] less struggle to afford the basic food shopping in Australia."

Survey participant, female, 13, SA

"I hope I can have a home in Australia."

Survey participant, male, 13, NSW

"[I hope for] more houses to rent cheap."

Survey participant, female, 12, NSW

What are the most important things you want to see happen to make young people in Australia feel more hopeful?

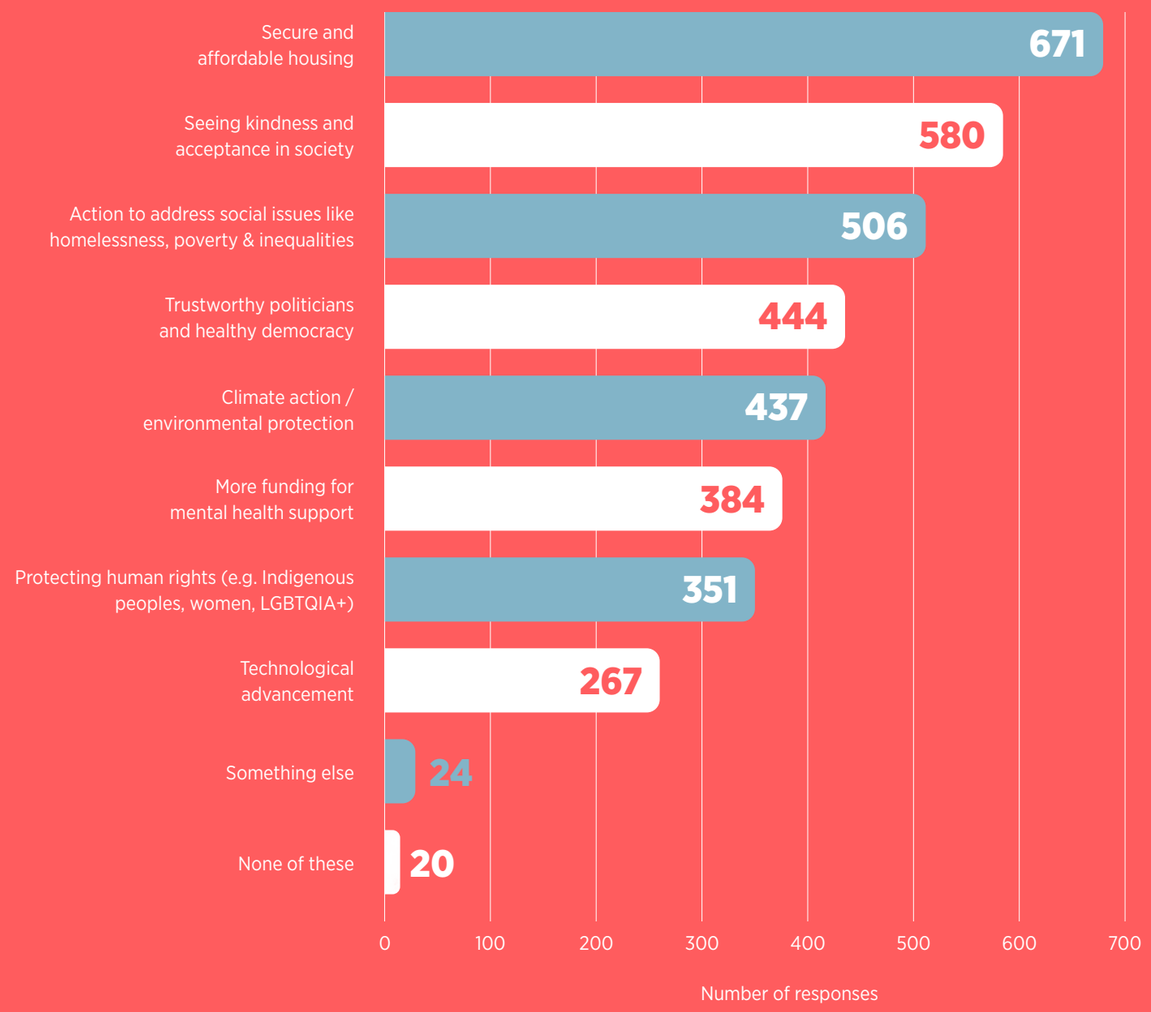


Figure 9:
The most important matters survey respondents want to see addressed to enhance hope in young Australians (n=1,002) (respondents could choose up to five).

Young people are hoping for normalcy[2] and stability in their personal futures. Many have 'everyday' goals. They want to learn and succeed academically to support their study and career pathways. They want good, meaningful and fulfilling jobs where they can make a difference, and which enable them independence and financial security. They want positive relationships with friends, family and partners, and strong connections with their community. Put simply, **young people's hopes are beautifully ordinary: They want to be happy and well in the future**.

"I want to have a job and I want to come home and cook dinner. And there's so many things I'm looking forward to and I can't wait to go to uni. I can't wait to learn and keep learning... I want to keep on learning for as long as I humanly can.

Interview participant, non-binary, 16, VIC

"I'm hopeful about my grades, because it means I can get into year nine... So that's basically what I'm trying to go for. If I can get into that, then I can get a better education, and if I could do that, that can increase my chances of getting an even more professional job."

Interview participant, male, 13, WA

"I'm really, really determined to get into law, get my degree, finish my degree, start working."

Interview participant, female, 17, NSW

"[I hope to] become more financially stable."

Survey participant, female, 18, WA, migrant background

"[In the future I would like] maybe a nice partner, [and to] still have lots of friends."

Interview participant, male, 13, VIC

"I want to have a family... and make connections in the community."

Interview participant, non-binary, 16, VIC

"I want to be in a place where I feel loved and happy and secure and safe."

Interview participant, female, 18, WA

[2] Here, it is useful to remember that the cohort of young people who participated in this research would have been deeply impacted by public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key takeaways

01

Political and economic instability causes young Australians stress, uncertainty and pessimism about the future. Young people are concerned that those in power make decisions that go against the best interests of society, perpetuating conflict and heightening global unrest. In response, young people hope for a peaceful, stable and secure, social, political and economic future.

02

Political decisions made overseas directly impact Australian young people's hopes for and anxiety about the future. They are concerned that social and political agendas in countries such as the United States may greatly influence Australian government and society, leading to policies and attitudes that undermine human rights.

03

The cost-of-living crisis is the one of the leading issues impacting Australian young people's futures. Young people are worried they will not be able to access basic necessities for themselves or their families in the future. According to young people, access to secure and affordable housing is one of the most important issues for the government to address.

04

What young people are hoping for is achievable, which is all the more reason to listen to them, take them seriously, and work with them towards positive change.

Provocations

- How can governments act to deliver on all young people's basic needs and assure them that their future is secure? How can governments best communicate progress towards this goal to young people?
- What transformations in decision-making processes will ensure that policies and initiatives are driven by the long-term best interests of young people?
- What is required to activate a rights-based approach that upholds young people's rights to safety and protection, education, health and social security in policy and practice that affects young Australians?
- What structural reforms, investments and community-based strategies are required to strengthen economic security for young people and their families experiencing disadvantage?
- What accountability mechanisms are needed to identify, address and provide remedy when young people's rights and needs are infringed or ignored?

KEY FINDING 04

Young people want to live in a society that is just, kind, supportive and inclusive.

In a time of escalating global unrest and divisive international policies and leadership, Australian young people are facing increasing exposure to polarising social and political views (Collin et al., 2025). Research shows that young Australians care deeply about their communities and society and are concerned about trends towards social and political polarisation (Collin et al., 2025).

Participants in this project demonstrated a deep sense of care for the collective. They want to live in a society that recognises the rights of all individuals, regardless of their age, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, neurotype, socio-economic status, faith, or cultural background. **Young Australians want to live in communities that are kind and supportive, and they want community structures and services in place to ensure that all community members can access the support they need**.

Reflection from Danya, Youth Co-researcher

"One standout finding for me from this research is that young people want to live in a just, kind, and inclusive society. This desire speaks to a deeper yearning for equity, respect, and belonging. It reminds decision-makers that policies cannot just focus on economic outcomes or institutional efficiency—they must prioritise fairness, social cohesion, and the lived experiences of youth."

Young people reported that their sense of hope is deeply and negatively affected by witnessing or experiencing social injustice and violations of human rights. Our participants were particularly sensitised to discrimination experienced by women and minority groups, such as LGBTQIA+ and culturally and linguistically diverse people. They told us that witnessing hatred, discrimination and negative attitudes in society greatly decreases their sense of hope. They feel disheartened and less optimistic for the future when they observe inequality and behaviours and actions that undermine the rights of particular groups in society.

> *"Yeah [there are things in wider society that decrease my hope about the future]... like, things that are just totally fuelled by hate, like, anti-LGBT groups... Groups that are against people's fundamental human rights to exist, like anti-abortion groups... Hate in general makes me less optimistic."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 17, VIC**

> *"[I hope for] less discrimination against different races in the world."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 17, WA, migrant background**

> *"[I hope for] equity between men and women, [for the] world."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, ACT**

> *"[I hope for the] world to be free from discrimination."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 15, VIC**

> *"[I hope] to end racism worldwide."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 13, QLD**

> *"[In the future I] want to fight for women's equal rights."*
>
> **Workshop participant, female, NSW**

> *"[I hope for] better women's rights. The domestic abuse situation in Australia is horrendous."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 17, NSW**

Young people are critical of discrimination and social injustice in the world at large, but also at home in Australia. They are particularly concerned about the inequalities Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience. **Young people aspire to live in a society that respects, protects and fulfils the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and enables equality for all**.[3]

> *"I hope Australia becomes a less racist country and is more equal."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 15, WA**

> *"In Australia, I hope that society starts treating everyone the same rather than having double standards."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, NSW, migrant background**

> *"[I hope for] increased rights for First Nations people."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, QLD, migrant background**

> *"In Australia I hope [Aboriginal] and Torres Strait Islander peoples get more of a voice in parliament."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, VIC**

Consequently, **young Australians hope for a just future in which all members of society have their basic needs met, and in which every citizen, regardless of their background, can not only survive but thrive.** To achieve this, they highlight the need for 'action to address social issues like homelessness, poverty and inequalities' (see **Figure 9**, p. 61), and to strengthen community and belonging.

> *"[I hope that] world hunger [is] solved."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 17, NSW**

> *"[I hope for] no homelessness in the world."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 14, SA**

> *"When I think about what I would be hopeful for the world to look like, I'd want... simple things: That everyone has a roof over their head; that everyone has enough food; [that] they have a community around them; and [that] they have enough water."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 18, WA**

[3]We note here that one important context for the prominence of young people's concerns about addressing inequalities experienced by First Nations communities may be the October 2023 defeat of the proposal to amend the Australian constitution to establish a 'Voice to Parliament' representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In general, young people are hoping for a more caring, kind, compassionate, loving and respectful society. They want decision-makers to strengthen unity among members of society, which they currently perceive as more divided than united.

> *"[I hope for] respect [to] others for the world."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 17, ACT**
>
> *"[I hope] that people can get along better and live happily in the world."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 13, VIC**
>
> *"[I hope for a] more friendly and less divided society in the world."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 18, WA**
>
> *"[I hope for a] kind and safe community."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 14, VIC, migrant background**
>
> *"[I hope that] people treat each other with respect and genuine love."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 16, WA**

Survey respondents and interview participants reported that **witnessing acts of kindness – such as individuals supporting one another, being kind, welcoming and inclusive – greatly enhances their hope** (see **Figure 9**, p.61) and makes them feel optimistic about the future. Some interview participants characterise mateship, fairness and inclusivity as national cultural values, and they say these qualities make them feel proud to be Australian.

> *"As a society we are quite resilient. And we don't take ourselves too seriously and there's a culture of helping each other out... That's something I'm really proud of to be an Aussie. Fairness and equity are really important to me. I think that Australia [has] quite a welcoming culture. And I think that is really important to maintain."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 18, WA**
>
> *"[People doing] good inspires hope in other people... I feel hopeful for [those] people who support others and are kind to other people."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 13, WA**
>
> *"People standing up against discrimination [gives me hope]."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 17, SA**
>
> *"People being kind to each other and standing up for injustice [gives me hope]."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 17, VIC**
>
> *"I get harassed for being queer in public, so it makes me happy that people stand up for my relationship."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, WA**

Importantly, **young people also highlight the need to promote intergenerational understanding and forms of care**. Many survey participants indicated that, if adults were kind, empathetic and understanding towards young people, making an effort to understand their needs, rights and ways of being, this would considerably strengthen young people's sense of hope. Young people want to feel emotionally supported, cared for and shown love and compassion. They are calling on adults to be there when they need them; to have their back; and to provide constructive and proactive support. And they want adults to role model hopeful mindsets for young people.

> *"Adults should be more empathetic and supportive towards young people instead of writing us off."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, NSW**
>
> *"Apart from building confidence, [adults should] just show [young people] love."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 15, QLD**
>
> *"[Adults,] tell [young people] that you're always there for them."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 13, VIC, migrant background**
>
> *"[Adults should] ask if [young people] are okay and if they need to seek help; or maybe just talk to them and they'll express their feelings which could lift their burden."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, NSW, migrant background**
>
> *"Adults themselves need to be hopeful in order for young people to be hopeful."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, TAS**

Young people believe in their generation

Although young people feel a disproportionate burden to solve the problems they have inherited (Third et al., 2024a), many are holding on to hope that their generation will enact the change they want to see in society. They believe their generation can create a better future.

> *"I feel fairly hopeful about the future. I know that my generation [has] been handed a world that needs a bit of fixing up and improving. But... I see all the work that's being done to improve these issues and [to] raise awareness. And I think if the young people and those people just moving into careers now begin to start developing those technologies and helping [to] improve those issues, within 30 [or] 40 years, I can see a world that is a lot more harmonious and... with less struggles overall."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 16, WA**
>
> *"I'm hopeful... I really think there's so many people who are young in Australia who really care about everyone around them and really care about the environment and the world around us."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 16, VIC**
>
> *"The passion and creativity of my generation inspire hope for innovative solutions to societal challenges, as younger individuals often advocate for change and progress."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 13, QLD, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander**

Above all else, **young people feel hopeful about the future when they see their peers speak up on issues they care about and take collective action to advocate for a just and inclusive future**. Research shows youth-led activist groups build collective hope through shared goals, a sense of community, belief in democratic participation and courage to act (Nairn et al., 2024). Others have found high school students engage in political campaigns on social media as deliberate acts of citizenship (Collin, 2015) when they are otherwise locked out of political systems (such as voting) due to their age (Di Martino, 2024). Similarly, this research found collective action – or 'connective action' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) enacted through networks online – inspires young Australians' hope as it demonstrates that others share the same concerns and care about the world and, importantly, will work together to create the change they want to see. A total of 38% of survey participants say that social movements (e.g. School Strike for Climate, #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo) increase their sense of hope, as they enable engagement and collective agency, promote anti-discrimination and contribute to creating a better society.

> *"[Social movements and campaigns] can significantly increase a sense of hope because they represent collective action and the power of people coming together to create change. When individuals unite for causes like social justice, equality, environmental sustainability, or human rights, it shows that society is capable of standing up for what's right. Successful movements and campaigns can drive real-world policy changes, raise awareness, and inspire others to take action, creating a ripple effect that fuels optimism for a better future."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, VIC**

> *"People kind of realising what's happening and trying to do something about it [inspires my hope]... Speaking up about [issues that I care about]... makes me feel hopeful."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 12, VIC**

> *"The amount of people that are advocating for change that are young like me, I think that's really inspiring."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 18, WA**

> *"The climate change activists... give me hope, because when I see that I think well, at least they care about it. They care about the future."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 13, VIC**

> *"Things like... picking up rubbish, starting a campaign for climate change or... little things just keep me hopeful that there are still lots of good people."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 14 VIC**

> *"[Social movements and campaigns] show that we as humans [are] able to connect to fight for a bigger cause."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 17, WA, migrant background**

> *"Social movements increase my sense of hope because they show the power of collective action in fighting for justice and equality."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 16, NSW, migrant background**

Although most young people feel encouraged by collective action for social justice, a minority are critical of social movements or campaigns, as they believe these can be sources of manipulation, polarisation, marginalisation of certain groups to favour others, or are simply ineffective.

> *"I definitely agree with the goals of these movements, but just seeing the way it's been executed (violent protests and lighting things on fire and destroying properties etc) as well as [the] responses (media portrayal, police violence etc) just makes me feel so sad that not much actual progress is being made."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, NSW**

> *"[Social movements/campaigns] feel a little extra sometimes, like sometimes it is a good thing, but at other times it's unnecessary."*
>
> **Survey participant, prefer not to answer, 16, NSW**

How hopeful do young people feel that...

they will live in a society where inequality and discrimination don't exist.

29%
of survey respondents feel very hopeful;

26%
feel somewhat hopeful;

21%
are unsure or not hopeful at all.

they will live in a society where political leaders/governments look after everyone including the most disadvantaged.

28%
of survey respondents feel very hopeful;

25%
feel somewhat hopeful;

21%
are unsure;

20%
are not hopeful at all.

Key takeaways

01

Young Australians hope to live in communities that are kind and supportive, and which have community structures and services in place to ensure that all community members can access the support they need.

02

Witnessing or experiencing social injustice and violations of human rights negatively affects young people's sense of hope. By contrast, acts of kindness – such as individuals supporting one another, being kind, welcoming and inclusive – greatly enhance young people's hope.

03

Young people hope for just futures in which the rights of all individuals, regardless of their background, are respected, protected and fulfilled.

04

Young people highlight the need to promote intergenerational understanding and forms of support and care.

05

Seeing their peers participate in social movements and action for positive change online profoundly and positively influences young people's sense of hope.

Provocations

- What changes are required to align diversity, equity and inclusion policies with young people's expectations about upholding and protecting the rights of all citizens?
- What changes can governments implement to transform diversity, equity and inclusion policies to empower marginalised groups?
- What actions and accountability mechanisms can governments implement to ensure that policies lead to positive social, cultural and material change?
- What strategies and resources will best support youth-driven collective action to create positive social change?
- How can digital technology be harnessed to best support collective action for better societies?
- What resources can decision-makers allocate to co-design programs that support skills development and spaces for intergenerational connection, communication and collaboration?
- How do current laws, systems and institutions need to transform to be fair and equitable?
- How can young people and civil society organisations best be empowered and supported to call out and address discrimination, violence and injustice?
- What steps can be taken by policymakers to centre young people's concerns about injustice in current debates and action plans?

KEY FINDING 05

Young people hope for urgent climate action and environmental protection.

Australian young people are increasingly concerned about, and affected by, climate change. Many feel the effects of the worsening climate in their local communities and everyday lives (Third et al., 2024a; Kennedy et al., 2024).

In recent research exploring young people's perceptions of climate change, young Australians depicted their ideal futures as comprising a protected natural ecosystem and a clean landscape, and safe access to the outdoors (Third et al., 2024a). So too, the present research found that **young people derive hope from the natural environment**. When asked, in the survey, to describe how they envisage hope, approximately 60% of participants' responses featured a thriving natural world. Their descriptions included sunshine penetrating darkness; a sunrise over a calm ocean; a tree standing strong through the test of time; a seedling growing in a crack in the concrete; a blue sky; birds singing; and so on. This suggests that, for many young people, the natural world is a source of peace and happiness, symbolising life, new beginnings and opportunities.

Protecting the planet is key to fostering young people's sense of hope. **Survey participants reported that climate action and environmental protection is one of the top five most important actions impacting young people's hope** (see **Figure 9**, p. 61) **and they urge decisive action from leaders and members of society**. Indeed, other research indicates that 86% of young Australians consider global warming a key voting issue (Dockery et al., 2025).

A collage created by workshop participants depicting their ideal future for the environment.

Young people hope to live in a sustainable environment with less pollution and waste. **They are calling for increased global cooperation, accountability and care from society and its leaders, internationally, nationally and locally, to urgently address climate change**.

> *"I hope that over the next year, we see more meaningful progress on climate action, particularly in the areas of renewable energy adoption and sustainable practices. This is something I hope for both globally and in Australia, given how crucial it is for everyone to contribute to a healthier planet."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 15, NSW, migrant background**

> *"With climate change being an ongoing crisis, I hope to see more impactful global actions towards sustainability. This could mean more investment in renewable energy, better conservation efforts, and a global push to reduce waste."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, QLD**

> *"[I hope] that climate change [will] be taken more seriously worldwide."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 17, WA, migrant background**

> *"Maybe, if we all help the climate, we will live better and save everyone in the future."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 14, QLD, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander**

> *"[I hope for] stronger policies to help combat climate change, urgently."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 18, NSW**

At the same time, reflecting previous research, this research found that **many young Australians are distressed by perceived inaction on arresting and/or reversing climate change, by actors in Australia and around the world** (Third et al., 2024a). Research participants worry that inaction on climate change will negatively affect their long-term futures, as well as the futures of their children and grandchildren. They want to see government, community leaders and broader society step up and take urgent action on climate issues. Indeed, they believe the next generation deserves nothing less.

> *"The continued slow pace of global climate action makes me worry about the future of the planet. Despite clear scientific evidence, too many governments and corporations are still not taking the bold actions needed to address the crisis, which can lead to irreversible environmental damage."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 15, NSW, migrant background**

> *"[I feel] a little bit less hopeful for the world, because I know that, obviously, we don't have the most sustainable practices. So, sometimes I wonder what will happen if global warming gets worse and what kind of future I will have if that continues to get worse."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 15, VIC**

> *"I think the climate should be everyone's number one concern. Like, there literally isn't a future for the world if, you know, world leaders don't do better."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 17, VIC**

> *"I think one of the things I feel worried or sad about is what I'm going to continue living with... especially in terms of how the world is – like, nature and climate change."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 15, VIC**

> *"Climate change is killing our planet. Gen Z who [were] born into a world exploited by previous generations deserve better. My future kids deserve better."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 17, NSW**

Young Australians' concerns about the climate are exacerbated by what they perceive as differing attitudes within the community. Specifically, **young people are deeply concerned that the older generation are not taking climate change action seriously and are placing the viability of their futures in peril**. This reflects other research, which shows that young Australians are acutely conscious that they bear a disproportionate responsibility for arresting and/or reversing climate change; that many young Australians are much more concerned about the changing climate than their parents and grandparents; and that they are frustrated by the older generation's lack of action on climate change (Third et al., 2024a).

In the present study, **young people expressed particular concern – and disillusionment – with corporate greed globally, which they see as a key driver of the climate crisis.**

> *"All of this greed about coal... It's just like: what about the world? What about all of the bushfires? All that wildlife that's being hurt? All of those homes? All of the people who have lost everything?"*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 16, VIC**

> *"[We] sweep issues under the rug that are really important and things that we aren't dealing with properly."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 18, WA**

> *"I feel hopeless for those who just don't care."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 13, WA**

> *"Especially with America... their corporate stuff is much more "I want to expand and expand and expand"... Fast fashion companies [are] definitely not the best for the world, because they're producing so much at a time. But it's really ruining the environment."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 14, NSW**

> *"The only thing [politicians] care about being green is their money."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 13, NSW**

Nonetheless, **most young people persist in the hope that action on climate change is forthcoming**, with the majority of survey participants indicating they are very hopeful (26%) or somewhat hopeful (29%) that they will live in a society where climate change is resolved, compared with 24% who feel unsure and 14% who are not hopeful at all (see **Figure 10**).

Their hopes for a sustainable world notwithstanding, many young Australians surveyed feel they have no (20%) or little (31%) influence over climate change. Noting the ever-increasing impact of climate change on their lives, interview participants repeatedly expressed frustration and concern over inaction on the worsening climate. Young people's frustration is significant, because research shows that feeling powerless to influence issues they care deeply about negatively impacts young people's sense of hope and wellbeing (Snyder, 1994).

> *"And yeah, I don't know about climate change... Like, we've known about this sort of stuff for years. And we've been saying like, we need to do something, and no one's been doing anything."*
>
> Interview participant, non-binary, 17, VIC

> *"I believe that people are just harming the world... I think the goals we set are not achievable, the net zero sort of thing... So, I don't think we're doing what is best for the world, so that makes me slightly worried for the future."*
>
> Interview participant, male, 13, WA

> *"One of the primary concerns for me when I think about climate change [is that] there aren't enough people that have enough power to be able to make change in those areas."*
>
> Interview participant, female, 18, WA

These findings suggest **that climate action, ideally formulated and enacted in partnership with young people, is an urgent priority if Australia is to cultivate a society in which young people feel optimistic and secure about the future, and able to realise their hopes.**

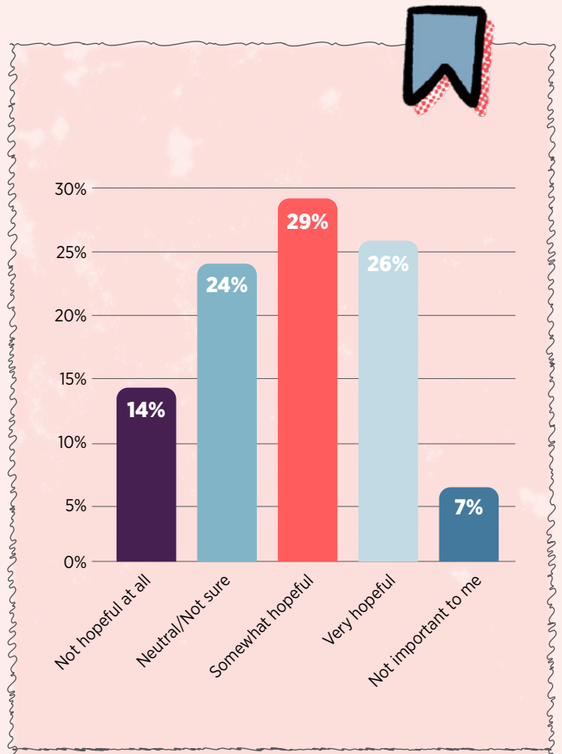


Figure 10:
How hopeful are you that you will live in a society where climate change is resolved? (n=1,002).

Key takeaways

01

Young Australians derive hope from the natural environment, which represents peace, optimism, opportunity, and new beginnings.

02

Young people hope to live in a sustainable environment, supported by global cooperation, accountability and care from society and its international, national and community leaders.

03

Australian young people view climate action and environmental protection as a top priority for the nation, and for enhancing young people's hopefulness about the future.

04

Many young Australians are distressed by perceived inaction on climate change and believe that, by not taking climate change action seriously enough, the older generation is endangering the viability of their futures.

05

Despite perceived inaction, young people continue to hope that action on climate change will be forthcoming.

Provocations

- What resourcing is required from governments to better support youth-led climate organisations and integrate their ideas and concerns into national and international dialogues?
- What mechanisms are required to enable local, state and national governments to best collaborate with young people to develop long-term environmental and climate action plans that articulate young people's hopes?
- What steps need to be taken to implement an ecosystemic approach to climate action that aligns government and business agendas with young people's hopes and needs?
- What can various levels of government do to actively contribute to strategies and actions that bolster young people's sense of hope that positive environmental change is possible?
- What strategies can educators be supported to implement to ensure young people have the knowledge and skills they need to advocate for and take climate change action?
- What processes can governments deploy to develop long-term roadmaps and action plans that centre young people's rights and hopes, keep actors accountable and empower agents across society, including young people, to work towards environmental goals?
- What accountability mechanisms would ensure that the disproportionate burden of climate change on young people is appropriately addressed?
- What can be done to better understand the economic costs of inaction and to make these costs visible to decision-makers?

KEY FINDING 06

Technology use and development are both a source of optimism and anxiety for young people.

Young people are living and growing up in a time of accelerated technological transformation. The rapidly evolving technological landscape offers many opportunities for the future but, as with any form of rapid change, it is also accompanied by deep uncertainty.

A collage created by workshop participants highlights young people's mixed feelings about the influence of technology on future society. It represents the safety and privacy concerns young people associate with technological development, as well as the opportunities they imagine technology affords for access to and quality of healthcare and transportation (see **Figure 11**).

Figure 11:
Collage created by workshop participants illustrating their imaginations of technology in the future.

Australian young people are hopeful and excited about the possibility that technological transformation offers them a future beyond their imagination. They hope for the advancement of sustainable technologies, so they become more affordable and accessible. Their hope that technological advancement will positively impact society is also reflected in survey results, with participants reporting that climate technologies (42%) and biomedical technologies (43%) in particular increase their sense of hope.

> *"I think I'm feeling quite hopeful [about the future because] I think there's going to be a really, really big difference and we're going to be living in a different whole new world with so much technology, so many advancements. So, I think I'm pretty hopeful for the future and I'm really excited to see what's coming up next."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 14, NSW**

> *"Hopefully, electric vehicles become a bigger technological [development]. Hopefully, more sustainable options become more accessible to the average person."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 17, VIC**

> *"I hope for a future where technological advancements are harnessed for the benefit of all, with a focus on sustainability and ethical considerations. This includes responsible AI development, equitable access to technology, and solutions that address environmental challenges. Ideally, this means technology helps to bridge gaps, rather than widen them, and that Australia is a leader in ethical and sustainable tech."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 16, WA**

Their optimism about technological development notwithstanding, **many young people also report concerns about the ways that technology is encroaching on everyday life**. They worry, for example, that the juggernaut of artificial intelligence (AI) is unfolding beyond the scrutiny of the public and that a lack of comprehensive regulation may lead to unintended impacts on society. They are also concerned that new technologies are ushering in a culture of intensified surveillance, and that these implications are not being taken seriously enough.

> *"It really is only a matter of time before we begin to push the limits of technology with AI."*
>
> **Workshop participant, aged 16-19, NSW**

> *"The use of drones for surveillance illustrates the danger of the unrestricted development of technology."*
>
> **Workshop participant, aged 16-19, NSW**

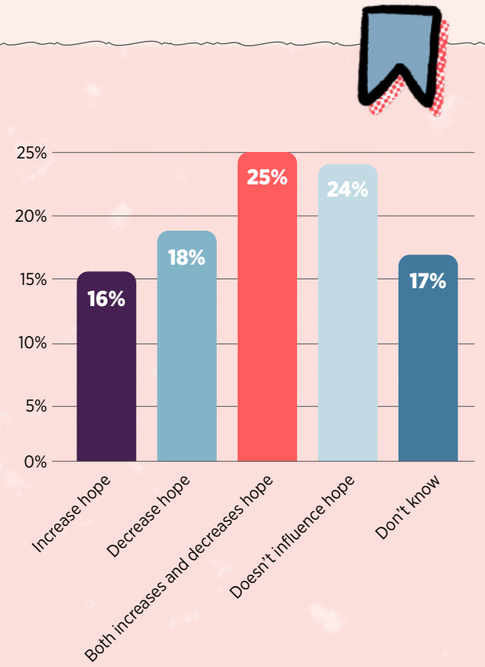


Figure 12:
Does AI increase or decrease your sense of hope? (n=1,002).

A quarter of survey participants report that AI both increases and decreases their sense of hope, compared to 16% who say it increases their hope, 18% who say it decreases their hope, and 24% who say it does not influence their hope (see **Figure 12**).

Interview and workshop participants were anxious that many roles in their desired industries would be replaced by AI, leading to job losses and less opportunities for secure and fulfilling employment in the future.

> *"Every time I talk to someone, they say "What do you want to do? Make sure AI doesn't take your job." How am I going to know?... The thought that it's going to be replacing people's jobs soon is terrifying. That doesn't sound positive to me."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 17, NSW**

> *"I guess everyone would want to feel hopeful about their future, but... technology... can replace people's jobs and things like that."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 13, VIC**

Some participants were particularly concerned about the influence of AI on creative industries. Those workshop participants who aspire to roles in the creative industries were deeply concerned that the increasing reliance on generative AI in creative endeavours will negatively impact their future job opportunities. Some survey participants who reported that AI decreases their sense of hope also expressed concern about the potential loss of human creativity and critical thinking skills. They worry that the proliferation of AI and associated practices will create the conditions for a lazy, technology-dependent society.

> *"Because people rely on AI, they are causing artists and writers to be forced out of a job, since it is cheaper to use AI then it is to hire artists. This decreases my hope for being an artist."*
>
> **Survey participant, prefer not to answer, 14, NSW**

> *"AI is taking away the humanness of creativity."*
>
> **Survey participant, 17, female, VIC**

> *"[AI] makes me feel as though I'm not smart enough to complete my work by myself."*
>
> **Survey participant, prefer not to answer, 17, TAS, migrant background**

> *"[AI] decreases my sense of hope because it's being used instead of actual human talent in some places and making people lazy."*
>
> **Survey participant, prefer not to answer, 17, WA**

Recent research conducted by the Insight Centre also found that many members of Gen Z fear how AI might negatively impact creative work, with half of those surveyed seeing AI as a threat to the creative industries (Denejkina, 2025).

However while many young people have concerns about AI, they are also hopeful that it will lead to positive innovation in fields such as education and healthcare.

> *"AI gives me hope because it can solve complex problems faster than ever before. From improving education to helping in healthcare and making daily life easier, AI has the potential to make the world more efficient, connected, and innovative."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, NSW**

> *"Because it makes things like school work easier, and takes off the stress of having to understand EVERYTHING in one lesson, and instead AI like ChatGPT can help you in your own time!"*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 14, WA, migrant background**

> *"AI in health: robots make accessibility to healthcare easier for disadvantaged communities. AI and technology allow for faster, cheaper access to life-changing healthcare. Also reduces the chance (margin) of human errors and hence unwanted fatalities. Making tricky operations easier on the docs."*
>
> **Workshop participant, aged 16-19, NSW**

In addition to emerging technologies, such as AI, young people are avid, everyday users of other digital technologies, such as social media. A recent study found that 97% of Australian young people use social media daily (La Sala et al., 2025). Indeed, young people are increasingly 'digital-by-default' (Stoilova et al., 2020). Digital technology use plays an important and formative role in young people's lives. For example, social media platforms afford social connections and are important arenas for socialisation, education and play (Third et al., 2024b).

As with AI, **young people have mixed feelings about the role of social media on their sense of hope**. The majority surveyed (39%) say that social media both increases and decreases their sense of hope, compared to 10% who say social media increases their hope, 23% who say it decreases, and 19% who say it does not influence their hope at all (see **Figure 13**).

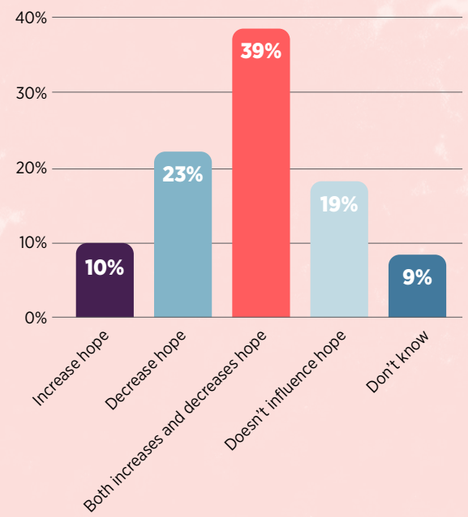


Figure 13:
Does social media increase or decrease your sense of hope? (n=1,002).

Participants in this research say social media exposes them to information and stories of resilience that boost their morale and help them to feel more hopeful.

> *"Young people usually use social media, like, a lot a lot. So, I think if there's like, hopeful things [on social media]... then I think it can influence the thoughts of young people to like be more, 'oh, I think I'm going to be more hopeful about this, more optimistic'."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 14, NSW**

> *"There's a lot of motivational sources on social media."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, SA**

> *"Using social media can help me feel more hopeful in a few ways. It allows me to connect with a global community, where people are sharing positive stories, solutions to problems, and movements for change."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 15, NSW, migrant background**

> *"Social media can inspire hope."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 18, WA**

On the one hand, **social media builds young people's hope because they can seek information about global issues such as the climate crisis and hear about how others are coping with these problems**. Stories about overcoming hardships and working together to create positive social movements can be a great source of hope as they inspire young people to face challenges, achieve their goals, and make them feel less alone. The sense of companionship and networking possibilities found on social media platforms are also sources of hope for some.

> *"[Social media] allows me to connect with a global community, where people are sharing positive stories, solutions to problems, and movements for change. It's encouraging to see how many individuals and organisations are working together to address issues like climate change, social justice, and mental health."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 15, NSW, migrant background**

> *"[Whether] that's through social media or... traditional media and educating young people about... 'It's hard, it will be hard, but some people have done it and this is an example of... how they did it and what tools they can use'... The reality is that most young people will figure it out. They will. But they don't have to have such a tough time emotionally and have so much stress about it because they feel that they have to completely carve their own path and they're foraying into never-before-seen territory. Whereas a lot of people that are going through the exact same thing did figure it out and they don't realise it, but they have a roadmap that they can give to people and show them how they got there."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 18, WA**

> *"Seeing influencers my age or close to my age on social media achieving their goals and goals similar to mine give me hope that I can do the same thing."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 17, VIC**

> *"Sometimes the videos you see on social media help you go through hard times. They share their experiences and tips."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 13, WA**

On the other hand, **some young people find that social media can also fuel hopelessness, highlighting how algorithms prioritise unethical content and influence negative behaviour**. Factors such as the promotion of antisocial interactions, the spread of mis- and disinformation, social comparison, and 'addictive' tendencies contribute to the belief that social media can sometimes undermine their sense of hope.

> *"While social media can connect people, it often promotes negativity, misinformation, and unrealistic expectations. The constant bombardment of distressing news, cyberbullying, and superficial content can make it harder to feel hopeful about the future or the world."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, QLD**

> *"Negativity sells, so social media always looks at the negatives for views."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 18, NSW, migrant background**

> *"Because everyone just makes fun of everyone [on social media], and it's a pretty toxic thing to be a part of if not dealt with properly."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, TAS**

> *"Too much information, opinions etc that is harmful or false etc [on social media decreases my hope]."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, NSW**

Considering the impact that digital technology use and development has on young people's sense of hope, and the benefits that technology use affords young people in terms of accessing information, connecting with others, and taking action on issues they care about, **great care should be taken to minimise the risks and enhance the positive potential of digital technology use to foster young people's hope.**

Evidence-informed policymaking in a rapidly changing society

Strategic action must be grounded in high quality evidence (Orben, 2020; Third, 2025). However, what happens when the evidence base is inconclusive and lacks the detail needed to guide effective decision-making, yet responsive action is urgently required? Robust, youth-centred evidence about the role of digital technology use in young people's everyday lives, in particular, is lacking (Orben, 2020). To guide effective policy and practice, there is a clear need to address research gaps, systematise existing evidence, and develop tools and processes that enable rapid translation of research (Dezuanni et al., 2023; Third, 2025). Researchers and policymakers must also design deliberative mechanisms to weigh up evidence and the pros and cons of (in)action with interdisciplinary experts (Third, 2025).

Key takeaways

01

Australian young people recognise the enormous impact of technology use and development in their lives, and they hope for an exponential increase in sustainable and ethical technology, which they believe will significantly, and positively, shape the future of the world in their lifetime.

02

Young people are also concerned that rapid technological development is unfolding beyond public scrutiny, and they worry that this may result in unintended impacts, such as increased surveillance. The rapid and unregulated development of AI is a source of particular anxiety for many young Australians.

03

Young people fear the careers they aspire to in the future may be replaced by AI, which causes them to feel uncertain and anxious about finding meaningful work.

04

Social media use enables young people to connect with others, to access information, to organise and to take action on issues they care about. Social media also exposes young people to inspiring examples of perseverance and resilience that foster their hope.

05

Young people also recognise the ways in which negative content on these platforms sometimes undermines their sense of hope and influences negative behaviour.

Provocations

- How can government regulation and policy be strengthened to minimise the challenges of digital technology use and development for young people, whilst maximising the benefits that young people derive?
- What mechanisms can hold technology platforms to account for young people's rights to participate in safe digital environments; to activate Safety by Design principles; and to inspire the design of optimal platforms for young people?
- What forms of education, for young people and the adults that support them, can strengthen young people's capacity to engage safely and constructively in the digital environment?
- How can existing evidence and research best be channelled into digital policy and programming?
- What mechanisms would enable policymakers to confidently and effectively regulate digital technology in the best interests of young people, even when current research and evidence are limited or inconclusive?
- What cross-sector policies, investments and regulations are required to ensure young people feel safe across both offline and online environments?
- How can educators best equip young people with the skills and confidence to be ready for a future employment landscape?

KEY FINDING 07

Social relationships, community groups and hobbies bolster young people's hope.

Research shows that strong social relationships are important for young people's mental health, wellbeing and resilience (Jose et al., 2012; Viner et al., 2012). **Our research found that young people's hope is deeply relational: social structures that facilitate positive interactions and affective ties significantly enhance young people's feelings of hope**.

Survey results show that **spending time with friends and family is by far the most important factor in enhancing young people's hope, followed by their hobbies, interests and sports** (see **Figure 14**).

Young people rely on social relationships with family and friends, as well as on community and interest-based groups, for support, affirmation and belonging, which nurtures their sense of hope and wellbeing.

Young people thrive and feel optimistic about the future when they feel connected to their family, peers and communities and can move through life alongside a network of like-minded people. Young people form these networks both organically and through active curation, as they pursue their personal interests, such as sports or hobbies, and explore their identities, such as their sexuality or their cultural and religious beliefs. When shared, passions, experiences, interests and identities powerfully drive young people's affirmation, resilience, self-belief and belonging (see also Finding 8) (Ito et al., 2019). The sharing process can be critical to hope, to support, to happiness and for enabling conditions in which young people can thrive (Third, 2016).

> *"[It's important to have] a support network so that when you don't feel hopeful... you have other people that can carry you on their backs and keep you moving forward."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 18, WA**

> *"My church and youth group is an amazing source of support for my friends and me... It fills me with so much hope and happiness."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 17, VIC**

What are the most important things that make you feel more hopeful?

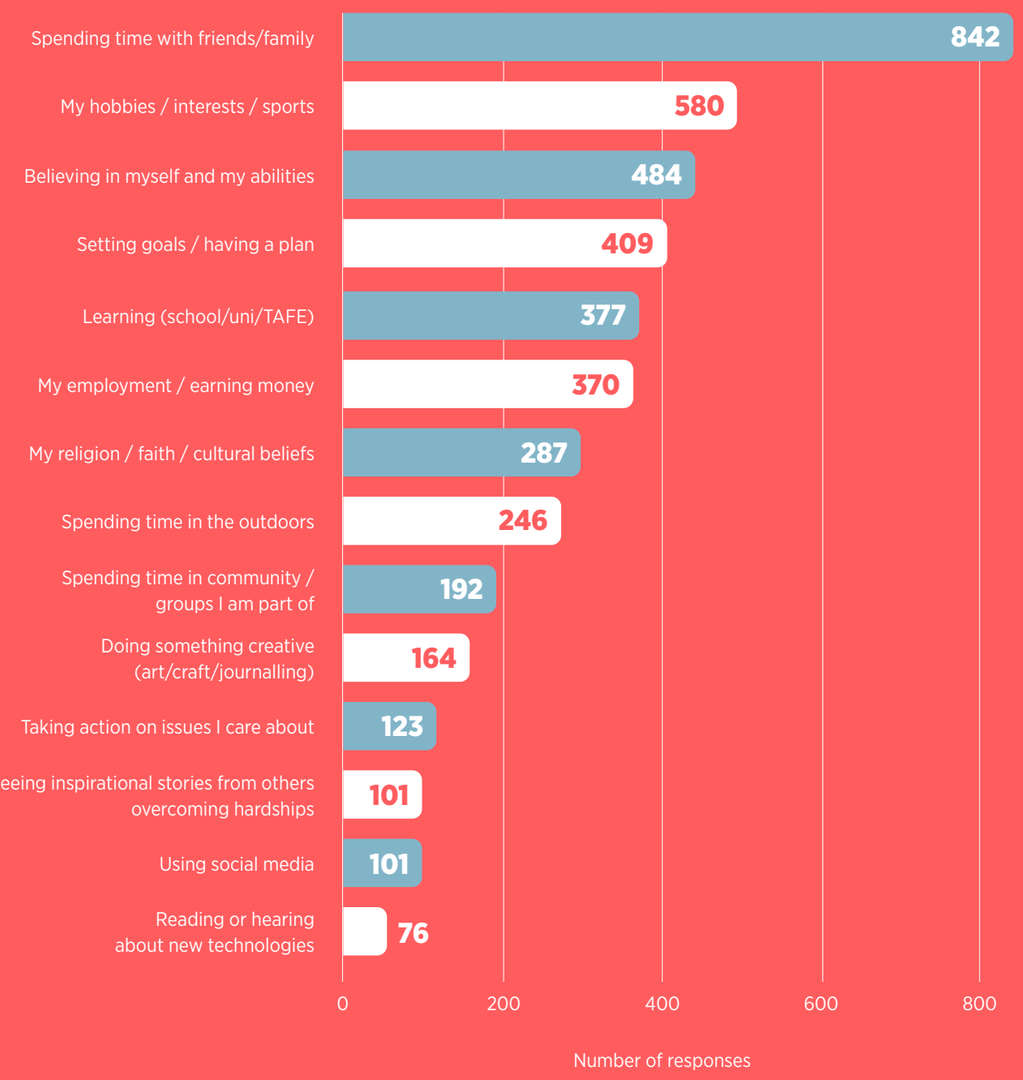


Figure 14:
The most important factors that can make young people feel hopeful, according to survey participants (n=1,002) (Respondents could choose up to five).

60%

say family increase
their sense of hope.

57%

say friends increase
their sense of hope.

42%

say community groups
increase their sense of hope.

"Australian girls choir, my netball club...(increase my sense of hope)."

Survey participant,
female, 13, QLD

"A shared community of people of the same culture as me brings me happiness and hope."

Survey participant,
female, 17, NSW

"My soccer team gives me hope for a soccer star future."

Survey participant,
female, 17, VIC

Immediate and extended family networks constitute crucial structures of support and sources of hope for many young Australians. Families support young people by fostering their sense of being loved and cared for, listened to, and reassured. Family units often encourage young people's self-belief, boost their resilience, and inspire them to a positive outlook. Research participants told us that their families are primarily a source of encouragement and support, especially when they navigate periods of peak uncertainty or experience adversity.

> *"[Family] listen to my worries and tell me I got this."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, NSW**

> *"[Family] support me and believe I can do anything with my life."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 16, QLD**

> *"[Family] encourage me and show me that things could get better."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 14, NSW**

> *"My family [tells me] to... keep trying and... don't lose hope. Don't give up because nothing is ever impossible, anything is possible. So, I think... my family probably gives me the most hope."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 14, NSW**

Moreover, young people in this study reported that 'believing in myself and my abilities' is the third most important factor that supports and sustains their hope (see **Figure 14** p.81). The role of family in supporting young people's self-belief is thus significant for their hopefulness.

Like family relationships, **friendships augment young people's sense of hope because they provide emotional support, motivation and encouragement; create solidarity and shared purpose around hopes, beliefs and values; and foster the sense of belonging and connection that is all-important for wellbeing**. For some young people, their friendships are a lifeline as they navigate the challenges of growing up, studying, navigating relationships, forming their views, and finding ways to express their unique personality and talents.

> *"I love my friends. [They are] the only thing getting me through school, to be honest. I think at our age, [friendship is] such an important thing to have. Yeah, it's a big part of hope for me... Seeing them try so hard, seeing them be so happy - it makes me so feel like, 'oh, I can do that too'... Things are easier when you're in a group, right. So, it feels like getting through school and succeeding isn't impossible because we're all doing it together."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 17, NSW**

Friends increase hope in young people because...

They provide emotional support, motivation and encouragement.

> *"[Friends] always got your back, rain or shine, mate."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 13, QLD**

They share the same hopes, beliefs and values.

> *"[Friends] help me have a positive outlook on life that we can achieve together."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 16, VIC**

And foster a sense of belonging and connection.

> *"My friends give me hope because they remind me that kindness, support, and laughter still exist, even in tough times. Seeing how we look out for another shows me the power of community and connection."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 18, VIC**

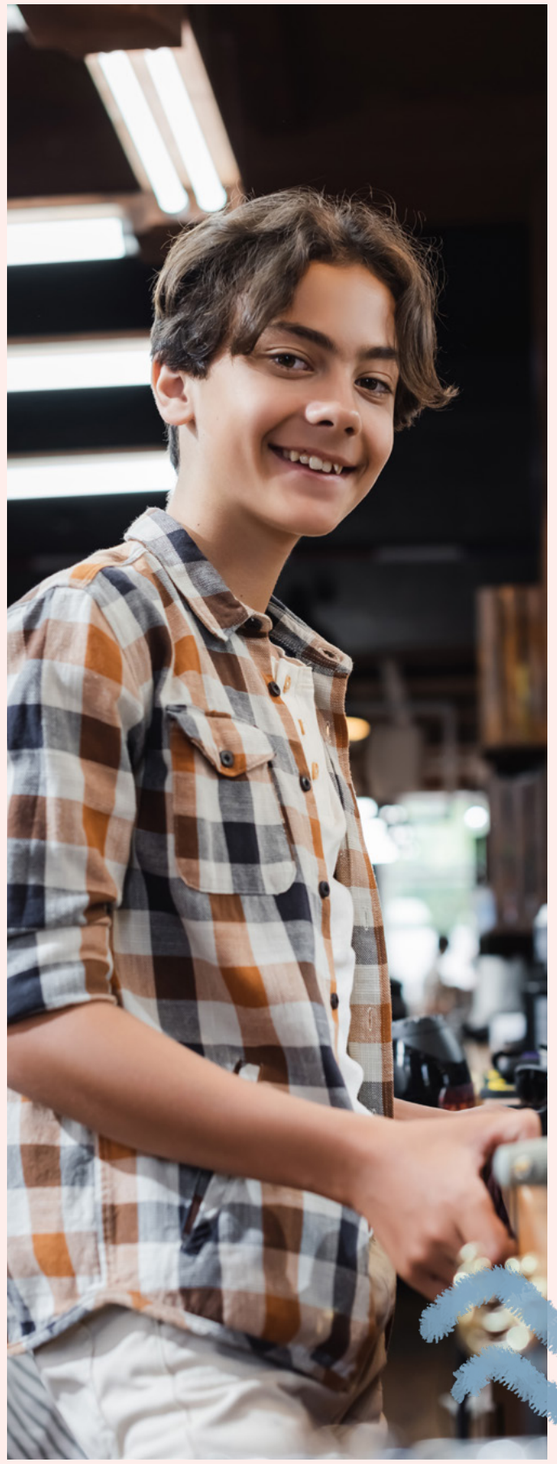
Nonetheless, **while relationships with others can be sustaining, precisely because young people attribute great importance to their familial and social connections, experiencing deep and/or routine relationship tensions can have a substantial negative impact on young people's sense of hope, resilience and wellbeing**. Indeed, while most participants in this research say friends and family increase their sense of hope, others have mixed feelings. Just over a quarter (26%) of survey participants say friendships both increase and decrease their hope.

Young people also report that their **friendships can be volatile and, at times, negatively – and significantly – affect their hope, resilience and wellbeing**. Friends who persistently communicate pessimism; are unsupportive; or when they fuel, rather than resolve, friendship tensions decrease young people's sense of hope. Participants report that friends who are uncaring or who consistently demonstrate negative or "toxic" attitudes significantly challenge their sense of hope, leaving young people feeling "worthless", "disconnected" and "abandoned". Young people generally recognise that friendships are not always smooth-sailing, but when friends avoid the issue, or refuse to take responsibility for or to work together to grow through challenges, friendship frictions can be detrimental to young people's sense of hope.

> *"[Friends] can encourage and motivate me. But sometimes, when I see the way they behave, it really makes me lose hope."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 14, NSW**

> *"Lately, I've noticed how hard it is to have real friendships because people just don't take responsibility for their actions anymore. When someone messes up, they won't apologise or admit they were wrong, and it makes everything feel really shallow. I've had friends who've hurt me or others, but they just act like nothing happened or completely avoid the issue. It feels like there's no real growth in friendships anymore just drama and ignoring problems. It makes me feel like people just don't care enough to fix things, and that makes me feel disconnected from everyone – like true friendship is disappearing."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 16, WA**

> *"If a friend is consistently negative, pessimistic, or dismissive of your goals and aspirations, it can wear down your sense of hope."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 16, WA**



Moreover, **approximately one in five (22%) survey participants report that family both increases and decreases their hope**. Family tensions can significantly impede young people's sense of hope, particularly when young people do not feel understood and listened to by family members, or when parents, caregivers, siblings or extended family members do not support their hopes. Moreover, it needs to be acknowledged that Australian families are under considerable pressure, caused by a range of social, cultural, economic and environmental factors. Evidence shows that financial, housing and employment stress can all contribute significant pressure to family dynamics, and that parents and caregivers often (inadvertently) pass on their stress to their children (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2024), underscoring the need for governments, civil society and businesses to ease the burdens on families.

> *"Sometimes [family] encourage me, but sometimes they are toxic in telling me some reality that crushes my passion in order to face reality."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, QLD**

> *"Sometimes [my family] gives [me a] sense of belonging, [but] sometimes they are very close minded/not understanding."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 17, VIC**

Further, given social support and social connectedness mediate young people's hope and resilience (Çiçek, 2021), it is vital that governments, services and youth-facing organisations explore how to better support young people and their families with the tools and resources to navigate family and friendship challenges, and to fortify positive relationships.

Beyond immediate family and friendship networks, fostering a broader sense of social belonging is essential to fostering young Australians' sense of hope. Research participants highlight the benefits they derive from affiliating with groups or communities who affirm their identities and ways of being and encourage them in the pursuit of their goals. They told us that being surrounded by likeminded people enables young people to feel supported, included and understood, and thus positively impacts young Australians' sense of self-worth and their hopefulness about their lives and their futures.

The importance of belonging

New research suggests belonging significantly and positively impacts young people's aspirations (Kalemba, 2025). By contrast, experiences of exclusion or discrimination for different reasons (such as race), and in diverse contexts (such as the workplace), undermine young people's aspirations (Kalemba, 2025). More research is needed to examine the relationship between belonging, aspirations and hope.

Reflection from Danya, Youth Co-researcher

"Equity means recognising that not all young people start from the same place and that offering support needed means that everyone can thrive. When equity is prioritised, young people feel seen in their unique challenges, which strengthens their sense of belonging and ability to aspire. Equity transforms participation from a symbolic gesture into meaningful inclusion, becoming the foundation for sustainable hope amongst young Australians."

Pursuing personal interests and participation in hobbies, sports, and artistic, cultural or religious activities greatly enhances young Australians' hopes for the future. Survey participants rated this as the second most important thing they do that sustains their hope. These activities offer young people an outlet for creative self-expression and productivity; opportunities to meet others and to develop new skills and capabilities; boosts to their wellbeing; and opportunities to set, pursue and achieve tangible goals. Similarly, other research has found that indulging hobbies and participating in extra-curricular activities increases young people's sense of purpose, their hopes for the future, as well as their autonomy, self-esteem, happiness and flourishing (Bower & Carroll, 2015; Conner et al., 2016). Young people look forward to participating in these activities, extending the horizon of their hope and optimism. Further, being active, participating in collective activities or finding avenues for individual creative consumption or expression all enable young people's sense of hope both in the present and for the future.

> *"I also play guitar... Hobbies... give me hope for the future, in a way, because if I have something to entertain me or interest me, it won't feel like I'm bored all the time. And if I'm always bored, then I'll lose hope that there's actually something I can do. If I have more hobbies, there are more chances... of maybe getting a good job and things like that."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 13, WA**

> *"Journaling symbolises to me... wellness and mindfulness. And that's something that I want to continue to incorporate more seriously into my daily routine."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 18, NSW**

> *"The movies is really probably the only thing that's got me looking forward to the future right now; the movies coming out later, in years to come."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 13, VIC**

> *"I get happiness in my sports teams."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, QLD**

What do young people say about community?

"My community is very welcoming and it gives me hope."

Survey participant,
female, 16, VIC

"The (university) community have been really kind and caring and they bring me hope that I will succeed alongside them."

Survey participant,
male, 17, WA

"I think my friends, like people in my local community (help me to keep hopeful) -- I'm part of a couple of youth groups -- I think people who I talked to there, especially like the youth workers, help me to sort of feel, yeah, more hopeful. ... there are people that will support you, and there are people that will, I don't know, be allies with you. I think that's given me hope."

Interview participant,
non-binary, 17, VIC

"People at work and at sports clubs really care about me and are some of the nicest people I have ever met."

Survey participant,
female, 15, TAS

"I think what I can definitely say is at Midsumma (pride festival), being part of groups that are LGBT affirming, that's very important for me."

Interview participant,
non-binary, 17, VIC

"It definitely does (enhance hope) to see that sense of community. Just so many people coming together for what they believe in. I think one way to remain hopeful is to find a community and find people who understand you."

Interview participant,
non-binary, 16, VIC

Key takeaways

01

Young people's hope is deeply relational. Social structures that facilitate positive interactions and affective ties significantly enhance young people's feelings of hope.

02

Social relationships with family and friends have the greatest impact on young people's sense of hope. These relationships can both increase and decrease hope, and therefore efforts to build positive and supportive relationships are essential to young people's hope and thriving.

03

Fostering a broader sense of social belonging is essential to building young Australians' sense of belonging, optimism and hope. Increasing avenues for social participation and belonging – be it through, for example, social media or community groups – is essential for young people's wellbeing.

04

Personal hobbies and interests give young people an outlet for creative self-expression, productivity, increased mindfulness and wellbeing. They enable young people to set and achieve goals, fostering self-efficacy, and create opportunities for connection with others, essential for supporting hope.

Provocations

- How can various levels of government expand access to inclusive, affordable, and locally available social and recreational programs for young people?
- What steps can be taken to develop and preserve physical and digital spaces where young people feel safe, supported, and free to explore their interests and identities?
- What targeted community-based programs and resources can be put in place to help families and caregivers build resilience and provide emotional support to young people?

KEY FINDING 08

Young people feel disillusioned with and disconnected from politics. They want government to take action and include them in decision-making.

Previous research shows that Australian young people care about politics (Collin, 2025). Participants in the research reported herein value democratic systems that enable all members of society to be equally represented and to have a voice. **Democratic values of inclusion and equal representation inspire young people's hope** (see **Key Finding 4**).

Young Australians celebrate political diversity and the freedom to disagree; to talk about issues that are important to them; and to protest injustice. They believe that democracy protects diversity, which gives them hope for an inclusive society in the future.

> *"[Everyone has their] rights and freedoms, everyone's entitled to them and everyone exercises them. Which I think is so important. Even if people disagree completely about political issues... they have the right to disagree with each other, and I think that's amazing."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 17, NSW**

> *"[I see hope] when I see my friend putting up posters for rallies, or when I see my friend talking about the issues that that I feel are important... That's when I feel optimism."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 18, TAS**

> *"There's just so many things [to be hopeful about], you know. Just seeing everyone come together and say: 'This is my opinion. This is my voice. This is our voice'."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 16, VIC**

Although young people generally believe in the value of democracy, they report that the mechanics of Australian democracy do not satisfy their hopes for a healthy political system: 21% say that Australia's way of choosing leaders and making decisions decreases their sense of hope, and 32% say that it does not influence their sense of hope at all (**Figure 15**).

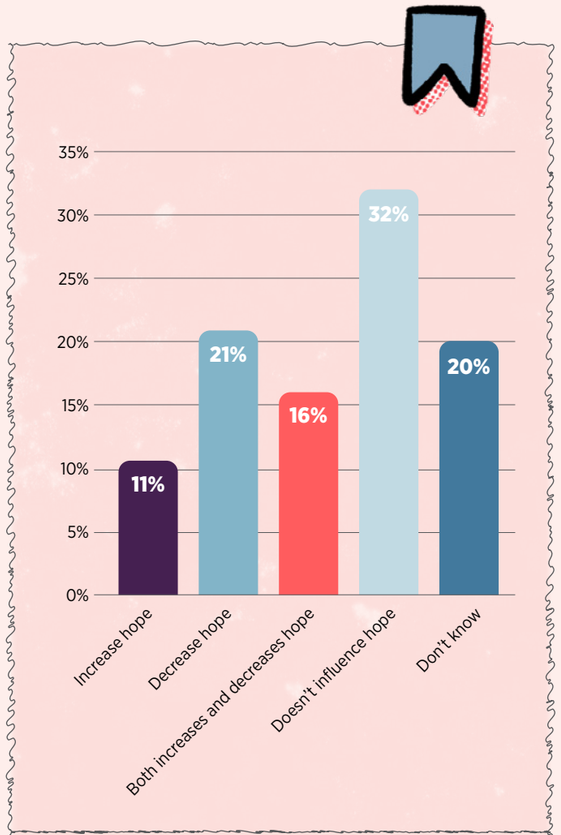


Figure 15:
Does Australia's way of choosing leaders and making decisions increase or decrease your sense of hope? (n=1,002).

31%
of survey respondents say that Australian politicians decrease their sense of hope.

21%
of survey respondents say that Australia's way of choosing leaders and making decisions decreases their sense of hope.

Recent findings from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has found that Australian school students' knowledge and understanding of Australia's democracy, political system and civic processes has fallen to the lowest levels since testing began (ACARA, 2025). Better education, co-designed with young people, to improve young people's civics knowledge is required (Collin, 2025). This can foster hopefulness in young people about Australian democracy.

> *"Australia's way of choosing leaders makes me feel hopeless because there is a huge lack of education about the voting process. For instance, many young people reach adulthood without fully understanding how elections work, leading them to make uninformed choices or disengage from voting altogether. Without proper education on how to create change through voting, it feels like our political system is set up to keep the same people in power instead of allowing real progress."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 16, WA, migrant background**

Some young people are disillusioned with the two political forces that dominate Australian political decision-making (the Australian Labor Party and the coalition between the Liberal Party of Australia and the National Party of Australia), feeling that neither major party aligns with young people's own political priorities.

> *"Maybe in the future we can have five plus political parties instead of just two and a half, so [that] it's a bit more competitive and diverse."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 18, regional TAS**
>
> *"[The] two-party system [decreases my sense of hope]."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 17, NSW**
>
> *"I don't like how it always has to be one of the major two political parties in lead."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, NSW**
>
> *"It would be easier to flip a coin. The two major parties are both as bad as each other."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 13, SA**
>
> *"No politician directly aligns with my beliefs."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, NSW**

Indeed, **young people express deep frustration with Australian politicians.** Almost one third of survey participants (31%) say that, rather than inspiring their hope, Australian politicians decrease their sense of hope (see **Figure 16**).

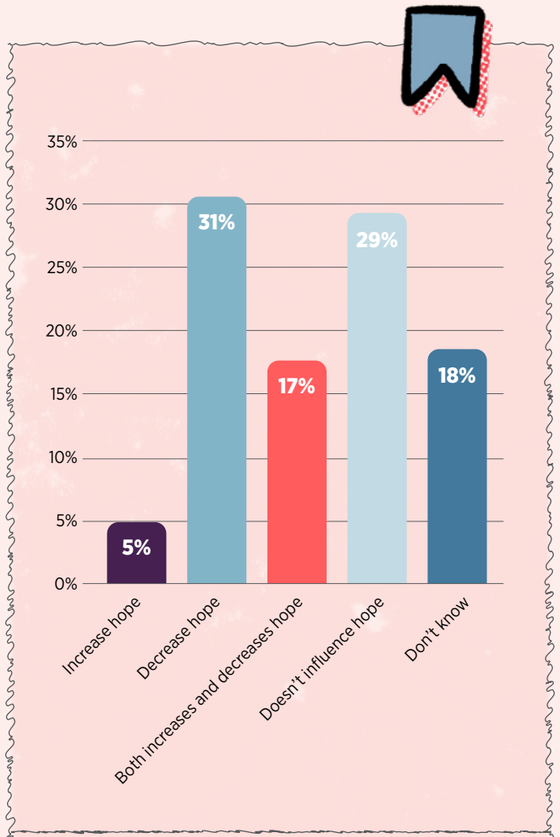


Figure 16:
Do Australian politicians increase or decrease your sense of hope? (n=1,002).

Young people take issue with the ways political actors disburse their responsibilities to the Australian public, with some highlighting that **politicians can come across to young people as misdirected or out of touch with the everyday lived experiences of Australians – in particular, those of disadvantaged and minority groups.**

> *"Bad politicians that don't stand for the right ideas and don't [act] in the best interests of Australian minorities [decrease my hope]."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, NSW, migrant background**
>
> *"Australian politics lowers my sense of hope because it often feels corrupt and disconnected from everyday people."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 16, WA, migrant background**
>
> *"[I would feel more hopeful] if politicians actually got off their butts and, instead of going on vacations, went and visited disadvantaged communities."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, WA**

In young people's experiences, politicians can be corrupt, disingenuous, dishonest, and cater to their own personal agendas, which young people perceive as directed at maintaining influence and status rather than serving the public interest (see also Dockery et al., 2025; Stephenson et al., 2024).

> *"There's a lot of higher ups that are kind of evil. So that's kind of what I feel pessimistic about."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 18, TAS**
>
> *"Politicians seem more focused on maintaining their power and financial gain than solving real issues like the cost of living or climate change."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 16, WA, migrant background**
>
> *"Sometimes [politicians] seem more focused on party politics and short-term wins than solving real issues. It can feel like genuine change takes a backseat to personal or political interests."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 18, VIC**
>
> *"Australian politicians at times, can be seen as self-interested or disconnected from the needs of the people. Their inability to reach consensus on important issues, or actions that seem to prioritise party politics over public welfare, can decrease trust and hope in leadership."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, QLD**
>
> *"[Politicians] don't have good intentions in mind and I don't feel hopeful."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, VIC**

What does the ideal future look like for young people?

Reflection from Aliet, Youth Co-researcher

"Young people including myself want to see a successful and thriving future where politicians care and value the voices and opinions of young people. A future where sustainable solutions such reducing waste, climate change, and transitioning to renewable energy have been implemented and practiced."

Consistent with previous survey research (Maire et al., 2023; Stephenson et al., 2024), **many survey participants in this study believe Australian politicians are short-sighted or lack a long-term vision for Australia's future.**

> *"[I'm] not the (most) hopeful, because... what [politicians are] choosing right now [is] not the best, but I hope that someone can come into office or into the government or into local council, and be like, 'Hey, guys, let's more think about long-term, not short-term goals'."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 13, VIC**

> *"[Australian politicians] need to take long-term action to fix structural issues in [the] economy and not just focus on getting votes in short-term."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 16, NSW, migrant background**

Moreover, **young people are critical of perceived surface level engagement or performative gestures to secure their allegiance and their votes**. In particular, young people are cynical about politicians' use of social media to appeal to young voters and often perceive it as patronising. They would prefer that politicians genuinely accommodate their needs through action and policy, and communicate this clearly.

> *"Politicians shouldn't try and get Gen Z votes by posting brain rot or funny videos about games and Fortnite. Instead they should try and accommodate for us and making policies that Gen Z or teenagers need, like more mental health support or something similar."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, VIC**

> *"[Make] actual policies that young people believe in, not just brain rot campaigns."*
>
> **Workshop participant, male, 19, NSW**

Their mistrust in political leadership undermines young people's faith in government and contributes to their pessimism about the future. In short, many young people in this research have little confidence that existing political and decision-making systems and processes can lead to meaningful and necessary change, especially in the long-term.

> *"It feel[s] like no matter how much people vote or protest, nothing ever changes, leaving the future uncertain and frustrating."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 16, WA, migrant background**

> *"Politicians need to act instead of talk and move the country positively."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, TAS**

Not surprisingly, then, young people are calling for thoughtful leadership that prioritises real-world change and positive social impact, rather than that which tilts at re-election or other short-term goals.

Concerningly, young people believe that those in government are failing in their duty to provide young Australians with a hopeful and stable vision for the future. Moreover, **young people believe political leaders are not delivering policies and initiatives that acknowledge their needs and support their generation to prosper alongside other members of society.**

Young people feel deeply alienated from decision-making processes, which often have very significant impacts on their everyday experience. They believe their concerns are not taken seriously and that the burden they bear for decisions taken today, which will affect the future, is consistently overlooked because they are not yet eligible to vote. Young people are insistent that their views count, and that political leadership should be listening much more attentively.

> *"[We have] no public voice."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 17, VIC**

> *"[There needs to be] [g]reater youth representation in decision-making (for Australia and the world)."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 16, SA, migrant background**

> *"Politicians should take under-18s seriously, even if we can't vote. Just because we're not legally allowed to choose leaders doesn't mean we don't have opinions or that the decisions they make won't affect us."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 16, WA, migrant background**

Reflecting the insights generated by this study, a body of research has consistently documented that many Australian young people believe their perspectives are not heard or taken seriously by governments (Stephenson et al., 2024). Younger Australians, who cannot yet vote, feel especially excluded from democratic processes and power structures (Maire et al., 2023). This body of research also shows that, for diverse young people, the feeling of being invisible in decision-making processes is particularly acute. For example, in a recent survey, only 6% of LGBTQIA+ young people felt the government understands and listens to people like them (Minus18 Foundation, 2025). The limited opportunities for young people to participate in the decision-making processes that impact them can thus be said to one of the major human rights problems faced by young people in Australia (see also Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

Crucially, our research with young Australians surfaced their deep sense of frustration about inaction on critical issues that shape their futures, particularly around climate change, cost of living and housing issues. Young people are clear that politicians should consider how their decisions today will affect young people tomorrow and develop future-oriented policies. Young people want to see leaders who develop a genuine understanding of the issues their generation face and who communicate with integrity and transparency.

> *"[Politicians aren't] doing the things I want to see changed."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 17, SA**

> *"Politicians and community leaders should prioritise policies that address issues like climate change, mental health, and education, [thereby] reassuring youth that 'We are committed to building a better future'."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 15, QLD, migrant background**

> *"Address young people's concerns: Politicians can demonstrate hope by making tangible efforts to tackle issues that young people care about, such as climate change, education, and job opportunities."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 13, QLD**

Young people in our research were clear that their involvement in political decision-making is key to fostering their hope. Above all, young people say they want politicians to listen and respond to their ideas and concerns. They told us that acknowledging and valuing their perspectives and input is critical to sustaining hope that they have a meaningful role in bringing about the change they wish to see.

> *"For upcoming generations... I want to see a world where people listen to young people in the sense that they actually use young people's opinions and these are reflected in the policies."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 18, TAS**
>
> *"[In my ideal future, young] people would have more of a say in the decisions made about the country."*
>
> **Interview participant, female, 17, NSW**
>
> *"Listen to what we have to say and be willing to adapt and actually implement our ideas."*
>
> **Workshop participant, aged 16-19, NSW**
>
> *"We have so many ideas, aspirations and a voice that needs to be heard. We want transparency, accountability and justice!"*
>
> **Workshop participant, aged 16-19, NSW**
>
> *"All politicians must give young people a voice to raise their concerns for the planet [of which] they are only temporary custodians."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 14, SA**

Research participants suggested that political leaders could strengthen young people's sense of inclusion in decision-making by:

- Communicating with young people transparently and routinely;
- Addressing the issues young people care about, and which will powerfully impact their futures;
- Diversifying and strengthening mechanisms for diverse young people to participate in decision-making processes; and
- Improving mechanisms of government accountability to young people.

The remainder of this section discusses young people's views on these recommended actions.

Inclusion in decision-making

Reflection from Fiona, Youth Co-researcher

"Being a youth co-researcher in the project offered a unique opportunity to engage with the research process from a deeper perspective. Traditionally, young people are seen as subjects or participants in research, but through this approach, I had the opportunity to shape the direction of the study and be part of the decision-making process. The involvement was not limited to simply answering questions or note taking; it included collaborative tasks such as designing research tools, leading interviews, conducting recruitment, interpreting data, and contributing ideas during team discussions. It was very empowering being able to engage with young people on issues and experiences that also resonated with or mattered to me while acting in a research capacity."

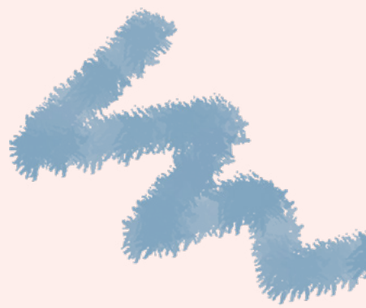
Young people are clear that political leaders have a profound influence on their sense of hope. They are **calling for politicians and others with responsibility for implementing policies and initiatives that impact young people to routinely communicate how they are working to secure the best interests of the next generation**. They say that this would help to eliminate some of the uncertainty they face, inspire their hope, and help build their trust in political processes.

> *"Politicians have the power to actually change people's lives. [They should] tell young people how they actually want to help people's lives and how they're going to do it. This can help to instil actual hope and help young people feel more positive."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 17, VIC**
>
> *"We don't really understand what the government has in store for us. So I guess what would make me feel more hopeful, and I'm presuming other young people [too], would just be to have a... vision of the future, and being able to actually see the changes taking place."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 16, WA**

Young people want politicians to take decisive action; to stop making vague promises; to enact beneficial policies; and to clearly demonstrate the positive impact of policy agendas. They cite a range of social, civic, economic, political and environmental issues that they would like to see governments act on, which would bolster their sense of hope. **Young people want Australian governments at all levels and in all jurisdictions to take action on the following issues**:

- **Environmental issues:** investment in renewable energy; reduced pollution; protection of nature and animals; stronger climate change policies; and sustainable practices.
- **Social and civic issues:** support for disadvantaged and minority communities; protection of First Nations rights; reductions in discrimination and racism; gender equality and reduced pay gaps for women; improved infrastructure and services for rural areas; more funding for public schools; better public transport; less crime and violence; and improved mental health support access and awareness.
- **Economic issues:** cheaper housing and rental prices; financial support for home buyers; lower interest rates; lower costs of living; protection of the economy; reduced unemployment and better pay rates; and subsidised university fees.
- **Political issues:** stronger international relations; increased independence; and an understanding and honest government.

> *"[I'd like to see] more funding for mental health support services. I can just tell that... people will benefit from it. And it's being said time to time every single day that there's not enough funding."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 18, TAS**
>
> *"I think we should definitely get homeless shelters around Australia – like good ones. Maybe jobs – make it easier for people to get jobs, even if it's like, low paying."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 13, VIC**
>
> *"I think maybe in the next 10 years the government will be making actions that I see will be right, and will be good for the future of the planet... So I would like to see a massive increase in renewables. And no new coal gas projects in Australia or anywhere else in the world hopefully."*
>
> **Interview participant, male, 18, TAS**
>
> *"Policies actually need to be put in rather than just talked about. Especially things like, with Victoria, like getting closer to a treaty [with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples]. Like, that sort of actual change is what's making people hopeful rather than just saying, you know, rather than just doing an acknowledgement of country at the start of an address or something like that. It's the actual policies and... the forward thinking sort of stuff."*
>
> **Interview participant, non-binary, 17, VIC**
>
> *"[To support young people's future aspirations, the government needs to] FIX THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS!!!"*
>
> **Workshop participant, aged 16-19, NSW**
>
> *"Politicians need to help more with cost of living so the younger generation can feel more hopeful."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 12, VIC**
>
> *"Politicians should take a good look at themselves and start practical measures to [reduce] inflation and poverty."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 13, NSW, Aboriginal**
>
> *"Politicians should be able to encourage kids that they will be able to live in a supportive country, with peace, no discrimination and a fair life."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 15, NSW**



Key finding 08

Young people in this research assert the importance of including diverse groups and ages in decision-making. This is particularly important as diverse and marginalised young people often remain excluded from policymaking spaces, despite their desire to be involved in decisions that affect them and society (Vromen and Collin, 2010).

Young people want to be engaged in decision-making via diverse methods. **Young people appreciate youth consultation efforts that leverage surveys and advisory groups, but also highlight that these have limitations**. In particular, they highlight that these participation mechanisms do not always represent the diversity of young people's concerns, and they can come across as tokenistic when decision-makers do not follow up on the concerns young people raise.

> *"[Advisory groups should] have a diverse group of youth selected based on their circumstances/lived experience, instead of academic [achievement]."*
>
> **Workshop participant, aged 16-19, NSW**

> *"Politicians... should have youth advisory groups, actually respond to young people's concerns, and stop making policies that ignore our future."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 16, WA, migrant background**

In addition to convening youth advisory groups, **young people want policymakers to meet young people where they are at and have direct conversations, via, for example, school visits and digital platforms**.

> *"Dear policymakers/government, please come to us instead of us coming to you!"*
>
> **Workshop participant, aged 16-19, NSW**

Others want more accessible engagement options for engagement that are less daunting than writing to elected representatives. And they highlight a strong need for more education and information about how young people can get involved in politics and civic life.

Regardless of the ways young people are engaged, they ultimately want to have their contributions genuinely respected, rather than dismissed, due to age or a perceived lack of experience.

Lastly, young people say political and community leaders should demonstrate answerability by following through on their commitments. **Young people are calling for stronger accountability mechanisms to hold leadership responsible for their actions.**

> *"Politicians should speak to young voters specifically about what they plan to do (on a platform or in a way that actually engages them) AND STICK TO THEIR PLANS."*
>
> **Survey participant, female, 18, WA**

> *"Politicians need to do the right thing and represent the people that voted them in. They need to keep their promises and if not, they need to be held responsible. They need to stop being greedy and thinking of themselves."*
>
> **Survey participant, male, 13, SA**

> *"[Politicians should] exercise more transparency to give young people faith in... campaigns and policies being trustworthy and effective."*
>
> **Workshop participant, aged 16-19, NSW**

Despite repeated calls from young people, advocates and researchers alike to account for young people's perspectives in the decisions that shape their present and their futures (Bell et al., 2008; UNICEF Australia, 2021; Stephenson et al., 2024; Collin et al., 2025; Dockery et al., 2025), the kind of change that would centre young people's priorities in political agendas has not been forthcoming. And many young Australians feel at a loss as to how to change this: **21% of participants in our study say they feel they have no influence on whether they will one day live in a society where young people's views are taken seriously, and 28% feel like they have only a little influence**. Moreover, 21% report that society is somewhat unlikely to respect their views, and 10% that it is extremely unlikely.

Even so, significant numbers of young people hope – perhaps against the odds – that, in the future, the insights, experiences and aspirations of the next generation will be valued by society and its leaders: 32% of survey participants are very hopeful and 32% are somewhat hopeful that, in their lifetime, they will live in a society where children and young people's views are taken seriously. A quarter (25%) believe that they are somewhat likely to see this change in the future. Given these insights, **it is an opportune moment for decision-makers to reflect on how they can support young people's hope, wellbeing and resilience by redoubling efforts to communicate with and engage the next generation in the decisions that impact them.**

Key takeaways

01

Australian young people believe in the values of democracy but they feel increasingly disillusioned with and let down by political leaders. Many perceive politicians as lacking a long-term vision that accounts for their hopes as a generation, and not taking the necessary action to secure the nation's, or their generation's, long-term best interests.

02

Young people's hope hinges on decisive and effective governmental action on the key social, civic, political, economic and environmental issues they care about.

03

Young people feel deeply undervalued and want to be included in political decision-making. To foster hope in the younger generation, it is critical that governments listen to and act on the perspectives of young people.

04

Political leaders could strengthen young people's sense of hope and inclusion in decision-making significantly by communicating with them transparently and routinely; addressing the issues they care about which will powerfully impact their futures; diversifying and strengthening mechanisms for diverse young people to participate in decision-making processes; and improving mechanisms of government accountability to young people.

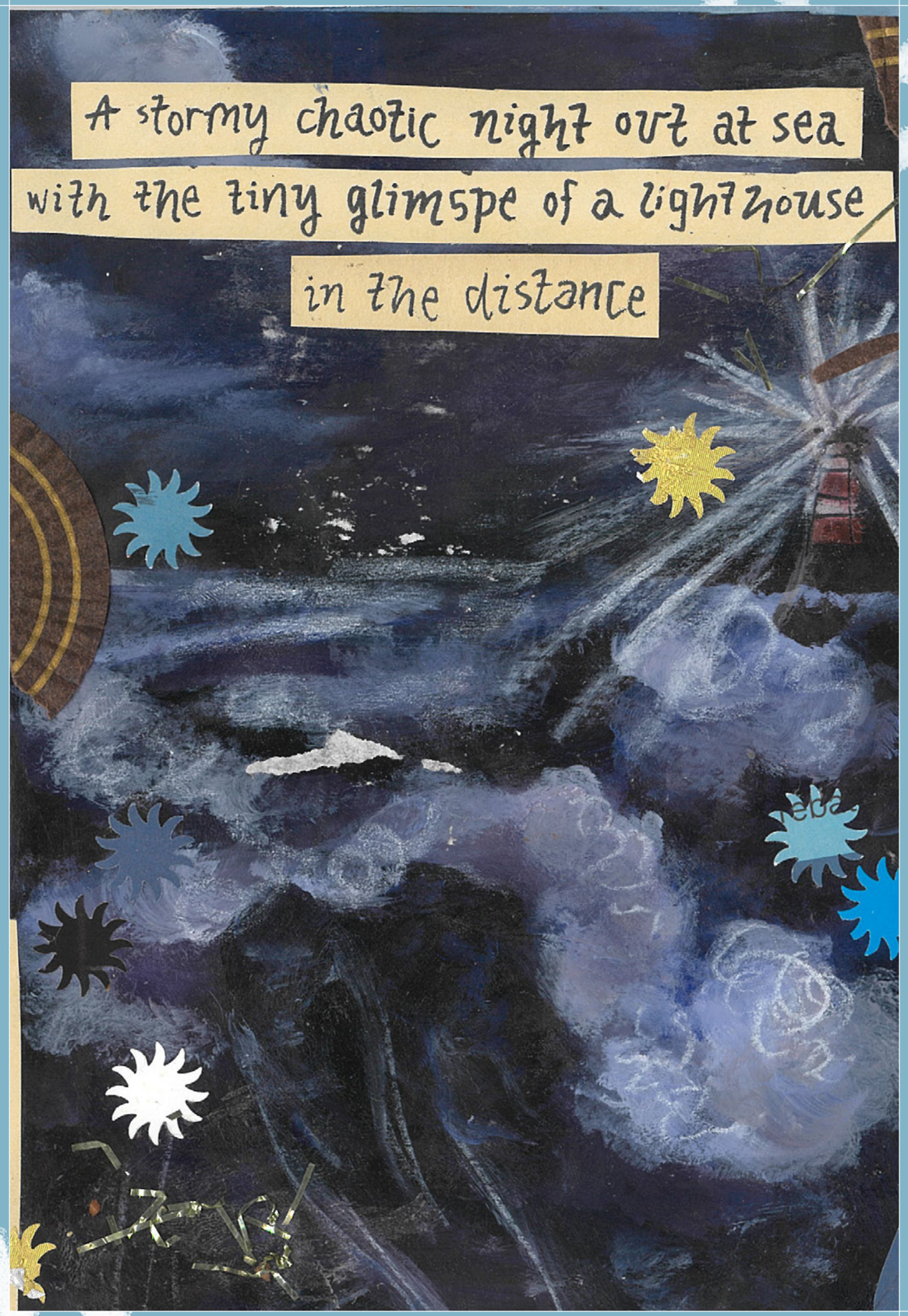
Provocations

- What steps and actions do politicians need to take to restore trust and repair relations with disillusioned young people?
- What actions are needed to ensure politicians actively listen to and account for the voices and perspectives of young people in policy decision-making?
- What changes would make political engagement more accessible to diverse young people?
- What mechanisms are required to enable government to identify young people's needs and aspirations, and ideate, co-create, implement and evaluate strategic actions?
- What transparency and accountability measures are required to ensure political leaders engage with and address the concerns of young people?
- What digital and face-to-face channels can be created or strengthened to enable young people to shape policymaking in real time and at scale?
- What cross-portfolio strategies and processes should be implemented to best address the interconnected forces that shape young people's experiences?
- What reforms in governance are needed to better respond to young people?

04

CONCLUSION

In Australia, young people are facing an uncertain future. Increasing global political and economic instability, rising costs of living, polarising social values, inequalities and injustices, inaction on climate change, lack of regulation on emerging issues such as AI, and disillusionment with political leaders are causing fear, anxiety, and pessimism about the future for many young people.



Yet, in the face of all these anxieties, young people demonstrate an enormous capacity to be hopeful. **Indeed, their response to instability, inequity and adversity is *hope***. In finding hope amidst complex challenges, young people build their resilience to persevere and to realise their ideal futures.

This research has taught us that **hope is a source of immeasurable power.** Hope is both a motivating force that propels young people forward and a response to circumstance. **Young people need hope** to move forward with purpose, and they **generate hope** when they encounter adversity. This suggests that **hope is a mechanism of resilience.** Providing they have some purchase on the possibility of change, young people hope most intensely when they witness and experience hardship, injustice, fear and instability. Hope enables young people to confront and to respond to these experiences. Hope drives positive action, like participating in this research, which we hope will contribute to the structural changes required for young people to realise the futures they desire.

The future that young people hope for is not wildly imaginative or unachievable; rather, it is beautifully ordinary. Young people hope to achieve good grades; to find meaningful and fulfilling work; to own a home; to have a family; to live in community where everyone is respected and valued; to feel safe and secure; and to enjoy life.

Young people call on decision-makers to act now to realise the resilient futures they desire. Above all else, they ask government and politicians to listen to their concerns; to meaningfully consult them about the issues they care about; to involve them in the decision-making process; and to be accountable for their long-term best interests. Young people want to participate in the decisions that they will inherit and believe in their generation to drive, and achieve, positive change. **Involving young people in policy should be an urgent mandate for government.**

Final reflection from Fiona, Youth Co-researcher

"The young people we engaged with all have busy lives – their experiences reflected the chaotic reality so many other young Australians experience. They underscored the importance of this research in showcasing the aspirations and calls to action from young people like us. Strengths-based approaches are crucial to address the pressing challenges young people face, and how valuable it is to create space for them to contribute to discussions that affect their futures and enact the change they want to see. Young people wish to reshape the future according to their values: they seek purpose and fairness, not just personal success, but prioritise collective wellbeing. If hope is a compass, then the direction young people are pointing us in is a powerful one. As long as collective hope is met with collective action now, the future will always hold more possibility."

Final reflection from Danya, Youth Co-researcher

"This study powerfully highlights that hope is not just a feeling, but a necessary driver for young people's wellbeing and their belief in a better future. Its relevance is especially urgent in today's context—where global uncertainty, rapid technological change, and environmental degradation weigh heavily on youth. As someone actively engaged with young people, I see firsthand how hope, and consequently youth proactivity, can diminish when our voices aren't heard or action is absent. This study brings crucial insight into what young people care about and what sustains their sense of possibility."

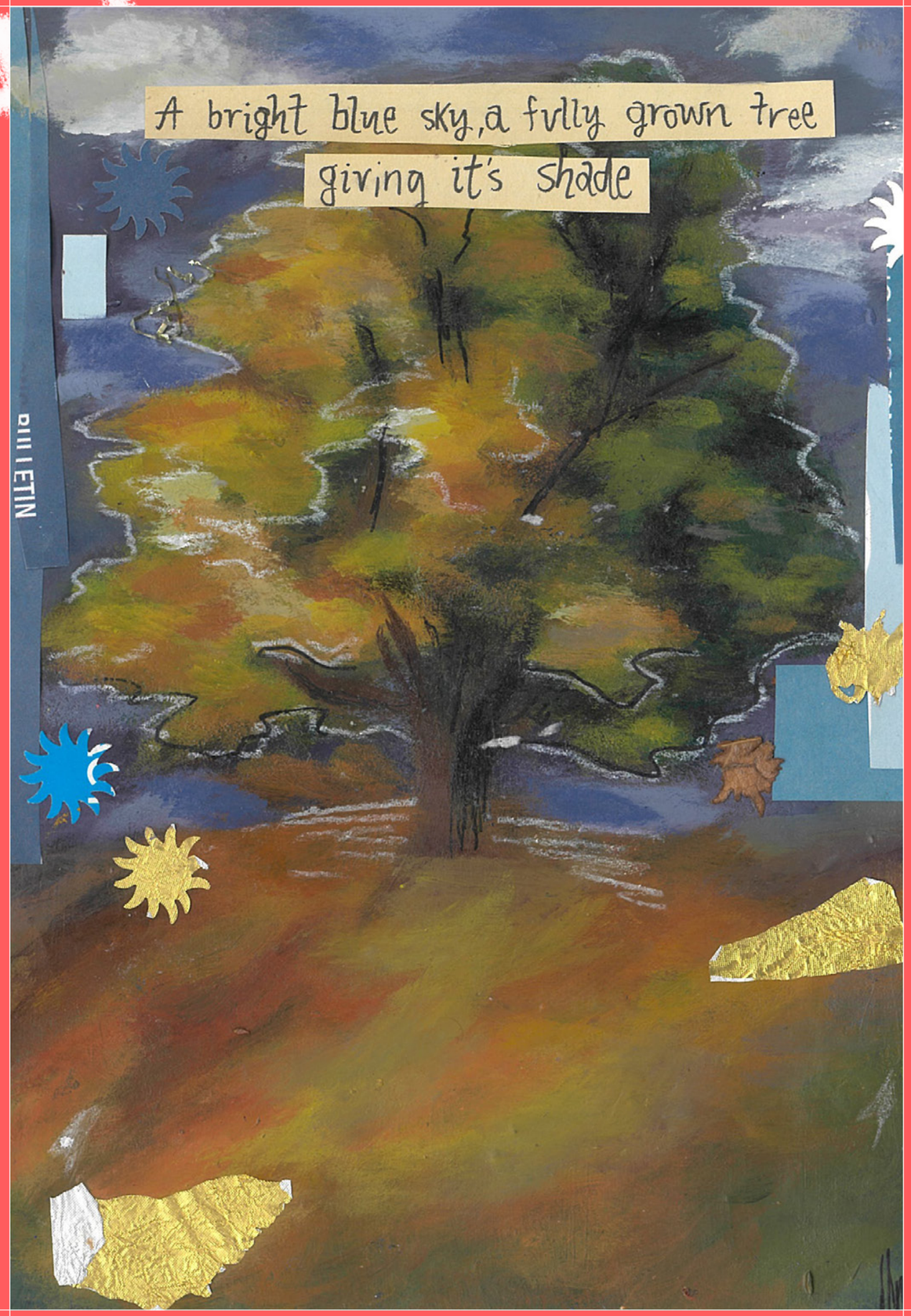
Final reflection from Aliet, Youth Co-researcher

"A lot of changes have been made in recent years that give me hope that we are working towards a future we want to see. There is also still time for changes to be made in our society. This is a reminder that there is room for growth. As long as there are changes made in the present, a lot more can and will be done in the future. This serves as a reminder that young people like myself can be involved in change making about issues that affect young people – enhancing our hopes."

05

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the spirit of listening and responding to young people, we offer the following recommendations for governments, policymakers, educators, researchers, businesses and civil society organisations to strengthen young people's hope and agency to build resilient futures.



Recommendations

Young people say: Hope is critical to our wellbeing and resilience.

Policy and practice must recognise the pivotal role that hope has to support young people's wellbeing and resilience. This should be supported by **government** investment in youth mental health and wellbeing services and **policymakers** ensuring equitable access to digital and non-digital offerings. **Civil society organisations** and **businesses** should invest in co-designed programs and tools with diverse and marginalised young people to foster their hope and wellbeing.

Educators and **civil society organisations** should support and empower young people to visualise goals for their future and foster their confidence and agency to achieve these. This should be supported by **governments** boosting and continuing investment in youth-focused and youth-led grants, programs and activities that foster hope and equipping them with the skills to achieve their goals (e.g. NSW Youth Opportunities grant program).

Policymakers and **practitioners** should invest in research and evaluation to understand what activities, programs and policies can enhance hope in young people, particularly for those experiencing mental health challenges.

Researchers should continue to study and to measure young Australians' hopefulness, how this changes over time, and the relationship between hope, wellbeing and resilience.

Young people say: We feel cautiously optimistic about the future.

Governments, civil society organisations and **businesses** should support activities and programs that build young people's and their family's and friends' confidence and self-efficacy to navigate uncertainty.

Policymakers must adopt intergenerational and collaborative approaches to develop youth-focused policies that are proactive, future-oriented, and that build on young people's strengths and aspirations. These policies should be informed by evidence generated with young people.

Governments should empower youth-led organisations to advocate and take action on social and environmental issues and collaborate with, and learn from, these organisations.

Policymakers and **government** should communicate with young people in ways that are transparent, instil trust, and which are receptive to feedback for young people to input into future policy directions.

Policymakers, civil society organisations, and **businesses** should role model positive change for young people, sharing stories of resilience, hope and perseverance that demonstrate positive change is possible.

Researchers should explore how young people sustain hope during uncertain times as they respond to emerging issues and challenges.

Young people say: We want to live in a secure and peaceful future.

Governments must ensure that policies and interventions are guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), so that young people feel safe and secure, and their basic needs are met. Strong accountability mechanisms are required to identify and redress when young people's rights are infringed.

Governments must support the delivery of programs and policies that address financial insecurity, job insecurity and housing affordability, while pursuing social cohesion. These should be tailored to diverse groups of young people to create positive impact.

Policymakers must design policies that place peace at the centre, both domestically and globally, to support young people to feel safe, and that reflect young people's desire for stability, visibility, and fairness. Policymakers should collaborate across sectors to address the range of interconnected issues that undermine young people's sense of hope.

Civil society organisations should provide young people with accessible resources and tools to receive support when navigating financial hardship.

Young people say: We want to live in a just, kind, supportive and inclusive society.

Governments should provide young people with leadership models that foster unity, cooperation and care.

Policymakers should embed inclusion and justice in every stage of policy design. This means resourcing communities equitably and ensuring policies are designed with young people, especially those from underrepresented groups (i.e. financially, linguistically and geographically diverse). There must be commitment to legislate through an intersectional justice framework and eliminate inequity.

Policymakers should focus on policies that strengthen community connections and social cohesion and that empower marginalised groups.

Governments and **educators** should provide space for youth-inclusive debate (in and outside of politics), where issues related to diversity, equity and multiculturalism are discussed.

Government and **civil society organisations** should create youth-targeted platforms that engage young people in policymaking and communicate the steps that policymakers are taking to build a thriving and diverse society. Decision-makers must ensure fair representation and increase opportunities for diverse leadership in politics, businesses and social institutions.

Governments and **civil society organisations** must support youth-led advocacy programs and digital campaigns to address social injustice, rights abuses and inequality.

Young people say: We want urgent climate action and environmental protection.

Governments and **policymakers** must recognise young people as an important stakeholder group when legislating on climate. The government should support a duty of care bill to provide legislated protection to young people in the climate crisis, which shows young people a long-term commitment to protecting their futures.

Governments should invest in youth-led climate organisations and collaborate with groups to embed their ideas and concerns into national and international dialogues, policymaking and action plans.

Governments should allocate funding for programs that build young people's advocacy skills to communicate climate concerns and mobilise collective action.

Educators and **civil society organisations** should provide young people with education about environmental issues and solutions, advocacy skills, and support programs that foster peer-to-peer education.

Governments, civil society organisations and **businesses** must work together to address young people's climate concerns by implementing youth-centred, co-developed recommendations (see Third et al., 2024a, for recommendations).

Governments, civil society organisations and **businesses** must activate child-centred indicators to design climate initiatives and measure the impacts of climate policies and strategies according to the criteria that matter most to young people (see Third et al., 2024a, for indicators).

Young people say: Technology use and development is both a source of optimism and anxiety.

Government and **businesses** must strengthen online safety regulation and policy to maximise the benefits of digital technology use whilst minimising risks of harms. For **policymakers**, this means investing in youth-centred research to better understand the role and impacts of digital technologies and to inform evidence-based policies. **Businesses**, such as digital platforms and services, must implement youth-informed rights-based principles (see Third & Moody, 2021, and Safety by Design principles), which put user safety and rights at the centre of the digital design and development.

Researchers must conduct youth-centred, robust studies about the role of digital technology use in young people's everyday lives. **Researchers** must also prioritise synthesising existing evidence and develop tools and mechanisms to enable rapid translation of research to effectively guide policy and practice. **Researchers** should also trial and test mechanisms to weigh up evidence and the pros and cons of (in)action with interdisciplinary experts.

Educators and **civil society organisations** should develop co-designed online safety, digital literacy and critical media literacy resources to build young people's and their family's skills and knowledge to engage safely, ethically and constructively with the online environment and emerging technologies.

Educators and **government** must prepare young people for a workforce shaped by emerging technologies. This means equipping teachers with high quality, ready to use resources and ongoing training (see Latham et al., 2024, for further recommendations).

Young people say: Social relationships, community groups and hobbies bolster our hope.

Governments should provide funding to support educators and youth-focused organisations to deliver accessible, free social and recreational programs and activities to young people. Programs will ideally encourage intergenerational and cross-community engagement.

Civil society organisations should equip **parents** and **caregivers** with the tools to have supportive conversations with young people about their hopes, future and goals, and to identify what adults (including teachers, parents, caregivers) can do to support young people to enhance hope.

Policymakers and **civil society organisations** should support initiatives that support parents' and caregivers' wellbeing, including flexible working policies, accessible mental health services, and community support networks.

Businesses and **civil society organisations** should create safe digital and physical spaces in which young people can interact and engage in purposeful activities with family members, community members, and their peers.

Researchers should conduct future studies to understand the diverse ways young people find community and belonging, including online.

Young people say: We feel disillusioned with, and disconnected from, political leadership and processes. Our hope hinges on government action and our inclusion in decision-making.

All levels of government must respect, value and advocate for young people's rights and participation at all levels of decision-making that impacts young people. To achieve this, **government** should activate human rights instruments, e.g. Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and accompanying implementation guidance, plus human rights laws that apply in jurisdictions at state/territory government level.

Governments should incorporate genuine and ongoing youth engagement in all policy development, embedding co-designed, innovative and digital approaches (see Office for Youth Engagement Toolkit and mini-guide resource for youth engagement methods) to support diverse and marginalised young people's engagement. Evaluation, accountability and routine reporting processes should be developed to track youth engagement commitments and impacts.

All levels of government should communicate with young people in ways that are two-way and transparent and ensure direct, relevant, accessible and consistent dialogue between young people and those in leadership, to determine their best interests, communicate goals, strategies and progress.

State and federal government should strengthen ongoing youth participation mechanisms to empower young people to review policies and initiatives, ideate solutions and generate recommendations. Funding should be directed towards long-term and intergenerational policy and practice labs that engage young people and government officials in co-designing policy and programmatic solutions.

State and federal government should set national benchmarks for youth representation in decision-making, in collaboration with young people and advocacy bodies. Policies must centre young people's needs, rights and aspirations to orient towards sustainable long-term planning.

Local governments and **civil society organisations** should collaborate to support ongoing efforts to understand young people's insights and experiences and develop community initiatives to address young people's priorities.

Researchers should investigate the interconnected issues that affect young people's lives, and channel insights into policy and practice.

See the Roadmap Tool on the next page for further guidance towards advancing young people's inclusion in government decision-making.

ROADMAP TOWARDS ADVANCING YOUNG PEOPLE'S INCLUSION IN GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKING

This roadmap provides considerations and actions across all levels of government to enhance young people's meaningful participation in inclusive decision-making processes. Young people's participation requires acknowledgment of shared responsibility and coordinated action to ensure consistency in implementation, and to address interconnected challenges. Each action below contributes to inclusive processes and is of equal importance.

10 GUIDING PRINCIPLES TO DRIVE EFFECTIVE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Respect
Respect, value and advocate for young people's rights to have a say in decisions that affect them.

Inclusivity & diversity
Embrace the diversity of young people's experiences and perspectives and include diverse young people in decisions that affect them.

Transparency
Be open and honest with young people about what is and what is not possible, and communicate why.

Authenticity
Undertake authentic community consultation that gives young people time and clear mechanisms to participate.

Accountability
Nurture genuine partnerships with young people, monitor actions and report back.

Collaboration
Collaborate with young people, researchers and youth-oriented organisations.

Safety
Create safe spaces for young people to share their experiences.

Capacity building
Mentor, resource, and support young people to participate in and lead initiatives.

Sustainability
Commit long-term to youth engagement initiatives and strategies.

Impact
Routinely evaluate youth engagement initiatives and act on learnings.

CONSIDERATIONS

Have young people's concerns been heard and understood by government?

Are policy and decision-making processes addressing the concerns of young people?

ACTIONS

All levels of government

Leverage young people's expertise to **strengthen government youth participation capacity.**

Fund and adopt youth-centred research to drive co-design and implementation.

Activate human rights instruments and implementation guidance at all levels of decision-making.

Act decisively on young people's hopes for change and communicate progress.

Local government

Collaborate with community organisations, schools and youth-oriented organisations to understand young people's experiences.

Seed community initiatives to address young people's priorities.

State & Federal government

Strengthen mechanisms to engage young people in reviewing government initiatives and generating solutions and recommendations.

Fund long-term, intergenerational and cross-sector policy and practice labs to co-design policy and interventions.

Set national benchmarks for youth representation in decision-making.

Support duty of care bills to protect young people's long-term interests.

Co-design civics and citizenship education with young people for optimal uptake and impact.

Invest in long-term relationships with youth-oriented organisations.

CONSIDERATIONS

What accessible strategies and initiatives best support diverse young people to contribute meaningfully to decision-making?

ACTIONS

All levels of government

Engage diverse young people via **outlets they regularly use** (e.g.schools, digital platforms).

Embed youth inclusion and justice in every stage of policy and program design.

Collaborate long-term with youth organisations that support diverse and/or marginalised young people.

Co-design and implement innovative youth participation approaches in decision-making.

Promote diverse young people's insights, experiences and ideas for change.

Act on diverse young people's feedback about participation mechanisms.

Local government

Leverage local programs and services to build deep, ongoing relationships with diverse young people.

State & Federal government

Evaluate policies, programs and practices to identify and address barriers to diverse young people's participation.

Resource youth-oriented organisations, local councils, and schools to support young people to engage.

Create opportunities for diverse young people to learn about government structures and processes.

CONSIDERATIONS

From the perspective of young people, are their best interests the ultimate goal of government decision-making?

Are government decision-making processes transparent and accountable to young people?

ACTIONS

All levels of government

Routinely reflect on how government communicates and engages with young people and addresses their concerns.

Identify opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing about youth engagement across portfolios and jurisdictions.

Evaluate current youth participation mechanisms to identify what works best.

Develop strategies to **avoid duplicating youth engagement efforts** across government, civil society, and industry.

Communicate clearly with young people about local, state and federal government responsibilities and what action they can expect.

Prioritise **integrated and sustainable models of youth engagement** over one-off, issue-specific engagements.

Local government

Embed youth participation mechanisms in all local policies and initiatives.

State & Federal government

Implement cross-portfolio taskforces to align action on young people's priorities.

Invest in ethical data collection to improve youth participation efforts.

Secure ongoing resourcing for long-term initiatives.

Champion inclusive youth decision-making processes following changes of government.

CONSIDERATIONS

How do government institutions and processes need to transform to better respond to young people's needs, rights and aspirations?

What structures and processes will facilitate coordinated action across portfolios to address the interconnected forces that shape young people's lives?

ACTIONS

All levels of government

Prioritise two-way, transparent, accessible, consistent and relatable communication with young people, to determine their best interests and explain progress and outcomes.

Use digital platforms to communicate and engage with young people.

Evaluate and develop accountability mechanisms to track youth engagement impacts.

Align and strengthen youth participation processes across jurisdictions.

Local government

Advocate for the rights of young people with state and federal governments.

State & Federal government

Act on young people's input from youth consultation processes.

Invest in research to explore how best to respond to the interconnected issues affecting young people's lives.

Prioritise long-term planning that centres young people's rights and priorities.

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