Generations and Social Change: Negotiating Adulthood in the 21st Century


JOHANNA WYN, GRAEME SMITH, HELEN STOKES, DEBRA TYLER AND DAN WOODMAN

Research Report  29

Australian Youth Research Centre
The University of Melbourne
January 2008
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Social Change and Generations</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Introducing the 2005 Cohort</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: The First Steps</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Still Seeking the Right Balance</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Conclusion</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1: Youth Education, Employment and Wellbeing Data</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2: Life-Patterns Publications</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Australian Research Council (ARC) has funded the next phase of the Australian Youth Research Centre’s *Life-Patterns* research program. Titled *Pathways Then and Now (2005 – 2009)*, this phase of the project involves the initiation of a new longitudinal cohort and, at the same time, supports the continuation of a modified form of the original longitudinal cohort of the *Life-Patterns* program study. Julie Marr and Rhonda Christopher have provided administrative support, and the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (especially the Melbourne Education Research Institute) also provides technical and administrative support for which we are grateful. Associate Professor Peter Dwyer originated the *Life-Patterns* study and has continued his involvement in the program since his retirement in 2000 in an honorary capacity, until his resignation from the project in May 2007. We acknowledge Peter Dwyer’s contributions to many dimensions of the *Life-Patterns* program. We are also grateful to Dr. Kellie Burns for her perceptive comments on a draft of this report.

Professor Lesley Andres from the University of British Columbia, Canada is a Chief Investigator on the new ARC grant. The *Life-Patterns* research program has benefited from the links with her study, *Paths on Life’s Way*, based in British Columbia, Canada.

During 2007 Dr. Bjenk Ellefsen participated in the *Life-Patterns* program supported by a two-year scholarship from the *Fonds Québécois de la Recherche sur la Société et la Culture (FQRSC)*, focusing on the work experiences of the 1991 cohort.

This phase of the *Life-Patterns* program continues the tradition of a strong participant research dimension, through regular written and verbal feedback by participants, which shapes the progress of the research. We appreciate the generosity, willing engagement and honesty of our participants.
Executive Summary

This report introduces the next phase of the Life-Patterns research program. In addition to continuing to research the original cohort of young people (who left secondary school in 1991), we have initiated a new longitudinal cohort based on young people who left secondary school in 2006. There are two key differences from the original longitudinal cohort. First, data from the new cohort explore their experiences of the final years of secondary school, whereas the first cohort was contacted after they had left school.

Secondly, whereas the first cohort is confined to young people who attended secondary school in Victoria, the new cohort is based in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and Tasmania. This phase of the research program is funded by the Australian Research Council 2005 – 2009 and is called Pathways Then and Now.

In Chapter 2 we provide an overview of some conceptual issues which are raised by researching young people in a context of social change. As we enter the comparative analysis of the findings from two panel cohort studies of young people who were born in approximately 1973 and 1989 (around 16 years apart), we find we are inevitably engaged in contemporary debates about social change, the nature of generation and the question of when does a new generation begin and the previous generation end. We have found the term social generations useful for exploring the common social conditions shared by each generational grouping. Our emerging understanding of generation is based on the evidence that there was a major social shift in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Australia that led to the emergence of a new social generation, which we have labelled the Post-1970s generation. We contrast their lives to that of their parents who can be loosely thought of as the Post World War 2 generation (also referred to commonly as the Baby Boomer generation).

We ask how different will the Life-Patterns of the next cohort be? Will they also usher in a new set of patterns or will they instead make their own mark on the patterns
established by the first cohort of the post-1970 generation? Will their lives involve changes in patterns of living, attitudes and subjectivities that are significant enough to warrant them being described as a new and distinctive generation? What advice do they have for the new cohort of young people, with the benefit of hindsight?

In Chapter 3 we provide data from the first survey of the full cohort, which includes young people from Victoria, New South Wales, the ACT and Tasmania, resulting in a representative sample of 3977 participants who were surveyed in 2005 or 2006 when they were in Years 11 and 12 (aged 16–18 years). The survey results reveal some commonalities amongst this cohort, but what stands out is the way in which socio-economic status, gender and location shape young people’s views, expectations and strategies at this stage of their lives. Our preliminary data, reflecting their first steps after leaving secondary school, reveal that school does not serve young people from low socio-economic backgrounds particularly well. They are the least likely to say that they like their teachers and they are the most likely to see a strong link between further study and getting a good job, and the most likely to see study as a waste of time. Young people in the lowest socio-economic group were also much less optimistic than any other group about the future, were the least likely to plan to travel after completing secondary school and the most likely to go straight into a job. Socio-economic status was also evident in many of the other areas.

Young people from rural and remote areas are less likely to see a strong link between education and getting a good job and are the least likely to say that they intend to undertake further study after completing secondary school.

Chapter 4 is based on interviews with 30 participants from the 2005 cohort, conducted during the first half of 2007. In this chapter we have chosen to focus on the differing experiences around moving out of home and relocating for study because this issue was particularly salient at this point in our participants’ post school lives. Participants’ stories pointed to the importance of family and friends and extended networks, and the financial and other resources these people provide. The importance of these people and resources meant that many of the interview participants who did not need to move for further study planned to spend 2007 living in the family home. Our non metropolitan participants faced relatively greater challenges in moving into higher education beyond the financial costs associated with having to relocate; relocating means that they have to connect with new networks if they are going to access resources to help them negotiate stress, maintain balance and face new challenges as they arrive.

Chapter 5 focuses on our first cohort. This group left secondary school in 1991 and continues to participate in the Life-Patterns program. They are now aged around 33. In 2006 we were able to follow up a sample of 323 participants from the first cohort, who completed a survey. The preliminary analysis of their experiences and views, supported by data from interviews with a sub-set of this group, reveals that they are at a stage of life when many (but not all) are focusing on establishing their own families. They have been in the workforce for over a decade, and many are also continuing to question and re-evaluate career and work. For all, the question of balance in life, which emerged as a theme for this cohort early in the study, continues to be relevant.
We asked our older cohort what advice they would have for young people leaving school in 2006. Overwhelmingly the advice was:

- It is very important to maintain relationships with friends and family and to learn to manage your finances.
- Try to maintain a balance in life between work, personal relationships and leisure, with a view to maintaining wellbeing.
- Do not be afraid to seek advice from others on any issue.
- Be persistent – keep trying even in the face of obstacles.
- Do your own thing, make your own decisions and take responsibility for them. Do not be swayed by what others think (and there is a recognition that this will be difficult), and don’t be pressured into the road most travelled. The message is strong: make choices - do not just fall into things ... do not be restrictive in your thought processes - take a punt, go for it!
- It is not the end of the world if you do not go on to university.
- Be prepared for change and keep your options open; if your view is too narrow, you will not see what is really on offer.
- And remember to use contraception.

We conclude that the four key empirical factors that we identified at the outset of this project, based on the experiences of the 1991 cohort, continue to be relevant:

- Continuing inequalities: Young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds are able to respond to the increasing need for credentials by entering tertiary education pathways. Young people from low socio-economic backgrounds are still half as likely to participate in higher education as their peers from medium or high socio-economic backgrounds and have poorer health outcomes.
- The contexting of choice: We found evidence in our 1991 cohort to support the view that young people place choices about education and employment within a broader context that includes personal relationships, wellbeing, lifestyle and leisure.
- Flexibility in decision-making: Having a number of options and having the capacity to make choices became critical for the 1991 cohort, reflecting the processes of ‘individualisation.’ For many, this meant holding options open by juggling both employment and study at the same time.
- Re-definition of careers: These factors have inevitably resulted in the emergence of new meanings of career. As the links between formal education and occupational outcomes have become more complex, and as employment has become less likely to provide security, career is being seen as a personal journey rather than a position or pathway within an occupation or organisation.
Chapter 1: Introduction

A new phase of the Life-Patterns research program has been initiated through the establishment of a new longitudinal cohort. This phase, funded by the Australian Research Council 2005 – 2009 is called Pathways Then and Now and has three aims which focus on the issue of understanding young people’s lives in a context of social change.

These are:

1. to analyse the post-2005 pathways of a new generation of post-compulsory education participants, in order to develop an explanatory framework for the choices confronting students in the third millennium;

2. to test their choices and trajectories against the assumptions of existing policies with a view to closing an emerging policy gap in this field; and

3. to compare the evidence from the new cohort with the findings of the previous Life-Patterns research (of a 1991 cohort) in order to determine the extent to which their experience represents a long-term, enduring change in approaches to careers in a post-industrial economy.

Previously, the Life-Patterns program has documented the pathways of young people who were completing their schooling in 1991 at about the age of 17 (the 1991 cohort) and continues to document their life journeys. The first phase of the program enabled us to analyse the post-compulsory education, work and life experiences of these young people through their twenties. This new phase will record their experiences well into their thirties.

This most recent phase of the Life-Patterns program introduces a comparative element through the introduction of a new longitudinal cohort (the 2005 cohort) which was initiated with young people who were in Year 11 in 2005, documenting their progress and choices over five years through to the end of 2009. This will enable us to compare the experiences of our new cohort of young people (who were born around 1989) with those of our previous cohort who had entered on their pathways 15 years earlier at the end of 1991 (and were born around 1973).

Reflecting on the available evidence from the analysis of the first Life-Patterns cohort and other Australian studies concerning education, career and broader life pathways in the 1990s, we identified four key empirical factors that are particularly relevant for research on young people who were in the final years of secondary education in 2005 and 2006. These formed the basis of the most recent ARC research proposal, and have recently been described in Stokes and Wyn (2007):
a) Continuing Inequalities
Recent studies of inequality in Australia confirm that young people from low socio-economic backgrounds consistently have the poorest educational outcomes and are the least likely to be involved in paid work and have the poorest health outcomes (NSW Commission for Children and Youth 2005; Australian Institute for Health and Welfare 2007). This data confirms earlier research that highlighted the significant disparities in achievement based on socio-economic background (Teese 2000). Young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds are able to respond to the increasing need for credentials by entering tertiary education pathways. Young people from low socio-economic backgrounds are still half as likely to participate in higher education as their peers from medium or high socio-economic backgrounds (James 2002). As socioeconomic disadvantage increases, so does mortality, morbidity, levels of smoking, poor nutrition and low rates of exercise (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007: 69).

b) The Contexting of Choice
While achieving a good education and getting secure employment were high priorities for our 1991 cohort, we found evidence to support the view that young people place these priorities within a broader context. Personal relationships, wellbeing, lifestyle and leisure took a central focus in their lives and we saw how these elements began to influence their study and work choices – even their concept of career. This balancing act both reflected and contributed to the tendency to prolong (and diversify) engagement in formal education, to interweave formal and informal learning opportunities and to take non-traditional pathways towards achieving job satisfaction. Our analysis of the 1991 cohort shows that, in 2004, developing personal relationships was ranked as the main practical commitment in life (83%) over pursuing work or their career (77%), and, for those in a career job, the most significant factor in their decision to take the job was related to the wider context of their lives (e.g. being close to family, leisure opportunities) (Dwyer et al. 2005).

c) Flexibility in decision-making
This cohort experienced the emergence of a precarious labour market, both through the weakening of the labour market in the early 1990s (Gregory 1995; Wooden & VandenHeuvel 1999) and through changes to the laws governing industrial relations. These external factors meant that while educational credentials were becoming more important to gaining employment in general, they were less likely to provide certainty of entry to young people's desired occupations. Only 17% of our participants in the 1991 cohort said that their field of study was directly related to getting their job. Being flexible: having a number of options and having the capacity to make choices became critical, reflecting the processes of ‘individualisation’ discussed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001). For many, this meant holding options open by juggling both employment and study at the same time. Many changed track as they explored different options, reflecting a pattern found in other studies (Evans 2002; Andres 2002).
**d) Re-definition of Careers**

These factors have inevitably resulted in the emergence of new meanings of career. As the links between formal education and occupational outcomes have become more complex, and as employment has become less likely to provide security, we have seen young people’s attitude towards career change. Instead of seeing a career as being related to a particular position or occupational pathway, the participants overwhelmingly saw career as a personal journey rather than a position or pathway within an occupation or organisation. In 2002 over 80% of the participants in the *Life-Patterns* study (1991 cohort) defined career in terms of the scope that the job offered for advancement of their situation, commitment and personal fulfilment rather than expertise or permanent full-time positions. Mobility across jobs was an important element in this approach. As many as 82% of our sample changed jobs and a fifth had done so at least five times between 1996 and 2002. In 2002, while 44% held what they considered to be career positions, they nevertheless did not expect to be in their present job in two years.

To begin the new study in 2005, we surveyed Year 11 students in schools in Victoria and New South Wales, and followed this up in 2006 with a further group of Year 12 students in schools in the ACT and Tasmania. The results of these surveys have been consolidated to establish a representative sample of over 3000 participants on which the longitudinal study is based.

In this report we provide an overview of some conceptual issues which are raised by this phase of our longitudinal program. As we enter the comparative analysis of the findings from two panel cohort studies of young people who were born in approximately 1973 and 1989 (around 16 years apart), we find we are inevitably engaged in contemporary debates about social change, the nature of generation and the question of when does a new generation begin and the previous generation end. We discuss this in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3 we provide a detailed description of the sample of the 2005 cohort and a summary of the results from the initial and follow-up surveys conducted in 2005 and 2006. In Chapter 4 we present preliminary findings based on our analysis of young people in rural areas, drawing especially on the interview data conducted in 2006 and 2007. In Chapter 5 we provide preliminary analysis of further research on the initial (1991) cohort, the participants of which are now aged approximately 33 years. This analysis is based on details from a survey in 2006 and interviews in 2007. This chapter includes their reflections on their early post-secondary school years, and their words of advice to the young people who constitute the second cohort in this research program. In Chapter 6 we offer some preliminary conclusions based on our analysis and reflections on the issues raised. In Appendix 1 we provide current statistical evidence about the education, employment and wellbeing of young Australians as a point of reference for our own findings.
Chapter 2: Social Change and Generation

This chapter provides a summary of some recent thinking about the question of generational and social change. The Life-Patterns research program provides a unique data base which can be used to analyse the effects of social change on young people’s lives – and the ways in which young people also shape their lives.

Given the sociological observation that the experience and meaning of age is shaped by social conditions, we have analysed the findings of the Life-Patterns study to identify how the circumstances that the post-1970 generation faced when they left secondary school in 1991 and subsequently, have shaped their approaches to learning, life and work. As Dwyer and Wyn concluded in their discussion of the Life-Patterns findings in 2001:

There is a genuine issue of generational change at stake here. If the wide-ranging social and economic changes that have occurred during the post-1970 period in Western societies have changed the conditions of life and future prospects for both young and old in these societies, we need to develop new research frameworks of inquiry and analysis that enable us to question assumptions which measure outcomes with reference to the norms of the past.... There is a danger here that the experiences of a past generation is accepted as ‘normative’, and in effect belittles the ongoing significance in the new life-patterns that young people today are shaping for themselves (Dwyer & Wyn 2001: 205).

In subsequent work, Wyn and Woodman (2006, 2007) have argued that the concept of social generation offers an approach to understanding young people and social change that can fully acknowledge the significance of new patterns of living and new approaches to life, as well as the continuities with the past. In the following sections of this chapter we provide a brief summary of this argument.

WHAT IS A GENERATION?

A variety of social and intellectual changes have led to a renewal of interest in the concept of generations within sociology (Edmunds & Turner 2005; Wyn & Woodman 2006, 2007; Roberts 2007), yet the term remains surprisingly elusive. The lack of clarity has been exacerbated by the widespread use of terms that describe different generations in the popular media. The labels Generation Y and Generation X, The Lost Generation, Millennials, Baby Boomers, Baby Busters and others are frequently referred to in popular literature and the mass media in Australia and internationally (Heath 2006; Howe & Strauss 2000; Huntley 2006; Salt 2006; Sheahan 2005). As a consequence, these terms have come to function,
often confusingly, as a shorthand to describe successive cohorts of young people.

Despite their shortcomings, these labels have served to interrupt the traditional view of youth as a universally experienced transition to adulthood. For example, the idea of Gen Y implies that this group of young people is facing different social conditions from previous (and therefore possibly future) cohorts and that this is of interest because it impacts on their experience in a way that will continue to shape their lives well after they are no longer young. Using these labels also brings problems however, as they tend to overlook diversity and often assign contradictory attributes to the generation. Popular generational labels often function as a stereotype – commonality of experience is taken to mean that people from one generation are all alike, overlooking the diversity of experiences and inequalities. The stereotypes also seldom acknowledge that individuals in any one generation often react in very different ways to the same conditions. For example, generational effects are strongly mediated by social and geographic location. In other words, while there will be some common experiences and ways of seeing the world, there will also be significant differences.

As we have found in the first cohort of the study, socio-economic background, gender and geographic location make a difference to the options that young people have and to how they shape their lives during their twenties and early thirties.

A second problem with the term generation is that it carries several different registers, and can refer to a cohort of people, or an age-group, or even the succession of parents by their children. Vincent (2005: 582) suggests that as generational labels and the term generation itself can have diverse meanings, the term generation should always be used with a qualifier such as familial, historical, or demographic generation. Sociological approaches to generation distinguish between biological and social generations. This approach often owes a debt to Mannheim’s classic essay The Problem with Generations in which he proposes that people who belong to a common period of history, or whose lives are forged through common conditions form a ‘generational consciousness’ (1952). Mannheim distinguished between age cohorts, where this consciousness did not exist, and social generations (which may consist of several age cohorts) whose participants do develop distinctive attitudes and priorities.

In exploring these issues in more depth, Wyn and Woodman have recently argued for the use of a concept of social generation as a tool for understanding young people’s lives against a backdrop of social change (2006, 2007). Social change is not just about the changing patterns of employment, family life or leisure – it is also necessary to understand the distinctive subjectivities (possibilities for being) that mark different groups and generations from each other. A social generational framework enables us to see age as a political tool and a social construction, as well as a biological process. Most importantly though, a social generational approach enables us to take account of the active role that young people themselves (must) play in constructing the kinds of reflexive approaches that will enable them to navigate their way through life.

They argue that...

...the point is to distinguish generation as a succession of age cohorts from social generation. The concept of social generation invites us to explore the altered, complex markers of adult status, to question what contemporary youth and adulthood means and to consider the social effects of changing conditions for people’s sense of self and belonging (2007: 375).

Edmunds and Turner have drawn on this distinction to propose that levels of social engagement and opportunities for influence lead to generational shifts in political consciousness. For this reason, they characterise generations as ‘active’ and ‘passive’. For example, they argue that the ‘1960s generation’ was the first global generation and was an active generation, through its engagement in demonstrations against the Vietnam War and protests against nuclear proliferation. They agree that ‘generation X’ or the 1970 and 1980’s generation was a passive generation, whose parental inheritance meant that it had comparatively little social capital, fewer employment opportunities and fewer welfare resources, all of which came together to generate widespread political apathy (2005: 562-563). They speculate about the emergence of a new global generation that they call the ‘9/11 generation’, which, they argue, is globally connected and is more politically engaged.
Generation has become a legitimate addition to, or even substitute for, the categories of class, ethnicity, locality and gender that provide the foundations for analysis of the experience of young people and their transitions into adult life. However, understanding a generation is also exceedingly challenging. For researchers, the use of familiar media labels, such as Baby Boomers, Generations X, and Generation Y, poses serious problems. As we have suggested, they operate as stereotypes that mask diversity, despite obvious contrary evidence. There are other questions also. For example, how do we determine the following: the length of each generation and whether all social generations must be of equal length; when one generation ends or another begins; whether those born at the start of a particular generation have much in common with those born at the very end; whose competing claims are correct among the obvious inconsistencies in different characterisations of the different generations; and, finally, is it even useful to develop these kind of clear cut typologies of generations?

In light of the above problems, throughout our Life- Patterns Project we have tended to avoid the Gen X and Gen Y labels and, in recognition of the impact of particular economic and social conditions on their lives, referred instead to ‘the post-1970 generation’. We see the post-1970 generation as marking the emergence of a new social generation, based on the emerging evidence of a shift in generational consciousness.

A concept of social generation sees social conditions (for example labour markets, industrial relations, educational processes, health patterns, family forms, the physical environment and community) as providing a framework which shapes the possibilities that individuals work with. A social generation approach argues that while social conditions affect all people, they have an especially significant impact on young people because they establish a form of ‘consciousness’ about life which is relatively enduring. A social generational consciousness may be relatively subtle. For example, is there a difference between the hopes and realities of the Baby Boomer generation in relation to ‘family’ and those of the post-1970 generation? Wyn and Woodman argue that:

Young people now readily accept that something different from the traditional nuclear family is a possibility in their own lives, and different forms of living are far more of an option for them at this point in their lives than it appeared to the vast majority of their parents. This does not mean that many, or even a majority, will no longer hope for a fairly conventional coupling with two biological children, but it does mean that this seems much more like a choice that has to be made and actively worked for, rather than a relatively straightforward progression that simply unfolds. This recognition shifts the meaning of relationships. It is this feeling of a greater variety of relationship possibilities, and also of the possibility of a breakdown in these relationships that we were highlighting. The post-1970 generation have only known a world where other forms of family were present and comparatively acceptable; this is what points to a generational shift (2007: 377).

Our new cohort of participants share a social context that, in many ways, mirrors that of our previous participants, and may be another cohort in the social generation we have called the post-1970s generation, but also there are some changes (for example, new labour market conditions or the impact of digital communications) that suggest the possibility of the emergence of a distinctive new social generation.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that ‘sharing’ a generational context or consciousness does not necessarily mean that all young people in that generation share the same opportunities and risks. We expand on this issue in other work which takes up class and gender issues (Stokes & Wyn 2007; Wyn 2007). That work explores in more detail how some young people have more effective resources than others to draw on as they make decisions and take up options.

Other research supports this approach. For example, McLeod and Yates’ (2006) study of young people analyses the differences that emerge in young people’s thinking, opportunities and outcomes across four different school sites in Victoria. Wierenga’s (2008) study of young people in a rural setting in Tasmania also takes these issues up in analysing the long-term effects of different social and material resource bases for young people. She found that the differences in the capacities of young people to imagine futures and put in place strategies that would enable them to achieve their goals, were largely based on the strength of trust relationships with significant others.
The use of the term social generations is useful for exploring the common social conditions shared by each generational grouping. However, our work is not primarily interested in developing another strictly defined generational typology, such as those that, at least to a degree arbitrarily, assign people born in 1980 to Generation X and those born in 1981 to Generation Y. Countless such typologies already exist (see for example Howe & Strauss 2000; MacKay 1997).

Our emerging understanding of generation is, however, based on the evidence that there was a major social shift in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Australia that led to the emergence of a new social generation, which we have labelled the Post-1970s generation. We contrast their lives to that of their parents who can be loosely thought of as the Post World War 2 generation (also referred to commonly as the Baby Boomer generation). Our claim of a shift to a new social generation broadly aligns with both the work of Mizen (2002, 2004) and of Furlong and Cartmel (2007), and to a degree with popularised labels.

Despite broad agreement about the timing of generational shifts, youth researchers have tended to focus on different dimensions of young people’s lives. For example, Furlong’s focus on young people’s engagement with labour markets emphasises the ‘worker dispositions’ that have emerged, and suggests a shift in approach at about the same points as our categorisation. Mizen’s focus emphasises how the State defines youth. His work analyses the effects of the Keynesian welfare state on youth, including the commitment to full employment, a social democratic vision of young people, the expansion of secondary schooling and an inclusive approach to young people in civic life. While his analysis focuses on the State in the UK, it mirrors the Australian experience. Mizen does not indicate a shift until the generation that is known as Gen Y and that Furlong calls the ‘social entrepreneurs’. Under monetarist social policies, there is curtailed public support for youth, increasingly exclusionary social policies and vocationalist education policies, and the expansion of tertiary education through private funding. The section below briefly summarises the shifts in life circumstances between these two social generations, providing a background to our analysis of our findings in the subsequent chapters.

**POST-WORLD WAR 2 GENERATION**

The so called Baby Boomer generation in Australia is relatively easy to categorise, and characterising them as a social generation is fairly defensible, because they faced very distinctive circumstances. The significant increase in birth-rates at that time had a definite demographic impact, which also had associated economic, educational, cultural and socio-political factors that affected the life course of those born in the years post World War Two. They were young in a unique period of Australian society. These were the years of post-war development, with dramatic urban expansion, the intake of large numbers of migrants from very diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds (but mainly from Western and Eastern Europe), an expanding economy dominated by Keynesian economic policies, the creation of mass secondary schooling; the opening of new universities throughout Australia, and the growth of a consumer society after the constraints of the depression and war years. They also forged new patterns of popular youth cultures, and new patterns of consumption (for example, Hip Hop and Straightedge) which emerged through the impact of radio and television (White & Wyn 2008).

The contraceptive pill was first introduced in the mid- to late-sixties, when members of this generation were teenagers and they experienced the draft for the Vietnam War. Contrary to many typologies, we do not believe the shift between generations is regularly clear enough to be linked to a specific year. In some senses those born in the early sixties represent a ‘cusp’ group, experiencing changes that were beginning to emerge, and that would have an impact on their identities and approaches to life. They were young adults during the late 1970s and early 1980s, with its serious economic problems and high inflation rates. The youth labour market, which had begun to collapse during the late 1970s was, by the end of the 1980s, no longer a source of secure full-time employment for young people.
This period was influenced by the emergence of the second wave of the women’s movement, the ideals of equal opportunity legislation, concepts of social justice through education and the emergence of a range of social and cultural changes, including an increase in de facto marriage, increasing recognition of same sex relationships, liberalisation of the laws of censorship and the growth of the hospitality and travel industries. Many therefore faced greater uncertainties in their transitions to adulthood than the earlier Post World War II babies (hence some typologies include a Baby Buster Generation between the Boomers and Generation X), but these changes were not of the magnitude faced by the group we call the post-1970 generation.

**POST-1970 GENERATION**

This grouping represents those born after the mid-seventies. We refer to this group as the post-1970 generation and claim they represent a distinct social generation because they were affected during their adolescent years by significant changes in education, the workforce and the political climate in Australia. Their lives were marked by the economic recession of the early 1990s and the far-reaching restructuring of the workforce with its downsizing, casualisation and emphasis on flexible career-paths. They were the first generation to be compelled to complete secondary school in significant numbers because of the lack of full-time jobs and a shift in Government policy priorities. The subsequent expansion of post-compulsory education brought with it the expectation that young people and their families would pay more for their education, and fees were introduced.

**Our new study is following a group of people whose lives and subjectivities may point to the emergence of a distinctive social generation or they may follow the patterns set by our 1991 cohort.**

There are some reasons to think that the new cohort, born in or near 1989, are distinctive, and indeed this is implied by the regular use of the term Generation Y (into which our current cohort would fit). One possible point of distinction is their engagement with digital communication technologies.

...while older people make reference to ‘new’ communication technologies, younger people do not regard digital technologies as new. They take for granted the use of digital technology for communication in personal, leisure and commercial life. It is routine for Australian children and young people to use computers as an educational tool, both in and out of school. Young people use the Internet for personal communication (for example, email and blogging), as a medium for seeking information and for shopping, banking, and organising travel. Young people expect to use a wide range of digitally produced and mediated leisure and communication including mobile phones, iPods, MP3s and CDs and enjoy television programs and films that are increasingly produced and distributed digitally. Indeed, young people increasingly produce as well as consume these media. Personal publishing and blogging are now commonplace, gradually shifting the balance from using the Internet as a source of information, to using it as a tool for communication (White & Wyn 2008: 210).

This group has also experienced rapidly increased education and housing costs. However our own research and our preliminary analysis of the comparative data of the two cohorts suggest that there are considerable continuities between the two parts of the Post-1970 generation and we wish to hold off from making claims about our new cohort’s relative distinctness until our study unfolds.

**CONTRADICTORY MESSAGES**

Our initial analysis has led us to be cautious about attempting to construct another typology of social generations in Australia. This is supported by the extent to which there are contradictory messages within popular writing about this issue, both about where the generational lines are drawn and about how to characterise the different generations. For example, a particularly strong line in the writing of the Baby Boomers suggests that Gen X and Gen Y are failures. In *The Age* newspaper, Edgar (2003) asserted that young people ‘bludged’ off their parents by staying in the parental home and tended to return even if they left, because they were unable to cope with ‘the inconvenience of caring for themselves.’ Carr-Gregg (2004) claimed that the problem with Gen Y is that they are ‘underdone developmentally’ and Colebatch (2003) argued that parents pay all the bills and that Gen X and Y ‘lead the spending on mobile phones and nights out’. According to Sheahan (2005: 43), Gen Y Australians want ‘independence with strings’, valuing autonomy to do their own things and make their own rules,
but yet enjoy being looked after, and are the most over-parented, over-indulged, over-educated, and welfare dependent generation ever. And, despite high levels of educational participation, young people are often portrayed as ignorant about important aspects of society – especially in relation to civic responsibility and political engagement (Fyfe & Wyn 2005).

A persistent but divergent characterisation of the second cohort of the Post-1970 Generation, particularly among Gen X and Gen Y authors, is that they are seen as pioneers of a new way of living. This view sees the contemporary generation of young people as confident, optimistic and trail blazing, especially in the areas of entrepreneurship, information technology, travel and lifestyle (Heath 2006; Huntley 2006). They are presented as well placed to deal with the opportunities the world offers but also equipped to deal with the challenges and risks that contemporary life entails (Eckersley 2004). This pioneering, generation-shaping tendency of this group is certainly taken seriously by companies that want to have a share of the Gen Y market. Some educational institutions are also taking Gen Y seriously, recognising the opportunity to market to the ‘educational tourism’ interests of this generation. There are regular stories of young people who are smart, autonomous workers in the new (mainly urban) economies, volunteer workers for causes they believe in and socially integrated within both local and virtual communities. Whether the characteristics attributed to them in the media stereotypes are accurate remains to be seen, but some international studies suggest that the growing disparities between rich and struggling families in Western societies are likely to lead to clear economic and social splits within the group as a whole.

The young people who are participating in the second cohort of our comparative study were born when our previous participants were completing their schooling and embarking on their own transitions into adult life. It makes good sense to initiate a second cohort study in order to explore the nature of social generations. Because each generation faces a specific set of life circumstances that influences the way they make their transitions to adulthood, a major task of the new cohort study will be to determine the balance between continuity and discontinuity with the past – and to identify the unique contribution that the new generation makes to defining the way that youth and adulthood are shaped.

CONCLUSION
Mannheim (1952) argued that social generation was an important conceptual tool for the sociological analysis of social change. He argued that people who belong to a common period of history, or whose lives are forged through common conditions form a ‘generational consciousness’, exhibiting common patterns of identity formation. He made the important distinction between age cohorts and social generations, and argued that individuals influence ‘historical configurations’ but are also constituted by them (Pilcher 1994: 490). In other words, a social generation will be defined by the distinctive social, economic and political conditions that individuals have been subjected to – and that they in turn have shaped.

Understanding social change and, in particular, its effects on and implications for young people (and for the conceptualisation of youth) is one of the central goals of the Life-Patterns research program. Inevitably, as we compare the experiences of one age cohort with another, we confront the complex issue of social generation. We follow a longstanding tradition to view age as a social construct, which is given meaning through the existing social, political and economic relations of society (Allen 1968; Finch 1986; Pilcher 1994; Wyn & White 1997; Mizen 2004).

So how different will the Life-Patterns of the next cohort be? Will they also usher in a new set of patterns or will they instead make their own mark on the patterns established by the first cohort of the post-1970 generation? Will their lives involve changes in Life-Patterns, attitudes and subjectivities that are significant enough to warrant them being described as a new and distinctive generation?

In the next chapter we provide a snapshot of the social factors likely to affect the life-context of our new cohort of participants, suggesting this context in many ways mirrors that of our previous participants, but also tentatively pointing to some possible changes. Provided we avoid prejudging the issues, we have the opportunity to analyse where the balance lies between continuity and discontinuity for these two cohorts of young Australians.
The new cohort study of the *Life-Patterns* study opened with a suite of three surveys which were conducted in 2005 and 2006. The surveys were implemented through Government, Catholic and Independent schools in metropolitan and regional areas in Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory.

The choice of schools and participants paid particular attention to factors such as gender, geographic location, age, and socio-economic factors (parental occupation and education). The first of the surveys (Wave 1) collected data from 1954 respondents who were in Year 11 in Victoria and New South Wales secondary schools in 2005. The second round of surveys (Wave 2A) consisted of 2023 respondents from the ACT and Tasmania in 2005. In order to increase the sample size, potential participants from Wave 1 (Victoria and New South Wales) were contacted in 2006 (Wave 2B), now in Year 12. The merging of the usable responses from these three waves of surveys resulted in 3977 participants who were surveyed in 2005 or 2006. Their characteristics are described below in tables 1, 2 and 3.

Table 1:
**Gender**
*Cohort 2, 2005-6 survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1782</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2188</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3970</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2:
**School sector**
*Cohort 2, 2005-6 survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>2277</td>
<td>57.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>1087</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3977</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables 1 and 2 show that the study has achieved a fairly representative sample across gender and school sector, with 57% in our sample attending Government schools, compared with 66% nationally (ABS 2006). Table 3 highlights an overrepresentation of young people based in rural and regional schools. The decision to oversample in rural schools reflects our interest in exploring the experiences of rural and regional youth. We recognise that Australia is a highly urbanised society, and that this frequently results in research that gives only tacit recognition of the issues facing rural populations (Wyn 1998). Given that the focus of this research project is on young people at a time of transition, we felt that it was important to construct a sample that would enable us to explore particular issues facing young people whose families are based in rural or remote areas (James 2002; James et al. 1999).
An overwhelming majority of the participants were born in Australia (88%). The remaining 11% were born in 40 countries, mainly China (1.1%), India (0.8%), New Zealand (0.7%) and Iraq (0.6%).

The data from Wave 2a show that a majority of the young people were employed in paid work during Year 11 (57%), with young men and young women equally likely to be employed. Young people attending Catholic schools were the most likely to be employed (63%), followed by young people attending Government schools (57%) and Independent schools (51%). There was not a great difference here in terms of the socio-economic status of parents, but there was in terms of location. Young people in country towns or regional cities (62% and 61%) were most likely to be in paid employment, young people in rural settings, not in town were the least likely (47%) and young people in metropolitan areas were in the middle (53%).

A summary of key features of the characteristics of both cohorts is given in Table 4. This table shows that there has been a very slight decrease over the 14 years in the proportion of young people whose parents were born in Australia and a slight increase in the percentage of young people whose father holds a professional or managerial job. The proportion of our sample who attended Government schools has remained the same. The most significant change between 1991 and 2005 is in terms of educational achievements and aspirations. The percentage of mothers who have acquired a university qualification was only just over ten percent in 1991, but by 2005 one third of the mothers have done so. The educational aspirations of young people have also shifted during this time, with over 90% of the 2005 sample planning to do some study post secondary school, compared with 73% in 1991.

### Table 4:
**Student backgrounds: a comparison of 2005 and 1991 cohorts, 2005-6 survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005 cohort (%)</th>
<th>1991 cohort (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian born</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Government school</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian born mother</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Professional/managerial occupation</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother university qualified</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan to do post-school study</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to seeking information about the social and family context of the participants, our initial surveys asked them to describe their current experiences of study and work and to share their plans about study and work after they leave school. The survey also covered broader issues regarding their hopes and concerns, their background history and living situation, their experiences of and attitudes to school, their views on friends and family, and their expectations of and goals for the future. Some of these questions replicate those that we asked of the previous cohort, in order to enable us to compare the attitudes of young people 14 years apart.

In the following sections we describe their responses to key questions about school, home life, leisure, work and their future plans. The survey generates a picture of a cohort of young people who, like their predecessors in 1991, are optimistic about their own futures. This generation bears the effects of the polarisation of wealth that has been noted in Australia over the last decade (Mission Australia 2005), reflected in different experiences and expectations based on socio-economic background. Gender and geographical location continue to be a significant factor in determining young people’s expectations and experiences. Overall, the participants are confident about their choices of subjects at school, choosing subjects they like and are good at, and place less emphasis on the influence of parents or teachers. Family, friends and having a good level of personal and mental wellbeing are important to them.
In general, participants were satisfied with school: 18% were very satisfied and 47% were satisfied with school. Young women tended to be more satisfied (68%) than young men (61%). The most significant difference in satisfaction with school, however, was between low and high socio-economic groups. Young people in the high socio-economic group were more likely to report that they were satisfied or very satisfied with school (26%) compared with young people in the low socio-economic group (15%).

Table 5 describes participants’ responses to the question: To what extent do you like the following aspects of school? This table shows that young people are most positive about their peers, but are also very positive about their subjects and their teachers, followed by free time activities. They are quite ambivalent, however, about classes and after school programs.

Our analysis shows that young women attending Independent schools were considerably more positive than any other group about other students and that students from high socio-economic backgrounds (and students from Independent schools) were more likely than other young people to say that they like their teachers. Young people who were born outside Australia were also more likely to report a high level of satisfaction with school (27%) than Australian born students (17%).

Table 6 describes young people’s attitudes towards their teachers in more detail. This table shows that there is a wide variation in how students evaluate different teachers. For example, 72% said that some classes are boring, and 61% said that some teachers are too impersonal. A majority said that most of their teachers take a personal interest in them (52%), are fair and just (56.5%), and give interesting and helpful classes (52.6%).

Various dimensions of school were seen to be sources of support and help. For example, 34% of students said that having friendly teachers was very important. Interestingly, counselling services were the least likely to be ranked a very important source of support (18%) compared with relevant subjects (54%), and support from peers (45%). A majority of young people stated that less pressure to achieve in their studies would be an important source of support (75%).

Table 5:
To what extent do you like the following aspects of school?
2005-6 survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Like %</th>
<th>Dislike %</th>
<th>Neither %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The other students</td>
<td>85.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The subjects</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teachers</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free time activities</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After school programs</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6:
How would you describe your teachers?
2005-6 survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>All %</th>
<th>Most %</th>
<th>Some %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers take a personal interest in us</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are fair and just</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are too impersonal</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers give us enough encouragement</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers insist on too many rules</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers give us interesting and helpful classes</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes are often boring</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>72.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In deciding what subjects they would study at secondary school, parents were the most important source of advice, followed by a teacher or careers teacher and friends. Young people said that choosing subjects suited to the career they want was very important (70%), followed by subjects they are good at (65%) and subjects they like (64%). Parental influence on selection of subjects was a very important influence for 13%, and selecting subjects on the basis of achieving high scores for university entrance was a very important factor for 21%. Young people attending Independent schools were more likely to rate choosing subjects suited to their anticipated career (74%) than students in Government (70%) or Catholic schools (66%). Young people in Catholic schools were more likely to choose subjects that they were good at and more likely to be influenced by their parents in their choices.

**HOME, LEISURE AND PERSONAL LIFE**

Young people’s family relationships are extremely important to them. Just over half (55%) said that their family was ‘very supportive’ and a further 35% said that their family was supportive. The support of parents and family was seen to be ‘very important’ by 77% of the respondents, and so was that of their peers - 45% said that support from peers was ‘very important’ to their wellbeing. An overwhelming majority were satisfied with their home life (84%), but when we looked at the patterns by region and type of school attended, we found that young people living in rural areas (not in a town) were significantly less likely to feel satisfied with their home life (84%), but when we looked at the patterns by region and type of school attended, we found that young people living in rural areas (not in a town) were significantly less likely to feel satisfied with their home life (Table 7) and young people who were attending schools in the Independent sector were the most likely to report that they were very satisfied with their home life.

**Table 7:**
Very satisfied with my home life by region and school
2005-6 survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional city</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country town</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural, not in town</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic school</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government school</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent school</td>
<td>51.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Young men are far more likely than young women to be playing a sport or doing outdoor activities and spend less time with their family than young women. Young women were more likely to spend most of their leisure time with family (32%) than were young men (13%). Table 8 shows that both young men and young women spend most of their leisure time with friends.

**Table 8:**
How I spend my leisure time (%)
2005-6 survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Males Mostly</th>
<th>Males Sometimes</th>
<th>Females Mostly</th>
<th>Females Sometimes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With my family</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With friends</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading or enjoying music</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>51.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A hobby</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing in particular</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching sport</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>53.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the computer</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing sport or outdoor activities</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Young men were much more likely to say that sport and leisure pursuits were a positive aspect in their life at present (31%) than were young women (19%). However, personal health and fitness was seen as being very important to 48% of young women and 44.5% of young men. Young women relied more on support from a close friend (56%) than did young men (42%) and were more likely to say that their families were a positive influence in their lives (59%) than did young men (54%).

For a majority of the young people, their family and friends are the most positive sources of support. About a quarter of young people also found that their social life, what they are learning about themselves, and sport and leisure pursuits were very positive influences.

**FUTURE PLANS, GOALS AND CONCERNS**

An overwhelming majority (82%) of young people were planning to continue with study after completing secondary school, but this figure reflects a complex mix of opportunity and constraint. Social and economic factors have a powerful influence on their plans at this stage. For example, the type of school attended is relevant: young people from Independent schools were most likely to have plans for further study (92%), followed by those attending Catholic schools (82%) and Government schools (78%). These patterns also reflect the socio-economic status of their families: 93% of young people in the highest socio-economic bracket planned to continue their studies, compared with 72% in the lowest. Geographical location is also a significant factor. Young people from metropolitan areas were most likely to plan to continue with their education (89%), followed by young people in regional cities (79%) and rural areas (77%), with the lowest percentage planning to continue their education coming from country towns (74%). Young women were significantly more likely to say that they will continue with their education (88%) than were young men (77%).

The reasons for continuing their education were also varied. Further study was most frequently seen as being very important as a stepping stone towards a career (69%) or getting a job (67%). But simply gaining a qualification was seen as very important by 57%. Further education was also ranked as being very important as a means of personal development by just over one third of participants (38%) or seen primarily for interest or recreation (28%). Young men were more likely to be motivated to do further study by the desire to increase their chances of being rich (30%) than were young women (19%). Young women were more likely to see further study as very important to gaining a career (74%) than were their male counterparts (63%).

While a vocational focus is apparent in all young people’s responses, we are also seeing the emergence of a broader interest in education for personal growth reasons, a pattern that is consistent for both young men and women.

Those who were not planning to continue with study immediately after school identified a wide range of alternatives (Table 9).

When correlated with socio-economic background, the young people who did not plan to continue with their education, and were from the lowest socio-economic group, were most likely to say that they considered further study a waste of time (17%), compared with the highest socio-economic group (8%), and were also slightly more likely to be male.
Those who were planning to travel were overwhelmingly from the two highest socio-economic groups (74% of those planning to travel). Women were slightly more likely (32%) to say that they planned to travel than did young men (27%). Young people who were planning to go straight into the workforce were most likely to come from the lowest socio-economic group.

A key factor in how they portrayed their future options is the perceived link between study and employment. Overall, most young people saw this link as being strong (70%). Young women were more likely to see this link as ‘very strong’ (33%) than were young men (29%). Young people from low socio-economic backgrounds were the least likely to see a strong link between further study and education (26% compared with 38% for the highest socio-economic group) and the perceived link between further study and employment decreased by region (see Table 10).

We asked our participants to describe ‘the most important issues facing young Australians’. In response (Table 11), their concerns relate to issues that threaten personal life: family relationships are seen as the ‘most important’ issue facing young Australians today by nearly half of the respondents. Lack of money, and a range of issues related to health and wellbeing, are also singled out as being of greatest concern. It is interesting to note that alcohol and drug abuse emerge as two of the most important issues facing young people in Australia, mirroring the prominence given to these issues in contemporary popular media. They also mention bullying and personal relationships as significant issues.

Small gender differences appeared in their assessment of these issues. For example young women were slightly more likely to say that family relationships and personal health issues, drug abuse and bullying were significant issues, and less likely to say that lack of money was an issue, than were young men.

Young people’s hopes for the future (asked only of Wave 2a) reveals that a majority are hopeful (85%). Young people from independent schools were more likely to feel very hopeful (38%) than were their counterparts in Government schools (31%) or Catholic schools (28%). The most significant difference in hopefulness in the future was according to the socio-economic status of their parents. Of the young people who had parents in the highest socio-economic group, 46% were very hopeful about the future compared with 27% of young people in the second lowest socio-economic group.

### Table 10:
| There is a very strong link between further education and a better job |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 2005-6 survey               | (%                          |
| Highest socio-economic background | 38                     |
| Lowest socio-economic background | 26                     |
| Metropolitan                | 33                     |
| Regional city               | 31                     |
| Country town                | 28                     |
| Rural, not in town          | 30                     |
| Males                       | 30                     |
| Females                     | 33                     |

### Table 11:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most important issues facing young Australians 2005-6 survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal health issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence in public places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
COMPARING THE COHORTS

We were able to make a direct comparison between the two cohorts (1991 cohort who left secondary school in 1991 and the 2005 cohort who left secondary school in 2006) on the basis of their views of the important characteristics of a future career job (Table 12). Their responses reveal a remarkable consistency on some items: both cohorts are in agreement that job security and good pay are very important, and across both cohorts women are more likely than men to rate security highly, but rate ‘paying well’ less highly than do men. Women were more likely to rate working with others as very important across both cohorts, and both groups ranked flexible hours as very important.

Relatively few of the items revealed a significant difference between the two groups, but one area of difference is the desire to have a ‘high status’ job and to have responsibility over others. The 2005 cohort have answered these questions at a point in their lives when they are nearly ten years younger (aged 18) than the 1991 cohort was when it answered the same questions (26 years). At this stage, the 2005 cohort are more interested in having a ‘high status’ job and a job that involves ‘a position of responsibility over others’, than were the previous cohort. They are also much less likely to want a job that ‘makes me think’. Their views reflect their perspectives at the point where many are just entering tertiary education. They are compared with the previous cohort who answered this question when many had completed their first higher degree and were seeking jobs using their educational qualifications. It will be interesting to see whether the difference in their views at this stage reflects an enduring difference in attitude between the two groups over time.

### Table 12:
Comparison of ‘very important’ characteristics of a future career job

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The job is a secure one</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>54.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It pays well</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It makes me think a lot</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>17.95</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lets me work on my own</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involves lots of work with others</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is ‘high status’</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has flexible hours</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is busy and demanding</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires organisational skills</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involves responsibility over others</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13 compares the ‘goals for life’ described by the two cohorts. This comparison also shows that there is a remarkable consistency in values between young people who were born 15 years apart.

### Table 13:
Goals for life that were ranked as high comparison of the two cohorts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To have financial security</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td>92.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To develop my abilities to the fullest</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>92.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To care and provide for a family</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>89.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find self-fulfilment</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have a special relationship with someone</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>86.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To travel</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To pursue a life of pleasure</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>75.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be active in working for a better society</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>72.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To achieve a position of influence</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>70.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make a lot of money</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>64.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help people who are in need</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live up to ethical principles</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>47.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be better off financially than my parents are</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live up to religious or spiritual ideals</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The goals of this cohort remain firmly fixed around achieving financial security but not making a ‘lot’ of money or achieving ‘a position of influence’, or striving to be ‘better off than my parents are’ in order to achieve personal fulfillment. The focus is overwhelmingly on personal life and relationships, with broader social goals such as helping people in need, living up to ethical principles or spiritual ideal gaining low priority.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The survey results reveal some commonalities amongst this cohort, but what stands out is the way in which socio-economic status, gender and location shape young people’s views, expectations and strategies at this stage of their lives.

As they complete their secondary education, the participants in our 2005 cohort are overwhelmingly optimistic about their futures. They show a confidence in themselves and possibly a level of ambition that we did not see in the previous cohort. For example, a majority have made decisions about which subjects to study based on their own interests rather than simply on the advice of parents, teachers or school counsellors, or in order to gain entry into particular courses. Nonetheless, at this stage, the subjects they have undertaken at school are seen as a very significant form of support for their futures. More than the previous cohort, the current participants aim to eventually have jobs that are high status and involve positions of responsibility over others.

Family and friends are the most important sources of support, and participants also identified concerns that relate to personal dimensions of life: family relationships, drug and alcohol abuse and lack of money, as the most significant issues for young Australians. Wider social issues, including homelessness and the environment, are seen as less important. In this our new cohort reveals similar attitudes to the previous cohort, for whom issues associated with politics, the environment and community were less important than personal issues such as health and wellbeing, personal relationships and having a secure job.

Despite these commonalities, the survey results reveal relatively stark lines of division in young people’s experience. Clear differences based on socio-economic status reveal that school does not serve young people from low socio-economic backgrounds particularly well. They are the least likely group to say that they like their teachers and to see a strong link between further study and getting a good job, and the most likely to see study as a waste of time. Young people in the lowest socio-economic group were also much less optimistic than any other group about the future, were the least likely to plan to travel after completing secondary school and the most likely to go straight into a job.

Young people from rural and remote areas also express different views from their counterparts in regional and metropolitan areas. They are less likely to see a strong link between education and getting a good job. Young people in rural areas and country towns are the least likely to say that they intend to undertake further study after completing secondary school.

Gender is also a continuing source of difference amongst young people. Young women are more likely to plan to further their education than are their male peers, and are far less likely to be engaged in regular physical activity, although they rate the importance of being physically healthy more highly than do young men.

The data show that the factors of socio-economic status, gender and geographic location are interrelated, creating complex patterns. For example, young men from country towns are the least likely to be positive about their secondary school education, and have little intention of continuing their education at this stage. Young women from high socio-economic backgrounds in metropolitan areas are the most positive about school, their school friends, and intend to continue their education, are the most likely to plan to travel and are the most hopeful about their futures.

These results support the view that ‘continuing inequalities’ will mark the lives of this cohort. Their decision-making about school subjects reveals that they are already aware of the need to place choices within a broad context, including their personal capacities and interests. It remains to be seen to what extent this cohort develops distinctive approaches to work and career, but, as the next chapter shows, some groups have begun the process of learning flexibility of decision-making. The next steps they take will begin to reveal the extent to which these factors remain significant in their lives.
Chapter 4: The First Steps

Regular interviews with a cross-section of participants are an ongoing part of the *Life-Patterns* program. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with participants in the 2005 cohort during the first half of 2007. In this chapter we present findings from our preliminary analysis of these interviews, with a focus on their experiences of moving out of home and relocating for study, because this issue was particularly salient at this point in our participants’ post school lives. We also briefly look at our participants’ hopes for the future. We will have the opportunity to focus more on the group’s hopes for the future, and on other issues, over the coming years.

The expectation of mass participation in higher and further education for young Australians has raised particular issues for non-metropolitan youth. Most of our participants from outside metropolitan centres have had to relocate if they want to undertake tertiary level study. This move has involved leaving home and moving at least three hours to a regional or metropolitan university and hence these young people need to establish new networks in a new place. This means that they face distinct challenges because other groups (the young people in rural and regional areas who go straight into work in their local area and young people in metropolitan areas) are able to remain living with parents and hence can more easily draw on their existing local and family networks for support in the early days of their post school transitions.

**PLANS FOR 2007**

Of the 28 young people who participated in our first interview, 13 were from metropolitan areas and 15 from rural and regional areas. Of the group:

- 15 were taking part in higher education in 2007 (14 bachelor degrees and one undertaking an advanced diploma at a TAFE provider);
• 12 were not studying, 11 were engaged in paid work and one was looking for work. Of these, six were planning to undertake some higher education in the next few years; and
• One was repeating year 12.

Interestingly, of those interviewed, more regional and rural students were taking part in higher education in 2007 (10 to 5) and more metropolitan students were not studying and instead working or looking for work (eight metropolitan and four regional/rural). However of these metropolitan students, five were planning to attend university in the next couple of years (including two who were taking a gap year working as teaching assistants in UK schools).

MOVING OUT OR STAYING HOME

There were clear differences between the metropolitan and non-metropolitan participants’ living arrangement plans for 2007. All ten of the rural and regional young people at university had to move away from home to undertake their course. In comparison four out of five metropolitan students, all of whom are studying in their home cities, told us they were planning to stay in the family home for at least the majority of the year. Only one said she was likely to move out early in 2007, and this was mainly due to her expectation that her parents would need to relocate overseas for work. Of those who are working, the two metropolitan participants who were undertaking a gap year in England clearly had to move out of home, while the rest, both rural and regional and metropolitan, planned to live at home for at least the first half of 2007.

The primary reason listed for staying at home was to save money and a number of the rural and regional participants mentioned costs as a challenge they faced in attending university. Many of the participants from metropolitan areas mentioned they would like to travel for a month or more at some point in the next couple of years, and this seemed to be the principal reason for saving. Two of the metropolitan participants, one working and one both studying and working, were saving to move out later in the year. For most of the participants, their first choice seemed to be to continue living at home for their first year after high school.

In the box below, one of our metropolitan participants, who we call Anna, describes her plans for 2007 and how she came to enrol in the course she is undertaking. Anna’s story shows that, while staying at home was almost impossible for rural and regional participants undertaking

--

ANNA

This year I’m doing chiropractics full time at Macquarie University, and I’m organising to do some part-time work as a chiropractic assistant at a chiropractic surgery near my home. It will be a busy year; I have 25 to 30 contact hours a week with my course, so I’ll probably only work about four or so hours a week depending on how it works with the timetable. I might do up to ten if I need to though. The place I’m working is fairly happy to work around me and my timetable; they’ve said any time that I can come in, just come in.

I’ve probably been interested in doing chiropractics for about three or four years. I originally wanting to do physiotherapy but that had a really high university entrance score, and in the end I just found that chiropractic did more for me personally than physio did anyway. Physio’s good for sports related stuff but I think that chiropractic is better for overall health. I go to a chiropractor myself regularly, and my own chiropractor also swayed me a bit towards doing it myself.

I’m studying at Macquarie because it’s the only university in Sydney that does chiropractic. It’s a long way from my place. I don’t have my licence yet, but I’m working towards it, so I just go by public transport and it’s about two hours to get there. When I can drive then it will only take about an hour. Despite the travel, I’m going to keep living at home because it is easier with parents’ support, especially with being busy with everything else. I’ve also been playing netball in a local competition and I want to keep that up. I think I’ll probably stay at home till I finish my course – five or six years. Chiro’s a three year bachelor degree and then two years of masters, and you need to do the masters to do clinical work. In the end I would actually like to open my own clinic, but that is a long way off.
Despite the large majority of those moving out of home coming from rural and regional areas, in many ways the move was less risky for metropolitan students. As one of the metropolitan students who was hoping to move out some time during the latter half of the year, says:

I want to move out. I want to at least try and move out even if it’s just for a couple of months just so I can see if I like it because then I can always just move back (Female, Metro).

For the rural and regional participants, a move to the city is quite challenging: they have to leave behind social and support networks and jobs if they move to the city, and it is almost impossible to move home without discontinuing their study.

For those non metropolitan students who can afford it, one thing that seemed to make the transition to university life a little easier was enrolling in a residential college. Two participants suggested they have been able to make new friends and engage in a lot of social activity through their colleges and felt they were supported by the college’s provision of food and stable accommodation.

I will stay on campus; at first I thought maybe just a year or two but now I have found I really like it. It is just the whole atmosphere of it and the support you get from everyone and you meet so many new people when you are on campus - it’s awesome, lots of fun (Female, Rural).

For one young woman, the presence of extended family and numerous previous visits to Melbourne helped with her transition from her family’s farm in north-western Victoria to Melbourne for study.

Well, rooming at college definitely helps because you have – see I could definitely see myself becoming a bit of a hermit if I like rented or something, lived on my own. So definitely living in a college helps because you’ve got that social factor. So it’s a bit hard to get lonely when there’s people everywhere. I have family in Melbourne who I used to come down and stay with quite regularly, so Melbourne kind of feels like home anyway (Female, Rural).

The rural and regional participants who have had to find their own accommodation off campus have

---

ADAM

If my ENTER Score had been three points higher, I would have made it into my first choice, a paramedics course near where I live and where many of my school friends now attend. Instead I had to look for alternatives and have started nursing at a regional university 300 kilometres from home. I don’t really want to do nursing. My dream is to be a MICA paramedic and I hope to transfer back home next year. I have found the initial transition really hard. I have gone out of High School where it’s sort of relaxed into the real world. I found it difficult to meet people at first and with some of the academic work like referencing it has been hard. And I have got a bit stressed out. It would be good to be back at home because I would have parents to cook for me and I wouldn’t have to worry.

I have to cook and all that for myself now but I’m trying to eat healthily. I don’t do any sports any more because I don’t have the time and I can’t afford it so karate and swimming has gone down the wayside and I can’t surf up here anymore because I’m miles away from the beach. I used to get up at 5am and go for a surf every morning before school. The surf was just down the road from my house. So there’s a few things that I miss out on. I’ve made a few friends but no real close friends. And all my friends, they’ve sort of all gone to Uni and I suppose going through the same sort of transition that I am but a lot of them went to city campuses and the local campus. So a lot of them are still back at home, so I don’t get to see them very much.

I need to work to support myself and I work three to five nights a week at the Sports Club as a bartender. I can’t get Youth Allowance because my parents earn too much and I haven’t been out of home for 18 months. I try to get back home once a month or so but because of work it’s sort of hard. I’ve got to work a lot of the weekends as well. I’m actually trying to find a job that will allow me to work Monday to Friday nights instead of weekend nights but I’m having a lot of trouble with finding a job that will allow that.
faced a range of issues in regard to their living situations including financing themselves through part-time work, finding stable accommodation, making friends and cooking for themselves. In the box on the previous page, one of our participants, who we have called Adam, describes the transition he has made from a town on the coast in Victoria to a regional university in inland Victoria. He is living in a house with an older man who advertised the room on the university’s website.

Two of the rural participants had attended boarding school, and had contrasting perspectives on whether this helped or hindered them in making the move to university:

You’re living away from your parents from a pretty young age I guess but I don’t know, you just learn to rely, well not rely on yourself completely but you’re certainly by yourself to do most things, organise things. You become quite well organised early because you have to be. No one is there to pick up things after you or anything.

In contrast, Karin did not feel the same level of independence and confidence:

I always thought when I went to boarding school it would make the transition to Uni a lot easier, like the living away from home part of it, but I haven’t really got into the whole paying bills and rent and that yet because I’ve got Nanna living with me so she’s sort of paying for a bit of it and I’m paying for a bit of it and Mum and Dad are paying for it as well. My Mum and Dad and Nanna both bought the house at the start of the year so she’ll eventually move out.

Karin also felt that the school could have assisted with information about the transition from school to university and moving away from home. She describes how she tried to get this information while at school:

They pretty much placed most emphasis on achieving the best score that you can get but they didn’t really address the issues of school leavers when they become independent after this. I used to discuss this with the people, well the nurse in the sick bay, about how they don’t give us any indication of what the real world is like. It’s all about study and that, so I suppose in that way they probably should have taught us about paying bills and living away from home and being independent and going to Uni.

Participants mentioned skating, organised sport, hanging out with friends, and singing with a choir, as some of the ways they coped with stress and tried to maintain a balance during Year 12. While some of the metropolitan participants look at the end of school as allowing them an opportunity to pursue new interests, many are planning to continue in the groups, including the sports teams and choirs, which they joined during high school. However, for the participants from rural and regional areas who have moved away from home for tertiary study, maintaining these connections and hence maintaining this balance and using these previously developed coping strategies, has become more difficult, and this in turn can create further stress. While a few of the young people living in college accommodation have been able to relatively easily link into sporting

BALANCE, WELLBEING AND MAINTAINING NETWORKS

Karin’s narrative of achievement at school was mentioned by a number of the participants. In addition, a majority of our interview participants from both metropolitan and non metropolitan areas, as well as across genders and types of school, mentioned stress and the need to achieve balance as important challenges and priorities during their final year at high school.

I stressed so I got sick a lot and every time I had an assessment, I’d miraculously get sick; I don’t know why, but yeah I always got sick before assessments and that always stressed me out and I didn’t sleep properly...Just the exams and that and pressure, like when I was in Year 12 I thought if I don’t get into Uni that kind of thing.

(Interviewer) Was there anything that you did as a kind of coping strategy?
I sung (in a choir) (Female, Metro).

It’s just about stress management and that you need to balance your life out and make sure you are doing other things (Male, Rural).

I would say (to Year 12 students): don’t make study the most, well it is one of the most important things, but to get involved with other parts of the school because you need to have that line between study and extra curricular activities (Female, Rural).
networks and facilities, the move for university has led to several of the rural and regional participants not playing sport for the first time they can remember.

I play a couple of sports but at the moment I’m actually, for the first time as long as I can sort of remember, I’m not playing a couple of sports. I was playing soccer; I was playing like premier league first grade, helping first grade just because we had a lack of players at the time. So I played, like at some stages I was playing AFL and then driving to soccer with my boots on because I didn’t have time to take them off and then playing, yeah, playing two games of soccer with ten minutes between sort of thing. But at Uni I looked into soccer but just training and stuff didn’t work around Uni so I thought well I’m here for Uni not soccer, I’ll give it a year off and see how I go (Male, Regional).

In Year 12 I was playing sport; I played football and basketball, so that kept me pretty healthy and exercise was good – just makes you feel good. I haven’t organised anything this year but I might start up something once I’ve settled in a bit; maybe for next year I might get playing basketball. There is not a lot at campus because it is fairly small and I don’t even know where to look to find it, so I might have to look around (Male, Rural).

Our survey shows that young men in rural and regional areas were the most likely to stay in their area after leaving school. One of our rural participants had worked at the local football club behind the bar during Year 12 and, although he did not have any clear plans for 2007, took up a full time position working the bar when the football club offered it to him. Although he had done a school-based apprenticeship in hospitality while at school and had a Certificate 2 in hospitality, he felt the main reason he was offered the job was that he was well known at the club because he was playing for the team.

INTO THE FUTURE: PLANS FOR THE NEXT FIVE TO TEN YEARS

Many of the participants, metropolitan and non-metropolitan, had reasonably ‘traditional’ hopes: to own a home, to marry and have a family, and hopefully find secure and rewarding employment. Interestingly, more of our rural and regional participants appeared to have more detailed plans about where they wanted to be in the future in regard to their careers and future work. There was a sense from some participants, however, that they were expected to know what they wanted to do.

I have no idea what I want to do but I don’t want to be in admin forever. So in five or ten years I’ll definitely have a better job and in ten years I’ll probably be making babies... But I don’t know, I have no idea, I just feel like I’m too young to be thinking about any of that... Because now that everyone has finished school, everyone sort of knows what they want to do and I feel like I should know what I want to do as well. Then I can start working for it (Female, Metro).

However, even amongst those who did have relatively more detailed thoughts about the future, they tended to be keeping their options open. One way of doing this was making plans that would not necessarily lead to one particular area of work. One of the participants, a young woman from a regional city, explains:

I didn’t really care; I just wanted to get away from home and do something new and have a bit of a challenge. I got into that (visual design and communication) and went off to uni and I’m surprised because I really love it and it’s kind of my forte and I didn’t even really realise. Because the degree is so broad I can go out and do whatever I want. Like I could go into advertising, I could even go back into fine arts and do sort of design basic things. It’s really whatever I want to do, I can do now, which is pretty good. I can go and do another degree afterwards that will bulk it up a bit. You can pretty much get into any job within the area of that degree so it’s good... I want finish my course and start earning enough money if I can travel overseas and experience all the stuff that I’ve always dreamed about doing before I settle down and really get a proper job and all that sort of thing (Female, Regional).
SARAH

I don’t know, I’m only just sort of thinking through the next year. I’ve taken a year off and I plan to work and so be part of the working world which will give me a bit more time to work things out, and I also want to travel and see different cultures, different people and a wider world, a wider variety of things than what I know at the moment. After that I’m planning to do an interpreting course; I speak Japanese pretty well at the moment.

Five years is incredible. In five years I’ll be at the end or have finished my Uni degree so at that point I’ll be planning to see what I can do with my degree and how I can get into an actual career with it. In five years I see myself in getting a career, getting a stable sort of income and working on getting a house and stuff like that – yeah sort of the traditional thing I suppose. I guess it seems like a safe alternative too because you know, I don’t know, I value stability and I guess having your own house and sort of looking after yourself with your own salary means that you’re not going to have the rug pulled out from under you if you’re just sort of jumping from one job to another and don’t really know where you’re staying. I talk to some people who do interpreting and some did jump from freelancing to actually being a part of a business and you need to get your name around and that might involve moving around but still within the same sort of career.

The box (above) shows Sarah’s (Female, Metro) thoughts about her plans for the next five years. Her story points to an interesting ambiguity between freedom, security and risk.

In a sense, undertaking a university course that leads to a relatively bounded set of career opportunities, even in a relatively well paying field, could be seen as bringing a particular set of risks. Sarah’s plans to study interpreting mean that she will be aiming to establish herself in an area in which it may take considerable time to get secure employment. In order to have a greater degree of economic security, she aims to gain a foothold in the property market. It is possible that, for some of our participants at least, the very uncertainty and ‘flexible’ nature of their employment will make it difficult to enter the property market, which for some, like Sarah, might be thought to provide a buffer against uncertainty.

One of our regional participants, who we’ve called Richard, points to a different type of risk around employment (below).

For both our male and female participants then, there was a sense of uncertainty around future employment. For some, this uncertainty was also seen as an opportunity, while for others this was felt as more of a risk. As the project continues we should be able to make some stronger suggestions about how this sense of risk and opportunity links with both gender and living in metropolitan or regional and rural Australia.

RICHARD

I’ve been trying to find an apprenticeship in the local area but it hasn’t worked out so far.

I want to say I’m in full time employment doing an apprenticeship but that hasn’t come to light. I am doing a bit of part-time work but I’m hoping to get a trade in the near future. I did get offered an apprenticeship to start about half way through February in Hospitality as a chef. The bloke said “you’ve got to come and join our team; we’ve got to have this restaurant and I want you as my first year apprentice.” This was what I was looking for because as soon as Mum would let me start cooking I have enjoying cooking and all that. But I was about to start on the Monday and I went and seen him on the Saturday and he said “oh no we don’t need you any more.” I found that pretty devastating because I’d stopped actually looking for a job. I’d checked in with him about a month before I was meant to start, just to make sure the job was still available and he said “yeah, yeah, yeah are you going to do it?” but then he pulled the offer two days before I was going to start. I’m going to keep looking around this area for a trade because I don’t want to move away from the family. I’m hoping that something will come up soon.
CONCLUSION

Each of our participants had different priorities and faced different challenges as they negotiated their first moves post high school and attempted to deal with the opportunities and uncertainties their futures hold, but they are overwhelmingly optimistic. Most of the participants’ stories pointed to the importance of family and friend and extended networks, and the financial and other resources these people provide. The importance of these people and resources meant that many of the interview participants who did not need to move for further study, planned to spend 2007 living in the family home. In some senses at least, our non metropolitan participants face relatively greater challenges in moving into higher education, beyond the financial costs associated with having to relocate; relocating means that they have to connect with new networks if they are going to access resources to help them negotiate stress, maintain balance and face new challenges.

Young people feel the contradictory forces of the desire to gain new experiences and the almost inevitable risks that this involves, and the desire to maintain some security in their lives. Most were not prepared by school for the complexities they faced when they left school, but their narratives express a range of strategies for managing this challenge. For many urban students, managing this challenge involved continuing to live in the family home. They were willing to travel great distances to maintain the advantages of family support.
Chapter 5: Still Seeking the Right Balance

Our first cohort - who left secondary school in 1991 - continues to be a significant element in the Life-Patterns program. They are now aged around 33. In 2006 we were able to follow up a sample of 323 participants from the first cohort, who completed a survey. This chapter presents a preliminary analysis of their experiences and views, supported by data from interviews with a sub-set of this group. Their situation reflects a stage of life when many (but not all) are focusing on establishing their own families. They have been in the workforce for over a decade, and many are also continuing to question and re-evaluate career and work. The question of balance in life, which emerged as a theme for this cohort early in the study, continues to be relevant.

CURRENT SITUATION

Marriage
As this group has moved into their thirties, we are beginning to see some strong differences in their patterns of life based on gender. Over half of the participants are married (57% of women and 61% of men), but significantly higher proportions of women (24%) than men (14%) are living with their partners. Roughly equal proportions are single (22% of women and 21% of men).

Parenting
One of the most significant changes that has occurred over the last three years is the increase of women who rank their main current work situation as ‘family/home commitments’. In 2004 the figure was 17% compared with 27% in 2006. This responsibility has tended to fall mainly on women: only one male ranks this as his main work situation currently. Just over half of the women were satisfied with family life (55%), compared with 37.4% of the men. As one female participant said:

It's perfect; since I have had the family, it is not all about the dollars. You can't buy happiness. I am very happy considering what else is going on in the world.

Those who were parents were asked how satisfied they were with the support of their partner: 94% of men were very satisfied with the support they received from their partner compared with 71% of women. However, a higher proportion of men said that they had difficulty in balancing work and home demands. 30% of men were dissatisfied with their work–home
Many of those interviewed who had children, talked about making changes in the way their lives are organised as a result of having a family. For example, Eleni has just had her second child. When asked what this has meant for her family, she eagerly responded that everything at home is a team effort. Her partner Tom does less over-time as he wants to be home to help her and be with the girls. According to Eleni, Tom is also going into work later as he wants to spend more time in the morning before heading off for work.

Marcus illustrates the challenges faced by many of the men in our study as they try to manage both home and work effectively. Marcus hopes that he can ‘do it differently’ from his father. Having a family has put pressure on him to sort out his business so it will be less dependent on him. He stresses how time is precious and as a result his ‘fuse has shortened’. He describes dealing with people at work who take up his time with ‘nonsense’.

This means I have to stay at work longer to fix it and I want to go home. Some people think they own you.

For Marcus, running a very successful business that employs 11 people and having two young sons has motivated him and his partner to think very carefully about how the business is organised. He has previously talked about putting in new systems and delegating but now he is actually doing it.

Our roles aren’t as big now; some of our employees have stepped up and taken on management positions.

Marcus uses the analogy of the stretched rubber band to explain why he has restructured his business. He says:

Good relationships with your family is like a rubber band; you can only stretch it so far before it breaks. I have a have 4 year old and 18 month old; I will only get one chance to see them grow up.

He explains that his father was from a European background, and had no English when he arrived in Australia,

He only knew how to work hard - I can do it differently.

Changed priorities as a result of parenthood have also resulted in pressure on some men to find better and more secure employment, and to think about the future in terms of financial matters.

Matt feels that, as a result of having a family to support, he needs to ‘shape up a bit’. Matt’s wife is about to give birth to their second child and his wife will be on maternity leave for 12 months. Matt has struggled to find ongoing full time work in the area he has retrained in (professional writing and editing) so he feels the pressure to be able to support the family while his wife is on leave from her ongoing position. Matt now says it would be nice if he was to get a job that used his qualifications but that his goals have changed since having the kids.

I am less ambitious for myself, not chasing things as much. I want to keep the horizon closer... time is too stretched to do more with a family.

Matt keeps himself fit and healthy but feels he needs to ‘shape up a bit’ on the financial side. He admits that he has no idea about superannuation and that his dad manages a very successful portfolio so he will try and take some interest in this!

At this stage, the most significant concerns for our participants are those that impact directly on their personal lives: the cost of education, the physical safety of children and the development of values in the lives of their children. Broader social issues, including politics and mental health of children, were of low concern.

Work

The trend for women to stay at home with children is reflected in a decline in the number of women working full-time (43% in 2006 compared with 61% in 2002) and a subsequent increase in part-time work (17% in 2006 compared with 13% in 2002). By contrast, no males are undertaking part-time work (including those in same sex relationships) and 81% of those surveyed have full-time jobs. When asked what the status of their main job was, 77% of the men described their job as ‘permanent’, whereas only 66% of women were in permanent jobs. Twice as many men said they made their last job change to take up a better opportunity (51%) compared with 25% of women. However, overall, we are seeing greater stability for those who are employed. In response to the question ‘how long do you intend to continue in your current job?’, 48% of females and 57% of males said they would like to stay for ‘as long as I can’. In general, women were more positive than men about their careers, with 34.8% of women saying that they were satisfied with their careers compared with 21.6% of men.
Many of those who were interviewed focused on the stressful effects of managing work. The lack of time for personal life was one of the main reasons that interviewees gave for seeking to change their situation. For example, Sarah, who had been employed in a corporate position in a large company, has recently taken a less demanding job (reducing her wage by two thirds). She said:

*Time is the commodity I didn't have. I wanted to spend time with those I loved. Why wait till one of them dies to realise they were important to you? It's too late then. In my new job, I work 80 days less than my previous one. I used to be in the car for at least three hours getting to and from work - mainly stuck in traffic. Now I am 20 minutes away and no traffic. The lack of stress is HUGE!*  

Sarah was recently invited to apply for a promotion at her new workplace, but said:

*It would be possible to go up the ladder in this business; part of me is really interested but I stop myself. The reason I did this change was to reduce the stress; if I went for a promotion it would involve more responsibility. I'm really not interested.*

She wonders if she has experienced an early mid life crisis, but is reassured by comments from her previous work colleagues who tell her how relaxed she looks and how "we talk about you at work; you've done what we all want to do; you love your work!" Sarah hopes it won't take too long for her friends to figure it out and join her.

Another participant, Christy, also faced difficult decisions with regard to the balance between work and personal life. When her boss (Rob) suffered a heart attack as a result of the stress of negotiating the sale of the business he had built up over many years, Christy, as the second in charge, had to step in. She said:

*The pressure was put on me. Rob was in intensive care and I took over the negotiations with the new owners. This was in October 2005. By the end of 2005 I was ready for a complete collapse. The new owners took over and there were 16 redundancies. It was absolutely gutting, the worst part of my life.*

Christy continued to work for the new owners but only stayed a few months. She had been trying to have a baby for two years. Apparently the doctor's words were "a career or baby; you cannot keep up these long hours and expect to get pregnant". Christy left this new position and went to work in the family 'mini department store'. Her mother, uncle and two aunts run the business. She was employed four days a week, on average 32 hours - half the number of hours from her previous position. Christy remembers thinking "but what will I do on the Monday (the day she has off from the store); how will I keep occupied?" She is now due to give birth to her first child. She says it took her almost two years to slow down after twelve years at a ridiculous pace. "I felt as if in December 2006 I was getting there, slowing down. By February I was pregnant."

**Wellbeing**

As identified above, the struggle to achieve wellbeing is ongoing. As in previous surveys, women express higher rates of dissatisfaction with their health and fitness (32%) than do males (20%), but both regularly attempt to tackle this issue by reducing the amount of time spent at work and spending more time with friends and family and getting exercise, and by supporting the wellbeing of others. For example, Camille has changed her priorities because

*life is short, we forget to enjoy it. Work is to survive, not the be-all and end-all we were led to believe it was.*

Camille used to come in early and leave late from her workplace. She never even took a lunch break. Now, she says she still comes in early (as she is a morning person and it is the best time to get work done), but at 5pm she is GONE! After 12 years she says she has just got tired of it. Last year her mother had a very serious heart surgery and both Camille and her sister took a month off work to look after her. After 12 months, her mother has recovered and the daily nurse visits have stopped. She thinks it may have been her mum's illness that made her rethink her priorities.

*I just can't cram everything I want to do in two days; maybe it was mum. I'm just not prepared to keep on giving up my private life, for what? To do an office job? There are other things I would rather do: go to the footy, see my friends or my 3 year old niece. People keep asking me about my long term goals, you know: 'where do you see yourself in five years?' I used to think this way, but now I have re-arranged my priorities.*
Single and stereotyped

As described above, approximately 22% of the cohort is currently single. The interviews reveal the nature of pressures that some of these participants experience. All interviewees who were single said how frustrating it was to be categorised as ‘single’. In particular, participants felt that the view that single women needed to ‘get a bloke’ in order to be acceptable was offensive and tiresome. One single participant was told “so you have chosen a career over a family”; another was told she wouldn’t have any conversation to contribute to the group as she wasn’t in a relationship.

Our female participants emphasised that they have not necessarily ‘chosen’ to stay single – they have just not found a relationship that they felt could be long-term. All the single women felt that the implication that they would therefore be living miserable lives was very much missing the mark. As one participant commented:

If having children was on the horizon I would embrace it, but I am not pretending I’m okay. I am okay; I’m not faking it!

Another participant is critical of the pressure placed upon her:

I am single and very happy; many people are envious of my lifestyle and yet the children and relationship thing is used. It’s presented as if I haven’t been living until I meet so and so or have children,... It doesn’t lessen my journey with or without children!

This participant is critical of what she describes some women doing:

They are treading water, waiting for something to happen... waiting to be saved! I’m making decisions for me; they may be interpreted as selfish but I make them and live with them.

Home ownership

This group is committed to home ownership, with 57% of both men and women living in a home they own. Only 14% of women and men are renting and 12% are living with their parents, in contrast with regular media messages that would have us believe that high proportions of adults in their early thirties are still living at home!

ADVICE FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING SCHOOL IN 2006

We asked our older cohort what advice they would have for young people leaving school in 2006. Overwhelmingly the advice (from both men and women) was:

1. It is very important to maintain relationships with friends and family and to learn to manage your finances.
2. Try to maintain a balance in life between work, personal relationships and leisure, with a view to maintaining wellbeing.
3. Do not be afraid to seek advice from others on any issue.
4. Be persistent – keep trying even in the face of obstacles.

Other popular advice was:

- Do your own thing, make your own decisions and take responsibility for them. Do not be swayed by what others think (and there is a recognition that this will be difficult), and don’t be pressured into the road most travelled. The message is strong: make choices - do not just fall into things... do not be restrictive in your thought processes - take a punt, go for it!
- It is not the end of the world if you do not go on to university.
- Be prepared for change and keep your options open; if your view is too narrow, you will not see what is really on offer.
- And remember to use contraception.

This advice can be seen as reflecting the challenges and struggles that the older cohort have encountered along their way. We have presented their views on these issues over the years in successive research reports and articles (see Appendix 2). Our own analysis of the experiences and views of this cohort reinforce the words of advice they have chosen. We have identified personal relationships, balance in life, and responsibility and choice as the three key areas in which they have established distinctive approaches compared to the previous generation (Wyn & Woodman 2006). For example, we argue that:

In the face of uncertainty and change, personal relationships... play a strong mediating role in both the processes of building a life and finding a balance.... The strength of young people’s relationships impacts on the way they go about mobilising resources in building a life. Trusted others (across the age span) help provide the cultural resources to develop the habits and ideas to be successful and ‘strategising people’ who can build a personal future. Friends and family also provide young
people with examples of how to
engage in the present, how to
find time and space for being.
(Wyn & Woodman 2006: 510)

Their view on ‘seeking advice
for any issue’ is based on their
experience. As we have argued,
they have encountered

... through their family, school
and other sources that mediate
between young people and
Government policy, the idea
that the project of building a
life should be given a significant
amount of time and energy. ... In
a sense they are required to
take this view, as they are faced
with the necessity of making
decisions about all aspects of
their lives based on the best
information that they can get,
when social structures which
were previously comparatively
fairly stable, at least for the
majority of the Baby Boomers
(such as education, work, and
the family) no longer provide
predicable outcomes. (Wyn &
Woodman 2006: 508)

Keeping a balance is a recurring
theme that has remained fairly
constant over time. We found that:

Even now, the interviews with this
cohort in 2007 were dominated
by their focus on achieving a
balance in life. At this point in
time, achieving a balance involves
a degree of re-prioritising and
making changes to “create a life that
works better for me”. One participant
remembers advice from a friend
given to him when he was 21. He
said the friend told him to just
“keep chipping away and everything
will fall into place”. He says he now
understands this but it has taken
him till he is 33. Still he remembers
the advice, so something must
have clicked for him.

During the interviews it was
recognised by many of the
participants that making decisions
can be scary (also for teachers
and parents to let you do it!) but it
was felt that young people need
to learn how to make decisions in
order to survive. One participant
described school as sheltered and
cocooned; you need to be ‘savvy’
in the field to survive. Another
participant said the best thing for
her was going to a Government
school where the teachers made
the students do everything
themselves; this, in hindsight, was
the best grounding she could have
had for post school.

Some participants regretted that
they did not do what they wanted:

I would have liked to do teaching,
but I listened to others; at 17 you
are easily influenced by others.
There is an understanding that
when you are in Year 12 you don’t
get to explore everything and the
pressure is on to choose the one
career that will last a lifetime.

CONCLUSION

The message from the 1991 cohort
is clear: make decisions for yourself,
take a punt, work hard, be open to
change, keep your options open
and don’t be too impatient getting
where you want to go – it will take
time. The 1991 cohort is living
evidence of this advice – and of the
reality that where you want to go
changes over time.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

As we embark on this next phase of the *Life-Patterns* research program, we have invited a new cohort of young people to participate in the process of documenting, reflecting on and analysing their personal journeys. These journeys will be undertaken against a backdrop of political, economic, environmental and cultural conditions that bear some similarities with and also differences from those experienced by the young people in our original cohort, who left secondary school in 1991.

Similarities in their circumstances include the pressure to gain post-school qualifications in order to get a good job, a lack of defined pathways into employment, and insecure and precarious employment, even for those with qualifications. Many will have more then one part-time job in order to survive financially. For the new cohort, it will not be any easier to ‘leave home’ than for the previous cohort: costs of housing are escalating, there is a shortage of affordable accommodation, and the costs of education and health care continue to climb.

On the positive side, compared with 1991, unemployment is relatively low in 2007, and there are jobs available (mostly part-time). Education systems have begun to respond to the need for flexible pathways through education and training, and Governments acknowledge that young people may change direction during their studies. Educational pathways are more varied and more flexible, encouraging young people to enter post-secondary study at a range of levels, including TAFE.

Participants in the 2005 cohort, who left secondary school in 2006, have benefited from greater community awareness (in part, we would like to claim, fostered through the publications and media reports of the *Life-Patterns* findings) of the many different ways in which young people achieve their goals. It is almost normative now for young people to ‘take their time’ with their educational qualifications. Having a ‘gap year’ either on completing school or during their next phase of education is very common.

The new cohort will doubtless make their own contributions to these patterns. With the benefit of the detailed analysis of the preceding cohort, we are able to predict that the new group will develop particular ‘life patterns’ that will be distinctive. We are also aware that they will, no doubt, come up with new ways of seeing the world and of managing their lives, that may seem to be individually motivated but that will nonetheless reflect ‘their generation’.
For this reason, we are interested in the sociological and conceptual issues that relate to the question of what makes a social generation. In Chapter 2 we argued that there is evidence that the first cohort (the post-1970 generation) have established distinctive ways of living their lives and seeing the world that continue to be very significant to them. To put this another way, the themes that marked their lives in their twenties (personal relationships, balance in life, and responsibility and choice) have continued to be significant as they move into their third decade of life. The 1991 cohort, in their early thirties now, continue to take a proactive approach to shaping their lives. Many have made conscious decisions to place their personal lives first on their list of priorities, as they find that ‘getting there’ is a constant struggle. This is not the least because ‘where’ they are aiming to get, changes. At this stage they have benefited from the flexibility and the emphasis on keeping options open that they learned in the first years after leaving school.

The very early evidence from our new cohort is that these themes continue to be important. Our preliminary data reveal that these issues are in the foreground as they make decisions about their next steps.

We remain open, however, to the idea that this cohort may come up with different patterns and priorities as they go in and out of work, experience mass higher education, ensure their wellbeing and forge relationships that are important to them. They have the benefit of following others who have largely been responsible for showing that older ideas of transitions as a linear process are out of date. Instead, educators now use different metaphors to describe young people’s complex transitions: mosaics have replaced pathways. The awareness of complexity, which was in one sense thrust upon the previous cohort, may lead to a more relaxed attitude to strategising and planning for the future in this next cohort.

As they take their first steps after leaving secondary school, we see the evidence of continuing inequalities and difference, especially with regard to socio-economic status, geographical location and gender. These factors are intertwined in young people’s lives, revealing the disadvantages faced particularly by young men in rural and remote areas and the optimism and hope felt by young women in high socio-economic metropolitan areas.

The advice of the first cohort may be well-received: the new cohort exudes a confidence about the variety of pathways they are following. They are aware of the need to keep options open and the need to be flexible, especially in relation to work options.
References


Appendix 1: Youth Education, Employment and Wellbeing Data

The choices that our new cohort, the *Pathways Then and Now* participants, will make in the coming years will affect all dimensions of their lives - their learning, their work, their wellbeing and the more personal aspects of their identity formation. Here we focus our discussion on the available evidence we have on the three key dimensions of learning, work and wellbeing that will shape their lives.

**LEARNING**

At the time the members of this new generation were born, Australian Federal and State Governments adopted a ten-year target for educational achievement by young Australians. They agreed in 1991 that, by the year 2001:

- 95% of 19 year olds would either be participating in Year 12 or its equivalent or would already have completed Year 12; and
- 60% of 22 year olds would be participating in education and training programs leading to a skilled qualification.

As the 2002 Report of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum succinctly put it, 'all stake holders now agree these targets have not been met' (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2002: 17). Figure 1 shows the situation in 2006, the year that our 2005 cohort were leaving school. It shows that Government targets have not been met, that young people are taking diverse pathways through education, and that socio-economic status and gender continue to significantly affect young people’s situation.
FIGURE 1: SOME FACTS ABOUT EDUCATION

- In 2006, the apparent retention rate was 75%, with young women having a retention rate 12% higher than young men (AIHW 2007)

- In 2004, the number of students obtaining a Year 12 certificate as a proportion of the estimated potential Year 12 population was 68%, and this proportion has remained fairly consistent between 1998 and 2004 (AIHW 2007)

- In 2005, 75% of 20-24 year olds had completed Year 12 – an increase from 65% in 1996 (AIHW 2007)

- In 2004, Australia was above the OECD average in terms of mean years of formal education and proportion of the population with a tertiary qualification (AIHW 2007)

- Across Australia, the proportion of students attending Government schools has been falling and those attending Catholic and Independent schools increasing
  - In 1996, 70.6% attended Government schools, 19.6% Catholic, and 9.7% attended Independent schools. By 2005, the percentage attending Government schools was 67.2% and 20% attended Catholic and 12.8% Independent schools (MCEETYA 2007)
  - From 1996 to 2006, the proportion of students attending non-Government schools has increased by 21.5% and the proportion attending Government schools has increased by 1.2% (ABS 2006)

- Students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds are the least likely to complete Year 12
  - In 2005, 52% of young men from low SES backgrounds completed Year 12, compared with 83% of young women from high SES backgrounds, 76% of males from high SES backgrounds, and 66% of young women from low SES backgrounds
  - Young men from middle SES backgrounds were less likely (58%) to complete Year 12 than were young women from low SES backgrounds (72%) (MCEETYA 2007)
EMPLOYMENT

There is increasing recognition of the pattern for young people to combine intervals of work and study, and that school leavers are taking long and varied pathways from school to eventually achieve full-time work. Young people who are not participating in full-time education and/or work are regarded as being ‘at risk’ with regard to their personal and financial wellbeing (Dusseldorp Skills Forum & Monash University 2006). The Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) found that there was a 50% increase in the risk of psychological disturbance amongst young people who became unemployed (Morrell et al. 1994). Youth unemployment continues to be a problem (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2002), with young people comprising 38% of the unemployed population in 2006 (AIHW 2007: 123). However, overall, 8% of 15-19 year olds and 12% of 20-24 year olds were neither working nor studying (AIHW 2007: 123). Figure 2 describes some of the key patterns for young people’s employment.

FIGURE 2: SOME FACTS ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE’S EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT

- The percentage of young people employed casually has increased significantly since 1992. In August 2005, 66% of employed 15-19 year olds and 33% of employed 20-24 year olds were casual employees – an increase from 1992 of 54% and 23% respectively
- Part-time employment combined with education is now commonplace
  - 27.2% of 15-19 year olds and 13.1% of 20-24 year olds were in full-time education and part-time employment in 2006
  - 5.4% of 15-19 year olds and 8.6% of 20-24 year olds were in full-time employment and part-time education in 2006
  - 41.3% of 15-19 year olds and 10% of 20-24 year olds were in full-time education only in 2006
- Unemployment rates for young people have declined over the last decade but have remained higher than the rest of the population
  - The unemployment rate for 15-19 year olds has decreased from 17.3% in 1996 to 12.5% in 2006
  - Unemployment rates for 15-19 year olds are 2.5 times that of the national rate and for 20-24 year olds are 1.5 times the national rate
  - In 2005, under-employment for 15-19 year olds was 11.8% and for 20-24 year olds was 7.5% - compared with a national rate of 5.3%
- In 2006, approximately 19% of 15-19 year olds received some form of income support – a decrease from 2001 when the figure was 23%
- In 2004, 20% of 15-24 year olds owned a credit card - but of all people who owned a credit card, 15-17 year olds accounted for only 3%
WELLBEING AND HEALTH

Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffer poorer health on almost all indicators than their non-Indigenous counterparts (see Figure 3).

While the overwhelming majority of young Australians’ health is very good, mental illness, drug abuse and smoking cigarettes, continue to significantly jeopardise the health of a significant minority. In addition, there are concerns about poor diet and lack of adequate exercise leading to weight gain and in some cases obesity (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 3: SOME FACTS ABOUT THE HEALTH OF YOUNG INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

- Indigenous young people accounted for over 50% of all young Australians living in Very Remote Areas
- In 2004-5, young Indigenous Australians (15–24 years) were more likely to report fair or poor health than were non-Indigenous Australians (9% compared with 7%) and were less likely to report excellent or very good health (59% compared with 70%)
- The estimated life expectancy at birth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is much lower than for other Australians. It is comparable with the life expectancy for Australians in the years 1901-1910. In 1996-2001, life expectancy at birth for Indigenous males (59 years) and females (65 years) compares with 77 years for all Australian males and 82 years for all Australian females
- The incidence of some conditions, such as asthma and diabetes, is higher amongst young Indigenous people than amongst all young people
- Rheumatic heart disease, which is largely associated with socioeconomic disadvantage, almost exclusively affects Indigenous people. Australian Indigenous people living in remote areas have one of the highest rates of rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease in the world
- One in two young Indigenous people aged 18-24 years were current daily smokers – a rate twice as high as for other young Australians
- In 2005, Indigenous young people accounted for almost one third of the prison population aged 18–24 years, despite accounting for only 2% of the Australian population aged 18–24 years
- The death rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people is just over four times that for non-Indigenous young Australians, and for young Indigenous males is twice that for young Indigenous females

Source: AIHW 2007
FIGURE 4: AREAS OF CONCERN REGARDING YOUNG PEOPLE’S HEALTH

- 25% of young people experience a mental disorder. Mental disorders accounted for almost 50% of the disease burden among young people in 2003. Depression, anxiety and substance use disorders are the most common mental disorders (75%), which typically occur during adolescence and early adulthood.
- Substance use disorders are the most prevalent (16%), followed by anxiety disorders (11%) and affective disorders (7%).
- Young women are more likely than young men to experience high levels of psychological distress (19% compared with 12% in 2004-5).
- The rate of diabetes increased by 16% between 2000-1 and 2004-5.
- 25% of young people were categorised as obese or overweight in 2004-5 – an increase from 2001, and less than half of young people were meeting recommended physical activity guidelines.
- Almost one third of young people drank alcohol in amounts that put them at risk or high risk of alcohol-related harm.
- 17% of young people were current smokers in 2004.
- 31% of 12-24 year olds consumed alcohol at levels that placed them at risk of short-term harm in 2004-5, and 22% of 17 year olds had consumed five or more drinks in one session (considered to be high risk) at least once in the previous week.

Source: AIHW 2007

Elsewhere, we have noted that young people’s health and wellbeing is integrally related to the ways in which they manage the effects of social change, especially in a context where they feel personally responsible for their health status (White & Wyn 2008). We would expect that health and wellbeing would continue to be a significant issue for the new cohort. Figure 5 highlights the impact of social conditions on young people’s wellbeing, and especially the negative impact of socioeconomic disadvantage. It reflects the effects of a fragmenting, socially isolating and individualising society (or risk society) through figures such as increases in the proportion of young people on care and protection orders, and reveals the costs in terms of mental health.
FIGURE 5: SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND YOUNG PEOPLE’S HEALTH

- The proportion of young people on care and protection orders and in out-of-home care continued to increase
  - One in three clients of agencies funded through the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program were 12-24 years in 2004-5
  - The rate of young people 12 - 14 years in out-of-home care has increased from 4.3 to 5.8 per 1000 young people between 2001 and 2006

- Families living in neighbourhoods characterised by greater community investment, trust and organisational affiliations tend to function better (Korbin & Coulton 1995, quoted in AIHW 2007: 94)

- Safe neighbourhoods are associated with better psychological wellbeing and educational achievement of young people (Meyers & Miller 2004, quoted in AIHW 2007: 94)
  - In 1998, a higher proportion of young people aged 12 – 17 years with emotional and behavioural problems lived in less cohesive families. 36% of young people with emotional and behavioural problems lived in families with poor or fair family cohesion, compared with only 13% of those without emotional and behavioural problems
  - Parents of young people aged 12 – 24 years who were living in the most disadvantaged areas were the most likely to report their health as fair or poor
  - People without social support have higher rates of morbidity and mortality than people with social networks

- Research shows a direct association between a young person’s level of social support and the number of health risk factors they exhibit
  - Around 30% of young people who lacked social support were daily smokers compared with 17% of other young people
  - 30% of young people who lacked social support did not participate in social activity or did so less than once a week, compared with 20% of other young people

- The likelihood of a young person being a victim of physical or threatened assault increases with social disadvantage

- As socioeconomic status decreases there is a parallel increase in mortality, morbidity and in smoking, poor exercise and diet

Source: AIHW 2007
Appendix 2.
Life-Patterns Reports and other Publications

The Life-Patterns research findings have been published regularly in the Australian Youth Research Centre’s Research Report Publication series. Back copies are available from the Centre and more recent Reports may be downloaded from the web on http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/yrcresearch/reports/

RESEARCH REPORTS:


JOURNAL ARTICLES:

BOOK CHAPTERS:
Australian Youth Research Centre

The Australian Youth Research Centre is located within the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne. It was established in 1988 in response to a recognised need by the youth affairs sector for relevant and up to date research on the issues facing young people today.

The aims of the AYRC are to:

• conduct relevant, coherent and reliable research on young people in Australia, with a state, national and international focus;
• assist with the development of policy and the implementation of initiatives based on research findings;
• develop strong links with the youth affairs sector, with particular attention to helping to identify and address the sector’s research needs;
• facilitate communication between educators, researchers, policy makers and youth workers;
• support the research activities of university staff and post-graduate students who have a specific interest in youth affairs; and,
• enhance the professional development of staff and students by assisting them to be informed about the broader context of young people’s lives.

Australian Youth Research Centre Activities

The AYRC has particular expertise in research on education, transition pathways, social justice, gender equity and employment issues as they affect young people.

The main AYRC activities are:

• undertaking research and publishing the outcomes in a manner accessible to policy makers and the youth sector;
• providing information and policy advice to governments and other organisations;
• assisting and encouraging individuals or groups who work with young people.

AYRC activities involve:

• undertaking small projects for groups lacking the capacity or opportunity to do so themselves;
• providing a base for post-graduate students wishing to undertake Masters or PhD research on topics related to young people and the youth sector;
• enabling academics to participate in established AYRC projects, and/or undertake their own research on youth related issues;
• maintaining a youth sector resource library;
• publishing series of Working Papers and Research Reports;
• conducting public seminars and conferences on a variety of issues relevant to those working in the youth sector.