

Young adults' experience with Australian public services

A report by Monash University, in partnership with the Australian Catholic University – proudly supported by the Australian Public Service

FINAL REPORT

October 2020

Research team

Chief Investigators

Dr Brady Robards
Assoc Prof Steven Roberts
Dr Barbara Barbosa Neves
Dr Zareh Ghazarian
Dr Jonathan Smith (ACU)
Dr Jacqueline Laughland-Booÿ (ACU)
Dr Verity Trott
Prof Jo Lindsay

Project Manager

Dr Ben Lyall

Research Assistants

Dr Chiara De Lazzari
Dr Madeleine Ulbrick
Dr Sarah Hewitt
Patrick Marple
William Lukamto
Callum Jones

Copyright:

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons NonCommercial 4.0 licence (CC BY-NC 4.0): <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

Suggested citation:

Robards, B., Roberts, S., Lyall, B., Neves, B. B., Ghazarian, Z., Smith, J., Laughland-Booÿ, J., Trott, V., Lindsay, J., De Lazzari, C., Ulbrick, M., Hewitt, S., Marple, P., Lukamto, W., & Jones, C. (2020). *Young adults' experience with Australian public services: Final report*. Monash University. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26180/15139101>.

Further information:

For additional information about this report please contact trustandtransparency@pmc.gov.au

Table of contents

List of figures and tables..	3
Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Young people were keen to contribute their views	6
Defining ‘public services’	7
Existing research informing our approach	7
Complex lives and transition pathways.	8
The impact of COVID-19 on young adult lives	13
Focus Areas	14
1. Young people want to learn more about public services so they are better prepared to engage with them	15
Finding out about services	16
Public services and school.	17
Who else helps young people?.	19
2. Information about services isn’t gathered from a single APS source	21
Social media sentiments about public services	22
Peer support.	23
Sourcing information online	25
3. Young people value digital services, but can find them depersonalising	27
The digital learning curve.	28
Faceless interactions.	28
Finding answers through online communities	29
4. Young people want flexible service touchpoints	31
Navigating the system	32
Flexible contact	33
Sharing and comparing experiences.	35
5. Young people’s knowledge and experience of the APS varies by social characteristics and cultural background.	37
Uneven knowledge among young people	38

Knowledge and experience by qualification profiles	39
Gendered experiences	39
Experiences of the children of migrant parents	41
6. Young people who need consistent support report initial and ongoing barriers	43
First service interactions	44
Consistent access and inconsistent results	47
Young parents' service experience	48
7. Young people report mixed experiences with third-party service providers.	51
Healthcare	52
Looking for work	52
Non-secular providers	54
Moving to Australia.	54
8. Young people report stigma as a barrier to service engagement	56
Difficult interactions with staff.	57
Troubling labels	58
Service stigma in regional Australia	59
Attitudes are changing: COVID-19	60
9. Young people feel mental health needs greater recognition	62
Young adults' mental health	63
Turning to social media for help	64
Mental health support services.	66
The impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing	67
Conclusion69
COVID-19 and the new normal?	70
References71
Appendix: Research Methods.72
Focus groups	73
Secondary data analysis.	74
National survey	75
Sentiment analysis.	76

List of figures and tables

Figure 1: Key Pathways into Adulthood in Australia (LSAY).	9
Table 1: Key Pathways into Adulthood in Australia (LSAY)	10
Table 2: How would you like to find out about public services that can support you?	16
Figure 2: Public service sentiment online (n=3,000)	22
Figure 3: Sentiment analysis of social media posts (n=230) discussing Centrelink.. . . .	24
Figure 4: Navigating the system	32
Table 3: Navigating the system	32
Table 4: Preferred means to access/apply for APS (multiple choice)	33
Figure 5: Percentage who were 'Very Confident' of parental support, by pathway type	44
Table 5: Percentage who were 'Very Confident' of parental support, by pathway type.	45
Figure 6: Percentage who had ever received any form of government allowance	45
Table 6: Percentage who had ever received any form of government allowance	46
Figure 7: Concern with staff treatment.	57
Table 7: Concern with staff treatment	57
Table 8: Percentage with probable Serious Mental Illness (SMI), by government support	63
Table 9: Percentage with probable Serious Mental Illness (SMI), by pathway type.. . . .	64
Figure 8: Mental health since COVID-19	67
Table 10: Mental health since COVID-19.	68
Table 11: Survey sample characteristics	75
Table 12: Survey respondent location.. . . .	76





Executive Summary

Context for this report

We have undertaken a large-scale, mixed-methods study with young people in Australia, examining their experiences of public services. This research was undertaken during an unprecedented global pandemic, but also in a broader context where for the last few decades young people have been following increasingly complex, non-linear, and uncertain pathways towards adulthood. Today's young people navigate combined stresses of education, employment, housing, and relationships, and public services are essential to support young people during these transitions. Work can be done to improve how young people enter, transition between, and exit services, to empower them on their paths into adulthood. Young people were keen to participate, and from March to August 2020, our study involved:

- 47 **focus groups** with 155 young adults from around Australia, aged 18-30.
- 2,261 responses to a **national survey** of young adults, aged 18-30.
- 30,000 **social media posts**, collected from Twitter, Reddit and Whirlpool.
- **Secondary analysis of longitudinal data** from *The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth* (LSAY) and the *Our Lives* study.

Our findings highlight nine focus areas where there is room for the APS to improve service-delivery to young Australians:

- 1. Young people want to learn more about public services so they are better prepared to engage with them.** The quality of outcomes for young people - and the level of compliance for the APS - depends upon the level and reliability of information they receive.

Our national survey showed **47% of young people want to learn about services within myGov.**

'myGov makes it pretty streamlined. **It's pretty easy. I like having all those messages there from all the different agencies**' (focus group, VIC, F, 21).
- 2. Information about services isn't gathered from a single, APS source.** Young people feel services could communicate better to avoid misinformed expectations about service interactions.

On social media, people sought advice, discussed services, and offered criticisms. The dominant theme was how **services communicate and provide information.**
- 3. Young people value digital services, but can find them depersonalising.** This can leave young people feeling like they are invisible, and can see them look for assistance to interpret information.

'I feel like live chats on websites can be really helpful, especially if you've got questions like how to get through the website' (focus group, VIC, M, 22).

4. Young people want flexible service touchpoints. Along with digital options, they want the flexibility to engage on more complex issues – online, by phone, and in-person.



‘On the phone or on the internet, you’re on hold. You’re waiting for emails, you’re waiting for someone to get back to you, and **you feel just so invisible in the system**’ (focus group, QLD, F, 20).

5. Young people’s knowledge and experience of the APS varies by social characteristics and cultural background. This can lead some young people to feel services don’t speak to them, leading to confusion or disengagement with services.



In our survey and in focus groups, more **young women reported difficulties understanding or accessing services than young men.** In particular, women expressed less confidence regarding taxation and superannuation.

6. Young people who need consistent support report initial and ongoing barriers. This can lead to some vulnerable young people feeling disenfranchised and isolated – negatively impacting service interactions and outcomes.



A young person with a disability said: **‘having to speak about yourself and justify yourself - I find I have a lot of trouble in doing that even now’** (focus group, QLD, F 21).

7. Young people report mixed experiences with third-party service providers. Because of this, young people have less confidence in service programs and are less likely to fully engage.



‘With the added weekly Centrelink interviews and all the paperwork I had to fill out, **I literally quit Centrelink so I could concentrate on finding work**’ (social media post).

8. Young people report stigma as a barrier to service engagement. As a result, young people may wait until they are in crisis before seeking support from services, or not may not access services at all.



79% of young people are concerned about how service staff would treat them.



‘I think for us rural kids, there is a bit of a stigma attached to it still’ (focus group, SA, M, 25).

9. Young people feel mental health needs greater recognition. Without acknowledgement or awareness of the mental health pathways available, young people are less likely to engage with and trust services, delaying access to mental health support.



Young adults receiving government payments are **likelier to have a probable serious mental illness than young people who do not.**



Young people with mental health concerns want an **‘agent, advocate or advisor’ to assist them (53%), and ‘more information on the topic’ (39%).**

Introduction

Australian public services are central to the lives of young Australians, from welfare systems to support with education and employment, to taxation and to systems related to international travel. The participants in our study have had a range of positive and transformative interactions with public services, along with a range of challenges and issues.

In this study we set out to understand young people's experiences and perceptions of Australian public services by first understanding young people's transitions towards adulthood. From March to August 2020, we engaged a broad range of young Australians through a national survey (n=2,261) and focus groups (n=155), who connect with an equally broad range of services. We were guided by the following Research Questions:

1. What are the current pathways young people take into adulthood in Australia?
2. Where, when and how do young people interact with Australian public services?
3. What are young people's perceptions of and experiences with Australian public services?
4. Where, when and how can Australian public services be delivered to meet young people's needs and expectations?

Importantly, though not by design, our research took place during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic threw up immediate medical challenges and is having a significant impact on Australia's social, cultural, and economic landscape. As we demonstrate below, young people bear the brunt of precarious employment and uncertain futures, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic intensify these issues. The pandemic forms an important backdrop to our findings.

In this report, we map out nine key '**Focus Areas**', informed by our research findings around learning about services, accessing and interacting with services, and places where young people saw room for improvement. These focus areas are designed to provide stakeholders in the APS (Australian Public Service) with evidence and data with which to improve public services for young people. The intent of the research is to represent the experiences and perceptions of young people in Australia, not to make specific policy recommendations. Before we get to the focus areas, we provide some background on the study.

Young people were keen to contribute their views

During this project we were overwhelmed with the response when we invited young people to participate. Our call for volunteers for focus groups received more than 700 responses across the country. Young people clearly wanted to contribute to this project, and want their voices to be heard, countering the narrative that young people are disengaged and disinterested in contributing to discussions about government services.

A number of focus group participants contacted us afterwards to emphasise the importance of their participation. Participants were, for instance, appreciative that the research was being conducted and that the APS wanted to engage with young people directly:

'Thank you for putting in the time and effort to organise this whole thing and for really engaging with what we all had to say – it's really awesome that you're actually looking into

these services, it's an area that needs a lot change and reform' (ACT, F, 19).

Others emphasised the importance of services getting feedback from actual users:

'I wish government services got feedback from the people that are using them. Like this. I think this is really good ..., in the sense that people actually feel like we're having voices [and our] own opinions' (VIC, M, 18).

Similarly, survey respondents highlighted the importance of the research and their hopes that their voices contributed to an evidence base for policy development:

'I hope this survey will reach the government' (VIC, M, 27).

'It was a good survey and it is good to know that these problems are being addressed' ([location not disclosed], M, 20)

Other respondents emphasised the importance of the research in the context of COVID-19 and mental health concerns particularly:

'Thank you for caring and being interested in what young people have to say, as well as how the current global situation has affected us, is really appreciated :)' (NSW, F, 19)

'Thank you this is very relevant nowadays. And I feel like someone cared' ([location not disclosed], F, 24).

'Very good survey, that I hope does change something in the system. Wish the government had more easily available information about mental health besides health line numbers' (survey respondent, WA, F, 25).

Defining 'public services'

This report focuses on Australian public services, as used by young adults. We did not differentiate between specific services, and allowed participants to detail their individual experiences across a range of different services including Centrelink/Services Australia, Medicare, the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), the Australian Tax Office (ATO), and Home Affairs. Their perceptions and experiences often carry across and between services. This report also includes mention of state, local, and non-government services, which young people sometimes connected to a broad understanding of 'public services'.

Young people in this report often refer to specific services. For example, Centrelink or the ATO – because this is where a majority of their experience is based. However, our findings are applicable at a whole-of-APS level. While the results, examples, and case studies we provide sometimes name specific services, they are often indicative of broader issues across the APS.

Existing research informing our approach

We understand 'youth' as a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. It is not defined by biological age parameters and is instead a socially constructed phase of the life-course. A 'successful' move from youth to adulthood has conventionally been understood through achieving three interrelated transitional milestones: 1) the school to work transition (i.e. from full-time education to full-time position in the labour market); 2) the domestic transition (i.e. from family of origin to starting one's

own family); and 3) the housing transition (from residence with parents to not residing them) (France & Roberts, 2017). These three markers each have the potential to determine, and be determined, by attainment of one another.

From the end of the second world war through to the late 1970s, youth transitions in the OECD nations were characterised by relative linearity and predictability. After leaving school, usually at around 16 years old, most young people were absorbed into an economy predicated on unskilled jobs, while a relative few went into further and higher education (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006). Moving out of the family home and starting a family of one's own tended to happen around the same time, or very quickly after.

In recent decades there has been a combination of globalisation, technological advancement, and occupational change alongside the steady retrenchment of welfare states (France & Roberts, 2017). This trend is clearly born out in our own present research. These changes rapidly transformed youth transitions in industrialized nations, uncoupling the previous alignment of achievement of the three domains of adulthood (education to employment, family, and housing). This has resulted in 'a set of movements which are less predictable and involve frequent breaks, backtracking and the blending of statuses' (Furlong et al., 2003: 24), such as growing experiences of churning through insecure employment and underemployment, alongside delayed exit from and, increasingly, returns to living with parents.

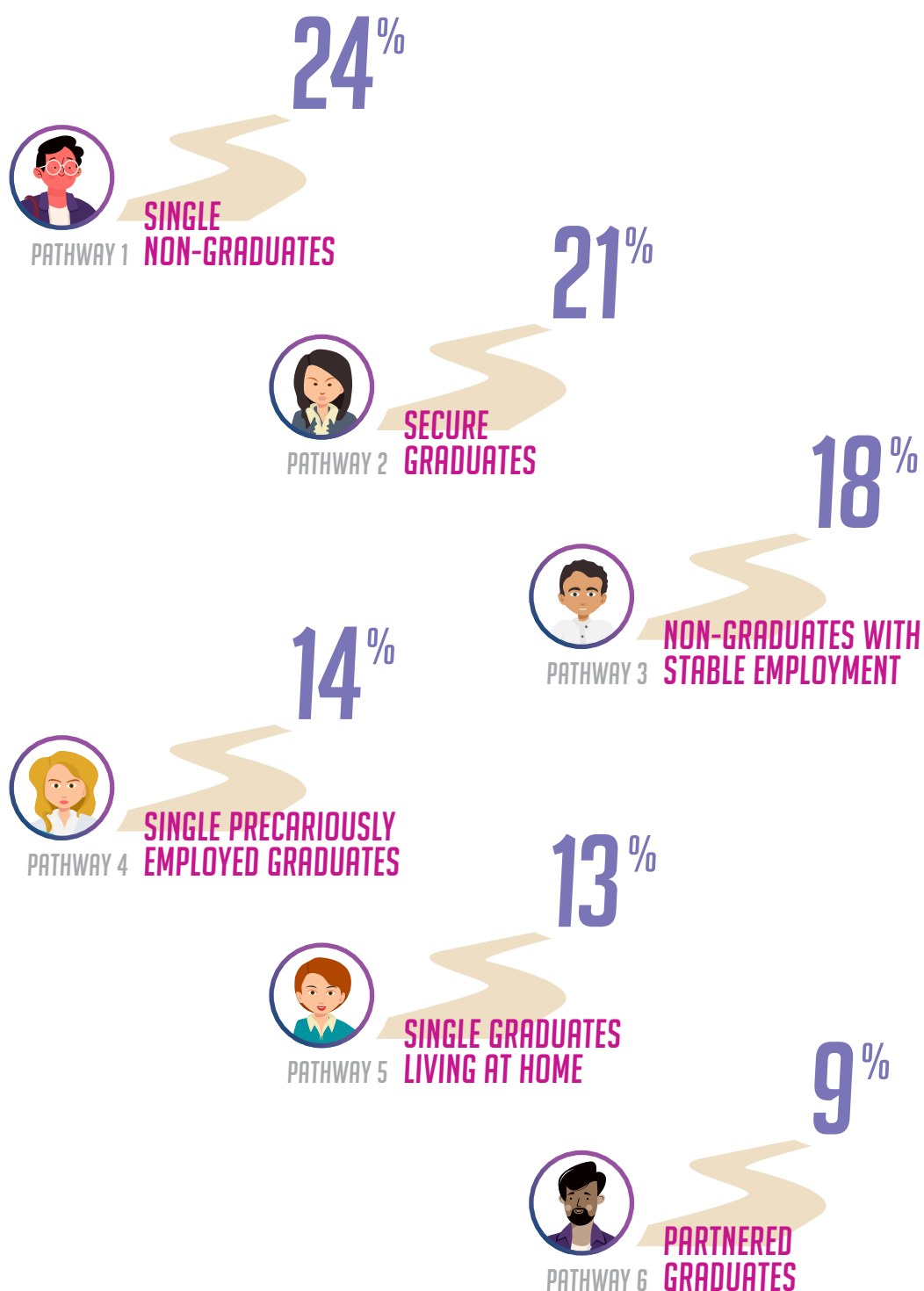
These trends continue. For example, in Australia, 47.2% of men and 36.5% of women aged 18 to 29 resided with their parents in 2001, but by 2017 these figures grew to 56.4% and 53.9% respectively (Vera-Toscano, 2019). As well as the clear closing of the gap between men and women, two key findings emerge: first that there is growth in young people residing with parents; secondly, those living with their parents are over-represented among the unemployed, non-working full-time students and those who are single. These together illustrate the significant impact employment status has upon transitions to independence across the 20s. This has led to the deployment of a variety of metaphors, describing youth transitions as 'extended', 'fragmented', and young people as part of a 'yo-yo' or 'boomerang' generation (Walther 2006; Woodman & Wyn 2015; France & Roberts 2017).

Complex lives and transition pathways

Contrasting to previous generations, young people today follow a range of complex pathways into adulthood which includes navigating education, employment, housing, and relationships in different ways, sometimes moving back and forward between 'milestones of transition'. Despite this complexity, the young people in our research have conventional linear understandings for achieving typical, if delayed, adulthood milestones – such as owning and living in a home of one's own, partnership formation, and parenthood. Gaining independence from family is a goal many young people share. The challenges for agencies include how to support young people on these different pathways in their bid to achieve these longer-term goals, how to meet the need for variable outreach strategies, how to work with differentiated first points of contact, and how to maximise engagement when young people connect with services in different ways.

To identify the current pathways young Australians take to adulthood we analysed secondary data from the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth* (LSAY) (n=2,945) and the *Our Lives* project (n=1,500). We found six typical pathways into adulthood experienced by young people over the last decade.

Figure 1: Key Pathways into Adulthood in Australia (LSAY)



Source: Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, 2009 cohort data, Waves 1-10 (final analytic sample n=2,945)
Note: These figures have been rounded, and may not total to 100%.

Table 1: Key Pathways into Adulthood in Australia (LSAY)

Pathway number	1	2	3	4	5	6
Pathway Name	Single Non-Graduates	Secure Graduates	Non-Graduates with Stable Employment	Single Precariously Employed Graduates	Single Graduates Living at Home	Partnered Graduates
Key Pathway Attributes	No Uni, Permanent Work, or Cohabitation	Uni + Became Permanent + Left Home	No Uni + Permanent Work + Cohabitation	Uni Without Permanent Work or Cohabitation	Uni + Permanent Work + At home	Uni + Later Cohabitation
Work Pathways						
Stable Permanent	32%	0%	47%	16%	22%	36%
Lost Permanent	8%	0%	9%	9%	0%	9%
Became Permanent	25%	100%	23%	0%	78%	15%
Never Permanent	35%	0%	20%	75%	0%	39%
Study Pathways						
Stable Unskilled	54%	0%	39%	0%	0%	14%
Early Vocational	26%	0%	31%	0%	0%	7%
Late Vocational	20%	0%	22%	0%	0%	7%
University	0%	100%	7%	100%	100%	72%
Residential Pathways						
Early Leaver	18%	42%	45%	23%	0%	22%
Returner	4%	0%	5%	5%	9%	8%
Late Leaver	26%	57%	46%	30%	0%	32%
Stayer	52%	0%	4%	42%	91%	38%
Relationship Pathways						
Stable Single	100%	55%	0%	99%	100%	0%
Late Partnered	0%	38%	51%	0%	0%	100%
Separated	0%	1%	13%	1%	0%	0%
Stable Partnered	0%	6%	36%	0%	0%	0%
% overall sample*	24%	21%	18%	14%	13%	9%

Source: Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, 2009 cohort data, Waves 1-10 (final analytic sample n=2,945)

*These figures have been rounded, and may not total to 100%.

PATHWAY 1

SINGLE NON-GRADUATES [24% OF THE SAMPLE]



The most common 'pathway to adulthood', pathway group 1 consists of 'unskilled' and vocationally educated young people, who are not cohabiting with a partner, and many of whom do not have a permanent job at age 25. Of all pathway types, this pathway contains the highest proportion of respondents who have not completed a post-secondary qualification (54%). Many in this group (28%) were still studying towards their bachelor's degree, either as their first post-secondary qualification or following a vocational degree. Though many had more recently found permanent work, 28% were still working casually in their mid-twenties and 16% were either unemployed or not in the labour force. Just over half of this group was still living in the parental home (52%).

For example, Coby (QLD, M, 25), moved from a regional area to Brisbane to find a job. He lived in a share-house but moved back in with his parents after experiencing difficulties with his mental health. Coby is currently living at home and really wants to move out, although he doesn't think that he can afford rent. He would like to be in a relationship but is not actively seeking a partner.

Another example is Bek (SA, non-binary gender, 23) who lives alone in a different state to their family. Bek works in a casual job while remotely studying an arts double-degree. They have lived in three capital cities, moving for different study options. Bek has enjoyed the independence gained through these experiences, but is concerned about future permanent job prospects.

PATHWAY 2

SECURE GRADUATES [21% OF THE SAMPLE]



This pathway is made up of university educated young people who are all in permanent work and residing out of their parental home by age 25. Three-quarters of this group worked casually during their university studies prior to transitioning to permanent work after completing their degree. Very few of these young people are engaged in any further postgraduate study at age 25. Around 55% of this group still remained single at age 25, while 38% had become married or entered a de facto / cohabiting relationship in their early to mid-twenties.

For example, Nate (NSW, Male, 27) is renting his own place in inner Sydney. He has a university degree, and works in an allied health role. He had employment related to his degree while studying, and now has a full-time job in the same sector. Nate's work hours have been cut recently and this has put a strain on his finances.

PATHWAY 3

NON-GRADUATES WITH STABLE EMPLOYMENT [18% OF THE SAMPLE]



Pathway 3 is characterised by unskilled and vocationally educated young people who have mainly held long-term permanent work, and who have spent the most time (of all pathway types) living independently with a cohabiting partner. This group was also the most likely to have become parents (20%) by age 25. Half of this group had left the parental home early by age 21, and almost all had left by age 25. Similarly, half of this group were in a married or de facto relationship

by age 21 (around one in four of which had dissolved by age 25). With the exception of those early cohabiters who had separated, all respondents in this group were cohabiting with partners by age 25. Most had completed no post-secondary education (39%), whilst others had completed a vocational degree either by age 21 (31%) or age 25 (22%). Most had held permanent jobs longer-term (47%) or had more recently gained permanent work (23%).

For example, Tan (Male, 27) is married, and does not have children. He has diverse and extensive work experience, working a range of permanent jobs in Indonesia and Malaysia. In 2017, he moved to Australia with his wife and is now studying social work.

PATHWAY 4

SINGLE PRECARIOUSLY EMPLOYED GRADUATES (14% OF THE SAMPLE)



Pathway group 4 is populated by university educated young people who are neither cohabiting with a partner nor with a permanent job at age 25. Further analysis indicates that 40% of this group is undertaking additional post-graduate study and 57% are employed casually at age 25.

Young people in this group are the most diverse of all pathway types in terms of their housing transitions. While 42% had not left home by age 25, 23% had left by age 21, and a further 30% had left by age 25.

PATHWAY 5

SINGLE GRADUATES LIVING AT HOME (13% OF THE SAMPLE)



Pathway 5 consists of university educated young people who are all single, in permanent work and still residing in the parental home at age 25. Similar to the Graduate Workers Out of Home pathway, most of these young people (61%) worked casually during their university studies

before transitioning to permanent work by age 25 following their degree, and relatively few were pursuing postgraduate studies.

PATHWAY 6

PARTNERED GRADUATES (9% OF THE SAMPLE)



The Pathway 6 group is composed of university educated young people who are beginning to form families and independent households. The young people in this group gained a university degree and married or established a de facto relationship during their early to mid-twenties.

The majority had also left the parental home to begin cohabiting, though many still remained at home. Partnered graduates were also one of the most diverse groups in terms of their work pathways. Approximately half of all respondents had held either stable permanent work, or transitioned into permanent work by age 25, but 39% had never held permanent work. This was one of two pathway types associated with parenthood – 8% of this group were parents at age 25.

In summary, young people today follow diverse pathways towards adulthood, marked by a range of different and often non-linear transitions through education, employment, housing, and partnering. Understanding diverse pathways is important for understanding the current context for young people engaging with Australian public services.

The impact of COVID-19 on young adult lives

Our results indicate some of the early effects of the pandemic and young people's employment, finances, and future plans. Participants reported that COVID-19 restrictions on employment and study arrangements had a significant impact on study plans, with 57% saying their plans for future study had changed since the COVID-19 lockdowns.

17% of young people reported receiving *monthly* financial support from their parents or caregivers in the wake of COVID-19 while 26% didn't receive *any* financial support from parents. In a typical week before COVID-19, 31% of respondents were able to **financially** manage fairly easily, while now 25% of respondents report being able to do so. **More respondents report finding their finances slightly more difficult to manage now (29%), than before COVID-19 (23%).** It is important to note here that while COVID-19 has exacerbated these challenges, they are not new and are long-standing issues faced by young people.

In relation to employment, study, and finances during COVID-19, notable impacts on young people, are listed below. We note here that the experience of the pandemic varied across time and across the country, which may account for increases and decreases that seem counterintuitive.

- 24.0% had their work hours reduced
- 12.3% were laid off or their employer went out of business
- 9% had to leave their job as their own circumstances prevented them from working
- 6.3% were stood down without pay (including young people accessing JobKeeper)
- 13.7% had their pay reduced
- 6.3% had work hours increased
- 3.9% had their pay increased
- 18.2% experienced a disruption to their studies
- 28.4% changed their plans for future study
- 3.9% moved back home to live with their parents
- 2.8% had to move somewhere else (with a friend or partner, or to a smaller dwelling)
- 8% had to renegotiate their rental agreement, home loan, or housing payments
- 6.1% applied for relief or to defer basic costs of living (electricity, internet, phone, etc.)
- 5.4% accessed their superannuation early

Significantly, our survey also revealed that **1.6% of respondents were currently living in insecure housing.** An additional 15.8% had '*slept rough*' or in *improvised shelters* or spent nights in *emergency accommodation, youth refuges, or 'couch-surfed'* in the last six months.

The impacts of COVID-19 and the associated restrictions introduced to manage the pandemic are evidenced across many of the Focus Areas we explore below. Our research was able to capture the immediate impacts on young people as they were experiencing them, but it is important to note that these impacts will be enduring and will also change over time. The transformation of some entire industries, for instance, will not yet be immediately apparent, and this will have flow-on effects for young people in the future.

For the remainder of this report, we move on to discuss nine Focus Areas. In each section, we highlight key findings, organised thematically, and endeavour to outline the points of most significance for the APS.

FOCUS AREAS

1. YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PUBLIC SERVICES SO THEY ARE BETTER PREPARED TO ENGAGE WITH THEM. [SEE PAGE 15](#)
2. INFORMATION ABOUT SERVICES ISN'T GATHERED FROM A SINGLE APS SOURCE. [SEE PAGE 21](#)
3. YOUNG PEOPLE VALUE DIGITAL SERVICES, BUT CAN FIND THEM DEPERSONALISING. [SEE PAGE 27](#)
4. YOUNG PEOPLE WANT FLEXIBLE SERVICE TOUCHPOINTS. [SEE PAGE 31](#)
5. YOUNG PEOPLE'S KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE OF THE APS VARIES BY SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND. [SEE PAGE 37](#)
6. YOUNG PEOPLE WHO NEED CONSISTENT SUPPORT REPORT INITIAL AND ONGOING BARRIERS. [SEE PAGE 43](#)
7. YOUNG PEOPLE REPORT MIXED EXPERIENCES WITH THIRD-PARTY SERVICE PROVIDERS. [SEE PAGE 51](#)
8. YOUNG PEOPLE REPORT STIGMA IS A BARRIER TO SERVICE ENGAGEMENT. [SEE PAGE 56](#)
9. YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS GREATER RECOGNITION. [SEE PAGE 62](#)



FOCUS AREA: 1

YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PUBLIC SERVICES SO THEY ARE BETTER PREPARED TO ENGAGE WITH THEM.

.....

YOUNG PEOPLE REPORT A LACK OF AWARENESS ABOUT CIVIC RESPONSIBILITIES, LIKE TAXATION. THEY WANT MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF PUBLIC SERVICES THROUGH OFFICIAL CHANNELS. THEY REPORT THEY WANT THE APS TO HELP BRIDGE THIS GAP, AND WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HAVE BEEN TAUGHT ABOUT SERVICES AT SCHOOL. THE QUALITY OF OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE – AND THE LEVEL OF COMPLIANCE FOR THE APS – DEPENDS UPON THE LEVEL AND RELIABILITY OF INFORMATION THEY RECEIVE.

.....

Key points:

- Young people feel that myGov is a useful service, and **47% of young people want to learn about services within myGov.**
- Young people feel that there are many websites with overlapping purposes and information. One person described it as an ‘absolute dog’s breakfast of different resources that don’t communicate with each other’ (ACT, F, 19).
- **Young people feel like the APS could visit high-schools** to explain the purpose and role of services in civic life: ‘Oh my goodness. I constantly think back on if only I learned about tax or superannuation in school’ (NSW, F, 29).
- **To fill knowledge gaps, young people often turn to family members and friends – however, not all young people have these supports available to them.**

Finding out about services

Young Australians have an appetite for learning about the APS and associated agencies. In our research, young people told us they want reliable information produced by the APS in easily accessible forms, especially online.

myGov is seen as the main interface for public services – and was regarded positively by young people. They feel that myGov is a great hub for services and correspondence:

'I think myGov makes it pretty streamlined. **It's pretty easy to get in. And I like having all those messages there from all the different agencies...** it's pretty easy' (VIC, F, 21).

'I mean, with the new system on the myGov website, it's just pretty much click-a-button. It was actually fairly functional, which caught me by surprise. **I was expecting it to be a bit of rabbit warren, but no, it was pretty straightforward**' (NSW, M, 20).

Older participants (over the age of 25) also noted how simple, clear and fast the site was compared to earlier forms of digital service access.

However, **it was often suggested by our focus group participants that the myGov website and app could act more as an educational resource.** Young people think that as well as *linking* to services, myGov could also *explain* what different public services do, and give some age-appropriate tips for new service users. Almost 47% of our survey respondents said they wanted to 'find out about public services' through myGov. Other common preferences for learning about services were 'government websites' (28%) and 'via email' (26%).

Table 2: How would you like to find out about public services that can support you?

Response	%
myGov	46.9
Public service websites	28.3
Emails from the government	26
Social media (Instagram, Facebook etc.)	23.6
From my high school or university	19
Text messages from the government	18.9
From my place of employment	16.3
Face-to-face service centres	14.2
Home visits by social workers/others	7.2

Q63: How would you like to find out about public services that can support you? Select all that apply.

Young people saw social media as limited in its ability to provide information – but saw it as a stepping-stone to learning more about services. Our focus group participants saw social media as important in this learning process. A variety of themes linked to the process of learning emerged, notably with a focus on trust, succinctness, and capacity to be received by young people:

'...by using [social media] appropriately rather than leaflets that we don't pick up anymore... [Making information] accessible on your phone, that will definitely make it more trustworthy and also more helpful towards people' (NSW, F, 19).

'I think social media can play a very good role in terms of awareness [of public services]' (VIC, M, 30).

'This is how I consume my information. I read news on Instagram. **I don't even like going on websites anymore. I literally search on Instagram. Social media is huge. I think like the government should use that a bit more.** I mean, they are using it quite a bit 'cos I do see ads on social media, but I think they should use it a bit more and use it in a way that kind of appeals to young adults and people of our age' (SA, F, 25).

This is consistent with findings from existing APS research: while myGov is the highest-use contact point (across Australian demographics), young people are larger users of phone and face-to-face public services contact than other age-groups (Citizen Experience Wave 2 Report, 2019). This suggests that establishing strong relationships with young people – and helping to establish key expectations around citizenship and rights – is vital.

Public services and school

Beyond 'how' young people want to learn about services, focus group participants pointed to a recurring theme about 'when' would be the ideal time to learn. **Young people repeatedly identified an absence of service information provided during their schooling**, particularly in relation to the latter years of high school. This was not so much a theme about what teachers or schools could do more of, but rather about the possibility of the APS being more present and visible within schools.

Indicative of the upper age group, a 29-year-old woman, reflected 'oh my goodness. I **constantly think back on if only I learned about tax or superannuation in school**' (NSW, F, 29). Another participant reflected on her recent schooling, noting that 'sometimes in my legal studies class, they would talk about taxes and things like that. But not like... a full-on actual educational class. It was just bits and pieces' (VIC, F, 19).

Importantly, the **young adults in this study did not blame their teachers** nor necessarily expect that the education system to be solely responsible for providing a solution. Instead **they framed their school years as being the obvious time for intervention and information provision**, given school is considered the necessary foundation for preparing young people for the adult world. They therefore often looked back with surprise that they were finding out about their rights and responsibilities *after* starting their journey into adult life. This was very common across the age range of the sample.

Without public services being embedded in education, the possibility to normalise APS interactions as part of adult participation in civic society, is reduced. Similarly, while young people can and do access information about public services through other sources – such as wider family and peer networks – such sources are not available to all young people, and can be variable.

Thinking about the kinds of advice they would have valued during their school years, young people pointed to how **they were educated about risky and dangerous matters like fire safety in primary school or hard drug awareness in high school, yet they were not informed about the more mundane but crucial role that the APS plays in the lives of all Australians.**

The absence of information about a wide range of public service issues in the schooling phase of life left people feeling 'alone' in navigating early adulthood:

'I don't think I learnt anything like this in school, I had to figure it all out myself or through other people. I think we should have learnt about what kind of services are available [...] what taxes are and how that works. I still haven't figured that out... I think that should be taught in high school' (VIC, F, 24).

'I was having this conversation with my partner who's a maths teacher. You know, most of the kids in his class [...] **they'll know how to do trigonometry, but they won't know how to read an [Fair Work] award. They won't know how to read a payslip** or a wages-table, because that's not taught in schools. They won't know how to calculate what their entitlements should be [...] or how much taxation they should be paying' (NSW, M, 26).

'[We are told] what being on meth looks like. But there's nothing about Centrelink. There's nothing about Youth Allowance. There's nothing about how you deal with HECS, you know? I think that it should be integrated into the education system, giving us more of a chance to learn these things through trusted sources. Instead of asking, you know, any old uncle, "hey, how do you set up a Centrelink account? "What's myGov?"' (QLD, F, 21).

This led to numerous suggestions for targeted classes in high school to teach young people about public services to boost their knowledge and confidence. Also, though, the emphasis, as above, was on authoritative and 'trusted' sources' and the role of the APS staff in feeding into or delivering these important sessions that might be held in the school setting:

'I think the schools could definitely benefit from having a representative come in and just being really transparent, a little bit fun, opening up the conversation to young people so that they feel like they can ask these questions and maybe fill in the gaps if they don't really know. So that [they] are set up then for going into adulthood and just kind of knowing who to ask and what to ask' (NSW, F, 29).

'I was going to say even stuff like, **I had no idea how to vote.** If you get someone to come into school and be like, "this is how you vote, this is how you understand the ballot that you're given". It would be helpful' (QLD, F, 20).

'Preparing people for the real world kind of classes. **Instead of a study period or a sport class "here's how to set up your myGov and here's how to do taxes.** And here is how to set up their TFN together and their superannuation"' (WA, F, 19).

'I definitely would have appreciated being taught how to navigate support systems like Centrelink or, and doing tax and Medicare and that kind of thing. I'm trying to educate some of my friends about how to do it' (QLD, M, 18).

Young people framed school-based intervention and education as necessary because they felt ill-prepared to engage with the public service and are unsure of their rights and responsibilities. This lack of preparedness can exacerbate inequalities, with some young people experiencing economic disadvantage as a result of not being equipped with knowledge about the public service and the confidence to access it. This not only highlights potential exploitation of young people in the workforce, but also has a significant impact on their savings for the future.

The following examples from focus groups, which all revolve around issues of tax, illustrate this:

‘...I think I was 16. I got paid like a large amount over the holiday break and they taxed me nearly all of it. ‘Cos **I didn’t have a Tax File Number. I don’t think I ever got that [money] back.** I don’t know why’ (QLD, F, 20).

‘I worked at [a restaurant] and I’m pretty sure I **never got any super** but I didn’t want to follow it up. My sister thinks that if I call them, they’ll be able to tell me if they contributed super to my account. But I just think I don’t want to follow it up anymore’ (VIC, F, 19).

Our participants explained that this lack of confidence often came from not knowing their rights or responsibilities.

‘You have all of these different numbers [i.e. CRN, TFN] that are inaccessible and you forget about them and then a different institution asks you for it and you can’t remember it. Like **it’s kind of a very messy system and none of our systems talk to each other.** So it’s sort of like there’s just these absolute **dog’s breakfast of different resources that don’t communicate with each other** even though they really need to’ (ACT, F, 19).

Who else helps young people?

Not all young people navigate service access alone. Indeed, many young people consult family members for advice on public services and often rely on them for support and guidance. One participant explained how her sister became an important source of knowledge because of her prior experiences:

‘I feel like most of the time I go to websites and I call up hotlines, or I also talk to my **sister** sometimes because she has experience with Centrelink and she’s applied for **JobSeeker** and other things that I haven’t’ (VIC, F, 19).

Another of our participants contrasted the learning he had done about services at school with the learning he did at work and through his family:

‘High school taught me basics about rentals and tax but I learnt more from my self-education at university and life experience from work. **My parents and friends taught me more than school**’ (QLD, M, 28).

In both cases, and throughout our research, family clearly plays an important role for many young people in framing what public services are for and how to access them. This experience of learning through the family was not universal however. As another participant said, ‘unless you’re lucky enough that your school helps you, or your parents help you, you kinda just have to work it out yourself’ (TAS, F, 19).

One young person posted online asking for advice about Centrelink on behalf of their girlfriend (who was 21). This indicates that young couples at times work together to try and navigate the system when they do not have other family support. This user posted:

‘My girlfriend was recently stood down due to the virus. The application for the Centrelink claim (Youth Allowance as she’s 21) had us confused as we are unsure if she can take annual leave whilst waiting for the claim to be processed, or if she has to just wait until she hears back from Centrelink, which means she’ll have no income. Does anyone know if she can use the annual leave or do we need to wait?’ (Reddit user).

As we discuss later in this report (**see Focus Area 6**), parental guidance is not always available, and can also be patchy. This is problematic given that the heaviest users of services are those with less overt parental support (**see Focus Area 2**). This is compounded for children of migrant families, who often face an additional hurdle in learning about the role and availability of Australian public services as they often situate their parents as lacking knowledge and confidence in accessing services themselves:

'As immigrants it's kind of the other way around for me personally, I feel like I'm the one helping my parents sometimes. I sometimes feel like I'm the one helping her [my mum] a lot' (VIC, F, 19).



.....

At present, some young people are experts who help parents and peers, while others still feel uncertain about the role of public services in daily life. There is a sense that information can be distributed more effectively, and to younger age groups. Young people would welcome opportunities to learn about the purpose of public services through official channels and to have aps staff provide information and advice in the school setting to ensure everyone gets consistent and accurate information.



FOCUS AREA: 2

INFORMATION ABOUT SERVICES ISN'T GATHERED FROM A SINGLE APS SOURCE.

YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL LIKE EACH SERVICE COMMUNICATES IN A DIFFERENT WAY. THEY REPORT GATHERING INFORMATION ABOUT SERVICES FROM A RANGE OF DIFFERENT SOURCES (FROM OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT WEBSITES THROUGH TO SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, FRIENDS, AND FAMILY), AND USE THEIR EXPERIENCES TO ADVISE PEERS. YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL LIKE THEY ARE RECEIVING SIMILAR SERVICE INFORMATION, BUT FROM DIFFERENT SOURCES (OFTEN WITHIN THE APS), INCREASING COMPLEXITY AND CONFUSION. THEY FEEL SERVICES COULD COMMUNICATE BETTER TO AVOID MISINFORMED EXPECTATIONS ABOUT SERVICE INTERACTIONS.

Key points:

- Young people report searching for information about public services from non-APS sources: **'I'm going to Google it** and then scroll through and find what I think looks reliable' (VIC, F, 30).
- In long-form social media posts (on Reddit and Whirlpool), **only 14% of posts contained overt criticisms of services**. A common theme here was the way services communicate.
- Most often **(47% of these posts) users were asking or giving advice**.
- Young people feel like they would like to see services have a more consistent social media presence – and they often cite state-based services as examples.

Social media sentiments about public services

Since many young people turn to the internet for information, and to learn about public services our analysis of social media captured the sentiments related to various Australian public services. These are presented in the 'bubble' graphic below (Figure 2). **Bubble size** indicates how much discussion there was about a service. **Warm colour (pink) indicates negative sentiment and cool colour (blue) indicates positive sentiment. Deeper colours indicate more extreme positive or negative sentiment.**

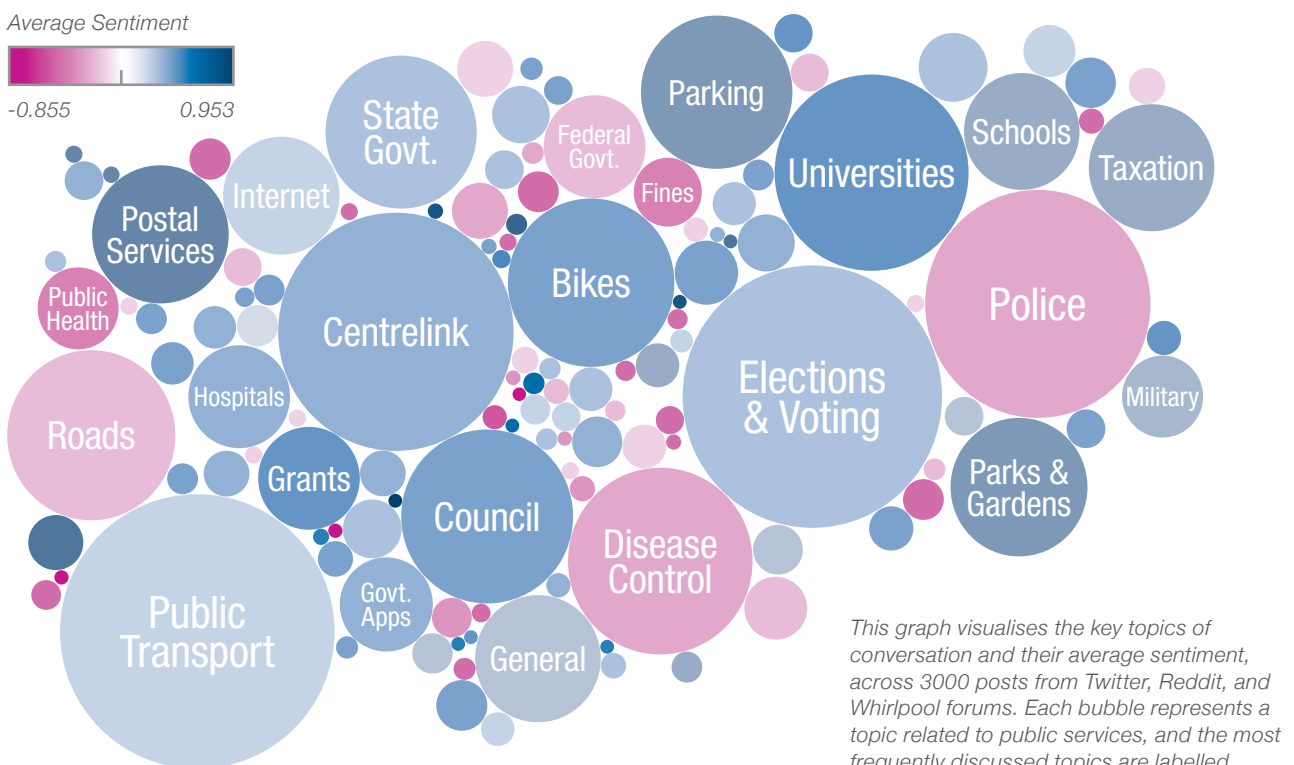
Some services may appear positive, because users are helping each other. Others might appear negative because of concern and confusion (i.e. about changes to support payments or COVID-19 restrictions).

In this chart, Elections and Voting is a frequent topic of discussion with relatively **neutral** sentiment, while Fines is an infrequent topic with **negative** sentiment.

See Figure 3 for a more specific example of sentiments expressed regarding Centrelink.

A major trend that emerged from the online discussions about public services was related to *how* users discussed services. **Overall there was a slight positive trend in sentiment in these discussions, which arose from the way users helped each other and as they replied to users who sought help in accessing public services and support packages.** There was a high frequency of information-sharing and peer support present within online spaces and while users expressed frustration and negativity either about their prior encounters with some public services (for example, long wait times or confusion about eligibility) or anxiety and stress about their current personal circumstances, they remained polite and thankful toward each other within online spaces, and it is this tone that is reflected in the positive sentiment analysis visualised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Public service sentiment online (n=3,000)



Our social media datasets demonstrated that users frequently turned to online spaces to seek help about public services when their immediate, physical networks (family, friends, school, university) were not able to help. The key types of questions users posted as they sought help and information about public services revolved around four key issues:

1. Whether users would receive **back-pay** and the timeline between the submission of application and the receipt of funds.
2. Whether a **change in personal circumstances** (getting older, becoming more independent, varying hours of work, configuration of studying) would affect or influence one's eligibility for payments (for example one's Youth Allowance).
3. **How and if different public services are connected or share information.** There appears to be an underlying expectation that myGov connects all public services seamlessly – which leaves users feeling confused when services operate differently.
4. **How to locate the first point of contact with a service.** For example, users reaching out for the first time asking about mental health resources and how to get started.

These dominant requests for information illustrate where young people would like clear guidance from service communications. Sometimes when users posted questions online they reported or indicated feeling anxious, frustrated, hopeless, and depressed when they were isolated from offline networks that would traditionally be a source of support.

Peer support

Encouragingly, many online users responded to information requests in positive ways, showing support and solidarity; helping them to navigate various public service systems and applications. This online peer learning helped users interpret, understand, and navigate public service websites in a positive and personalised way. Within these discussions, **users stitched together a range of public and third-party services and information from multiple sites (including official government websites, newspapers and other outlets) to help explain support services to peers in need.** These discussions revealed online spaces to be valuable sites of information for users who felt lost or confused when dealing with online services.

A more targeted analysis of a subsample of 600 longer-form social media posts about public services on Reddit and Whirlpool, indicated that **47% of posts were initiated by those seeking advice**, 37% were broad 'discussions' of services, and 14% were 'criticism'. **The most dominant theme across all these posts was service information and communications.**

One explicit case-study below shows some examples of the discussions relating to Centrelink, which was a consistent topic across platforms, locations and over time, making up 8% of all online discussions in our dataset. As the figure below visualises (Figure 3), conversations about Centrelink were often positive in nature. However, as the annotations make clear, this is due to *how* users asked for help rather than experiences with the service. There was a collective trend to remain up-beat and positive when asking for help, even when some users conveyed they were in very serious situations and facing quite traumatic personal issues. As a result, the positive sentiment here emerges not from users' experiences with public services, but from the peer-support processes and a 'we are all in this together' mentality.

Figure 3: Sentiment analysis of social media posts (n=230) discussing Centrelink



This graph visualises the average sentiment of 230 posts related to Centrelink, broken down by month and online platform.

This graph visualises the sentiment of 230 posts related to Centrelink. This sentiment is displayed by month of data collection, and by social media platform (Twitter, Reddit and Whirlpool) and by category (a specific account or forum). **Warm colour (pink) indicates negative sentiment and cool colour (blue) indicates positive sentiment. Deeper colours indicate more extreme positive or negative sentiment.**

Discussions related to Centrelink were more positive or negative on some platforms than others, but sentiment varied over time. For example, the discussion on the **Whirlpool JobsForum was negative in February, while the r/Melbourne subreddit was positive in April.**

As an example of online peer support, we observed older and more experienced users sharing their experiences with newer or first time users, giving advice, and helping to shape newer users' expectations. Several users recounted their 'practical' and lived experience dealing with public services. For example, one user posted their experience with receiving a stimulus package early during the pandemic:

'Hey mate, last time the stimulus was paid out it was paid by the ATO into our accounts I believe, could be similar, however if it is directly through Centrelink, I assume it will not be part of the regular payment and will be individual. If you're desperate you should apply for an advanced payment through them. It can be up to about \$1500 I believe' (Reddit user).

Sourcing information online

Unsurprisingly, focus group participants also pointed to internet searches as a source of information – one participant explained, '**we're the googling generation**' (VIC, F, 25). But even though young people are keen to research public services, they may not encounter the correct information:

'I tend to – I will just Google something. I'm going to **Google it and then scroll through and find what I think looks reliable**. So yeah, always preferred reading information and finding it that way. And I know government pages are usually Australia-based ones, but I couldn't necessarily tell you what they were off the top of my head' (VIC, F, 30).

Even when successfully locating information online, young people felt that service websites use 'such complex language' (NSW, F, 29), that the 'terminology is a bit confusing' (QLD, F, 25), and needs to be 'more concise' (NSW, F, 28). In an active demonstration of this, the language in our focus groups was often slightly outdated: nobody spoke of 'Services Australia', but often used older terms like 'Newstart' and 'Department of Immigration', and interpretations of means-test and age-based criteria varied widely. Across online discussions, we also see acronyms like 'JSP' referring to both 'JobSeeker Payment' and 'Job Service Provider', depending on the circumstance.

Young people wanted more outreach from services. There was a sense that the onus was always on them to know about different public services, and different criteria for accessing support. Young people wanted 'even just a basic checklist of the different services, what they offer and like, what they basically do and your basic responsibilities' (TAS, F, 19) when they reached later teen years. One focus group participant from Victoria suggested that services should follow the formal style of communication that the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) provides to new voters:

'I know you get a letter from the voting agency AEC or whatever it is. And they say "it's time to enroll". What if they could send out a whole book? "this is each agency, this is what each agency does, here are your responsibilities". I think that's really important. That idea of, well, "what are your responsibilities now?". So you don't miss out on anything or get in trouble and, and what we can offer to you' (VIC, F, 21).

On average, male participants articulated greater confidence in their own knowledge of services, and more often seemed to be the beneficiaries of parental advice on responsibilities and rights with regards to various agencies. As a result, the discussions about pursuing and understanding information about public services, and the difficulties encountered when accessing support, were clearly gendered.

Despite digital hubs like myGov being able to centralise access to services, young people still described how services felt different – with the care and quality of digital communication varying greatly between different services:

'It's always in the news, **Centrelink. There's always an issue with the website.** I might say something controversial now, but I think that the services you pay for, so we're talking about the Department of Transport and ATO, their service is better than when they have to pay people [...] **You barely hear any complaints about the ATO, the website is amazing** [...] **same with ASIC**, I think their website is great [...] so just imagine you have to pay like tens of thousands in tax and then the website crashes and you'll just be so angry' (WA, F, 25).

There was much debate about public service presences on social media. Many wanted to see more content from federal public services on these platforms, but at the same time, they wanted this to be meaningful: they rejected the idea of essential support services being framed by relatable content or memes. **State-level services were cited as good digital communicators.** Services we often heard about were VicRoads, Service NSW, Service SA, Queensland Health and NSW Police. These services were praised for striking a balance between **an approachable tone for young people and providing useful information.** Young adults realise the core functions (i.e. licensing, housing, law enforcement) of state services differ, but they argue that the communication principles are transferable to Commonwealth services:

'The advantage of a social media post [is,] typically they're quite succinct, so if you wanted to address young people and eligibility criteria for a certain bursary, you just have four or five dot points on eligibility criteria and then at the end you can just have a hyperlink. If you tick these boxes, go to this link for more information and then that takes you to the government website because that's kind of, the stepping stone, the advertisement, the outreach' (QLD, M, 22).

Other participants suggested that social media was more important for conveying significant changes to services:

'Whenever there's like a massive change or something that's really important [...] just really clear, consistent messaging all over like websites, social media and stuff that can be really quickly and easily understood and digested and spread through people' (NSW, M, 18).

And for others, it was important to leverage the inherently visual nature of social media to convey sometimes seemingly complex systems and processes in friendly, digestible formats:

'It's not difficult to have your marketing team develop a graphic. A simple scroll-through image collection set on Instagram where it's like, "this is how to submit a tax claim or here's how to enroll to vote"' (VIC, F, 20).



Young people suggested that services could provide information in a clearer and more coherent way. Young people seek advice about services from different sources (from official government websites through to social media platforms, friends, and family), and use their experiences to advise peers. Young people feel services could communicate better across a variety of channels and in different formats to avoid confusion.



FOCUS AREA: 3

YOUNG PEOPLE VALUE DIGITAL SERVICES, BUT CAN FIND THEM DEPERSONALISING.

ONLINE SERVICES, APPS, AND WEBSITES ARE ESSENTIAL FIRST POINTS OF CONTACT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, BUT MANY OF THESE ARE PERCEIVED AS GENERIC AND DEPERSONALISED. THE INFORMATION PRESENTED, AND THE LANGUAGE IT IS PRESENTED IN, CAN LEAVE YOUNG PEOPLE FEELING LIKE THEY ARE INVISIBLE, JUST A NUMBER IN THE SYSTEM, AND CAN LEAVE THEM LOOKING FOR ASSISTANCE TO INTERPRET INFORMATION. THIS EXPERIENCE IS EXACERBATED WHEN THEY ARE IN A VULNERABLE POSITION, WISH TO PERFORM MORE COMPLEX INTERACTIONS, OR REQUIRE TAILORED ASSISTANCE.

Key points:

- **Many online service websites are described as ‘quite easy’** (NSW, M, 24) to use, and ‘very good’ (VIC, F, 24) at providing information.
- Some young people experience difficulties and delays, and feel that online services do not always explain errors: ‘The app crashes all the time or the payment is not there for another four weeks and it’s kind of like what is going on?’ (ACT, F, 19).
- **Young people would like to see a wider implementation of live (text) chat** on public service websites.
- Young people report difficulties in managing and linking their digital services.
- Online services are recognised as convenient, but young people sometimes feel **faceless interactions are ‘pushing responsibility away’** (VIC, M, 24).

The digital learning curve

Digital means of interacting with services are essential for young people, as they allow flexibility in how and when people engage with services. Online access points are always open, and young people don't need to make service contact fit around other business-hours activities like work or study. Positive experiences in this respect featured in young people's discussions of the various agencies across the public services:

'I never faced any difficulty. Most of the time I never had a human interaction, it was always via email or directly through the website. So **it was quite easy** and quite handy! For example, I applied for [a] TFN and within a week I received a letter from the ATO with my TFN number' (NSW, M, 24).

'I was thinking about PR [permanent residency] or should I get my citizenship? **So a lot of government websites helped me out** with that. I was kind of looking at what's the benefits of being an Australian citizen, and lists of countries you can go visa free, what kind of government assistance there is. It was really good' (VIC, F, 24).

However, digital modes of engagement still come with a learning curve for young people, and often succeed in delivering *some* of the necessary support or information. One focus group participant explained:

'The app crashes all the time or suddenly the payment is not there for like another four weeks and it's kind of like "what is going on?" And then you call them and **you just get put through thousands and thousands of checkpoints with robot-voice people until you get to actually speak to a real person. And that's really frustrating**' (ACT, F, 19).

Faceless interactions

While many young people appreciated digital service delivery, as documented above, there was also often a need for more personal, human contact. Often, the frustration was with faceless elements of service interactions, especially if an issue ended up needing to be resolved via phone or in-person. Participants noted that digital portals felt very one-way, with no clear notification of receipt of documents, nor action taken by service staff. Generic emails represented another example of de-personalised digital contact with services:

'Emailing is a pretty universal form [but] when you get an email about something quite significant and it's sent from a no-reply address. It's basically just like pushing responsibility away to someone else. That's something that I've really struggled with, dealing with these kinds of institutional processes. **[You need someone with a] brief history so you don't have to re-explain yourself. Seems like it can reduce a lot of inefficiency or unnecessary stress I think**' (VIC, M, 24).

Some focus group participants also found websites too 'generic' (focus group participant NSW, F, 23) and hard to navigate. They described following circular hyperlinks that did not lead to useful information:

'For me, it was like asking for anyone inside the bureaucracy's help was pretty much useless because they just send you to a webpage which had nothing on it. Like I don't know if you've experienced this, but **a webpage that's supposed to tell you the info and then it gives you all these hyperlinks that send you [...] back to the original page you were on.**

And you're just like "what?!" Yeah, it's ridiculous. I hate it' (QLD, F, 21).

While digital access points are useful for all public service users, it was noted in focus groups that more needed to be done here to aid young users and those without personal networks to seek advice from. This was particularly the case for young vulnerable users as explored further in **Focus Area 5**. Online information was sometimes perceived to be 'random' and needed to be clearer...

'...for the people that, you know, aren't lucky enough to have that support – either different family or friends or like school or whatever' (VIC, F, 20).

Finding answers through online communities

To navigate services, we observed people often **worked together in online communities to interpret information from various government and service websites**. Sometimes these are basic, time-sensitive questions like 'is the mygov site down?' (Reddit), but often there were long discussions about services – full of questions and clarifications. More confident or experienced users would curate information from several web pages and sources and include the links within their comments to provide other users what seemed to be a comprehensive overview of the services that related to a specific question or problem asked.

People posted online to figure out how the services could be connected together on myGov. One user explained to another how myGov functions:

'myGov is the umbrella site for a number of other Govt services like the ATO, Medicare etc. You can have myGov access for those and a number of other federal services. [You] may have access to myGov, but not Centrelink specifically' (Reddit user).

Users posted about their frustration at how different services (such as the ATO and Medicare) would create 'connection' issues on myGov with Centrelink. One user posted that 'calling them up won't help. Go to Centrelink with proof of identification and get a linking code, after that you can use the computer there to link to myGov. That's what I need to do to link Medicare to myGov'. Another user replied 'I had the same problem, went to Centrelink after numerous unsuccessful attempts there they disconnected me from the ATO site then Centrelink was about to connect. You then have to ring the ATO to reconnect'.

These users expressed a desire to have services easily accessible and navigable online but found that when they needed to access multiple services this would create incompatibilities with the existing online systems. **Many of the users would resort to calling services when online options failed them**. Attending services in person was generally considered a last resort, but useful to resolve challenging issues.

Other users demonstrated that they had come to understand the services as being quite distinct and separate in their operations despite myGov allowing them all to be linked together. In the example below, users state that they had problems when trying to perform service-specific tasks through myGov. There are also debates about **if and when to resort to phone contact, and if there were any advantages or disadvantages** in doing so. They then shared these experience to help other users understand how the process worked with a particular service:

'The first link up you do sets the stage for the rest of them when verifying information, and the ATO had put my middle name down as part of my first name, while Medicare correctly had my middle name as my middle name. After trying forever to get a cluey person, it turned out the only ones who could resolve the issue was the ATO, rang them, **they**

fixed up their system and within 24hrs I was able to link Medicare up' (Whirlpool forum user).

'I should point out **you can take a pic of the medical cert (or any other document you want to give to Centrelink) and use the mobile app to send it to them**, or the myGov website on your PC. **Don't try ringing them, the wait time is an eternity** and that's once you get past the robot. **In theory they should send a letter** advising if it has been accepted, but might be easier to ask the job provider who can look it up on the system' (Whirlpool forum user).

'As of today, finally today, the form they promised on Monday to notify them of an intent to claim is available online to users without an existing Centrelink CRN (but with a myGov account). If accepted they'll backdate the claim to the date you submit that (Not to Monday as the minister said on TV). If your need for money isn't critical and you have an emergency fund **you can now theoretically be at no eventual disadvantage by not going in in-person'** (Reddit user).

Young people were cognisant of strains on the public service system, and understood the need for digital service offerings – for both services and citizens. But they wanted digital services to still feel personal and direct. Consistently, they pointed to **live text chats or direct messaging** as their preferred way to engage digitally. Many had used live text chat for *some* services – but wanted this deployed unilaterally *across* services. In a focus group, a regional Victorian summarised the importance of this:

'I feel like live chats on websites can be really helpful, especially if you've got questions like how to get through the website. A lot of the time the people who are using it [live-chats] are younger people who do know how to use the website or navigate it. So the language [of live-chat] is already sort of catered for people under the age of 30 (VIC, M, 22).



.....

Online services, apps, and websites are essential first points of contact for young people but many of these are perceived as generic and de-personalised – personal and direct communication was preferred. Interactions with government websites was experienced as unnecessarily stressful by many. When young people encounter these issues, they are likely to turn to non-APS sources for advice, tips and tricks – which may not properly explain their rights and responsibilities, and ultimately delay timely service engagement.



FOCUS AREA: 4

YOUNG PEOPLE WANT FLEXIBLE SERVICE TOUCHPOINTS.

THEY REPORT THAT NAVIGATING SERVICES IS DIFFICULT, AND ARE FRUSTRATED AT NEEDING TO INVEST A LOT OF TIME AND EFFORT TO REACH AN OUTCOME. IN-PERSON INTERACTIONS ARE OFTEN PERCEIVED AS A MORE EFFECTIVE WAY TO 'BE HEARD', BUT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT THIS INTERACTION TO BE FACILITATED BY SOMEONE WHO 'KNOWS THEIR CASE'. WHILE VALUING DIGITAL OPTIONS, THEY STILL WANT MORE FLEXIBILITY TO ENGAGE ON MORE COMPLEX ISSUES, INCLUDING ONLINE, BY PHONE, AND IN-PERSON.

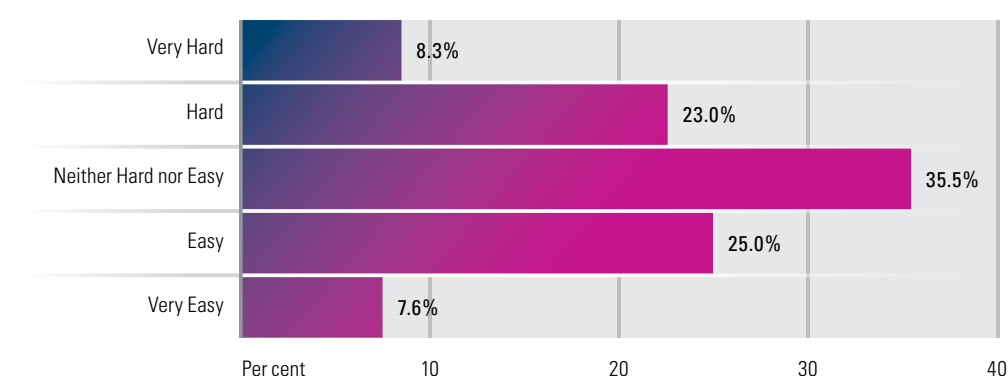
Key points:

- **Young people feel that they have to contact services through multiple channels** to have their concerns heard, and they express frustration at not knowing which channel is best suited to solving a particular issue.
- **More than 31% of our national survey said that navigating public service systems is 'hard' or 'very hard'.**
- Only 32% found it 'easy' or 'very easy', while the remainder reported navigation was 'neither hard nor easy'.
- Young people express frustration at 'waiting' to speak with services, and feel '**so invisible in the system**' (QLD, F, 20), and as a result, they may look for shortcuts rather than details about service processes.

Navigating the system

While young people appreciate – and use – multiple means of contacting services and finding information, only one-third report this being ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’ (33%). A significant minority, (just over 31%), suggest that navigating the system is ‘hard’ or ‘very hard’ (Figure 4). As noted in **Focus Area 1**, sites like myGov are seen as useful but not instructive.

Figure 4: Navigating the system



Q57: If you were to access government support (for example, financial assistance or training/information), how easy or hard do you think the following would be: ‘navigating the system’

Table 3: Navigating the system

Response	%
Very hard	8.3
Hard	23
Neither hard nor easy	35.5
Easy	25
Very easy	7.6

Q57: If you were to access government support (for example, financial assistance or training/information), how easy or hard do you think the following would be: ‘navigating the system’

Young people identify multiple challenges in this respect. The first challenge relates to the means through which young people want to access and engage with Australian public services. As illustrated in **Focus Area 3** and in Table 4, digital portals are important to young people, and most (46%) nominate myGov’s web and app presences as their preferred method of accessing and applying for public services, with the next most listed option being email (35%). Of note, phone calls (21%) and face-to-face interactions at a service centre (17%) are preferences among a significant minority of young people. As we discussed in **Focus Area 1** young people value myGov but feel the platform could do more to facilitate service interaction, beyond centralising their service login.

Table 4: Preferred means to access/apply for APS (multiple choice)

Response	%
myGov	46.4
Through public service websites	26.3
Through social media	35.3
Via email	14.7
Via phone call	20.9
Via video call	8.8
Through text messages	16.4
Face-to-face service centre	17.2
With an agent or advocate at home	7.7
With an agent or advocate at their office	9.5

Q64: How would you like to access and apply for public services which can support you? Select all that apply.

Flexible contact

These issues were brought to the surface in focus groups where young people talked about the need for a flexible, responsive service that blends online interactions with other modes. The (perhaps surprising) interest in email contact is based on a preference by some for formal and asynchronous ways to interact with services. Focus group participants saw email as more accountable – akin to formal face-to-face meetings. They also see a clearer overlap with paper applications and written documentation when these were required by services. While phone calls, as above, are noted as a relatively preferred mode of engagement they are also the source of frustration when navigating the systems, particularly with regards to wait times:

'I struggle with just doing things online or on the phone and can't do things on the phone.

'Cos I have uni eight to five 5 days a week, so I can't sit there for hours on a telephone. And then if you go in, you think you'd be able to clarify face-to-face, but then you go in and then they say you have to sit on the telephone there. It's no different. And the app's a bit clunky just overall' (SA, M, 25).

'On the phone or on the internet, you're on hold: you're waiting for emails, you're waiting for someone to get back to you, and **you feel just so invisible in the system**' (QLD, F, 20).

All of this is bound up with an underlying awareness or perception that **service staff are too busy to properly serve young people**, and instead want to quickly move them out of the system, making for an impersonal and sometimes rude experience when navigating the system:

'Personally I would love to have more places where you can go face-to-face. I just find by the time you wait for an hour and a half on the phone to someone, especially Centrelink, and then **they just kind of give you a really blunt answer and hang up**' (NSW, F, 26).

'In a lot of people's experiences with Centrelink, people say that they never got a call-back about something, even though they were told they would. Or they got called back three

different times in a day by three different people. And I think, yeah, it, **it doesn't give me a lot of confidence that things are being processed the way they should be'** (ACT, F, 26).

Ironing out issues with phone interactions is seen as essential because while young adults suggest there is a need to 'be able to go up to a person, working at Centrelink and then explain like go through the forms with you' (VIC, F, 18), **young people's busy lives are often seen as incompatible with service agency opening times:**

'Cos I got a full time job. So **it's really difficult for me just to take maybe a half day off just to go to Centrelink and then line up and just hope to speak with someone.** I don't think it's really worth it, just to take a half day off just to do that' (QLD, F, 25).

'Also the waiting times are so long. I have spent full days in there, and **it's really hard when you're still in school because of the opening hours.** It's usually nine to four. So it's basically the start of school till the end of school. **So it's either don't go to school, or don't go there.** So it's difficult' (VIC, F, 19).

These kinds of frustrating and difficult experiences in navigating the system are understood as being well documented, but difficult to transform. As this young person noted:

I think it always makes me frustrated going to the Centrelink office. I feel like you go in there, you think you're doing the right thing, you got the right paperwork but **something's always wrong. It's just so frustrating.** You expected it because that's just how it is, from news articles and all this kind of stuff. And **there's no way to give feedback or vent or say "this wasn't great"**. So just stays the same way' (SA, M, 25).

This is all reflected in our data from social media discussed in previous Focus Areas, which highlights that users frequently recount challenges to navigating services. Within these discussions, users would commonly reveal how they navigate and contact services in a multitude of ways including online, over the phone and in person. Frequently, users indicated they found themselves crossing these different platforms and contexts as they encountered challenges. **They may begin online, and then move to the phone and then as a last resort attend offices in person.** However, this was not a linear process and users found themselves moving back and forth between these various modes of contact. As an example, we found **Reddit users in Western Australia discussing the lack of clarity** about service contact points:

'Might want to **try turning up at an office first thing in the morning** with all your documents. I prefer that to spending all day trying to get through on the phone'.

'**How did you get a customer reference number?** I'm hitting roadblocks saying I either have to call or go in?'

'For about 6 months I wasn't able to get through on the student line! Then a year later my partner had the same problem. **The only way she was able to talk to a human being was by calling the debt recovery line,** and pestering them until they patched her through to someone useful'.

"So before you submit anything, **make sure you have exactly everything they require and don't give them any excuses to put your claim in the too-hard basket** for someone else to do. It took me 11 weeks to get my claim processed along with dozens of phone calls and hours and hours spent on hold'.

The above examples indicate that, as shown in our social media sentiment analysis, **online spaces were imbued with a lot of negative sentiment and frustration** related to when users try to

navigate services. One Whirlpool forum user, for example, posted about feeling conflicted between directions to self-isolate during COVID-19 restrictions and attending services in-person:

'I can't work this out either. You go to the Centrelink site and it tells you to make an account through myGov. You load up myGov and it tells you you need a Centrelink CRN number? Nowhere tells you how to get one of those. I'm assuming then you need to go to an actual Centrelink office to get one, but aren't we all supposed to be self-isolating? Isn't that just going against the government's own message' (Whirlpool user).

Many users agreed and discussed whether it was essential to go to the Centrelink offices in person or whether there were other pathways to successfully navigating these services that were either completely digital or over the phone.

Furthermore, as per the focus group data, many users complained about frustrating waits for phone calls and believed that in-person was the most effective way to complete an application. One user encouraged others to go in-person based on their experiences:

'The date where I received a phone call to submit my bank statements, the lady on the phone seemed impatient and from memory gave me a number to call back, to which when I did I was put in a phone loop and waited around 45 minutes to get through. If you have the option of getting your paperwork verified by phone or in person, I'd highly suggest going to your local branch and sorting it out there' (Whirlpool user).

Sharing and comparing experiences

These frustrations around having desired and effective methods and points of access were the primary challenge in terms of how often they emerged across the various data sources, but they sit alongside a range of other complex challenges. The challenge that relates to and is somewhat woven through the issues above, is the consistency of service staff interactions. Much of the negative sentiment online and in focus groups pertains to inconsistent behaviour, knowledge, or attitudes towards young people. We also explore this with regard to **stigma** in **Focus Area 9**. For example:

'My Centrelink experiences have been awful every time I go in there. Just 'cos, I mean, I guess the people that work there that deal with a lot of people every day. **Most of them are really rude. They just don't want to help because they don't want to be there.** They're literally just there because they're getting paid. That's what it seems like. It's really hard to get help. I know the amount of times I've had to ask someone to help and they're just like, "oh I don't know". So it's difficult and it's not a fun experience' (VIC, F, 19).

In major parallel with our discussion of the experience of **consistent service users (explored in Focus Area 6 ahead)**, these accounts evidence young service users' feeling 'lucky' when getting a great service outcome. Luck of course is not a solution to challenges of trying to navigate the public services system, but does seem to have an influence:

'It kind of went in circles 'cos they kept saying I was applying, well, wasn't providing enough information and things. But, then it was one of those things **I finally got someone face-to-face and I've got this amazing lady who went, "why haven't you applied for these?"** All these different things I didn't know to do' (NSW, F, 23).

This points to a related challenge, which is that young people need to be very well informed and persistent if they are to get the maximum utility from Australian public services:

'I think information about what services are available needs to be told, because I didn't even know any, like **I didn't even know rent assistance existed, I didn't know Youth Allowance existed until I started actually needing them. I didn't actually get them until I could barely afford my rent. You should start getting these services before you really, really need them.** You know, you don't want people to be struggling to pay for food and stuff' (VIC, F, 19).

The previous two quotes are indicative of a key theme that emerged in focus groups: that **young people felt they needed advocates who could explain what support they can access**, rather than only being able to access services that they already know about or actively seek out. This again speaks to the challenge of a lack of knowledge among young people, and, seemingly, an uneven provision of information by agency staff:

One thing I would ask for from Centrelink is just **a streamlining of services. Like why are there so many different payments that a 23-year-old can get?** Why is it so confusing? Why aren't they all just supplements? There should be more flexibility but at the same time there should be less payments 'cos it just makes finding the right payment for you confusing. And Centrelink can never tell you when the payment you've applied for is wrong. They just send you the pieces of paper back. I've don't know how many applications I've made that have just gotten sent back to me and I've just been like "okay what the fuck"?' (VIC, F, 21).



For a substantial minority of young people navigating services is difficult, requiring time and persistence. While valuing digital options, flexible and hybrid ways to engage and solve problems would be welcomed. There are examples of outstanding service where APS staff have been proactive in suggesting options and helping navigate eligibility, but such approaches are deemed not to be the consistent standard. Demand for services is likely to rise as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to play out in coming months and years.



FOCUS AREA: 5

YOUNG PEOPLE'S KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE OF THE APS VARIES BY SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S GENDER, LIFE STAGE, AGE, AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND, ALL CONTRIBUTE TO VARIED AND INCONSISTENT EXPERIENCES WITH THE APS. YOUNG WOMEN REPORT THEY ARE MORE LIKELY THAN YOUNG MEN TO FIND IT DIFFICULT TO NAVIGATE AND ACCESS SERVICES AND TO UNDERSTAND THEIR ELIGIBILITY FOR SERVICES. YOUNG MEN SPEAK ABOUT SERVICE KNOWLEDGE MORE CONFIDENTLY. THOSE WHO HAVE YEAR 12 EDUCATION ARE MORE LIKELY TO FIND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT HARDER TO ACCESS AND NAVIGATE THAN THOSE WITH A DEGREE. YOUNG PEOPLE FROM MIGRANT BACKGROUNDS FEEL DISCOURAGED FROM ACCESSING SERVICES AND FEEL THE BURDEN OF NEEDING TO BE KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT SERVICES FOR THE SAKE OF THEIR PARENTS. THESE DIFFERING LEVELS OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE CAN LEAD SOME YOUNG PEOPLE TO FEEL THAT SERVICES DON'T SPEAK TO THEM, LEADING TO CONFUSION OR DISENGAGEMENT WITH SERVICES.

Key points:

- **More young women reported difficulties understanding or accessing services** than young men. In particular, women expressed less confidence regarding financial matters, including taxation.
- The attainment of a **bachelor degree seems to indicate better understanding, and more positive experiences with services.**
- Young people from migrant backgrounds have to catch-up on service-related information. **Some argue that their parent's background 'really limited their knowledge** and how much they could teach me' (ACT, F, 26).
- In other cases, **young people are the experts in their household: 'I did a lot of adult things to kind of help my parents because they weren't really good at English'** (VIC, F, 19).

Uneven knowledge among young people

Our data reveals that many young people are confident in their knowledge about – and understanding of – a range of different services. Many have clearly benefited from successful APS communications and information-giving activities. However, young people's knowledge of different services and the systems around those services varies.

While it wasn't universal, some demonstrated **a clear understanding of the relationship between paying tax and living in a society supported by a range of public services**. One Whirlpool user explained how they understood and rationalised paying tax, which for them was higher because of HECS repayments:

'If your tax bill upsets you then think of it another way, the fact that you could live a reasonably comfortable life on a relatively low income is because at that time someone else was paying more tax. The other thing to remember is that the government doesn't keep the tax, they spend it. So long as they are spending it in Australia and it is not being accumulated by the wealthy or sent overseas then we all benefit' (Whirlpool user).

This narrative reveals a complex, 'whole-of-system' understanding of how paying tax fits into different life stages and in relation to other citizens who might pay more or less tax. **However, it's inaccurate to think about a uniform sense of 'young people's understanding' when it comes to knowledge about and experience of Australian public services.** Uneven knowledge is common across and within different social groups. This young man captures the implications of these differences well:

'I know it's small, but the concession health care card has been really, really useful for me to cut the cost of medical issues. **I'm trying to tell my friends – some of them haven't been to a dentist in 10 years!** I'm trying to say, "you can 'cos you're not earning that much"' (QLD, M, 18).

Talking about his friends, he makes clear that similarly situated people have a different understanding of the services available, and thus have a different experience and differentiated outcomes. But this variation in knowledge is about much more than dental hygiene. Indeed, in focus groups we found that uneven knowledge is leaving some people with disabilities significantly out-of-pocket:

'I can't remember the actual word, but we would be able to get the full disability support payment of like a grand a fortnight 'cos I **know someone with the same illnesses got it [the payment]. But [I] didn't know about it.** Would have helped because my meds are like 50 bucks a fortnight' (QLD, F, 21).

We take up the theme of the experience of disabled young people further in **Focus Area 6**, but use this example to illustrate the point that **uneven knowledge has material effects in young people's lives**. Our social media analysis also revealed similar themes, with multiple accounts of users discussing how they had no idea about Youth Allowance and other financial support services until they heard about them from their peers. For students, this meant they had sometimes begun their degree without knowledge of the types of support available. Among this variety, though, some themes emerge as being especially prominent according to social or demographic characteristics. Here we explore how gender, education profile, and different cultural backgrounds shape variable outcomes and experiences.

Knowledge and experience by qualification profiles

Our national survey used a variety of questions to explore how easy young people find it to access services, and how concerned they are about service access and treatment by services (see also **Focus Area 8**). A young person's education level has a statistically significant association with a variety of those measures. While the strength of the association is small, overall, those **young people who have a bachelor's degree are more likely to find government support easier to access, while those who have Year 12 as their highest qualification are more likely to find government support harder to access**. This was the case on individual measures such as 'contacting the service', 'navigating the service', 'filling and submitting forms', and 'finding what services or support I need'. Conversely, and of interest, whilst the strength of the association was small, there was also a statistically significant overall pattern which shows that those with a bachelor's degree are more likely to be more concerned about government support and those with Year 12 are less likely to be concerned. This was on measures such as concerns about 'How service staff will treat you', 'How much information I will need to collect to support my claim', and 'What I will be expected to do to receive support'. Importantly, there was no statistically significant association between age and these measures in our cohort aged 18-30. We infer from this that **the ability to more easily access services and the higher level of concern about services described by those with a degree is an education effect and not a 'life stage' effect**.

That said, in focus groups featuring older participants, we often found discussions of overwhelmingly positive experiences of accessing services to support the purchasing of their own home (QLD, F, 30) or to start a business (VIC, F, 25). Younger service users were also 'grateful' (NSW, F, 23) for 'really helpful' (NSW, M, 20) support like Youth Allowance – praised for 'helping me do my degree' (WA, F, 23). One young South Australian summarised:

'It's changed my life. 'Cos I study full time. I would have not been able to study and support myself if I didn't have Centrelink' (SA, F, 20).

Gendered experiences

Apparent gender differences in experiences are another area of concern. In focus groups, while there was a range of responses across all genders, **young women spoke with less confidence than young men about their knowledge of, or how to navigate, public services:**

'I've lived in Australia my whole life and I don't know anything about the best super fund or even how to research the best super fund and where it goes or how to look at my super fund. Like **I know that my employers are paying me super but I have no idea how to see how much super I have** or how to manage it' (ACT, F, 19).

'I don't earn enough to pay taxes yet, but I'm terrified. As soon as I get a job I'm going to have to log on to that website and stare at it blankly. It would be so good if someone could come and explain taxes' (QLD, F, 19).

This is not to say that young men did not also share such concerns, but that the gendered pattern was notable: on average young women more often spoke less confidently about navigating services, while young men more often expressed greater confidence about their knowledge of the system or how to find the information if necessary. While both young men and young women noted their parents as a potential resource for information and future queries, a trend in the data was that **young men appeared to more often have already been beneficiaries of parental guidance**.

This kind of response in focus groups, where men speak with greater confidence, can sometimes be an artefact of normative codes of masculinity – that is, men will more often seek to express expertise, and play down their lack of knowledge in 'face-to-face' situations. Our survey data, however, also reveals similar trends to the focus group data.

In the survey, while the strength of the association is small, on questions related to accessing government support a statistically significant association is present such that **women more often chose 'Very Hard' or 'Hard' when rating the following items in terms of difficulty:**

- Contacting the service
- Navigating the system
- Understanding my eligibility
- Filling in and submitting forms
- Finding what service/s or support I need
- Understanding how support could impact existing services or payments I receive
- Understanding how support could impact my tax
- Collecting information to support my claim (for example, birth certificate/citizenship documents)
- Meeting ongoing reporting requirements (for example, reporting income)

Conversely, measures from our survey results that were *not* gendered (where men, women, and non-binary people tended to report similar levels of difficulty), were:

- Understanding my eligibility
- Filling in and submitting forms
- Finding what service/s or support is needed
- Understanding how additional support could impact existing support
- Meeting ongoing requirements.

Of concern is that these **gendered patterns in knowledge can underscore issue of non-compliance**, as this young woman's account of her tax assessment reveals:

'Like, for instance, **I actually haven't done my tax from last financial year because I recently did some independent freelance work and don't know how to deal with tax** if – I suppose I'm an independent business in a way' (WA, F, 23).

A further issue with respect to gender is related to young mothers' experience of services. This is explored in detail in Focus Area 6. We note that non-binary people participated in the survey and focus groups, but the sample size is too small to make specific inferences about their experiences, although we do include qualitative examples of the experiences of non-binary participants throughout this report.

Experiences of the children of migrant parents

In our focus group discussions, some prominent themes emerged among young people who were children of parents born outside Australia. For the most part they spoke in positive terms about the breadth of service provision in Australia, often reflecting on how their parents had grown up in their country of origin without the prospect of such service support.

However, some more negative issues also featured heavily in their discussions. The first issue that arose for some second-generation migrant young people was that they were taught by their parents to believe that service engagement is negative:

'We are eligible for Centrelink payments, [but] my parents don't like to claim it. I just don't get it. I want them to claim it, but they don't allow me to get Youth Allowance as well [...] they just say it's because we shouldn't become reliant. It's like, it's a debt. Not like, it's not technically a debt, but they call it a debt' (NSW, M, 20).

The quote above is reflective of an impulse towards self-sufficiency, with use of Australian public services considered a form of dependency. This speaks to a lack of knowledge among the parents' generation about what Australian public services can and do offer. As a result of this limited knowledge, unlike many other young people who rely on their parents for guidance on how to navigate services, migrant or second-generation migrant young people cannot turn to their parents in the same way:

'The fact that my parents were migrants really limited their knowledge and how much they could teach me. 'Cos like when I look back in hindsight, like a lot of their advice was just really bad' (ACT, F, 26).

This lack of access to parental knowledge and guidance present a double-bind for such young people. First, they may access services alone, and rely on clear and simple communication from services or for there to be appropriate alternate sources of information available. This means that services and support can be missed because 'I didn't *know* they offered *anything*' (focus group participant WA, F, 20).

Further to this, the children of migrant parents also often feel burdened with having to be **knowledgeable about services on behalf of their parents**:

'My parents are first generation immigrants so they came in their mid-thirties. For me as a kid, I did a lot of adult things to kind of help my parents because they weren't really good at English, and I knew more English than them at the time. So obviously I would be helping them with forms, and doing that, while also trying to be a kid at the same time' (VIC, F, 19).

'Especially since my parents are both first generation immigrants, I had to help them with a lot of just basic things like dealing with public service too. And like even when we purchased our home, I had to do a lot of interpreting for them. So in some aspect I feel like some part of my childhood was taken away just because I learned to deal with a lot of these things at a young age, but then doing it for myself as different' (NSW, F, 19).



.....

Different levels of knowledge and experience can lead some young people to feel that services don't apply to them or aren't tailored to their context. This can lead to confusion or disengagement with services. Young women, young people with disabilities and those from migrant backgrounds reported more difficulties with understanding eligibility and navigating services than their peers. Some young people become 'experts' as a source of public service information for their peers, family, and the wider community. This brings challenges and opportunities for the APS.



FOCUS AREA: 6

YOUNG PEOPLE WHO NEED CONSISTENT SUPPORT REPORT INITIAL AND ONGOING BARRIERS.

SOME YOUNG PEOPLE NEED ONGOING SUPPORT FROM THE APS ACROSS MULTIPLE SERVICES AND AGENCIES. THIS IS PREVALENT AMONG UNASSISTED FIRST-TIME SERVICE USERS, SOME YOUNG PARENTS, AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES. THESE GROUPS REPORT FEELING INTIMIDATED WHEN THEY FIRST INTERACT WITH SERVICES, EXPERIENCE INCONSISTENT KNOWLEDGE FROM STAFF AND OFTEN STRUGGLE TO ADVOCATE FOR THEMSELVES. THIS CAN LEAD TO SOME OF THE MOST VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE FEELING DISENFRANCHISED AND ISOLATED – NEGATIVELY IMPACTING THEIR SERVICE INTERACTIONS AND FUTURE OUTCOMES.

Key points:

- According to LSAY data, **by age 25, 38% of young people have received a government allowance.**
- Allowances and support payments are vital for young people when they leave a family home, and they report being **'grateful'** (NSW, M, 20).
- Young people with disabilities report that it is **'difficult to speak about yourself and justify yourself'** (QLD, F, 21) when contacting services.
- They also report a pressure to **'act normal'** (VIC, F, 20) during service interactions.
- Young mothers report that **'[services] look after you'** but still feel that interactions are a **'hell of a lot of stress'** (QLD, F, 30).

First service interactions

Young people reported that support payments from public services were essential to their sense of independence – especially in troubling circumstances:

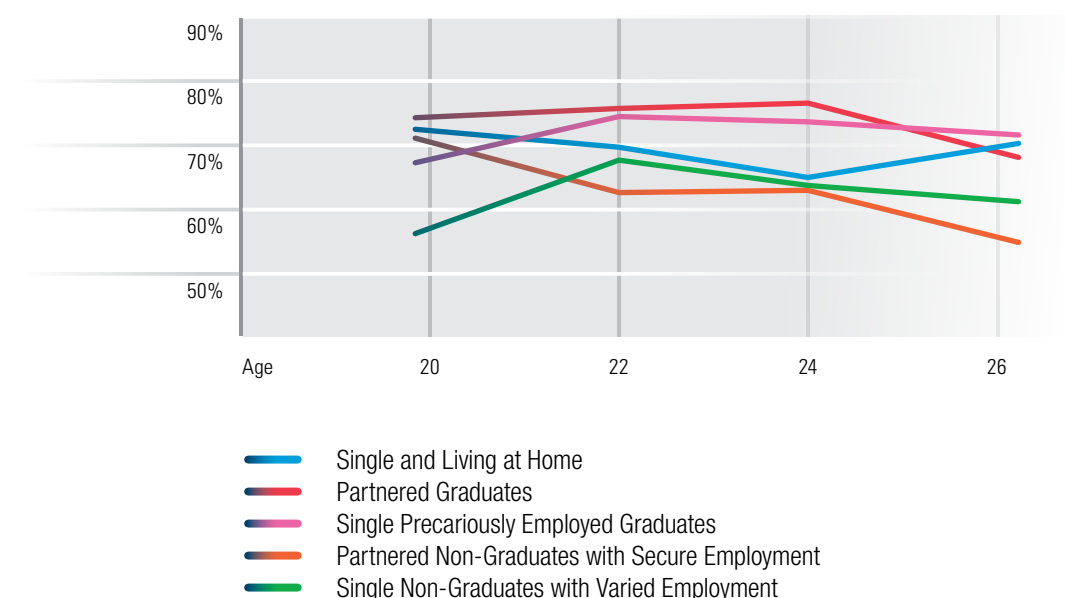
'I moved out of home when I was 16. I didn't have a choice. It got unreasonable to live at home. I was able to access Youth Allowance' (QLD, F, 28).

'[After losing my job this year] I've been really grateful for both Youth Allowance and JobKeeper support' (NSW, M, 20).

While not all young people experience hardships at home or in employment, the **longitudinal LSAY data we analysed illustrates that young people's first interactions with government support usually coincides with them leaving the family home**. The data also shows that young adults who receive government payments (and thus interact with government services) are generally likelier to be receiving support from their parents as well.

However, experience differs depending on the 'pathways' into adulthood. Our analysis of *Our Lives* data shows that, **young people who leave home earlier and who do not engage in university study** (i.e. those on 'Non-Graduate' pathways) **tend to receive less parental support (both financial and emotional) and are less confident in their parents' capacity to support them** during the transition to adulthood than their peers. Figure 5 below generally shows decreasing confidence in parental support over time, which is especially pronounced for non-graduate pathways.

Figure 5: Percentage who were 'Very Confident' of parental support, by pathway type



Source: Social Futures and Life Pathways ('Our Lives') n=1,500. (Note: this is a five-part typology based on 'Our Lives' data, resulting from a 'streamlining' of pathways over time)

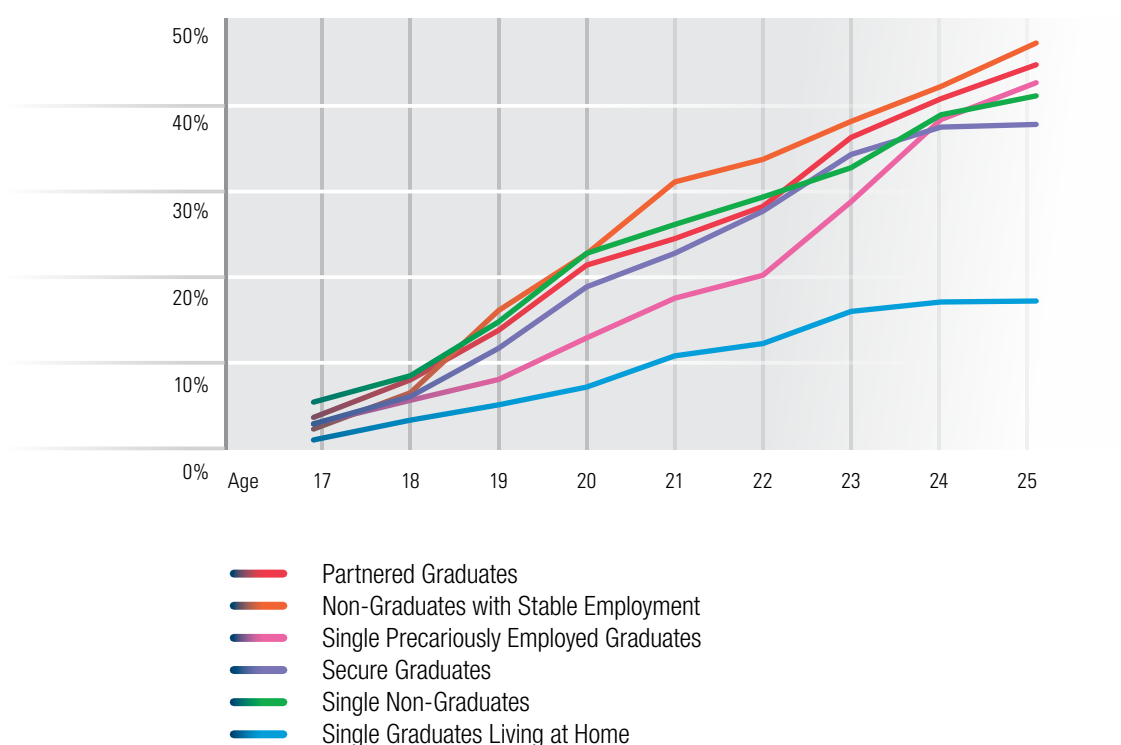
Table 5: Percentage who were 'Very Confident' of parental support, by pathway type

Pathway type	Age 20	Age 22	Age 24	Age 26
Single and Living at Home	72%	70%	66%	70%
Partnered Graduates	73%	77%	78%	69%
Single Precariously Employed Graduates	68%	75%	74%	72%
Partnered Non-Graduates with Secure Employment	71%	63%	64%	56%
Single Non-Graduates with Varied Employment	58%	67%	63%	62%
Overall sample	69%	67%	71%	67%

Source: Social Futures and Life Pathways ('Our Lives') n=1,500. (Note: this is a five-part typology based on 'Our Lives' data, resulting from a 'streamlining' of pathways over time)

Unsurprisingly we found that **those on non-Graduate pathways are among the earliest and heaviest users of government services**, while those on graduate pathways reveal relatively lower rates of accessing government support. This is, however, especially the case for graduate workers who remain living in the family home; a group that has much lower rates of uptake of government allowance (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Percentage who had ever received any form of government allowance



Source: Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, 2009 cohort data, Waves 1-10 (final analytic sample n=2,945)

Table 6: Percentage who had ever received any form of government allowance

Pathway type	17 years	18 years	19 years	20 years	21 years	22 years	23 years	24 years	25 years
Partnered Graduates	4.2%	8%	13.7%	20.9%	24.7%	28.5%	36.5%	40.3%	44.1%
Non-Graduates with Stable Employment	2.6%	6.7%	15.7%	23.6%	30.5%	33.7%	38%	41.7%	45.7%
Single Precariously Employed Graduates	3.5%	5.8%	7.8%	13.3%	17.3%	20.6%	29.1%	37.8%	41.1%
Secure Graduates	3.8%	6.3%	11.8%	18.8%	23.3%	28%	34%	36.7%	37.2%
Single Non-Graduates	5.2%	8.5%	14.7%	21.7%	25.5%	29.5%	32.7%	37.6%	40.3%
Single Graduates Living at Home	1.9%	4%	5.3%	8.5%	10.3%	12.2%	15.6%	16.7%	16.9%
All	3.7%	6.7%	12%	18.4%	22.7%	26.3%	31.5%	35.6%	38%

Source: Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, 2009 cohort data, Waves 1-10 (final analytic sample n=2,945)

Our analysis of social media complemented these findings, illustrating that young people who lived away from their family/parents or had moved to metropolitan areas for study sometimes turned to online spaces to ask for specific help in navigating and accessing services. This perhaps indicates they were trying to deal with difficult situations alone. The experience of the heaviest users of services and those without parental support, then, is of particular interest. A profound example (below) illustrates this isolation. We have removed some identifying details, but this comes from our social media analysis, and pertains to a 20-year-old from Western Australia.

CASE STUDY > SEEKING ADVICE IN MOMENTS OF CRISIS

This young adult posted asking if anyone knew of a flat or a room she could rent that would allow her two cats. When asking this question, she disclosed that she was trying to leave her older (30 years of age), alcoholic and possibly violent boyfriend and that shelters would not accept her pets. She said she was scared to leave her pets in case her boyfriend hurt them. Within her post she also mentioned that she was on Centrelink because she was studying and her family lived far away. She was confident in her knowledge about Centrelink and detailed her plan to accept a traineeship which would give her a solid income. Users responded to her with information about where she could potentially board her pets while she sought emergency shelter and some users even offered her a place to stay temporarily.

Within online spaces, discussions revealed that while some young users attempted to navigate Services Australia and Youth Allowance for the first time as they entered university, **they did not know their parents' history with public services. This created challenges to successfully completing the applications.** After a breakthrough in their application one user posted the following advice 'if your parents ever used Austudy or similar and listed you as a dependent you may already have a CRN. I called and got through and had my CRN that I didn't even know I had given to me over the phone in minutes'. However, several users responded in ways that indicated they could not access this information (by asking how they could find out from Centrelink if they had an existing CRN), suggesting they had little to no parental support.

Consistent access and inconsistent results

The data shows that those young people who are consistent users of government services are often left feeling frustrated and even disenfranchised as a result of their experiences. One general trend among consistent service users who left home relatively early relates to the feeling of precarious entitlement to support, and **that the outcomes of service interactions and applications 'feels like chance'** (QLD, M, 18).

This feeling of chance has two particular dimensions. First, heavy service users feel that the success or otherwise of a service interaction relies on the 'luck' of engaging with the right member of staff. Several young people for instance talked about how a staff member's knowledge provided a route into a particular service or allowance, while encounters with other staff members had not yielded the same result. Alternatively, beyond these perceptions of uneven staff knowledge, heavy service users also explained that they felt they needed the right luck to be dealing with a staff member who is sufficiently sympathetic.

Secondly, there was sometimes a sense among long-term service users that chance plays a role in getting a beneficial outcome:

'Being with Centrelink for nearly 10 years now since I moved out [...] you think you've worked out what you need to do [in terms of] processes and you submit everything and then your **fingers crossed that it'll get accepted or that it worked out.** It's not really clear [...] I've saved a bit up and I worry that they'll drop me off or something will happen' (SA, M, 25).

While some users were confident in navigating the system as a result of more exposure to services, **many felt demoralised** as a result of the above. Accordingly, we found common stories of consistent users who felt ill-prepared to self-advocate:

'But as with Centrelink, coming face-to-face with having to speak about yourself as a priority, it's not something I'm very equipped to do... **Having to speak about yourself and justify, justify yourself – I find I have a lot of trouble in doing that even now. I mean I'm underplaying how difficult this has been for me** (QLD, F, 21).

The lack of parental support in such circumstances is especially pivotal, and is exacerbated in cases where young people also have a disability. Young people with disabilities recounted stories of feeling marginalised or invisible in the system for a variety of reasons, as the examples below show. These examples reveal a tension between young people wanting to exert their own agency but also get some level of support:

'There's a lack of basic Auslan signing training, [a] lack of Deaf and Disability awareness. Public officers do not want to deal with people who have different

communication needs or Special Needs which require [a] long time for interactions or at meetings or drop-in visits or consultation sessions (QLD, M, 28).

'You have to be really disabled to be eligible for disability or you have to be so high functioning that you can study full time. [With aspergers] I'm not capable of working and studying full time. I'm perfectly capable of working part time and studying part time but I would need like a half Austudy to be able to get by. But there's no such thing as a half Austudy. **There's no flexibility in that regard'** (VIC, F, 30).

'Once you hit 18 you're pretty much seen as – unless you've got a major disability – “why do you need to see a social worker?” **I have ADHD, which makes these sorts of things incredibly difficult. It's like that whole invisible illness thing,** but yeah' (QLD, F, 21).

For these young people, a further tension existed regarding how best to secure the sympathy of agency staff. Some young people talked about feeling the need to be on the verge of tears, or actually crying, for staff to assist them. Several others described feeling the need to 'act normal', and even underplay the significance of their own needs to ensure staff members assist sufficiently. Though, this is recognised as problematic:

'You try to act normal because **you have to sort of be very normal and capable to be able to manage the administrative tasks required** to get whatever service it is, or payment, or whatever. And as a result **you put up this appearance of functioning higher than you really do in everyday life, and it makes you slip through the cracks** even worse' (VIC, F, 30).

Young parents' service experience

Another heavy user group is young adults who are parents. Becoming a parent is another key period in young people's lives where service interactions are frequent and overlapping. While some fathers talked about connections to and experiences of services, heavy parental **engagement with services is extremely gendered and most often tied up with the experiences of motherhood.**

Young mothers almost uniformly praised their experiences of home visits, contact from midwives and other critical aspects of postnatal care in the public system. However it was noted that public health provisions do not always cater to specialised needs and participants *suggested more specialised support* (such as lactation consultants) should be more widely via public agencies.

Young parents in focus groups also talked about their experiences of Medicare in mostly positive terms. They did note, however, that data matching between Medicare and Centrelink was often imperfect. Despite much recognition that systems were 'much better' than a decade ago, we heard multiple accounts of problems with services:

'When my bub had her first needles, somehow it didn't connect to Centrelink. So **Centrelink wrote back to me saying “you'll lose your tax benefit if you don't vaccinate your kid”**' (WA, F, 30).

'I did have an issue with my pre-parental leave and it's meant to data-match my child from the Centrelink system into Medicare and that didn't happen. So **the Medicare card should have been there within two weeks and it took more like six, which is a little bit of a headache**' (NSW, F, 28).

A common pattern in one-to-one interviews (from the *Our Lives* project), revealed that **some parents felt greater education about the various services available to parents was needed.** They felt they were not fully informed about what support existed, which would have potentially made the transition to parenthood smoother. When reflecting on what an ideal service would look like, some parents talked about wanting support services that already exist in some capacity, such as *Perinatal Anxiety & Depression Australia* (PANDA) and the *Raising Children Network* – services that are partially funded by the Department of Social Services and the Department of Health respectively.

This lack of awareness of the resources available to them parallels concerns among young people with disability regarding the ‘luck’ of coming into contact with a staff member with the right knowledge and advice, or with an attitude to maximize the user experience by offering helpful information even when it is not explicitly asked for. To counter such circumstances, one young mother suggested that more information about what services are available for parents should be made available through GPs.

An overriding concern for young parents related to demands on their time, a resource that is in short supply. Young mothers in particular talked about the challenges of having to go into agencies in person when their children were very small.

‘I’ve sat in Centrelink with a toddler on one arm, breastfeeding another. They look after you, but you know, even sitting there for half an hour is a hell of a lot of stress. It’s a very stressful time anyway’ (QLD, F, 30).

Frustrations was also apparent in accounts where variable staff knowledge led to bigger demands on, or even a waste of, their time, as per this focus group exchange:

‘I talked to probably five different consultants in Centrelink and everyone had a different answer for me, which was a nightmare to try and figure out what they actually wanted of me. So yeah, that was not very helpful’ (WA, F, 30).

‘... [Agreeing] with simple things they’re really good. But anything that’s slightly complex, **you get 10 bits of information from 10 different people**’ (QLD, F, 30).

One mother in an interview detailed her experience of being part of the ParentsNext program. She found attending the mandatory check-ins were sometimes inconvenient when her aspirations had not changed, though felt it was helpful in being able to undertake TAFE training to open up work opportunities once her child was older. We also heard in focus groups that while ParentsNext was billed as a flexible program for parents to gain skills for later work, the program’s status as a mutual obligation for some payments was an added stress. Appointment times and locations were also cited as inflexible and ‘not actually very fair to the family’ (QLD, F, 25) situations that it intended to support.

It should be noted that mothers are also a diverse group and have differing experiences. For instance, one focus group participant, who first become a mother at 19 years-old, described successfully accessing services and financial systems with the support of her parents:

‘I’ve got two parents that are chartered accountants, so I think I’ve managed to tap into everything possible. I’ve been very lucky that they’ve been my financial planners for 15 years’ (QLD, F, 30)



.....

Frequent users of government services would value more consistent support from services. Young people on Non-Graduate pathways are often the heaviest service users, yet they have less confidence in support from parents. Such users therefore need targeted support and guidance from the services. Young people with special needs or disabilities, as well as young parents (mothers in particular) would like consistent advice from staff, rather than a long search for the 'right' person. Young people feel that advocates or advisers would be helpful, especially for first-time or complex service interactions.



FOCUS AREA: 7

YOUNG PEOPLE REPORT MIXED EXPERIENCES WITH THIRD-PARTY SERVICE PROVIDERS.

WHEN PUBLIC SERVICES OUTSOURCE TO THIRD-PARTY PROVIDERS, YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL AS IF SERVICES ARE NO LONGER TAILORED TO THEIR NEEDS OR GOALS. THEY REPORT THAT THE PROCESS IS CUMBERSOME AND IMPERSONAL AS A RESULT OF THESE MISALIGNED OUTCOMES AND EXPECTATIONS. BECAUSE OF THIS, YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE LESS CONFIDENCE IN SERVICE PROGRAMS AND ARE LESS LIKELY TO FULLY ENGAGE.

Key points:

- When seeking support for health-related reasons, young people value the information and care provided through third-parties, from services like Medicare and the PBS.
- They have **overwhelmingly positive experiences with medical practitioners and allied health workers.**
- Young people have **less positive experiences with employment agencies** and in turn, links to payment mutual obligations. One online post claimed 'they make it twice as hard as it needs to be to find work', while another argued '**I quit Centrelink so I could concentrate on finding work**'.
- For crisis support, **young people prefer organisations to be secular** – reporting uncomfortable experiences with some providers.
- **When moving to Australia for work or study, young people report difficulties** and confusion between service and private organisations.

Healthcare

Young people understand that service delivery is complex, and requires the coordination of multiple organisations to deliver support. The stories of young people, however, suggests that there are policy and service areas where the synergy between government and non-government entities was stronger than others.

When this relationship between government and non-government bodies was effective, participants felt their interests and needs were efficiently catered for. In other cases, however, young people highlighted how they felt third-party providers offered services that were either irrelevant or unnecessary or, in some cases, appeared to put the interests of the provider ahead of the young person themselves. This raised barriers and hindered the opportunities for young people to engage and participate in economic and social activities.

A clear example of positive experiences of young people with third-party providers concerns the processes of navigating key health services and medical support through Medicare, the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) and individual GPs or other healthcare workers. **Generally, this was regarded as being seamless. The quality and ease of accessing medical care was not lost on young people, who often reflected that this was not available in many other countries around the world.** Typical comments from young people included:

'I think **Medicare has always been quite straightforward.** You hand your card over to the GP, they sort that out. **Never had issues online, never had issues with the card'** (VIC, F, 28).

'I get my information from my doctor and they provide me with really good resources for bulk billing or low cost services' (VIC, F, 21).

'In my experience, you can get help if you just ask a doctor or if you just asked Centrelink or if you just ask some authority, **they can point you in the right direction'** (QLD, F, 20).

Looking for work

There were other areas, however, where young people felt third-party providers were not as helpful. These were often in employment services, where one focus group participant commented 'they don't get an extensive amount of training, especially right now. They are outsourced. They're not public service employees' (SA, non-binary, 23). As our survey showed, **one of the key reasons people turn to public services was for support to find a job** (23%, n=519). In focus groups, young people told us about interactions with job service providers (JSPs) that they felt were poor-quality; where interactions were rushed and obligations (between users, agencies, and the Commonwealth) were treated as exercises in box ticking. One young female from New South Wales, for example, explained:

[Employment agencies] were really discouraging, they didn't really hear me. **They just want you to get any job, it doesn't matter what it is. It just didn't align with what I wanted. I felt like they were just there as like a-tick-box check-ups to make sure I'm doing the right thing,** you know, attending the meetings, looking for those jobs so that I can get my social benefits (NSW, F, 27).

Similarly, a young male from Victoria recalled:

'I was on Newstart for a long time. They gave me a private company that manages your job search and all that. And I found that while **the staff who ran that were really nice and like totally respectful and chill people, I found that whole program pretty bullshit. It's a huge waste of resources.** I think that the issue is actually the program itself, trying to set me up with jobs that I was not capable of doing really' (VIC, M, 29).

Others felt that employment services were unsympathetic to job seekers and were also propagating negative attitudes and myths about people who access welfare support to find work:

'I think the problem is beyond Centrelink. It's also with the job agencies who actually don't care at all and are just doing it to get paid. 'Cos they just see the dollar signs. I think there's a lot of corruption that doesn't help give it a good name. I think **they also don't help the "dole bludger" narrative**' (VIC, F, 26).

Such sentiments were also shared online as some users expressed scepticism about the motivations of job service providers. In one typical post, a young Australian noted that 'Job services providers get commission from the government for placing those on Centrelink only in jobs. That's why they don't talk to people who aren't on Centrelink' (Whirlpool forum user).

Users also described first-hand experiences that highlighted the patchiness in how effective job service providers could be as the following post on Whirlpool explained:

I was on Centrelink for 6 weeks and found JSPs worse than useless. They threatened me with all sorts of stuff unless I spent my meagre cash to show up to their interviews, at which they would say, "Have you found a job yet? No? Okay see you next week." With the added weekly Centrelink interviews and all the paperwork I had to fill out, **I literally quit Centrelink so I could concentrate on finding work.** Pity the poor people that don't have any savings and would starve without Centrelink, they make it twice as hard as it needs to be to find work.

In some cases, young people felt they were not listened to, or even deceived, by some third-party providers:

'Registered Trade Organizations trick you – they lie. You think, "oh yeah, I'm applying to like this specific place in this area" and then you get a call from a completely different business saying, "hey, we want contractors for warehouses so we can send them out". As soon as you show that you're need a little bit of human decency and compassion, they're like "nup fuck you, onto the next person". 'Cos **there's always someone to fill your shoes**' (QLD, F, 21).

Negative sentiments of JSPs went beyond young people who sought to access their services. One young person in a human-resource job, for example, spoke of businesses forced to be dismissive of JobSeeker applicants because of systemic mismatches between applications and requirements:

'Every time my work advertises a position, we get a lot of very random resumes that are like completely irrelevant to what we do. Like a plumber applying for a job as a social worker, because assumedly they're having to submit a certain amount of applications. About a third of the applications we get, will be completely random ones like, "oh, okay, they must be JobSeekers"' (ACT, F, 22).

Non-secular providers

Some young people who engage with public services expect the third-party providers to also be secular organisations. As the following story of one young Australian who sought housing assistance demonstrates, we were told of instances where young people were conflicted when they found the third-party they were accessing had religious links:

'You think that you're signing up for a government thing and then you realize that actually all the administrative side of it is handled by a charity. [...] I had a really rocky religious upbringing. I boycott religious op shops and stuff, I just won't shop at them. So I had to, ask them for help and then they sit you down and you're like, "I don't even know why I'm here". You know, **I applied for a government thing and for some reason I'm sitting there** [in the organisation with religious links] and they're just like, "what's your background?" **I never ended up going through with it** [accessing their services]. That was it' (VIC, F, 30).

In other cases, young people felt uncomfortable having to access services through religious providers:

'I can't tell you how many times I've gotten a little sermon just before getting some free food that I need to survive. Like I straight up almost got converted once, 'cos he was like, "hey we need more members of the church". And I was like "fuck you buddy". And he was like, "I guess you don't need this food" (QLD, F, 21).

Moving to Australia

Other challenges in dealing with third party providers were identified by young people who were in Australia temporarily or immigrating. **The agencies involved in this process were cited as expensive, but necessary** to liaise between travel documents, person identification, university paperwork and government forms. The experience of visiting or immigrating was fraught, however, as we heard how corporate visa sponsorships can fall-through at short notice leaving young students stranded, and that documents like electronic confirmation of enrolment (ECOE) from universities are stressful to acquire.

On some occasions, deadlines required coordination down to the hour. Flights entering the country had to line-up with the availability of the required documentation and the required staff to provide this documentation (focus group participant VIC, M, 23). When these don't align, focus group participants reported being 'questioned at the airport' (WA, F, 29), and feeling powerless when faced with responses from service staff like 'there's nothing we can do' (VIC, M, 29).

One international student summed up the cost and stress involved, as well as the role of third-party providers, in studying in Australia:

'I did go through an agency, but mostly **I like to do stuff by myself.** I hired an agent because it was compulsory to apply for Australian universities, [but] I drafted my own documents, my own SOP. I contacted the department. I often email the Department of Immigration as well: "what's the next step? What's the checklist?" And so **I often call the department as well. So I was doing most of the things. But certain universities require an agent. That's why I hired them'** (TAS, M, 28).

Further obstacles were encountered by young Australians with disabilities, especially during the restrictions brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. As one participant told us,

‘COVID-19 changes everyone’s lives with disruption to daily life, appointments and activities. **People with disabilities suffer in the Coronavirus pandemic because disability services providers and support staff ceased face-to-face services or cut down support facilities causing difficulties for them, especially NDIS clients.** Many people are fearful of the infection and social distancing restrictions impact people with disabilities’ lives more compared to people without disabilities’ (QLD, M, 28).



.....

The young people in our research noted that third-party providers can be of significant value, especially in health care. Challenges remain, however, in employment and housing services as well as those relating to education and disability. In these areas, young people do not feel confident that all third-party providers will offer high quality services that place the interests of the client first.



FOCUS AREA: 8

YOUNG PEOPLE REPORT STIGMA AS A BARRIER TO SERVICE ENGAGEMENT.

YOUNG PEOPLE BELIEVE ACCESSING SUPPORT IS TYPICALLY VIEWED AS EXCEPTIONAL AND DOES NOT FIT WITH THE IDEA OF 'BEING INDEPENDENT AND SUCCESSFUL'. THEY BELIEVE THAT STIGMA IS CREATED BY PUBLIC ATTITUDES AS WELL AS THROUGH THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH SERVICES. THIS CAN PREVENT TIMELY SERVICE ENGAGEMENT FOR SUPPORT WITH FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE OR POSTNATAL MENTAL HEALTH – WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WAITING UNTIL THEY ARE IN CRISIS BEFORE ACCESSING SERVICES, OR NOT ACCESSING THEM AT ALL.

Key Points:

- **79% of young people are concerned about how service staff would treat them.**
- Stigma is felt more in regional Australia, where service access is considered more noticeable. It was explained that **service payments are seen as crisis supports only, and that limiting one's service access is a 'social responsibility'** (QLD, F, 20).
- **COVID-19 has helped normalise service access.** With many Australians seeking support, it is **'less of a taboo'** (VIC, M, 22).
- Young people want to remove the stigma that surrounds asking for help. **They want to help eliminate language like 'dole bludger'.**

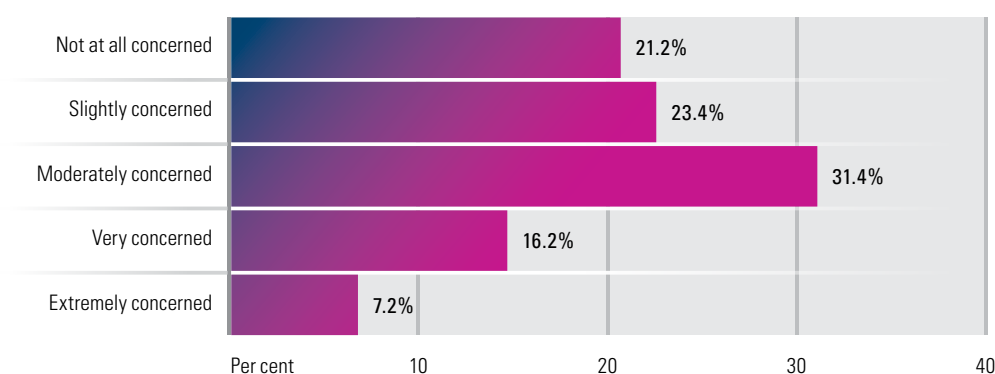
Difficult interactions with staff

Despite the necessity of public services in many facets of life, young people reported that getting information and accessing services was challenging. We did hear positive experiences, such as:

‘I’ve gone in and had amazing experiences with one Centrelink worker where, you know, you talk about it, you get your problem solved, then you go on your merry way’ (QLD, F, 18).

But **young people generally framed these as the exception rather than the norm**. This sentiment was underpinned by young people’s concern about being stigmatised by the wider population, but also is significantly related to how young people imagine and experience agency service staff. Our national survey showed young people’s levels of concern regarding how they will be treated when trying to access government support. Only a minority – just 21% – of all young people in our survey respondents indicated that they were ‘not at all concerned’ (Figure 7, below). **That is, nearly 80% of all young people in this nationally representative survey indicated at least some level of concern about how staff would treat them when trying to access government support.** Nearly a full quarter of respondents said they would feel ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ concerned which perhaps indicates a lack of trust, or fear of judgement.

Figure 7: Concern with staff treatment



Q58: If you were to access government support (for example, financial assistance or training/information), to what extent would you be concerned with the following: ‘How service staff will treat you’

Table 7: Concern with staff treatment

Response	%
Not at all concerned	21.2%
Slightly concerned	23.4%

Moderately concerned	31.4%
Very concerned	16.2%
Extremely concerned	7.2%
Total	99.4%*

Q58: If you were to access government support (for example, financial assistance or training/information), to what extent would you be concerned with the following: 'How service staff will treat you'.

*Some respondents (n=13) declined to answer this question.

This is reflected in this comment from a focus group. While at the more extreme end in terms of the characterisation of staff, it follows a pattern across the focus groups regarding how young people are treated negatively by agency staff:

'It's demoralizing because I've sat with some of those people before, like I haven't had to cry in front of those people, but I've sat with some of those people and **they want to be there even less than you**' (QLD, F, 21).

Troubling labels

Many people in focus group discussions described a degree of stigma attached to accessing financial support in particular. At the same time, online and focus group data noted how **young people wanted to be a part of removing labels like 'bludger' from common vernacular**, noting that 'it's really pervasive – even amongst people our age (focus group participant ACT, F, 26). **The COVID-19 pandemic was repeatedly flagged as an opportunity to move past this attitude**, though as one young Queensland resident noted, stigmatising attitudes run deep:

'So I think that there's sort of like a residual resentment there. There's less so now, [during the pandemic] because so many people are needing government support, but **there's definitely a stigma around Centrelink** that, I mean, I personally believe is incredibly wrong, and **labelling people who need government support as 'dole bludgers' is absolutely ludicrous**, but it's definitely something that is there, and, I think, **disadvantages so many people**' (QLD, F, 25).

Some settings and groups of people were seen as having particularly negative perceptions.

'Where I'm at uni, it's kind of a very like, private school, institutionalised. It's a very wealthy sort of group of people. So it's not something you talk about at all. Like it's just, it's kind of that, "ooh, like dole bludger" kind of terminology' (ACT, F, 19).

In some cases, young people perceived the 'system' of public services overall to be steeped in similar attitudes. Indeed, this young person, and others in their focus group, believed that a degree of prejudice is the foundation of the system design itself:

'The system itself needs to be based on giving people agency and basic human decency rather than, yeah. Rather than just treating them as if they're mooching off the government. 'Cos that's not the case. And that hasn't really ever been the case. It doesn't work like that' (VIC, non-binary, 26).

This sentiment was also echoed online, with the following post on Reddit serving as an example of young people's perception that the government did not genuinely want them to access JobKeeper. Here, **stigma acts in multiple ways, first with how the user suggested they feel stigmatised and let down by the system, but doing so in a way that was stigmatising longer term services users:**

'The government appears it would rather **give extra money to those that choose not to work, play the system and scam it** than help out people who generally need it for loss of work. Yes I know this is not everyone but why do those already on payments need the extra money. **It should be going to people who now have no job...**' (Reddit user).

In this report, we have already discussed the value of **learning about services in educational settings**, but it is worth returning to note that **education is also key to destigmatising services**: all Australians should be able to access support if they need it. As one focus group participant noted:

'I didn't have any of this at school, but anything that's like **coming into schools and telling you how it works and maybe even destigmatising it a little bit as well**. 'Cos **I remember when I was in high school, it was like, "oh, you're a bludger"**. But then as soon as I got out of high school and I realized everyone's on Centrelink' (VIC, F, 21).

Service stigma in regional Australia

Young people from regional backgrounds also reflected on how services were viewed differently in their smaller communities. In focus groups, we heard about experiences in regional centres like Cairns, Hobart, Darwin, Launceston, Bendigo, Bundaberg, Orange, Queanbeyan, as well as smaller locales in the Hepburn and Gippsland regions (Victoria) and the Sunshine Coast region (Queensland). **When discussing public services in regional contexts, there was a binary understanding, of being dependent or being self-sufficient.** Young people imagined service access in the city as being 'a lot easier' (TAS, F, 19 and VIC, F, 20) and noted how accessing support was very visible in smaller centres. One participant recalled negative comments he had heard from authority figures about welfare payments:

'I've had [a doctor] saying 'I would never go on Centrelink. [...] like, it's an utter embarrassment' and all this kind of stuff. [...] I keep quiet and, you know, I mean I've needed to be on it. **I think for us rural kids, it really helps out. But I think there is a bit of a stigma attached to it still somewhat** (SA, M, 25).

CASE STUDY > SERVICE STIGMA IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

One young woman, who moved away from their regional home to study in another state's capital city, contrasted the attitudes of young city-dwelling students receiving service payments to those in regional Australia. Crucially, here, there is a 'zero-sum' understanding of financial support from public services:

*'Being in the city definitely meant that it was probably a lot easier – and a lot less stigmatised for me – to get on Centrelink. I know that a lot of my friends that still live in [regional centre] who are either studying or working or whatever. [They] **feel like they shouldn't be on Centrelink because they're not the people that need it. Because in [regional centre], there's a very big socioeconomic gap.** So there's a large portion of, of our town that, you know, a very, very well off. My family and a lot of our friends, we're very lucky for both parents to have full time jobs. You know, I went to a private school, there's lots of opportunities for high-end work, but they require super advanced qualifications that not a lot of people in our town have. And then there's a massive unemployment rate. So a lot of people who are sort of like coming from those families who are, you know, like sort of on the luckier side, who, you know, both parents are working and have like a decent amount of income feel as though they shouldn't be accessing those supports even if they are eligible because they're, you know, lucky enough that both of their parents have a job and can continue to support them, even though they're not necessarily living there. **So it's social responsibility, but like, it also is stigma.** 'Cos like a lot of people, especially in the more like, well-off families, see it as something that you shouldn't be on. Like, you shouldn't have Centrelink, you shouldn't be relying on money from the government [because] ...it's other people... it's their taxes that they're paying that you're getting'.*

In this narrative, there is a sense of a division between the fortunate and those 'who need' support. For participants – like the above – who had a strong connection to 'home' but had also sought city-based university education, familial attitudes to welfare payments still informed their own. Despite the distance from family support, the costs of city living, the relative time-costs of full-time university study, and incurred HECS debt, community attitudes about not 'taking' from others remained.

Attitudes are changing: COVID-19

There is some evidence that the stigma around accessing services is diminishing. In focus groups, young people often talked about the disruptive potential of COVID-19 in this respect:

'I feel like at the moment this is the best experience I've had with Centrelink.'

It's never been this easy to actually access. **Attitudes are changing.** I think especially from the public's perspective, **accessing Centrelink will be less of a taboo.** I feel like a lot of **people will see it less as people 'dole bludging' so much as people accessing funds that really are needed for them.** And I feel like that might change, you know, public perspective and from a political view as well. They realize maybe [the] amount of funds that we were on before was sort of lower that maybe it isn't really viable, and things like this might get a small boost or a small increase in the amount of funding. 'Cos now everyone notices how much they need' (VIC, M, 22).

'I think it has been interesting in this time where so many people have lost work because it's been forced, because literally their place of employment has been closed down. **I think that has allowed other people to perhaps see that "yeah, it's not always the individual's decision that they're not working"** and therefore the system is in place [for us to access without stigma] (VIC, F, 30).

'I think like right now, when **so many people are clearly victims of a recession, we now understand, that there's a value to it and we can prioritise** and we can help people. I think it's a perfect demonstration that it [using services] was possible all along' (ACT, F, 26).

Others were more ambivalent about the possibility of diminished stigma if and when things return to 'normal':

'I think it'll be interesting once COVID is done and dusted and people move on and they forget about all the lessons learned, whether that **negative stigma will come back**' (VIC, F, 26).

In the meantime, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, **online discussions do help break down some of the stigma associated with accessing public services and support payments.** Here, young people, and service users of all ages, can be useful advocates normalising the use of public services. In part, this is likely due to the pseudonymous nature of online spaces, meaning users can share their experiences and ask for help without necessarily being identified or disclosing their struggles with their friends, family or other connections who they might feel would judge them. For instance, one online poster suggested that they had been on Newstart for 'a while' and expressed that 'having to rely on Newstart for 6 months has been one of the most stressful and dehumanising experiences of my life' (Reddit user). But such sentiment was often met with efforts to normalise accessing Centrelink payments or early withdrawal of superannuation during the pandemic with another saying that 'plenty are doing it. No drama' (Whirlpool user).



.....

Young people felt they would be stigmatised for accessing services and judged negatively by agency staff and others in their community. Due to normative understandings of who 'needs' support, young people may wait until they are 'in crisis' before accessing services, or even not access them at all. Young people point to the need to counter negative perceptions, and normalise seeking support when needed.



FOCUS AREA: 9

YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS GREATER RECOGNITION.

CURRENTLY, YOUNG PEOPLE DO NOT PERCEIVE SERVICES TO HAVE AN EMBEDDED CONCERN FOR MENTAL HEALTH OR BUILT-IN PATHWAYS TO ACCESS MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT. THEY EXPRESS FRUSTRATION AND ANGST ABOUT WHAT THEY PERCEIVE TO BE UNCLEAR REQUIREMENTS, ONEROUS APPLICATIONS, AND ARDUOUS REPORTING PROCESSES, WHICH DON'T ACCOUNT FOR THEIR WELLBEING OR OTHER ISSUES THEY MAY BE DEALING WITH CONCURRENTLY. WITHOUT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OR AWARENESS OF THE MENTAL HEALTH PATHWAYS AVAILABLE, YOUNG PEOPLE ARE LESS LIKELY TO ENGAGE WITH AND TRUST SERVICES, DELAYING ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT.

Key Points:

- Mental health is the issue that most young people identified as an area where they would like further support (23% – equal most alongside ‘finding a job’).
 - **The main type of support that young people with mental health concerns want is: an agent, advocate or advisor to assist them (53%),** followed by more information on the topic (39%).
- Since the COVID-19 pandemic, 40% report that their mental health has deteriorated (‘somewhat’ or ‘much’ worse).
- **Young adults who receive government payments are likelier to have a probable serious mental illness** than those young people who do not.
- **Young adults who experience smoother transitions through education and into careers, have better mental health outcomes**
 - Risk of serious mental illness is higher where the transition to economic and residential independence is either *delayed* (e.g. unpartnered and living at home) or occurs relatively *early* (e.g. non-graduate pathways).
- Public services as a whole are perceived as ‘just looking at the after-effects’ (NSW, F, 21), and **services are felt to fail to see how ‘financial stability affects your mental and emotional wellbeing’** (QLD, F, 25).

Young adults' mental health

Our survey revealed that mental health is the issue that most young people identified as an area where they would like further support (23% – equal most alongside ‘finding a job’). This was followed by issues such as education and training (15%), physical health (14%), budgeting (12.5%), and utility bills (12.5%).

Mental health (alongside finding a job) is an issue of considerable significance relative to other areas of needed support. Among our respondents, different groups reported experiencing poorer mental health. Women, for instance, are more likely to report worse mental health; however, research also shows that men are less likely to report mental health issues when asked about it (Seidler et. al 2017). Similarly, our LGBTQI respondents also report worse mental health outcomes, compared to their heterosexual and cisgendered peers, consistent with other research in this area (*National LGBTI Health Alliance, 2020*)

The main type of support desired among our respondents who have mental health concerns is to have an agent, advocate or advisor to assist them (53%), followed by more information on the topic (39%). This illustrates the role that government services might play in filling this gap in knowledge and support. Respondents also indicated that conversations about mental health were difficult within families. As well as support for mental health, young people wanted help to create ‘openness’ and ‘understanding’ when discussing mental health with those closest to them.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the mental health of young people in Australia. Prior to COVID-19, 59% of respondents rate their overall mental health as good or above, 24% as fair, and 15% as poor. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, 40% report that their mental health has deteriorated (somewhat or much worse). For 39% it remains the same and for 19% it has improved. Additionally, **for 53% of respondents the pandemic has made them feel lonelier than before.** In addition, since the pandemic, 24% had experienced reduced work hours, and 18.5% had reduced study load or dropped out of education.

Our typology of young adult's transitions – mapped out earlier in this report ([p. 9](#)) – shows young adults who receive government payments (and thus interact with government services) are likelier to have a **probable serious mental illness** than those young people who do not. In addition, the risk of serious mental illness is higher where the transition to economic and residential independence is either *delayed* (e.g. Unmatched & Still at Home) or occurs *relatively early* (e.g. Non-Graduate pathways).

Table 8: Percentage with probable Serious Mental Illness (SMI), by government support

	% Probable SMI* at Any Time Point
Does not receive government support	12%
Receives government support	19%
Overall sample	15%

Source: Social Futures and Life Pathways ('Our Lives'). *SMI is indicated by a score of 12+ on the six-item *Kessler Psychological Distress scale*. (Note: this is a five-part typology based on 'Our Lives' data, resulting from a 'streamlining' of pathways over time)

Table 9: Percentage with probable Serious Mental Illness (SMI), by pathway type

Pathway type	% Probable Serious Mental Illness (K6 score 12+)*			
	Age 22	Age 24	Age 26	Any age
Single and Living at Home	11%	11%	10%	21%
Partnered Graduates	4%	5%	6%	12%
Single Precariously Employed Graduates	5%	3%	8%	14%
Partnered Non-graduates with Secure Employment	5%	3%	11%	17%
Single Non-Graduates with Varied Employment	8%	8%	12%	19%
Overall sample	6%	6%	9%	15%

Source: Social Futures and Life Pathways ('Our Lives'). *SMI is indicated by a score of 12+ on the six-item *Kessler Psychological Distress scale*. (Note: this is a five-part typology based on 'Our Lives' data, resulting from a 'streamlining' of pathways over time)

This means that **young adults who experience smoother transitions through education and into careers, have better mental health outcomes**. The widespread view is that emerging adulthood – the period through the 20s – entails a normalised period of uncertainty and experimentation as part of an extended journey to adulthood status. By contrast the *Our Lives* data reveals the potential costs of this extended period of dependence and the impact of uncertainty on mental health. To date, such problems have largely been characterized as part of the 'fast track' to adulthood independence.

Our Lives also features a cohort of parents, and these individuals often reported accessing subsidised mental health support via Medicare. While Medicare plays a vital role, specialised psychology services were still a significant cost for those experiencing financial hardship. Mothers in particular, indicated that they felt a **stigma still exists in relation to mental illness**. Mothers said that more education was needed about mental health in general, as well as the types of mental health support available. They felt that if they had this sooner, they would have been better prepared for the postnatal period. Mental health support for mothers often comes down to GP relationships, but also involves public services. In some cases, mothers described minimising their mental health struggles when accessing services, and instead, turned to non-government services because they wanted to 'stay off a radar'. One mother's experience was coloured by a negative confrontation with a Centrelink employee handling her claim – in a personal context impacted by the loss of a previous baby, and anxiety about her current pregnancy. Although resolved, the issue resulted in the individual **not accessing support**.

Turning to social media for help

In social media posts asking what changes users would make to their school, one user replied 'better mental health support services in my high school' (Whirlpool forum user). There were also several

concerned discussions about accessing mental health resources in regional areas of Australia. For example, several users discussed what mental health options were available in their area. One user explained, 'I get free sessions with uni. I'm looking for a diagnosis really. I know you can go to a GP for that but I think I'd be more comfortable with someone who specialises in mental health. But if I can't I guess I'll speak to a GP.' (Reddit user, regional VIC). Another user in Tasmania asked 'Anyone know of any anxiety support groups in the Hobart area? I don't have a lot of money so I can't really afford to go to the doctors, and the medication makes me feel dizzy, so I'm trying to look for other options.'

Other social media users replied to these queries with their own experiences, which help to normalise sharing and seeking support around mental health, at the same time as they provided suggestions based on those experiences. In our social media analysis around mental health, users would reply to posts discussing services like Headspace, bulk-billing, where the best hospitals were to go to in specific communities. They discussed age-based restrictions (such as Headspace for under 25 year-olds), the function of mental health care plans from doctors, and would share resources. There were often discussions around 'how much you have to pay on top of what the government covers for you' (Reddit user), signalling the role of these informal peer-based forums for navigating complex health and government support systems.

CASE STUDY > TURNING TO SOCIAL MEDIA FOR HELP

One young person in our research – we will call them Sam – posted online asking for advice about how to help their sister who was having a mental health crisis. Their sister was a victim of domestic violence and their father had died the previous year. The user described how they lived with their mother but their sister lived on the other side of the city, and while she had seen a GP the previous day, she still needed help. The user wanted to know if they could take her to a hospital and what options were available to help. Sam said, 'it is hard to find information when you don't know where to start'.

Responding to Sam, several users gave suggestions. One worked in mental health and recommended that Sam bring their sister into the emergency department at the hospital to be assessed or to call an ambulance if they were unable to drive. The user also posted the phone number to a mental health line and told Sam that all of these services are free and available across 24 hours.

Another young person shared that they had experienced something similar, noting that they had good experiences with a particular hospital and that they are now on medication with a treatment plan that has 'saved my life'. This user said 'I haven't felt this good since I was 11 (I'm 20). I am finally myself again'.

Several users shared with Sam their understanding of how the mental health system worked from their experiences. Most of the users mentioned that attending a hospital was the first step (often the emergency department) rather than seeing a GP to begin with. From there, they were sent to a psychologist or a psychiatrist and a mental health clinician for an assessment and a diagnosis and either given medication and/or a treatment plan.

continued over...

Other social media users also responded to Sam with more negative experiences, pointing to system-level issues. One explained that their 'journey was so convoluted, from expert to expert to get a diagnosis and necessary help, the whole thing probably took a year'. Another recounted secondhand information about a hospital, claiming it to be 'the unsafest mental health ward in Brisbane for female patients' due to 'multiple sexual assaults, unethical care, patients belongings stolen...giving out unnecessary electroconvulsive therapy'. Instead, the user recommended alternative hospitals or clinics.

Mental health support services

Public services were sometimes seen as exacerbating mental health issues, rather than addressing them. Many young people access *specific* mental health support, but focus groups participants noted that public services as a whole 'are just looking at the after-effects' (NSW, F, 21), and that services fail to see how 'financial stability affects your mental and emotional wellbeing' (QLD, F, 25). Service interactions in themselves can also impact users' mental health. Focus group participants often reflected on experiences such as; 'sweating on the phone' to services, seeing payment applications as a 'fight for every dollar', and feeling 'crushed' after difficult and lengthy service interactions. This added to the existing anxiety created by reporting requirements and the feeling of services watching and waiting for them to make mistakes in applications:

'There's work involved when you're trying to access government assistance or whatnot. Typically you're in a relatively dire situation and **you feel as though your anxiety comes up. You hear horror stories:** people who have thousands of dollars of debt because they stuffed up some way. When you're already in a tense situation and you can't get clear and concise [information] it kind of just aggravates that [anxiety]' (NSW, F, 23).

This labour is even more burdensome when young people are seeking support for their mental health explicitly. They felt that significant effort was required to gain an understanding of where to go for mental health support in the first instance. Some young people had clearly become experts and advocates for mental health within their own friendship networks and in digital spaces like Reddit and Whirlpool. Others however, felt that messages about mental health weren't supported by resources and argued that young people were still unsure how to access support:

'I feel like **there's not a lot of common knowledge about the resources that are available to people in terms of mental health plans and that kind of thing** [and] it seems really overwhelming to some people I know, organize that kind of thing [...] *MindSpot* clinic is Medicare funded counselling and psychology. There's these apps and government-paid services that people can link in with. No-one's got any idea about' (QLD, M, 18).

However, all young people we spoke to tended to agree that **services did not seem to have a consistent and embedded concern for mental health**. Open text responses to some of our survey questions revealed that some young people wanted help but didn't know 'where to go or what to do'. Focus group participants described how mental health plans were difficult to transition between different GPs. Others reported that different settings such as schools, universities and workplaces had different material related to mental health. In sum, they felt this amounted to vague advice rather than proper information or referral, as one participant put it:

'They keep saying to us "you need to get good mental health, you need to look after yourself, you should learn mindfulness". **Nobody actually teaches you.** Unless you're motivated enough to go out and look at an online course or read about it, have the money to pay for some private teaching or something, it just doesn't happen' (SA, M, 25).

There was also an element of mistrust in accessing certain services, **fearing that diagnosis may result in exclusion.** One survey respondent felt that there 'are zero opportunities for people with severe mental illness'. To young people, public services are not seen as appropriate for support in moments of crisis, and they are wary about the persistent nature of diagnoses:

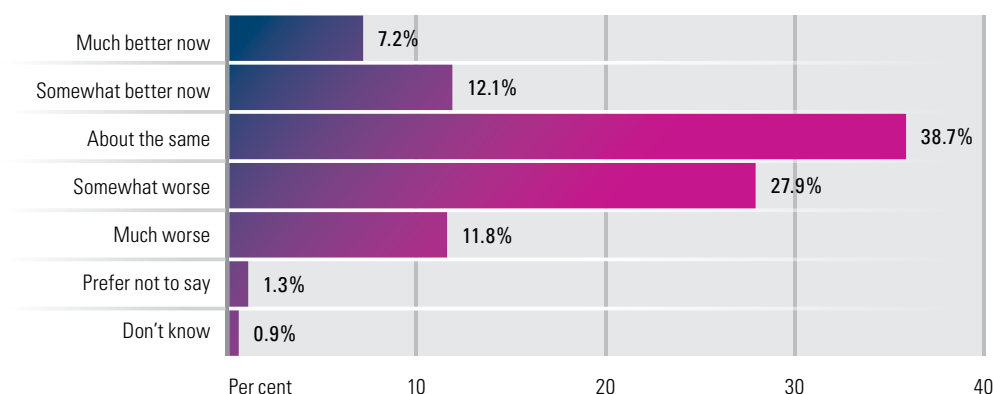
'In a really bad mental health situation [...] I wouldn't trust them [public services] to provide fast support when I need it. [...] Some people know about the mental health care plans, but among my peers, most wouldn't go on one just because to do that, you've got to put a **diagnosis** in, through Medicare, of a mental health condition. And then that **can follow you potentially [...] police, life insurance,** things like that – which I don't think is communicated properly. People who do know about it are reluctant to use it. ' (QLD, M, 18).

The impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing

The impact of the pandemic on health and wellbeing is uncertain in terms of timeframes and severity. Our results indicate that in terms of overall **physical health**, 75% of respondents reported having good, very good, or excellent health, while 5% report having poor health. Since the COVID-19 lockdowns 43% note that their physical health remains the same, **but 31% rate their physical health as worse.**

Considering mental health, 59% of respondents rate their overall **mental health** as good or above, 24% as fair, and 15% as poor (see Figure 8). However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, **40% report that their mental health has deteriorated (somewhat or much worse).** For 39% it remains the same and for 19% it has improved. Additionally, for **53% of respondents the pandemic has made them feel lonelier than before.**

Figure 8: Mental health since COVID-19



Q16: Since the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions (March 2020), how would you rate your overall mental health?

Table 10: Mental health since COVID-19

Response	%
Much better now	7.2%
Somewhat better now	12.1%
About the same	38.7%
Somewhat worse	27.9%
Much worse	11.8%
Prefer not to say	1.3%
Don't know	0.9%
Total	100%

Q16: Since the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions (March 2020), how would you rate your overall mental health?

One man spoke of the difficulty he felt discussing mental health issues in the context of the pandemic. Having moved back in with his parents, he had decided **not to seek mental health support:**

'[After moving back to the family home] it's difficult for me to continue establishing that relationship [with my doctor] and then possibly talk about mental health. Now that I'm back home, it's just easier for me to go to my old family doctor, which really means I'm not going to discuss mental issues' (NSW, M, 26).

As we have noted in other parts of this report, in times of stress young people turn to their parents and caregivers for support if this is available to them. Since COVID-19, **parents or caregivers** provided emotional support to many young adults (26% received emotional support on a daily basis and 28% on a weekly basis) while for others the challenges of navigating support systems for mental health continue as before.



As identified in all our data points – the survey, our secondary analysis, focus groups and social media sentiment analysis – mental health is a key issue for many young people. The secondary analysis of Our Lives data provides an insight into the impact interruption and delay of transitional pathways can have on mental health. The uncertainty and instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic makes support for mental health even more critical. Young people report challenges in navigating support, finding information, accessing it, and paying for it.

Conclusion

I think on the whole, I am really appreciative of a lot of government services and things. From HECS to Centrelink, and other things that have been available. Having received things like that, I hope one day to be working a job where I pay tax and contribute back to that (NSW, M, 20).

What are the current pathways young people take into adulthood in Australia?

We found that young people take a range of complex, non linear pathways towards adulthood. This generation of young people have been impacted by the aftermath of the GFC and now they are being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated global downturn in the economy. Current and future paths are being disrupted and government support and guidance is needed more than ever. **The public service plays a critical role for young people at different points in their lives.**

Where, when and how do young people interact with Australian public services?

Young people's knowledge and experience of the APS varies according to the paths they are taking in education, working life and in their personal lives. For example, we identified six distinct groups on different pathways in terms of leaving home, completing education, partnering and having children, and all require different levels of engagement with government services. There is no one successful or 'linear' pathway into adulthood. Despite this diversity in pathways, young people identified two critical areas where they wanted more support – finding a job and supporting their mental health. **Young people are not homogenous – some will require more support than others as they move toward independent adulthood.**

What are young people's perceptions of and experiences with Australian public services?

Young people value digital services, but find them inconsistent. They want flexible service touchpoints and see the value in face to face support in some circumstances. Young people report mixed experiences with third-party service providers. Some young people need more consistent support to access services and they were more likely to report initial and ongoing barriers to accessing services. Many young people report stigma is a barrier to service engagement – we found 79% of young people are concerned about how public service staff would treat them when trying to access government support, pointing to an underlying stigma and uncertainty around accessing some services. 24% said they would feel 'very' or 'extremely' concerned about how they would be treated.

Young people feel mental ill-health needs greater recognition. Most young people (59%) rate their overall **mental health** as good or above, 24% as fair, and 15% as poor. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, 40% report that their mental health has deteriorated (somewhat or much worse). For 39% it remains the same and for 19% it has improved. Additionally, for 53% of respondents the pandemic has made them feel **lonelier** than before. We note that young people who receive government payments are more likely to have mental illness than those young people who do not.

Navigating government services and seeking support is daunting for many young people, particularly for the first time. Services could consistently present in a caring and approachable way, to help avoid the sense that 'luck' determines the outcome of engagements with APS staff.

Where, when and how can Australian public services be delivered to meet young people's needs and expectations?

We found that young Australians have an **appetite for learning** about the APS and associated agencies. Young people told us they want reliable information produced by the public service in easily accessible forms, especially online and during school. Information about services doesn't always come from services themselves but from a range of sources including family members, peers and on social media. Social media is limited in its ability to provide detailed or accurate information about services, but young people saw these platforms as stepping-stones to learning more about services.

Hybrid and flexible models of information and service provision would be appreciated.

The nine focus areas outlined in this report are intended to reflect the current *experiences* of public services, and the current *challenges* young people face when engaging services. Young people often identified service needs (i.e. digital services, education) and complex perceptions (i.e. stigma, third-parties) that exist across multiple focus areas. These focus areas represent broad and sometimes shared challenges for the APS, indicating there is potential to synergise services for young people and solve multiple problems.

COVID-19 and the new normal?

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic during the earlier stages of the study presented an opportunity to learn from young people's experience in the context of a crisis. The first thing to note here is that while young lives are not immediately uniformly disrupted by crises, the medium to longer-term can bring about further disruptions. A sizable minority of young people needed to make changes to their present and future study, and many accessed new payments like JobKeeper. This is a trend that might continue, as the full economic fallout of the pandemic becomes clear. Young people's mental health has also suffered as a result of the pandemic, and ensuring access to the right information is a pressing concern here. Young people generally though, expressed optimism in the face of this adversity, with future aspirations and expectations for careers and family formation holding steady.

This optimism was coupled with a greater awareness of the need for public services in achieving these life aspirations, and a recognition of the role of public services in the lives of all Australians. The COVID-19 context has presented an opportune moment to build upon and reinforce this recognition, and with it further diminish the ways that service use is stigmatised or seen as taboo. Young people are keen to learn more about the range of services available, at the same time as they are keen to know and act upon their rights and responsibilities. As such, young people can be useful advocates for normalising the use of public services. The current moment is one in which the APS can maximise engagement and understanding of services to create a 'new normal'.

References

- France, A., & Roberts, S. (2017). *Youth and social class: Enduring inequality in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand*. Springer.
- Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (2006). *Young people and social change*. McGraw-Hill Education.
- Furlong, A., Cartmel, F., Biggart, A., Sweeting, H., & West, P. (2003). *Youth transitions: Patterns of vulnerability and processes of social inclusion*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Social Research.
- National LGBTI Health Alliance (2020). Snapshot of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Statistics for LGBTI People, available at: <https://www.lgbtihealth.org.au/statistics>
- Seidler, Z. E., Rice, S. M., River, J., Oliffe, J. L., & Dhillon, H. M. (2017). Men's mental health services: The case for a masculinities model. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 26(1), 92–104.
- Walther, A. (2006). Regimes of youth transitions: Choice, flexibility and security in young people's experiences across different European contexts. *Young*, 14(2), 119-139.
- Woodman, D., & Wyn, J. (2015). Class, gender and generation matter: Using the concept of social generation to study inequality and social change. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(10), 1402-1410.
- Vera-Toscano, E. (2019) Family formation and labour market performance of young adults', in Wilkins, R., Laß, I., Butterworth, P. and Vera-Toscano, E. *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings from Waves 1 to 17*. Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne. Available at: <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/hilda/publications/hilda-statistical-reports>



Appendix: Research Methods

Here we provide a brief overview of the research methods employed in this study.

We began with four research questions developed with the APS:

1. What are the current pathways young people take into adulthood in Australia?
2. Where, when and how do young people interact with Australian public services?
3. What are young people's perceptions of and experiences with Australian public services?
4. Where, when and how can Australian public services be delivered to meet young people's needs and expectations?

To answer these questions, we – in consultation with the Critical Friends group – designed a rigorous mixed-methods study that had four core pillars, implemented from March to August, 2020:

- A. Focus Groups (n=155)
- B. Secondary data analysis (datasets including 4987 young people)
- C. A national survey (n=2,261)
- D. Social media sentiment analysis (from a corpus of 30,000 posts)

Focus groups

Participants for focus groups were recruited using social media advertising. Over 700 young people from around Australia expressed an interest in participating, with 155 ultimately participating. 47 focus groups were conducted (with an average group size of three to four), using video-conferencing software (Zoom), and took advantage of audio, video and digital whiteboard features. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 30, and the average age was 23.5. They were from across the country, with a representative sample across all states and territories. There was a balance of male and female participants. Participants were grouped together for focus groups based on their 'life stages', such as 'studying at university', 'caring for young families', or 'working full-time'. Participants received a \$50 eGift card for their time.

Each focus group ran for 60-90 minutes, and included three sections. The first explored young people's perceptions of the meaning and nature of 'adulthood' in contemporary life; how young people navigate challenges associated with study, work, moving out and starting families – and how this has changed across generations. The second section explored how young people were supported in reaching their adulthood, by family friends and institutional support. The third section of the focus groups attended to the role of the Australian public service in the transitions to adulthood that young people experienced or imagined.

Secondary data analysis

We drew on two large longitudinal studies with young people in Australia to provide an initial evidence base to build upon, and to map the design of our own survey to.

The Our Lives Project

The Social Futures and Life Pathways (Our Lives), project is an ARC funded infinite-life, multi-wave, multi-method, cohort study of young people from Queensland, Australia, who began high school in 2006 when they were aged 12/13 years. The project combines large scale survey research with in-depth qualitative interviewing to assess how global uncertainty and social traditions, institutions and inequalities structure the life pathways of young people in Australia. The most recent full survey (Wave 7) was conducted in 2019, when the cohort were aged 25/26 years old (n=1,500).

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY)

Our analysis uses data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) 2009 cohort – a national study of young Australians surveyed from the ages of 15 to 25. We developed a typology accounting for different combinations of transitions young adults experience across the domains of work, study, housing and relationships. To allow for the complexity of this multi-dimensional focus, it was necessary to identify relatively simplistic indicators of transitional milestones within each of these domains (i.e. having permanent job vs. not having permanent job; living at home vs. out of home; being married / de facto vs. single, and having no degree / vocational degree / university degree). Next, to capture the dynamic nature of changes in these domains we differentiate between a respondents' status on these indicators at an earlier point (age 21) and the latest data collection point (age 25). This enabled us to construct transition variables for each of these domains which reflect different combinations of starting points and destinations. A form of cluster analysis was used to group together respondents who shared similarities across the four transitions variables. Our resulting typology consists of six distinct pathway types. Following typology development, we undertook further analyses to examine the sociodemographic composition and forms of government assistance associated with each pathway type.

National survey

Sample characteristics

Table 11: Survey sample characteristics

Sample	2261	Respondents
Age (years)	31% 31% 38%	18-21 22-25 26-30
Gender	51% 47% 2%	Women Men Adults identifying as non-binary, gender diverse or other
Citizenship	84% 6% 9%	Australian citizens Permanent residents Temporary visas & other
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	6%	Identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
Place of birth	77% 22%	Australia Overseas
Residence (State)	1% 23% 0.4% 13% 6% 1% 32% 6%	ACT NSW NT QLD SA TAS VIC WA
Languages	85% 2%	English Other
Education	5% 4% 24% 17% 9% 25% 14%	Year 10 or below Year 11 Year 12 Certificate I to IV Advanced Diploma or Diploma Bachelor's degree Postgraduate studies

Location

Using general population-level ABS data as a guide, our survey recruited for an 80/20 split between metropolitan and regional respondents. However, we also gathered more detailed information about locations (based on an optional postcode question). This is summarised below.

Table 12: Survey respondent location

Location	Frequency	%
Major cities of Australia	1552	68.6%
Inner regional Australia	207	9.2%
Outer regional Australia	72	3.2%
Remote Australia	9	0.4%
Very remote Australia	2	0.1%
Prefer not to say	332	14.7%
Total	2261	100%

Q40: What is the postcode of the area you primarily live in? (This question will only be used to determine general geographic area (urban, rural, remote). The survey is confidential and will not be used to identify you)

Sentiment analysis

Sentiment analysis and topic modelling were employed to analyse the online discourse present on social media platforms Reddit and Twitter, alongside the Australian discussion forum Whirlpool. Our overall corpus included 30,000 discreet posts. The sentiment analysis includes evaluating the emotional valence of text on social media and involves automatically calculating the sentiment of text based on its words and grammatical features. For each platform, datasets were collected across three periods of time: February, March and April.



Reddit (~10,000 posts collected)

Data was collected on several subreddits (groups on Reddit) to produce a diverse dataset centred on different locations: r/Melbourne (~175,000 subscribers), r/Sydney (~139,000 subscribers), r/Brisbane (~95,000 subscribers), r/Perth (~44,000 subscribers) and regional hubs, including as r/Bendigo (~800 subscribers), and r/Launceston (~400 subscribers). The 50 most recent threads (discussions) and the comments within them were analysed.



Twitter (~10,000 posts collected)

Posts made on Twitter that incorporate the location hashtags of the same coinciding metropolitan and regional areas described above or are directed at the Twitter accounts for the city councils were also examined. These accounts are: @CityofMelbourne, @CityofSydney, @Brisbanecityqld, @RegionalCities (this is Victorian based and includes Bendigo representation), @CityofLaunceston, and @CityofBunbury1. By analysing the tweets from the public directed to these accounts and with these hashtags we can gain insight into how users are attempting to access information and discuss more broadly a range of services relevant to their area.



Whirlpool (~10,000 posts collected)

Finally, we examined the Australian platform Whirlpool. Whirlpool is primarily a platform that consists of several discussion forums. It was initially developed as a community resource for Telstra's BigPond cable internet services in 1998. However, the website has since grown beyond its initial cable internet focus, with over 800,000 registered members, and has large discussion forums that operate as information sources for several general topics. These general forum topics will be the focus of this pillar. Eight of the generalised forums that have been categorised together as 'Life' related have been analysed. These eight forums orient around the following topics: jobs, education, graduate programs, finance, real estate, lifestyle, shopping, and travel. From these eight forums, 50 threads from each have been scraped along with the first ten comments on each, equalling 4,000 comments for three data samples collected for posts active to represent the time periods of February, March and April.

