

Australian “youth barometer” survey highlights growing poverty, precariousness

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A report issued by Monash University has shed light on the increasing pressures faced by young people in Australia, including widespread financial precarity, underemployment, poor mental health and anxiety about the future. Bank accounts are so tight that over half of the youth surveyed went without eating for a whole day at some point during the past twelve months.

The 2022 Australian Youth Barometer—conducted by the Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice—examined the experiences of young people on a range of topics including the economy, working conditions, education, health and wellbeing, and civic participation. Researchers surveyed more than 500 people aged between 18 and 24, and interviewed another thirty.

The survey reveals that financial struggles are a common problem across all but the wealthiest demographic groups, with 90 percent of young Australians experiencing financial difficulties at some point in the past year. Many reported that they worked multiple jobs and still struggled to make ends meet; their situations were particularly precarious during extended periods such as work placements or exams, when they were unable to work.

Future economic prospects are regarded as bleak. More than half of the surveyed young people think they will be financially worse off than their parents, and only half believe that it is likely that they will achieve financial security in their future. Many cited barriers such as rising costs of living, housing unaffordability and a lack of stable and sufficient employment. Home ownership is regarded as increasingly beyond reach, and only 58 percent of young people thought it is likely that they will live in a comfortable home.

The report found that working conditions have deteriorated for young people. Of those surveyed, 45 percent experienced unemployment at some point in the past year, while 61 percent experienced underemployment

(that is, working fewer hours than they would like). In rural areas, these figures rose to 69 percent and 76 percent respectively. More than half of young Australians also reported earning income from gig work in the past year; Indigenous youth were particularly likely to have done so (78 percent).

As noted by the researchers, working in the gig economy often leaves already-vulnerable young people completely unprotected by even the inadequate employment laws that exist.

The substantial economic strain on young Australians means that many have gone without food at some points in the past year. The survey asked young people if there was a time in the past 12 months when they had run out of food and were unable to purchase more; a quarter responded in the affirmative. Such food insecurity affected even those with full-time jobs and from higher socio-economic backgrounds; many said they had not been able to afford food between pay cycles.

As one interviewee, aged 24, told researchers: “There have been quite a few times when I have been down to my last two or three dollars to last me a week and, most of the time, [that] means that I live off a loaf of bread and some two-minute noodles. Yes, I would say there have been times when I have not been able to eat the food I wanted, if any food at all.”

Another interviewee, aged 22, said, “I’ll have a week of being able to eat whatever I want to eat and then, you know, next week, I have no money, so I basically just have to live off bread.”

The survey also revealed that at least once in the past year, due to lack of money, 68 percent of young Australians ate less than they thought they should, 67 percent were not able to eat healthy and nutritious food, 66 percent were hungry but did not eat, and 51 percent had to go without eating for a whole day.

The findings on mental health and wellbeing follow

directly from the above indices. Almost one quarter (24 percent) of young people rated their mental health as poor or very poor, and the vast majority (85 percent) reported feelings of worry, anxiety or pessimism. Researchers found that 40 per cent of young people are worried about their ability to live a happy and healthy life in the future.

When asked which issues needed immediate action in Australia, the surveyed young people identified housing (61 percent), employment (47 percent) and climate change (46 percent).

Only a very small number said that they felt properly represented in political discussions; many pointed out a lack of input in decision-making processes and the fact that their concerns were not taken seriously in the political sphere. In a telling indictment of the current system, almost one-third of young Australians (29 percent) thought it was unlikely that climate change would be effectively combated in the future.

In fact, none of the above issues confronting young people—be they climate change, financial and job security, housing affordability, or cost of living—can be properly addressed under capitalism. The profit system creates and exacerbates these issues by its very nature. Big business and finance capital rely on the impoverishment of young people and other sections of the working class as a means of ensuring the continued supply of readily exploitable cheap labour.

Parts of the “Youth Barometer” findings suggested emerging anti-capitalist sentiments among young people. The report’s authors noted “an unshakable feeling of a world in transition” when summarising their discussions with research participants. One interviewee stated that current structures and systems have been “designed to maintain and continue the status quo.”

To meet the crises confronting them, working class youth in Australia and around the world need to fight to build a movement against capitalism and for a rationally planned world socialist society.

This is a political struggle pitting young people against all of the defenders of capitalism, chief among them Labor and the trade unions. For decades they have presided over an assault on jobs, wages and working conditions that is now being intensified by the federal Labor government, as it seeks to make the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Albanese’s administration is deepening Australia’s alignment with a US war drive against China that threatens an unprecedented global catastrophe.

Young people who want to fight for a future should join

the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. Attend our upcoming meetings on how to take forward the struggle against war!

Details:

Melbourne, VIC

7 p.m. AEDT, Tuesday March 14

Lecture Theatre 2, 295 Queen Street (entrance via Little Lonsdale St), Melbourne CBD
Victoria University: City Queen Campus

Register:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/for-a-mass-movement-of-youth-and-students-against-imperialist-war-registration-559858029437>

The event will also be livestreamed for those who cannot attend in person, including the immunocompromised. Register for the Zoom livestream at this link: https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_RwFpGh4fTwaALq5z9vuhvA

Newcastle, NSW

7 p.m. AEDT, Thursday March 16

Lecture Theatre V205 (Mathematics Building)
University of Newcastle (Callaghan campus)

Register for the Zoom livestream at this link: https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_JrpMFl4dRzSx8sAZwia35Q

Sydney NSW

7 p.m. AEDT, Tuesday April 04

Lecture Theatre: 14SCO T2 Theatre
Macquarie University
Balaclava Rd, Macquarie Park NSW 2109

Register for the Zoom livestream at this link: https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_LHFd3V4KRVORyMXKa0Hrnw

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