

Australian youth survey highlights cost-of-living crisis

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The third annual Australian Youth Barometer report reveals a further decline in financial stability, mental health and job security among young people across the country. It is a damning exposure of the harsh conditions confronting the younger generation.

Conducted by Monash University's Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice, the 2023 report was based on data gathered in 2022 through an online survey. 571 people aged 18–24 completed the survey from around the country. The report was published in November 2023.

A key finding is that 90 percent of young people reported experiencing financial difficulties in the past 12 months, the same as in the previous year's report. However, while in the 2022 report 26 percent of participants said they experienced financial difficulties often or very often, this jumped to 32 percent in 2023.

For this generation, social conditions are regressing compared to previous generations. Those who believed that they would be financially worse off than their parents jumped from 53 percent in 2022 to 61 percent in the latest Youth Barometer report.

Youth in Australia are bearing the brunt of a social crisis that is affecting the entire working class. Workers in Australia and internationally have been hit by an inflationary spiral which has seen the cost-of-living soar.

Since the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, inflation in Australia climbed, reaching a high of more than 8 percent in December 2022. It is still above 4 percent and is not expected to drop below 3 percent before 2025, even based on the government's baselessly optimistic economic forecasts.

Meanwhile, wages are "increasing" at a rate below that of inflation, placing enormous financial strain on working-class households and young people. This has led to a fall in real wages of about 5 percent since the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese took office in May 2022.

The effect of this inflationary spiral is stark in the increasingly unaffordable housing market.

In the 2023 Youth Barometer survey, Australian youth

who thought it "likely or extremely likely" they would be able to afford a place to live in the next 12 months dropped to 35 percent from 46 percent the previous year.

A staggering 72 percent of young people aged 18–24 believe they will never be able to buy a home.

40 percent felt that they may not have a comfortable place to live in the next 12 months and 21 percent experienced food insecurity.

The report included quotes from 30 young people that were interviewed as part of the survey.

One anonymously said: "I feel like everything just rose in price, all of a sudden, quite quickly. Not just housing, even buying food and stuff. It all just rose quite quick. So I think a lot of people were taken aback by it. And I haven't seen anything about people getting pay raises. So I guess it's just people losing money at this point."

Financial difficulties among youth are compounded by disproportionate job insecurity among young Australians.

While accounting for 15.7 percent of the labour market, 18–24-year-olds make up 25.2 percent of the long-term unemployed.

Those who had experienced unemployment in the past year was 44 percent, roughly steady from 45 percent the previous year.

The report shows 50 percent of young Australians earned income from working in the highly insecure gig economy at some point in the past 12 months compared to 56 percent the previous year. Underemployment also dropped from 61 percent to 57 percent. However, only 22 percent worked full time, down from 37 percent the previous year, pointing to higher, more long term, casualisation rates across the board.

A 22-year-old woman from Tasmania said in a testimonial presented in the Youth Barometer report: "You have no idea when you're getting paid if you're casual. Because there's no, like you're not on a payroll, you get forgotten very easily in, like, bureaucracy."

Over the year, 67 percent had to turn to family members for financial support.

51 percent said that they believe employment opportunities

for young people is an issue that needs immediate action.

As youth face increasingly unliveable conditions, it is no surprise that mental health is also on the decline. An alarming 97 percent of young people reported feelings of worry, anxiety or pessimism in the past 12 months—up from 85 percent the previous year.

A 2022 National Youth Mental Health Foundation survey found that 57 percent of those 12–25 felt their mental health was declining. 26 percent rated their mental health as poor or very poor, up by 2 percent from the year before.

Very little detail is given on the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2023 Youth Barometer survey, echoing the government and media lie that the pandemic is a thing of the past.

The previous year showed the virus had infected more than 900,000 young Australians to 2021, killing 30 18–24-year-olds. Untold thousands are struggling with the debilitating effects of Long COVID. The 2022 survey found that 51 percent saw it as the most important national issue.

The 2023 report only makes a few remarks on the effect COVID-19 has had on educational difficulties and the labour market, focusing instead on the supposed negative effects of lockdowns—originally instituted as part of necessary, if limited, public health measures to stem the spread of the virus.

Since the end of 2021, both federal and state governments in Australia have dumped all basic public health measures as the ruling elite internationally have adopted the murderous “forever COVID” policy of allowing the virus to spread unchecked in the interests of corporate profits.

The most glaring omission in the report, however, is the issue of militarism.

Words like “military,” “defence” and “war” appear nowhere in the document. As the government oversees falling real wages and cuts social services like welfare, education and healthcare, it is ballooning military spending.

In its 2023 federal budget, the Labor government announced it will allocate a record \$52.588 billion on the military—a year-on-year increase of 7 percent. It is the first time the defence allocation has exceeded \$50 billion.

Last March, Albanese announced a \$368 billion agreement to buy nuclear-powered submarines as part of the AUKUS military pact with Britain and the US aimed at preparing for a US-led war against China. Australia has also been one of the largest non-NATO supporters of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

But the omission is most stark given the Australian government’s unwavering support for the Israeli genocide against the Palestinian population of Gaza which has killed 30,000 and left 70,000 missing or injured.

The lack of any reference to militarism and war is even

more significant given the widespread hostility among youth in Australia—as part of a global movement of workers and youth—against the genocide.

In a roundabout way, the hostility to the governments’ program of war and austerity is made clear in the lack of engagement in official politics reported in the Youth Barometer survey.

This does not represent a shift away from politics, but a turning away from the political establishment. A 20-year-old in New South Wales said: “The way I think of it is in more of a modern way. Politics less in the sense of governments and world leaders and everything and more about the politics of how the world’s population is running.”

Less than a third of those surveyed believe governments will act on climate change—the issue that was rated as the most concerning for youth. This expresses the sharp divide between the sentiments of young people and the interests of capitalist governments.

But the perspective offered in the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer is a dead end.

The authors argue that “the government alone cannot resolve the cost of living crisis. Rather, policymakers must work closely with the private sector... to achieve solutions that address short- and longterm issues on a local and national level.”

But it is the same profit interests of the capitalism, represented by the governments, that have led to the social crisis and imperialist militarism. To fight for a living wage, housing and access to free, high-quality social infrastructure, young people must take up a struggle against the corporate oligarchy.



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