

Australia: Young people list economic issues as top concern

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A survey of more than 15,000 teenagers aged 15-19, conducted by Mission Australia, a charity organisation, has provided a snapshot of the mounting economic concerns among young people. Around 31 percent of those surveyed listed the economy as the most important macro-issue, up from around 20 percent last year.

Mission Australia's National Manager of Research, Bronwen Dalton, commented: "In last year's survey, concern around the economy wasn't even in the top three... This year it's easily the most pressing national issue on the minds of young people. Accompanying that increase in concern has been a number of comments—some by children as young as 15—about the need to get a job and contribute financially to keep their family afloat."

More than 52 percent of respondents across the country rated financial security as either very important, or extremely important. Almost 39 percent of those surveyed were working part time. In an indication of growing youth unemployment, over 34 percent were not in paid employment, but were looking for work.

Figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicated that the youth unemployment rate, as of September 2012, was 25.1 percent. Youth unemployment rose sharply with the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008, and has since remained at high levels.

A recent report released by the Council of Australian Governments showed that the percentage of youth studying, working, or training fell from 76 percent in

2008 to 72.5 percent in 2011. In some working class suburbs, unofficial estimates placed real youth unemployment in the vicinity of 50 percent.

The Mission Australia survey indicated that financial uncertainty is heightening stress among young people. When asked about personal issues, more than 40 percent of respondents said they were either very concerned or extremely concerned about coping with stress, up from 20 percent in 2008, when the financial crisis began.

Comments by young people about the survey results confirmed their growing preoccupation with economic issues. Jessie Salas, an apprentice butcher living with his family in Sydney's north-west, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "The standard rate for an apprentice isn't enough to live off... You're trying to support yourself but at the same time the household... So some weeks I'll be able to have a little bit of money left over after paying bills but some weeks I won't have enough. I'm just really concerned about making it through each week, but it's extremely hard at the moment."

Other young people work full-time or part-time to assist their families financially. Lachlan Smith, a 17-year-old, said he worked to help his mother "so she can have a little bit of the stress taken off." His 16-year-old sister said it was difficult to find a job that paid more than \$9.50 an hour.

A major financial pressure is "rental stress" produced by the increasing unaffordability of accommodation.

An Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report

released on December 5 indicated that the number of households experiencing moderate housing stress—when 30 percent or more of gross household income is allocated to accommodation—rose from 900,000 in 1995 to over 1.4 million in 2010. Households in severe housing stress—when accommodation costs 50 percent or more of gross household income—increased from 300,000 in 1995 to 460,000 in 2010.

More than 1.1 million households received some form of rental assistance in the financial year ending June 2011. In addition, the waiting lists for public housing applicants expanded from 177,652 in June 2008 to 202,368 in June 2011.

Cassandra Goldie, head of the Australian Council of Social Service, told the *Australian* that the lack of affordable housing was the major cause of poverty in Australia. “It is well understood that we have a chronic lack of supply of low-cost and affordable housing for people on low and modest incomes, and we have predicted that this problem will continue to increase if we don’t try ... to increase the supply of affordable housing,” she explained.

Households also face a sharp rise in energy bills. Annual figures released by the Essential Services Commission in Victoria showed that electricity disconnections increased 33 percent and gas disconnections by 50 percent in that state during 2012. David Heeps, the commission’s chief executive, commented in the *Age* that the majority of disconnections “are of customers who struggle to pay their bills—not ‘skippers’ or movers from a residence.”

While the Mission Australia survey provided an insight into growing social and economic pressures on young people, its report reflected the outlook of a Christian charity, seeking to influence government policy. The report’s policy section made no mention of the economy, despite the concerns of young people, focusing instead on secondary issues, including body image and the Internet.

The survey did not address the issue of war, even though it is of major concern for young people who have grown up in a decade of the “war on terror” and

rising Australian military involvement, including in the illegal US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Some media commentary on the survey findings centred on the fact that the environment, listed last year by over 37 percent as most important national issue, fell to 17.5 percent this year. Within the limited scope of a survey, the shift is likely to reflect the growing impact of the slowing Australian economy on young people, rather than diminishing concerns about the danger of environmental disaster.

The growth of financial hardship among teenagers and working people in Australia is a direct result of the global economic crisis. It is also an indictment of the policies of successive Labor and Liberal governments at the state and federal level. They have presided over major attacks on the social conditions of the working class, including by selling off public assets, and overseeing the destruction of broad sections of industry and manufacturing, accompanied by the imposition of low-paid, casual labour.



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