

# Rethinking Youth Citizenship: *Identity and Connection*

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## Introduction and Key Findings

This research report summarises the key findings from the project *Rethinking Youth Citizenship: Identity and Connection*. The project aimed to gain a greater understanding of the changing nature of citizenship and identity for young people in Victoria, Australia. It contributes to the exploration of the issue of youth citizenship from the perspective of new life patterns that see the current generation making adult choices in a highly individualised context. In much youth research today, conventional notions of a ‘mainstream’ and of linear transitions to adulthood forged through a straightforward school to work transition have been replaced by an acknowledgement of the diversity, complexity and multifaceted nature of young people’s lives. This development is highly relevant for the study of youth citizenship because it may be leading to the recognition of new practices of engagement. If young people are no longer experiencing continuous, structured identities and predictable life trajectories, what does this mean for their participation in political and civic life?

Many recent studies of several Western countries, including Australia, suggest that these new life patterns see young people become increasingly disengaged from formal politics as well as community activity and knowing and caring little about formal political processes. This trend is often linked to a breakdown in structured pathways to adulthood, the diminishing relevance of formal institutions and disintegration of traditional civic affiliations. This project set out to investigate attitudes towards and practices of engagement on the part of young people in light of the new life patterns experienced by youth today, with an open mind to the possibility that the concept of citizenship itself needs to be re-thought. It explores the idea that young people are re-defining the experience and meanings of citizenship for current times. In addition, it highlights the need to engage differently with young people today as the traditional strategies that aim to increase youth participation and engagement may no longer be relevant.

## KEY FINDINGS:

Utilising survey and interview methods, the research established six key findings:

1. Young people cannot be expected to engage in traditional ways because of increasing life responsibilities and the absence of structural conditions that would support such affiliations;
2. Young people today experience social membership through leisure rather than traditional civic associations;
3. Young people's political engagement is about having a say in the places and relationships that have an immediate impact on their wellbeing rather than in traditional forums;
4. Young people recognise and are concerned about local, national and global issues but struggle to be heard and act on these;
5. Family, friends, school and the internet are increasingly important sites for developing civic and political engagement;
6. New methodologies for gauging and generating youth participation need to be developed.

## Chapter 2

# The story so far

Research on citizenship and participation has a long history in youth studies. Holdsworth *et al*, (2007) note that literature in this area has developed in distinctive waves around particular concepts over the last 30 years. According to their chronology, discussion of ‘youth participation’ first emerged in the 1970s, and addressed the ways young people are facilitated to take part in (organisational) activities or share in decision-making on issues that affect them. This broad concern with youth participation in civil society, the public sphere and the polity has increasingly become shaped around the concept of citizenship.

Holdsworth *et al* suggest that a more specific focus on ‘youth citizenship’ became apparent in the 1990s, especially with a widespread policy interest in enhancing young people’s education for their future adult status. Citizenship in this context is related to young people’s civic and political knowledge and engagement, for example, their awareness of and interest in politics and current affairs, their commitment to voting and their attendance at protests, strikes or public meetings. At the same time,

the language of ‘civic engagement’ has come to prominence, which reflects a concern with young people’s apparent disengagement from community or civil society rather than the polity *per se*. This has led to analyses of the activities young people are engaged in that enhance civic-mindedness (see Smart *et al* 2000) or that connect them to their communities, for example volunteering, community service or involvement in social networks and associations (see Adler & Goggin 2005).

Much contemporary Australian debate about youth citizenship focuses on the concern that young people are not sufficiently engaged with politics and civic life and are not well informed about the role of citizens. Several policy, curriculum and professional development initiatives have been introduced, most notably the Commonwealth Government schools-based program *Discovering Democracy*, which was funded from 1997 to 2004 to develop curricula and teacher training across Australian

States and Territories. Manning and Ryan (2004, p. 21) suggest that this is the most recent example in a long history of reviews of civics education and government responses to a perceived low level of interest in politics on the part of young people stemming from the Senate Standing Committee inquiries at the end of the 1980s and the Civics Expert Group report in 1994. By this time Australian students were widely regarded as suffering from a 'civic deficit' (Land 2003, p. 12). However, Manning and Ryan (2004, p. 21) write that:

*There are methodological and definitional disputes that call into question the validity of a conclusion of a "civics deficit", and the definition of citizenship which is implied in traditional quantitative surveys. It is possible that researchers who have concluded a "civics deficit" may be conflating a lack of interest in party politics with a lack of political engagement. It would seem that the perception of citizenship either held by young people, taught in civics or constructed by these surveys is rather narrow...*

In spite of these concerns, citizenship education is very much still on the public agenda in Australia, supported by recent research utilising traditional

indicators of political and civic engagement and knowledge. A key study that has contributed to the perception of a civics deficit amongst Australian youth is the 1999 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study. This study found that 'Australian students did not regard conventional forms of civic participation as important as did their peers from a range of other countries... and do not intend to participate in conventional political activities' (Mellor, Kennedy & Greenwood 2001, p. xix). Other Australian and international research that uses traditional scales to measure civic engagement tends to support these findings (Civics Expert Group 1994; Phillips & Moroz 1996; Krinks 1999).

Others, however, argue that new participatory typologies need to be developed to capture young people's contemporary political and civic practices and the meanings of their distrust of formal politics (Land 2003; Vromen 2003; Vinken 2005). This is because life patterns have changed dramatically since traditional ideas of citizenship were established, which puts the current generation out of sync with conventional indicators of engagement. Young

people live in a less stable world where they are increasingly obliged to forge their own futures without a safety net, and these new circumstances reduce time, inclination and support structures for civic and political engagement. The achievement of citizenship for youth has become a more problematic experience, with traditional pathways to adult status and rights disrupted by de-industrialization, a restructured economy and labour market and the retreat of the welfare state. For example, compared to earlier generations, young people today stay in education longer, reside in the family home for extended periods and move in and out of the job market rather than find a job for life (see Wyn and Dwyer 1999). The absence of experiences that have traditionally indicated adult status and in turn citizenship has had an impact on opportunities for effective participation.

Young people's lack of engagement with formal politics and traditional civic life is also a powerful reflection of the impact of globalisation on citizenship more broadly. As noted by many commentators, nation states experience a loss of control over matters significant to their citizens, and politicians are not perceived as effective players in

a world where social and political issues are debated and determined at a global level (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Giddens 1992; Bauman 2001). At the same time, public institutions are seen to be less and less effective at drawing the concerns of individuals into the public sphere (Bauman 2001). Even though some young people persist with engagement in different aspects of the political process and within their communities, many experience alienation from politics and civic life.

Social change has also led to fragmentation of older collective identifications and traditional structures and has resulted in the increased significance of individual choice and action; a process which Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1992)

refer to as 'individualization'. For young people, flexibility, mobility, personal responsibility and risk management are the best ways to manage in a less predictable and structured world, but these competencies are at odds with traditional notions of civic and political engagement. As Vinken (2005, p. 155) explains, 'the normal biography of citizenship required stable identities, strong-tie relationships, life-long commitments in formal and non-transparent institutions and associations', but these conditions are absent from young people's individualised, flexible and reflexive lives today. Instead, Vinken suggests, young people may be developing a new biography of citizenship, characterised by

'dynamic identities, open, weak-tie relationships, and more fluid, short-lived commitments in informal, permeable institutions and associations.'

Young people's engagement in citizenship is occurring against this backdrop of change. For this reason, it is important to broaden our understanding of civic and political engagement. In order to understand how young Australians are connected to political and civic life in contemporary society, it may also be necessary to bracket traditional, adult-centric views of what engagement means and explore the everyday ways in which young people experience and express their place in society.

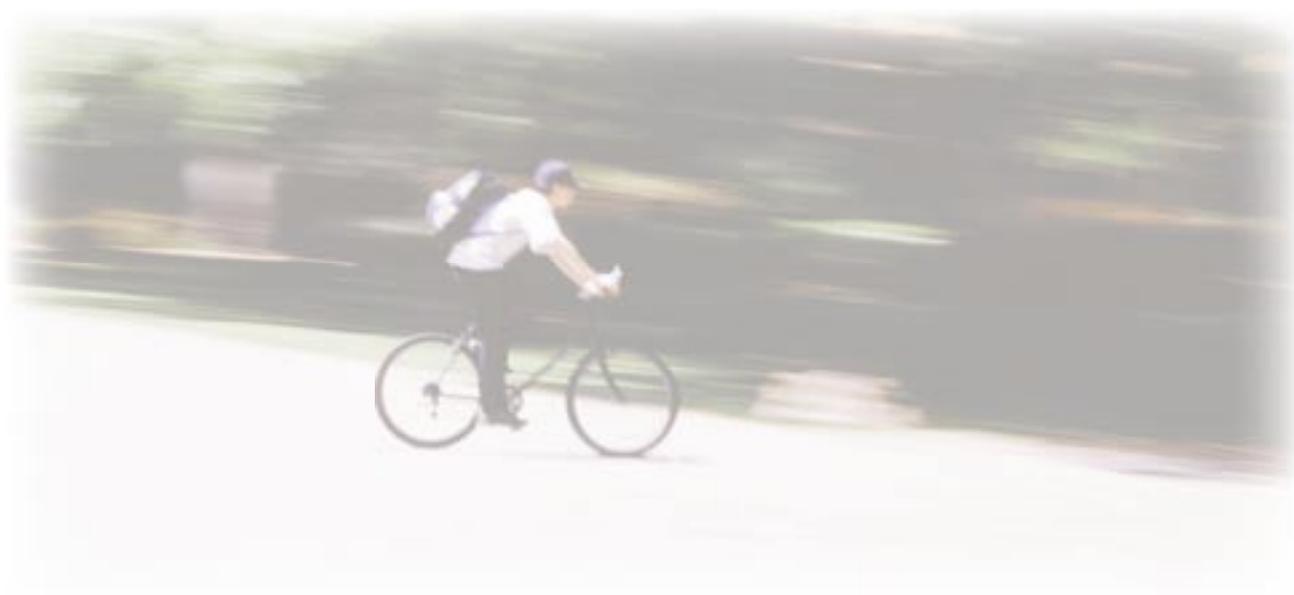


## Chapter 3

# Method

The project was undertaken in Victoria, Australia, and data were collected from young people in three local government areas and two internet sites. In the local government areas we recruited respondents from government and non-government schools as well as from youth services. The virtual cohort was recruited through notices on two not-for-profit media and arts organisation websites created by and for young people: Vibewire and Student Youth Network (SYN). The objective of recruiting from both physical and virtual sites was to capture a mix of young people with varying levels and styles of engagement. These sites each include a class, gender and ethnic mix of young people.

The three local government areas were chosen for their contrasting features. They were a regional Victorian town centre (Shepparton), an outer suburb of Melbourne (Melton), and an inner-middle suburb of Melbourne (Monash). Interestingly, in spite of the distinctive features of each of the local government areas, very few differences were found when comparing the data. Where variances were found, these have been highlighted in the discussion in the following chapters.



Shepparton is approximately 200 kilometres north of Melbourne's central business district. It sits in the Goulburn Valley in one of the state's most productive agricultural and horticultural regions. Local industry consists of fruit, vegetable and dairy processing, with strong investment from Australian and international processing companies, and there has been growth in these sectors over the last decade with increased export to the Asia Pacific region. It is a key regional town with a growing, although also ageing, population, and has been deeply affected by the recent drought. The median age is 36 (ABS 2006a). According to the 2006 Census, the Greater Shepparton local government area is made up of 57,089 residents. Whilst the number of Indigenous residents in this region (3.2%) is much greater than in the two other sites, the site is less ethnically diverse. 11% were born overseas (most commonly Italy, England, New Zealand, Albania and Turkey) (ABS 2006a). Christianity (59%) is the dominant religious affiliation among residents, followed by 18% identifying with no religion (ABS 2006a). The highest unemployment rate of the three sites is recorded in Greater Shepparton at 6% (ABS 2006a), higher than the state average of 5.4% (ABS 2006d). On the most recently available Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (2001), which ranks the 78 Victorian local government areas from most (1) to least (78) disadvantaged, Shepparton is ranked at number 9, well inside the most disadvantaged top third.

Melton is located 40 kilometres west of the central business district. It is a rapidly growing community that promotes an urban-rural lifestyle. The area became a key site for residential development in the West during the 1970s, and from 1975-1984 had the highest population growth of any Victorian municipality. It has a number of major housing estates, as well as other kinds of large, affordable housing and hobby farms. Unlike the other two areas, it has an increasingly youthful population, with a median age of 31 (ABS 2006a, b, c). It is currently home to 78,912 residents, of whom 24% were born overseas (most commonly England, Philippines, Malta, India and New Zealand). 0.6% of the Melton population is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The most common religious affiliation is Christianity (57%), followed by no religion (16.5%) (ABS 2006b). Unemployment is above the state average at 5.9% (ABS 2006b). Melton is ranked 31 in the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage, which puts it inside the middle third, but on the cusp of the most disadvantaged top third.

The Monash local government area is 20 kilometres south-east of the central business district. The area is large, diverse and fairly prosperous, with a highly skilled and highly educated population and a higher than average level of home ownership. Population growth in Monash is slowing and the area is ageing, with a median age of 38 (ABS 2006c). The area is notable for clusters of technology parks, headquarters of major companies, and as the site of Melbourne's largest university. Based on the data collected in the 2006 Census, there are 161,241 individuals residing in the area. Of the three sites Monash has the greatest ethnic diversity: 40% were born overseas (in comparison to the national average of 22.2%). The most commonly listed nations of birth other than Australia are China, Greece, India, Malaysia and England. 0.2% of the population is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (in contrast to the national average of 2.3%). The most dominant religious affiliation is Christianity (44%) followed by no religious affiliation (19%), and Buddhism (5%) (ABS 2006c). Unemployment in Monash is the lowest of the three sites at 5.6 per cent (ABS, 2006c) but still slightly higher than the state average of 5.4% (ABS 2006d). On the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage, Monash sits at number 66, inside the least disadvantaged bottom third.

The research had three phases: working with a Youth Advisory Group, the administration of a survey to 970 participants, and follow up interviews with 20 participants. In the first phase of the project we established a Youth Advisory Group, drawn from local youth and community groups, who met regularly with the researchers to advise on survey design and identify key issues relating to citizenship for young people today. This Advisory Group was recruited through a youth centre in one of the local government areas and was made up of a shifting group of 5 to 10 young people aged between 14 and 21 years.

With the assistance of the Youth Advisory Group the survey on which this report is based was refined with the intention of making it as 'youth friendly' as possible. The aim of the survey was twofold: it was intended to help the researchers gain a greater understanding of contemporary youth participatory practices as well as generating data which would assist in the formulation of an in-depth interview schedule. The survey was administered in 2005 - 2006 across the three physical and two virtual research sites.

In total 970 respondents aged predominantly 15-17 completed the survey: 815 from the three local government areas and 155 through the two websites. In addition, 88 participants indicated that they were interested in the follow up in-depth interview phase of the research. Of those participants, 20 were randomly selected to take part in the interviews. Interview participants' ages ranged from 16-18 years old. The survey data were entered into SPSS and analysed. A Chi Square test for independence was also used on the survey data from the local government areas cohort to analyse relationships between variables. The interview data were analysed thematically.

#### METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS:

A large majority of the participants were from non-government schools; predominantly Catholic and less privileged independent schools, as can be seen in Table 1. The over-representation of non-government schools was a result of a greater number of non-government schools granting access to their students. The overrepresentation of male respondents is a flow-on effect of these circumstances, as several of the non-government schools were single-sex (male).

Owing to a technical problem with the online data collection, it was not possible to conduct statistical tests on this data. Therefore, in this report the online data is not included in reporting on relationships between variables.

#### ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS:

Table 1 provides a profile of the participants in terms of age, sex and educational institution. It also notes the proportion of participants from each research site.

**Table 1. Profile of participants**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>%</i>
Male	62
Female	38
15 years old	32
16 years old	51
17 years old	13
Other Age	4
Clayton	51
Melton	18
Shepparton	15
Online	16
Catholic School	59
Independent School	19
Government School	19
Youth group	4

A majority (87%) of the respondents was born in Australia, while just under half of those surveyed had at least one parent or guardian born outside of Australia. 90% of respondents described themselves as 'Australian', and 45% of the whole sample indicated that they have ethnicities other than Australian. There was some expected variation in parental place of birth across the cohorts: for Shepparton, 84% of both male and female parents/guardians were born in Australia compared to 67% of male and 63% of female parents or guardians from the Melton cohort and 34% of male and 37% of female parents/guardians from the Monash cohort. Three percent of the overall sample identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, with a higher representation in Shepparton than the other areas.

The class status of the participants was difficult to ascertain, as is often the case with research on young people that uses measures of socio-economic status based on reported parental occupation and education, as ours did. 49% reported that their fathers were qualified professionals or managers, 14% salespeople, tradespeople or farmers, 10% factory workers or labourers and 3% unemployed. 37% reported that their mothers were

qualified professionals or managers, 19% home duties, 8% salespeople, tradespeople or farmers, 6% factory workers or labourers, and 4% unemployed. There was almost no variation across the cohorts. One third of participants reported that they did not know their parents' level of education. A slightly lower number thought that their mother (31%) and/or father (30%) had a tertiary qualification, and fewer again nominated Year 12 (mother 21%; father 14%) or trade qualification (mother 2%; father 12%). Although this picture is not entirely reliable, it is apparent that at least half of the parents/guardians from all the areas were reported to be either university educated or had completed year twelve, and at least half of the fathers were in skilled work.

The survey was designed to elicit responses from young people to questions about their social worlds, their communities and their political and civic activities and concerns. Follow up interviews with a sub-sample enabled us to gain more detailed information about the way in which they relate to their community, friends, family and their political and civic engagement. When asked about meanings of citizenship, young people tend to draw on

abstract notions of rights or status from which they feel distanced (see Manning & Ryan 2004). We avoided asking specifically about 'citizenship' but rather our approach was to tap into young people's experiences of political and civic life and record the meanings they bring to this, so that we may come closer to understanding how young people are connected to and how they act on their social and political worlds. Our questions enabled them to generate a picture of the norms, meanings and identities they were constructing in relation to participation in their social and political communities.

Upon examination of both qualitative and quantitative data sets, it is apparent that the young people who participated in this research exhibited unique – or unconventional – patterns of civic and political engagement and interest that are consistent with the idea of a new citizenship biography borne out of broader forces of social change.

## *Chapter 4*

# Civic engagement and social membership

As noted, a common criticism of young people today is that they are disengaged from and no longer affiliate with political or civic institutions or their communities.

While the young people who participated in this project indicated that they were very unlikely to be members of political parties, political organisations or unions, our evidence indicates that many of these young people are ‘joiners’ or involved in activities that connect them with others. As Table 2 demonstrates, a majority was affiliated with a sporting club, and a minority with online groups, youth/student groups, bands and religious groups. Only 15 percent reported no involvement in any activities outside of school at all. Traditional and more formalised sites of youth civic association such as religious organisations and community centres however are not popular, as we report below in Chapter 5 (Table 4). Membership in political organisations was very low in all three areas, but a relationship between these three areas and this type of membership was evident. Those from Shepparton (7.3 percent) were significantly more likely to be members of political organisations than those from Monash (2.4 percent) and Melton (2.3 percent), perhaps reflecting the stronger pull of local politics in a regional centre.

**Table 2. Membership in groups**

Sports club	51%
Online group	29%
Youth/student group	23%
Band	19%
Religious group	18%
Union member	7%
Political organisation	4%
A political party	3%
Other	9%

Vinken (2005, p. 155) argues that within the new youth biography of citizenship, the leisure domain is perhaps the best space for young people to build 'alternative routes to establish solidarity, community life and involvement in the common good', and Vromen (2003, p. 87) notes that sporting groups have a valuable role in the participatory citizenship of young people in particular, and ought to be recognised as engagement. Given this, it is interesting to note that a statistically significant relationship between the age of a participant and their membership in a sports club was found. 15 year olds were significantly more likely to be members of a sports club and more likely to participate in sport than 16 or 17 year olds. Sports club membership and sports participation declines as participants get older. This decrease in participation may well be related to an increase in school and/or work related responsibilities, as suggested by Shelley, an 18 year old from the Shepparton area, when asked if she was involved in any out of school activities:

*Shelley:* Not overly. I have work most nights a week. When I don't do that, I have my apprenticeship stuff... Certificate III in Child Services.

*Facilitator:* So you don't get much time to, you know, play sports or anything like that?

*Shelley:* No. I used to play sport a lot. Like on most Saturdays, I'll try and make time to go and watch my brother play sport. That's about as far as I get.

Work and study make it increasingly difficult for older youth to participate in extracurricular activities, in spite of their significance as participatory practices. However, a majority of the young people, regardless of age, tended to engage in a variety of extracurricular activities that enable them to relate with others, as Table 3 demonstrates. Interestingly, traditional sites of youth association are not meaningful to them. In response to the question 'where do you feel most comfortable?' some significant responses were negative: 49% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt comfortable in religious centres and 49% felt similarly about youth or community centres (see Table 4 next chapter). This reveals the extent to which young people are not drawn to join organisations that are intended to attract them.

Significant numbers however are involved in activities that connect them to other people. A majority of these young

people were involved with their peers in 'hanging around' (75%) closely followed by sport (71%). The participants were also very engaged in computer-related activities (69%) and shopping (65%). This picture reveals that young people tend to prefer to be engaged in informal activities that are not structured through organisations or by adults.

**Table 3. Social Activities**

	<i>Regularly/ Occasionally</i>
Hanging around	75%
Sport	71%
Computer	69%
Shopping	65%
Cultural	45%
Clubbing/gigs	43%
Religious	29%
Other	26%
Playing in a band	19%
Ethnic/ neighbourhood functions	16%
Political	10%

There are some notable patterns of area-based difference in participation rates in leisure activities. Participants from the Monash (45%) and Melton (39%) areas were significantly more likely than those from the Shepparton area (27%) to 'regularly or occasionally' take part in cultural activities, perhaps revealing the different range of leisure activities available in regional versus suburban and urban areas. In addition, those from the Monash area (40%) were much more likely than those from Melton (15%) or

Shepparton (20%) to be 'regularly or occasionally' involved in religious leisure activities, probably a result of the larger recruitment from Catholic and independent religious schools in that area.

A potential concern with young people's preference for purely social rather than civic activities is that these do not easily translate into social consciousness or an ethic of care towards the community. However, there was some evidence that a minority of young people were using their social spaces to transform social interaction into political deliberation. For example, Sally, an 18 year old from the

Monash area, was a regular internet user, and was concerned about 'immigration, and definitely the greenhouse effect and about water, our drought is really a big issue'. She found it helpful to discuss these issues with other young people from different countries in an online chat room:

*I like to go into these debating forums, and those are really good because they've got people from all over the world, so we can see how they do it like in England and all that; we're still seeing some very good input on homosexual and gay marriages. That was really interesting.*

This picture reveals a more complex view of young people's civic engagement and social membership, suggesting that their capacity to 'join' is shaped by the responsibilities forged by new life patterns, the facilities within their local areas, and their preference for interacting with peers without adult moderation. It suggests that informal leisure activities have taken the place of more structured civic associations in keeping young people connected to others in their communities.



## The importance of family and friends

Friendship groups and family relationships are extremely important sites of connection for these young people. Very few respondents from the whole cohort (only 4 percent) indicated that they do not have close friends, while a majority of the participants (59 percent) indicated that they had ‘a lot’ of close friends. In addition, over half (53 percent) of these young people indicated that they were ‘very satisfied’ with their friendships. In contrast, only a tiny minority (2 percent) was ‘very dissatisfied’ with their friendships.

Demetria, a 17 year old from Melton, talked about the importance of friends and family:

*I love hanging out with my parents. I'm very family orientated. To me it takes a lot to call someone [unclear] they become my family so me and my friends are – like if you know my friends they couldn't be closer to me. I'm very over protective. But we just love hanging out, having a laugh. I love laughing. Like just being stupid and that but at the same time we can have a chat, just hang out with each other. Like I'm very close to my friends. They have become my life. A lot*

*of the times we just talk, chat. We love the movies. We love music. We love clubbing. We go clubbing all the time. We love it.*

As we have seen, many of the young people who participated in this project were members of various types of groups and were involved in a range of activities, and the most comfortable places for them were the ones they share with friends and family. When the participants were asked where they feel comfortable and like they belong, their answers (Table 4) indicate a clear preference towards friends and family.

**Table 4. Where Participants Feel Comfortable and Like They Belong**

	<b>Strongly Agree/ Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree/ Disagree</b>
With friends	93%	2%
With my family	84%	6%
At school	77%	8%
By myself	76%	7%
Online	62%	13%
In public	58%	14%
Hanging around my neighbourhood	40%	23%
Religious centre	20%	49%
Youth/Community centre	16%	49%
Other	30%	56%

Mandy, a 17 year old from Melton, described a strong connection with her mother that was echoed by several participants:

*Just she's always there. She's more one of my best friends than my mum. We've grown really close since I've been growing up and stuff like that. We rely on each other for a lot of things. We hang out every now and again, do what me and my friends do...or something.*

It is important to acknowledge the extent of family and friendship harmony, closeness and support that is reported by many of these young people. This is in contrast to the more common picture of youth as a time of heightened intergenerational discord and peer group trouble and the dominance of the school to work transition approach to youth.. There is relatively little literature on the (positive) nature of relationships amongst young people and in families and most research tends to

focus on peer group 'pressure' and on conflict between parents and children. Gillies (2000) has pointed out that the overwhelming focus on youth as a period of transition to 'independence' has created a divide between youth and family studies. As a result, youth studies frequently overlooks the significance of family relationships to young people (except as a backdrop or 'risk factor'). The young people in this research reveal a different picture, of peer support and the experience of, or desire for, close family connections. Sara, a 17 year old from Monash, expressed a wish for more engagement with her parents, especially to discuss important issues such as continuing with VCE or leaving school to undertake an apprenticeship. She said:

*sometimes they don't have time for me. They're busy... I live with my mum...(She's busy) with housework and just go shopping, buy us stuff and stuff like that. And pay bills.*

Given this reliance on personal relationships, it is important to understand how the quality of family and friendship relationships affects young people's sense of connection to society; their understandings of 'how things work' and their capacity to have a say in decisions about their lives and their view of society. This is particularly so because, as traditional forms of association become less prominent, family and friends and the nature of the interactions that happen in this social space will have an increased significance in shaping young people's experience and understandings of citizenship. Our research findings support Gillies' call for less research on family relationships as influencing development and more on families as a resource for young people (Gillies 2000). Informal social bonds, based on locational friendship and family are keeping young people connected, but the quality of these relationships and the wider context in which they occur is variable.

## Having a voice and being heard

When we shifted the focus of our questions to traditional arenas of political engagement, we found an overwhelming lack of interest. However, rather than painting a picture of a disengaged generation, our data suggest that young people are interested in social and political issues but they are engaged through more informal networks and places where they already feel comfortable, where they feel they belong, and where they believe that they have a good chance of being heard. Their political engagement is about having a say in the places and relationships that have an immediate impact on their wellbeing. As a result, traditional conceptualisations of political participation are less relevant for contemporary youth. These young people reported that they prefer to discuss political issues in the private spheres of familial and friendship groups as well as in their classrooms. In addition, they appear far less interested in having a say in more formal arenas such as local councils, or at state or federal levels of government (Table 5). The interviews revealed that this is often because young people perceive politicians as ineffective and reluctant to listen to youth.

**Table 5. Having and Wanting 'A Say'**

	<i>Where I feel I can have a say</i>		<i>Where I want more of a say</i>	
	<i>A lot/ Some</i>	<i>Seldom/ Never</i>	<i>A lot/ Some</i>	<i>Seldom/ Never</i>
With my friends	95%	5%	62%	38%
In my family	89%	11%	65%	35%
In my classroom	83%	17%	63%	37%
At my school	76%	24%	64%	36%
At work	44%	56%	47%	53%
Online forums	40%	60%	36%	64%
In the media	21%	79%	42%	58%
In my local council	17%	83%	38%	62%
In the electorate in which I live	17%	83%	35%	65%
Other	22%	78%	30%	70%

Heath, an 18 year old from Melton, described his friends' frustration at attempting to resolve issues of gangs and graffiti by talking with the council:

*I've had friends that went to the local community and stuff like that to talk about the graffiti that is around the community and the different gangs that are around. Not in my community but at the school community. So they've thought that the only way to deal with that is to go straight to the local government... They went there and they said that 'yeah we'll think about it' but nothing has been done... I think it is an unproductive way to go about it because it just doesn't really – well in theory it would be the best place to go to have a whinge – but I don't think they really listen.*

As the above table indicates, a majority of the young people who were surveyed felt that, more often than not, they could have their opinions heard with friends and family as well as in their classrooms and at school. Interestingly, these were the same places where a

majority would like to have more of a voice.

Significantly, two contrasting pictures emerged of schools as places for experiencing democracy. As Shelley articulates below, many young people wish that schools could facilitate citizenship as well as impart education:

*the school doesn't get very active in most things. They're pretty focused on the school, not really on the outside. Like I wouldn't mind it if something came up where they said you can go and – like go to some meeting and put your opinions in here and see if you can make a difference or anything. I wouldn't mind if they gave us that opportunity. That would be good... (But) they kind of just say stay in school. Do your work. Pretty much it.*

For other young people, schools are already very important sites where opportunities for participatory democracy are cultivated. Andy, an 18 year old young man from Melton, felt that his school gave students 'a pretty good chance' to engage with politics:

*Like we have Senator McGauran come out who's the deputy whip in the senate, Federal senator, he came out and had a good chat to us. He's been real good. I got to go to the youth parliament last year in Victoria. That was good and with Mr Bracks and sat down there for a few days in the parliament. I think we get a lot of opportunities like that actually.*

Schools vary enormously in their capacity to provide these experiences to students given the range of pressures on them, and yet young people overwhelmingly look to their schools for the chance to both discuss issues and learn about as well as experience citizenship. Max, a 17 year old from Shepparton, said 'I reckon all major issues should be talked about [at school] in one way or another', and included topics ranging from interest rates to the drought and being stressed about study. And Andy noted that practical knowledge and experience of citizenship are not generally imparted 'unless you do legal studies or you do politics or something like that'; a point

reinforced by Adriana, a 17 year old from Melton, who said ‘if I wasn’t doing politics then ... I wouldn’t really know’. These young people suggest that citizenship in schools is still a subject that is learned about rather than a practice that is experienced.

Participants were also asked with whom they discuss social and political issues, and family, friends and classrooms all emerged again as the key sites (Table 6).

**Table 6. Who Respondents Discuss Social and Political Issues With**

	<b>A lot/ Some</b>	<b>Seldom/ Never</b>
Parents	58%	42%
Friends	56%	44%
In class	56%	44%
Other family members	44%	56%
No one	29%	71%
Someone else in the community	20%	80%
Online	20%	80%
Organisation/group I am in	19%	81%
In the media	18%	82%
Government representatives	12%	88%
Other	17%	83%

A large majority (88%) indicated that formal political procedures and forums were not relevant to them by stating that they ‘seldom or never’ discuss social and political issues with government representatives. However, only 16% said that a lot of the time they discuss political issues with no one. Several of the interview participants noted that informal, family-based and peer-to-peer discussions were more interesting

and effective than engagement with formal political processes. Chiara, a 17 year old from Melton, considered that it was important ‘to actually get young people involved with young people. I think that works. To me, when young people come and talk to us, I listen more than when old people come’. Like Sally, quoted earlier, she described the value of online social networking for the discussion of political and social issues amongst

young people, noting that ‘My Space is such a young thing. Even people reading your blog, whether they care or not, it sticks in their heads...’ and says that she uses it to ‘inform (people) of little issues’:

*My Space is a great thing. I checked my blog history the other day and it's like 400 people have checked my blog...The internet is a great place. You can go onto forum sites, read what other people have written.*

These responses suggest that it is important to be attentive to where young people feel comfortable discussing political and social issues, and that their capacity to speak and be heard in these forums ought to be enhanced, particularly on the issues that are important to them. Additionally, it is evident that these young people are engaged in social and political discourses. This reinforces the view that if we are interested in improving young people’s political engagement, we need to pay attention to where they want to have a say and find ways to hear this. One interesting piece of this picture is the internet: a place where a majority of these young people reported that they feel comfortable and like they belong. Insisting that political discourse can only occur within conventional, adult-centric forums (in which young people of this age group have little interest) misses an opportunity to create links between everyday and formal political spheres.

## Chapter 7

# Political action and concerns

Like other researchers, we feel it is important to make a distinction between engagement with social and political issues and interest in formal political action. Many argue that just because young people are not interested in agitating through formal politics and political institutions does not mean they are disengaged. There is a good deal of evidence already that young people are put off formal politics as a site for creating change, and our research supports this (Table 7).

**Table 7. Political Practices**

	<i>A lot/ Some</i>	<i>Seldom/ Never</i>
Recycled	75%	25%
Donated money to a cause	67%	33%
Signed a petition	37%	63%
Discussed political/social issues	37%	63%
Made a statement through art, writing or music	37%	63%
Listened to political music	28%	72%
Youth council/SRC	26%	74%
Made a political/social statement online	20%	80%
Contacted the media	18%	82%
Gone to a rally	18%	82%
Boycotted a brand	16%	84%
Contacted a politician	13%	87%

Although these young people were not engaging in the conventional forms of social change participation – such as contacting a politician, boycotting a brand or attending a rally – the data indicate that it would be incorrect to deem them apathetic. A majority was engaged in activities such as recycling and donating money to a cause and over one third had signed a petition, discussed political/social issues or made a statement through art, writing or music. Additional statistical analysis indicated that participants' gender and political activity were related variables. Females (43%) were more likely than males (27%) to have signed a petition, recycled (females:

84%, males: 68%), donated money to a cause (females: 81%, males: 58%) and made a statement through art/writing/music (females: 40%, males: 29%).

These young people focused on personal strategies to create social change, including discussions with friends and family, creative expression and changing one's own behaviour. They were often confounded, however, by how to translate these individualistic strategies into more enduring social and political change. For example, an interesting contrast to Chiara's enthusiasm about the internet as a way forward is this response from Shelley when asked the best way for young people to be heard:

*I'm not even sure anymore. There's like nowhere you can actually go. Like there's no forums or anything, where you can like – a lot of people start up big chat things on the internet and everything, start up a forum there and say what they want to say. Everyone else chucks a piece in. Like they're pretty interesting. But there's no way to like take it further...*

While enduring political and social action felt complex and somewhat elusive for these young people, they were very aware of key social and political concerns which related to both transnational and local issues. Their concerns illustrated the ways they were attempting to

negotiate both a current and future 'place' for themselves without predictable pathways or safety nets. Their personal concerns were focused on getting a good job (the most common 'number one' ranked issue), their studies, health, independence/freedom and money. They expressed considerable anxiety about doing well enough at school to secure a good future. These stresses about study, employment and their future prospects seemed to cut across rather than enhance their capacity for political action.

Several participants in the interviews indicated that their current responsibilities did not leave any time or energy for political activity, even while they were aware that their circumstances were directly related to broader social and political conditions. For example, Thomas, an 18 year old from Shepparton, was concerned about the GST, fuel prices, terrorism, the new industrial relations legislation, drugs and the difficulty young people faced accessing services. He had been personally involved in helping a friend get off drugs, and had many discussions with friends and family about these other issues. However, he found the pressures of his own circumstances – completing a difficult first year as a low-wage apprentice tradesperson – all-consuming and could not currently find any energy or time to commit to political action in spite of his concerns. He said:

*If I wanted to get my word out there you've just got to have the effort and time just to go and do it and that's if it affects you that much. At the end of this year I finish my first year and first year's the hardest year and I've battled along, had a break and next year it's going to be better.*

Similarly, when Sara was asked what stopped her from being able to have her say, she said 'I don't have time because I'm studying and Year 12 is really hard. That's why'. The young people in this research project who were still in school were also often undertaking paid work, on average, 10 hours per week, which further limited their free time and energy.

At the same time, these young people were highly conscious of larger social and political forces that shaped their worlds. A sense of anxiety about futures that could not be predicted or controlled deeply inflected their social and political concerns. Their greatest concerns for both Australia and the world were war/terrorism and the environment (Tables 8 and 9). These are issues that transcend the boundaries of national governance and reflect their experience of living in a 'runaway world' (Giddens 2002) where threats to livelihood, security and life itself are ever-present and insufficiently managed. Significantly, a concern about 'how governments are run' featured in their top five rankings both nationally and globally, which suggests some disenchantment

with the ways such threats are dealt with at the level of state politics. In the interviews, participants spoke frequently about the water shortage and environmental degradation, the war in Iraq and terrorism. For example, Andy said:

*the drought and stuff like that. That's definitely going to affect the way we live in the future I think. We've got to combat it, so like it's definitely a major issue, that needs to – which is being raised... The upcoming election is a very important issue too. With John Howard and obviously the Liberal and Labor Party. So they're the two biggest. Globalisation and the upcoming election would be the two big issues. Probably the war in Iraq is another one.*

**Table 8. What Respondents Are Very Concerned With On a National Level**

1. War/terrorism
2. Environmental issues
3. How governments are run
4. Getting a good job in the future
5. Poverty in Australia

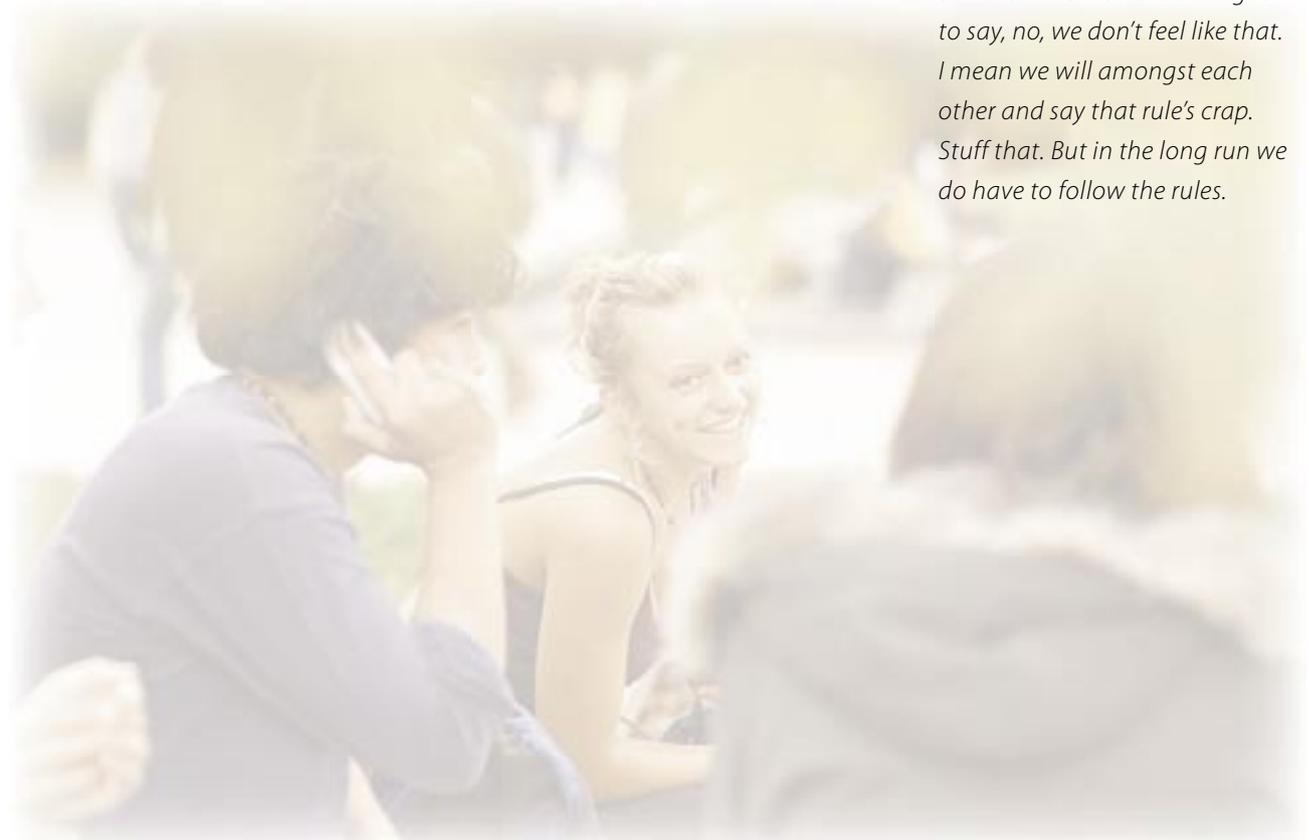
**Table 9. What Respondents Are Very Concerned With On a Global Level**

1. War/terrorism
2. Environmental issues
3. Poverty in other countries
4. How governments are run
5. Health and well being

As we have seen, these young people were developing a range of individualised strategies to address their concerns and expressed a

desire to have these facilitated by those in power. However, a lack of confidence that adults, at school, in local councils or those representing their electorate would listen to young people's concerns was a recurring theme in the interviews. When asked whether she felt she could have a say in political matters, Mandy said 'It feels like it's an adult world at the moment'. She was especially frustrated that she has little say at school about matters of importance to her and her friends:

*They make all the right decisions. We kind of don't feel like we're significant enough to speak up and say, "Well, we don't like that. So we want to change it to something else." We just kind of follow with what we're told. We don't feel like we have the right to say, no, we don't feel like that. I mean we will amongst each other and say that rule's crap. Stuff that. But in the long run we do have to follow the rules.*



## Chapter 8

# Conclusion

This research demonstrates how young people experience citizenship in less straightforward or traditional ways than previous generations. New life patterns are leading to new citizenship biographies that take into account the increased responsibilities faced by young people in a less predictable and less structured world. Their engagement is more likely to be informal, individualised and oriented towards the immediate institutions and networks of their daily lives as a response to the conditions of socioeconomic and political change that we have outlined. The research suggests that young people cannot be expected to affiliate in traditional ways because the structural conditions that would support such affiliations no longer exist. They tend to eschew formal political processes because these are viewed as unwelcoming and often ineffective. Instead, they develop individualised strategies; what Mandy calls ‘do(ing) my part’, to act on their social and political concerns. Similarly, they create ties to society through family, friends and informal social activity. These young people’s current practices of citizenship show them drawing on personal resources, including their own individual behaviours, their relationships, and the institutions of their everyday lives, to negotiate a sense of belonging and claim-making in a society that they perceive as adult-managed (and often mismanaged), but they often struggle to translate this into meaningful, effective citizenship action.

One of the issues that have been exposed through this research is the complexity of young people's everyday connections. Local environment and family can provide a platform for engaging more expansively with community and for understanding more universal issues – or can provide a narrowing down of the focus in which the young person's family and friends are simply a protection against a dangerous world. Further, the critical importance of family and the low significance given to other forms of association (for example, based on community or religion) means that young people who are not able to rely on family are especially disadvantaged and disconnected. If civic engagement is being forged increasingly through family, locality and school, young people who are homeless and who are not connected to school become particularly disenfranchised. At the same time, the role of friendship and peer relationships, which these young people have highlighted, is often overlooked. This includes those relationships and connections forged over the internet. For all young people, but perhaps especially those who are not able to rely on family support, fostering and recognising the importance of friendship in connecting young

people to community, in providing support and in providing a space within which to express their concerns is an unrecognised resource.

Beyond family and friends, school constitutes a very important space within which young people can make sense of their place in the world. Our findings suggest that schools vary in the extent to which they provide this space to young people. The views expressed by the young people in this study reveal their eagerness to be actively engaged in discussions with each other and with parents and teachers, that assist them to make meaning of their worlds. This includes personal and local experiences of the struggle to complete school; manage family responsibilities; to live with change and to have a positive impact on the problems that affect their communities, such as drug and alcohol abuse, violence, scarcity of water and the engagement in a war in Iraq.

The shift from traditional approaches to citizenship and political engagement towards a more inclusionary approach exposes the inadequacy of conventional approaches to youth participation in social and political life. The almost universal feeling

expressed by the young people in this study that adult-based institutions (schools, political parties, unions) are not interested in them highlights the extent to which the term (and practice of) 'youth participation' actually means that young people are expected to participate in adult-centred and managed processes. New methodologies, that enable adults to participate with young people in civic and political action will both expand our understandings of civics and citizenship in our changing world – and facilitate more effective engagement.

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# 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.