

Reports show worsening conditions for Australian youth

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Studies have revealed that a growing number of young people in Australia are experiencing worsening living conditions—a trend underway before the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has been exacerbated by the crisis.

Produced by the Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research at the University of Melbourne every year since 2001, the 2021 edition of the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA) survey was published in December last year with analyses of information from 2019. Gathering data on households, relationships, income, employment, health and education, HILDA is funded by the Australian Department of Social Services.

The authors note in introducing the 170-page document detailing their results: “While this year’s report includes data from the most recent wave of the HILDA Survey currently available, all of the data nonetheless pre-date the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Wave 19, the most recent wave, was collected between 30 July 2019 and 9 February 2020. Many of the findings from the HILDA Project presented in this report therefore relate to very different circumstances to those in which we now find ourselves. However, it is wrong to think they are not relevant today.”

One of the lead authors of the report, Professor Roger Wilkins, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “On a range of metrics, it does look like things have worsened for young people and then on top of that, we see this growth in psychological distress in the community which is very much concentrated among younger people, particularly young women aged under 25.”

Increased casualisation of the workforce between 2001 and 2019 was only found among those aged between 15 and 34. HILDA reported an increase of

casualisation from 50.6 percent to 55.7 percent among 15–24-year-olds, and a slight rise from 18.4 percent to 18.6 among those aged 25 to 34.

The report also stated that the mean age of new entrants into the workforce rose from 19.4 to 20.3-years-old over the same period, with young people increasingly struggling to find employment. Those with university degrees have seen their median hourly wages fall compared to the overall median wage since 2001.

Psychological distress was also analysed in the survey, which found that mental illness had increased in every section of the population, but was sharpest among those aged 15 to 24. The HILDA authors write: “Those in the 15 to 24 age group consistently had the highest proportion in distress coupled with a rising trend in prevalence, with 21.2% in distress in 2007 compared to 30% in 2019; an increase of almost 9 percentage points, or 41.6%.”

The report also details the prevalence of psychological distress in 2019 according to risk categories labelled low, moderate, high, and very high for different age groups. The survey found younger age groups reported higher levels of psychological distress. For instance, females aged 15 to 24 reported a mean “distress score” of 20.3 compared to a score of 16.4 among females aged 55 to 64. Similarly, 15–24-year-old males scored 17.6 in distress compared with 15.9 for 55–64-year-old males.

The report also notes a greater level of distress among the most oppressed and vulnerable sections of the working class. Unsurprisingly, the survey found that higher levels of psychological distress were found among the unemployed, and those with lower income and education qualifications. Heightened levels of psychological distress were identified among indigenous Australians and migrants from non-English

speaking countries.

Another study, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), published in August 2021, used statistics from up to 2020 to analyse the effect that the initial stages of the pandemic had on those aged 20.

The LSAY reported that 19 percent of 20-year-olds were working full time in 2020, compared to 43 percent working part time. Nine percent of 20-year-olds were employed but working zero hours. These young people predominantly work in industries—hospitality, retail, sports and recreation—severely affected by the limited, but necessary public health measures to prevent the spread of Sars-Cov-2 that have since been dumped by the state and federal governments Labor and Liberal alike.

Compared to 2014, 20-year-olds in permanent employment dropped from 43 percent to 39 percent, while there was a rise from 18 percent to 22 percent forced to work more than one job to pay for the rising cost of living. There was a large jump from 2014 to 2020 of 20-year-olds who would prefer to work more hours, up from 32 percent to 42 percent.

The survey also found that, compared to working hours before COVID, 31 percent of Australian youth were working fewer hours than usual.

Also highlighted in the report was a shocking rise in serious mental health problems among young people, up from 7 percent of 20-year-olds in 2014 to 23 percent in 2020.

Included in the LSAY results are quotes from participants about their future goals and prospects. One interviewee wrote: “I hope to make the biggest change in my mental health. I have always struggled with it, but particularly through COVID-19 it has declined considerably and I have given up or stopped most of my hobbies.”

Another said: “I hope to be financially independent again... this is after having to use almost all of my savings and borrowing money from family, in order to survive after being stood down in March [2020] due to COVID-19.”

These are common sentiments and experiences among many youth in Australia and internationally. Falling or stagnating wages, diminishing job prospects, rising living and education costs, and increased psychological strain are having a profound impact on young people.

Interviewed an by October 2021 titled “Generation COVID-19: Are the kids going to be all right?” Darcy Williams, a 20-year-old sports science student said “Unless you want to work at a fast-food chain or a supermarket, no one’s [been] working.”

Grattan Institute director Danielle Wood told the *Age*: “Whenever there’s an economic downturn, employers will often try and manage by cutting the staff that were last [hired] or not hiring, [or] not taking on new staff, which are more likely to be young people, so we know there’s always the widening of the gap in unemployment between young people and between older workers during downturns.”

“During COVID, that really supercharged because of the nature of the downturn. Because it has really hit employment in people-facing sectors like hospitality, like the arts and recreation and retail... this has been a recession that’s really bitten for the young,” she added.

Julia Coscolluela, a 21-year-old youth worker from Melbourne’s western suburbs, highlighted that the pandemic has exacerbated the concerns and problems confronting youth in her interview with the *Age*. “It hasn’t changed the fact that global warming is still happening... and our futures are still really insecure,” she said. “On top of having to navigate living in a pandemic and post-pandemic, we’ve also got all those other worries.”

“Honestly, I’ve resorted to not planning too far ahead. I haven’t even really thought about 2022, if I’m being honest,” Julia added.

Amid record COVID-19 case numbers and deaths in Australia, spurred on by the Omicron variant and the conscious, murderous policies of governments and big business to “let it rip,” the situation confronting youth continues to worsen. Young workers speaking out in interviews with the *World Socialist Web Site* have reported their dangerous working conditions on the frontlines of the virus’s spread, but also spoke in favour of a scientifically-backed program of eradication to end the pandemic and save lives.



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