

What are young Australians most worried about? Finding affordable housing, say researchers

November 29 2023, by Lucas Walsh, Blake Cutler, Thuc Bao Huynh and Zihong Deng



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Many of us were anxious and fearful during the COVID pandemic, but

we've probably started to feel a lot better since lockdowns have stopped and life looks more like it did previously.

But new data shows that hasn't been the case for Australia's [young people](#).

Our wide-ranging survey of youth across the country reveals many young people fear they'll never be able to own a home and will end up worse-off than their parents.

Affordable housing is their top concern

Data from the 2023 [Australian Youth Barometer](#), which surveyed 571 young Australians aged 18–24 and interviewed 30 more, highlight young people's interconnected and confronting attitudes about their futures.

In this third iteration of the annual survey, we expected improvements in young people's attitudes following the worst of the pandemic.

But the pressures have intensified following increases to costs of living and multiple disruptions to young lives, leading to anxieties about their future.

The clear majority of young people (70%) said affordable housing was their top concern (15% increase since last year), while 51% nominated employment opportunities (up 9%) as the second.

Concern about [affordable housing](#) is unsurprising. The fear is real.

Aside from skyrocketing rents and [house prices](#), many young people face the prospect of having nowhere to live. According to 2021 Census data, almost [one in four](#) of all people experiencing homelessness (23%) are 12 to 24 years of age.

A 23-year-old woman from the ACT, who's living in a caravan she doesn't own, told us housing was her biggest concern: "I'm very lucky to have it [the caravan]. And if it gets taken away from me, I'm back out on the streets again [...] I need to be able to shower, have a place to get ready, eat, all that. That's really the only concern in life."

Seeing a pathway to affordable accommodation is all the more challenging given young people's current circumstances.

Some 90% of those surveyed experienced financial difficulties in the past year, a continuation of last year's trend. Around one in five (21%) experienced food insecurity.

Surviving *now* is a concern, let alone affording a roof tomorrow. Just 35% of young people feel confident that they'll be able to afford a place to live in the next year.

Feeling unprepared for the future

Only 52% of young people we surveyed feel their education has prepared them for the future

Three issues arise here. First, some young people are critical of education in their schools and post school institutions.

One 23-year-old woman from South Australia said, "The learning system in Australia is absolutely appalling is what I have to say about it. It is so behind, it is so backdated, it has not kept up with the times, their learning ways are just inaccurate, and a waste of everyone's time [...] It wasn't catered to what would be best for learning in the classroom, it was just, "This is what the system is, that's what we're doing."

Second, there is a growing awareness that in a competitive labor market,

greater qualifications might not lead to desirable, secure jobs.

The third is understanding what is required to get that desirable work. Upheavals to the workforce, including technological developments such as automation, have led to questioning what skills, knowledge and experience are required for job futures that are decreasingly knowable.

Other factors such as [climate change](#) (the third top issue requiring immediate action) and geopolitical insecurity amplify uncertainty about the future.

Challenges to youth mental health

The challenges outlined above intersect. One 20-year-old woman from Queensland told us:

"I'm just worried that it'll be harder for me to get a job from my course or whatever, or that if stuff like cost of living and everything keeps going up, no matter if I get a job, I wouldn't be able to, like, stay on top of that, as well."

Only 52% of young Australians think that it is likely or extremely likely that they will achieve financial security in the future.

More young Australians think they will be financially worse off than their parents (from 53% in 2022 to 61% in 2023). Most (97%) felt worried, anxious or pessimistic in the past year (an increase of 14% on last year's data).

Just over a quarter (26%) characterized their [mental health](#) as poor or very poor (up 8% on last year). Nearly one in four (24%) received [mental health care](#) in the past year.

Young people see their health and well-being as interconnected to other factors, such as affordable accommodation, jobs and food security. A 24-year-old man from New South Wales said that:

"Financial independence is kind of a healthy thing. I think that knowing that you could afford your rent, knowing that you can afford food [...] knowing that you have a roof over your head is something that I measure for healthiness."

Attitudes that are here to stay?

Conditions for young people typically deteriorate during economic downturns. The question is whether the trends above reflect a tremor or a quake.

We saw during previous recessions how young people were disproportionately and negatively affected compared to older age groups. That tremor is already visible, despite relatively [good](#) employment figures in recent years (which insufficiently capture the quality, security and desirability of current employment). Even so, youth unemployment rate has increased to 8.7%.

So are these attitudes likely to remain?

A youthquake is typically defined as a marked [shift](#) in [cultural norms](#) brought about by changing values, tastes and attitudes of young people. Such shifts are associated with wider social, economic and political seismic upheavals.

Our findings suggest that conditions for the next youthquake might have begun.

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