

Mission Australia's 2019 survey highlights the need for genuine youth engagement

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Mission Australia's annual survey report shows that mental health is still the top concern of more than 25,000 young people aged 15 – 19 in Australia.

The report highlights that mental health is a broad and overarching outcome of many issues identified by young people including financial stress, a lack of confidence in achieving their goals, prevalent rates of bullying and a sense of hopelessness of having influence on decision-makers.

"CHF established the Youth Health Forum in 2018 as a platform for young people to discuss the biggest issues affecting their health and wellbeing, and solutions that they believe will make the system better for young people in the future. The results of the Mission Australia survey are disappointing but unsurprising to us, particularly the general feeling that young people don't have a say on important issues and this is an area that we hope our Forum will make a difference," says CEO Leanne Wells.

Youth Health Forum member Roxanne MacDonald says "Many people are feeling an impending sense of doom, especially with the fires that are happening around the country, and this climate anxiety is affecting young people's mental health. Climate change has moved to second place in the survey results, there have been climate strikes by school students across the country, and organisations like CHF are supporting the need for action by joining the Climate and Health Alliance but the politicians who can make a difference for our future just don't seem interested."

"The difference in the happiness ratings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, particularly girls, and the general population is concerning particularly in the context of continuing high rates of suicidality in Indigenous young people. Listening to young people and supporting community-led solutions should be a priority for our leaders, educators, and service providers.

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Implementing the recommendations of the Uluru Statement of the Heart would demonstrate commitment to genuine change at the top”.

Members of the Youth Health Forum made some recommendations to improve the wellbeing of their peers in a response to the Productivity Commission into Mental Health. These included re-establishing support for youth engagement at state and federal levels, addressing the need for primary health services to address the intersection of chronic physical and mental health issues for children and young people, a commitment to reducing stigma and improving the understanding of mental illness, focusing on prevention of mental illness such as social services that support individuals to have the resources and opportunities for to meaningfully participate in social and economic life.

“Young people are not disengaged. We have opinions on the health, social and education systems and there are many young people with innovative solutions to the problems we're facing. We want, and must be, included in the decision affecting us,” says Roxxanne MacDonald.

The Youth Health Forum has previously proposed that the health curriculum in schools is reviewed to better prepare young people to lead healthy, balanced lives. This included skills such as navigating the health system, budgeting, finding work, and how to apply healthy behaviours. The curriculum would survey young people to determine areas of interest and existing knowledge and be designed for implementation locally by students, parents, teachers and community organisations. They feel this would help young people to cope as they become independent young adults.

“We are pleased that there has been a recent surge of support and funding for youth engagement and advisory initiatives such as CHF’s Youth Health Forum, however the trust of young people will need to be earned through genuine collaboration. It is our hope that our Forum will help to bridge the divide and give young people a platform for meaningful health advocacy. We would like to see this kind of support extended across all government departments,” says CEO Leanne Wells.

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