Mapping young people's social justice concerns:
An exploration of voice and action

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Executive Summary

Mapping Young People's Social Justice Concerns: An Exploration of Voice and Action is the first phase of a two-phase action research project titled Building Activist Capacities of Young People Through Issue-based Campaigns.

The focus of the first phase was to explore key social issues facing young people aged 16 to 25 in Victoria, Australia, and to examine how they are responding to these issues. This study also aimed to better understand young people's experiences of voice, the contexts and conditions in which they can cultivate their voices for social change, and where their voices resonate.

The findings from this first phase have informed the second action-oriented phase of the project to implement the YouthCAN project in Melbourne. YouthCAN is an Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) programme that aims to empower young activists to challenge hate and promote peace through youth-led social justice campaigns. In partnership with Victoria University, YouthCAN has been delivered in Melbourne from August to December 2021. Four groups of young people from Melbourne have worked to create digital social campaigns to affect change in the areas of gender equity, young migrant workers' rights and the rights of those with disabilities. In the current research project, we sought to work alongside a range of government and non-profit organisations to develop a local knowledge base on young people's voices and actions in relation to social justice concerns. This data can then be used to inform programs, practice and policy.

Our data was collected over a 14-month period (October 2019 to March 2021) at arguably one of the most tumultuous times in recent Australian history. This timeframe included social movements, events and crises such as the 2019–2020 'Black Summer' bushfires, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. These events are linked to significant social issues that are global in nature, but that also play out in our local contexts and communities in very different ways. They have sparked young people's engagement with social issues and activism in ways that have undoubtedly changed their everyday lives, how they view themselves and the possibilities they see for the future.

This current research captures young people's perceptions and responses to these volatile social, political, economic and health shifts, but also provides insights into the spaces young people create and desire to be part of – to learn, to belong and to be heard.

Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach to gather a wide range of perspectives. An online survey of young people aged 16 to 25 from Victoria, Australia, was conducted in two waves (in December 2019 and March 2021). Individual interviews, focus groups and arts-based workshops were used to gather in-depth understandings of young people's experiences of voice and social change, including those working within organisations.

Key demographics

YOUNG PEOPLE

114 Survey participants

29 Interview/focus group/art workshop

YOUTH WORKERS

5 Interviews

AGE

21 Average age

16-26 Age range

GENDER

76% Female

4% Non-binary

3% Transgender

EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION

84% currently studying in University/TAFE

37% employed on a casual basis

BACKGROUND

45% not religious

47% one or both parents born overseas

15% born overseas

11% born rural Victoria

Overview of the findings

Mapping social justice issues

In Section 1, young people identified mental health and isolation as key issues, that had worsened as a result of COVID-19. Racism and discrimination were also named as very important, alongside capitalism, gender inequality and environmental degradation. Young people demonstrated a deep understanding and sophisticated analysis of social issues, paying close attention to the historical roots, the structural, cyclical and intersectional nature of these issues and how they impacted individual and collective wellbeing. The internet, including news site sources and friends, were sought out most frequently to learn about social issues. Many young people said they had not learned about important social issues like colonisation and racism in school, but in university they were exposed to these issues much more.

Cultivating voice, social action and change strategies

In Section 2, young people discussed important conditions for cultivating their voices, including the importance of doing 'inner work', in order to be able to speak up about social justice issues. Young people also spoke about the difficulty in finding spaces to cultivate and exercise their voices, recognising that learning through dialogue with others was crucial but difficult to find. The challenges and tensions of engaging in social media were also identified; cancel culture and the fear of backlash narrowed possibilities

for many young people to use this as a way to speak out on issues of social justice. This section also relayed the many different ways that young people participated in change, ranging from more traditional forms of activism like protests to challenging stereotypes and discrimination in everyday settings like schools and workplaces. Creative arts, storytelling and personal experience were important forms of activism for many young people, with social media an important platform to tell the stories mainstream media will not. Finally, this section also focused on the intensity of advocacy and activist work, bringing light to the detrimental effects it can have on young people's emotional, mental and physical wellbeing.

Institutional conditions for developing and supporting youth voice

In Section 3, we mapped the perspectives and insights from both young people and youth workers, identifying a number of practical barriers, but also some fundamental issues with organisational culture as a mechanism of exclusion. Specifically, young people felt that the language was exclusive and could be addressed by 'de-professionalising' these youth voice programs within organisations; however, they also wanted to be supported to build this capacity. Adult allies and mentors, peer mentors and strong relationships were identified as central to breaking down some of the conditions in organisations that were preventing young people from participating as 'wholly themselves'. Organisations were also seen to be 'white-

washed' and still centring ways of working and operating that excluded many young people, specifically Aboriginal young people and those of migrant background.

As many of the youth workers and young people discussed, we are at a transition point across the sector, and including young people in these organisations and institutions has only recently gained traction through co-design and co-production. There were a number of issues that pointed to the problematic way in which this process was being undertaken, including being tokenistic in the depth of engagement with young people, not compensating young people fairly, and lack of organisational preparedness and attention to power dynamics. Finally, this section also identified the voices that are most often included: loud shiny voices, middle-class voices, traumatised voices and obedient voices. Those that are excluded are First Nations and racially marginalised voices, regional voices, raw voices and critical voices.

One unbroken note: Young people reimagining solidarities and futures

Young people in this study went beyond speaking about their understandings and experiences of social issues, voice and social change. They used this knowledge and experience to fuel hope and dream of new ways of working together and taking action collectively to create a more connected and equitable society. In this section, we brought together reflections from young people that pointed to the need to create relationships, communities and collectives as an antidote and a path through the widening forms of isolation people were experiencing and as a way to create change from the bottom up. In this section, a number of young people spoke about the need to slow down and connect to nature and animals as a way to care for both self and the environment. Important strategies for working alongside young people were also included.

Key considerations

Building a sense of community and connection through activism in a time of complexity and crisis

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Prioritising the wellbeing of individuals and the collective in social change 'work'

Mental health emerged as the most significant concern for young people generally and for the participants we interviewed. Social isolation has worsened since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but young people also spoke about these concerns in relation to living in a complex and fast-paced world in which productivity was valued over wellbeing and relationships with others. In addition, many young people doing social change work were often on the edge of burnout and exhaustion. Connecting with nature, animals and people was identified as an important element of self and collective care.

Building strong relationships and connection in young people's social justice work/groups to facilitate learning and create conditions for voice and action

Young people in the interviews identified that many programs situated within organisations tackling social justice issues do not adequately devote time and resources to building relationships with facilitators or other program members. Many young people expressed the desire to be part of a community or collective doing this work as it provides a place to learn more about social issues but also to build capacities such as self-confidence, networks and an understanding of social systems and storytelling.

Honouring and valuing young people's diverse and intersectional identities, experiences and knowledge

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Redeveloping programs alongside young people to create more inclusive spaces that reach out and include those facing significant barriers, stigma and exclusion

Across youth and adult stakeholders there was concern about the 'white-washing' of spaces and programs within organisations. A number of young people also felt that they were not able to "participate as themselves". Power and privilege were often not explicitly discussed in relation to people's identities, experiences and positions in the projects/organisations. This led to exclusion of certain young people, which silences particular groups and can block them from being involved in change efforts.

Encouraging exposure to and support from key local youth activists, adult and peer mentors, and organisations

Young people already doing activist and advocacy work identified the importance of other youth mentors and activists in their journey. This included brief connections (hearing their stories, tips and advice) and extended mentoring with deeper engagement. Importantly, adult mentors who valued reciprocity, horizontal relationships and listening were central to young people feeling supported and confident to begin and sustain advocacy and activist work.

Addressing the multitude of challenges and circumstances that can compromise participation

Young people and stakeholders identified a number of practical barriers to participation in this study, including:
- financial stress
- employment commitments
- education and training commitments
- mental health issues (stress, anxiety and depression)
- phone credit
- internet access
- access to transport
- limited hours and areas of operation
- family and carer responsibilities
- institutional barriers
- COVID-19 (which presented additional barriers and stresses for many participants including unemployment, increased mental health issues and family crisis situations).

Addressing these challenges requires careful planning prior to our program starting. Building solid relationships and trust will also allow us to provide the supports for young people as issues arise throughout the YouthCAN program.

Key finding

Developing clearer policies, processes and practices linked to co-design with young people in organisations.

Young people and youth workers both identified significant issues with how co-design is implemented and used to increase youth participation and voice in organisations. Organisations often exclude particular groups of young people, specifically First Nations young people. These organisations value and prioritise young people that can, and will, speak to their agendas rather than looking for genuine collaboration. Their approach narrows young people's opportunities for feedback, or to tell their stories with complexity, with some practices identified as coercive and even traumatic.

Introduction

Mapping Young People's Social Justice Concerns: An Exploration of Voice and Action is the first phase of a two-phase action research project titled Building Activist Capacities of Young People Through Issue-based Campaigns. The focus of the first phase was to explore key social issues facing young people aged 16 to 25 in Victoria, Australia, and to examine how they are responding to these issues. This study also aimed to better understand young people's experiences of voice, the contexts and conditions in which they can cultivate their voices for social change, and where their voices resonate. The findings from this first phase have informed the second action-oriented phase of the project – led by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in partnership with Victoria University – which involves four groups of young people from Melbourne creating digital social campaigns to affect change.

Over the past two years a number of social issues linked to community cohesion have come to the forefront and been at the centre of media and political discourses. In mid-2019, when this project was in its developing stages, young people in Australia and globally were confronted with white supremacist terrorist attacks, increasing concerns around climate change and ongoing economic precarity.

Social movements for gender equity, the rights of the LGBTQI community and the Black Lives Matter movement have also been continuing struggles for justice over the past decade, shaping young people's coming of age and creating a new wave of social and political consciousness and participation facilitated and amplified through social media (Earl et al., 2017).

Large-scale research conducted by Mission Australia in their 2018 Youth Survey explored the social issues that Australian young people found most urgent. They surveyed 28,286 young people aged 15 to 19 across the country and found that 43% believed mental health was the most pressing issue in Australia today, with alcohol and drug issues (28.7%) and equity and discrimination (23.4%) as the next most important (Carlisle et al., 2018). Other longitudinal studies have also pointed to the unequal burden young people carry, including research by Wyn et al. (2019) into 2,000 Australians aged 15 to 25 from diverse cultural backgrounds, where almost half of the respondents experienced discrimination or unfair treatment in the preceding 12 months.

Taken together, this data provides a clear picture of Australian young people's concerns at a personal and societal level. It also highlights that a significant number of young people were involved in civic and community life *before* the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As our research project progressed from 2019 into 2020, Australians were witnessing and experiencing a number of natural and public health disasters that have shaped our lives and had a significant impact on how we connect and interact with each other. Both the Australian 'Black Summer' bushfires of 2019–2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic have dramatically changed the landscape of young people's current and future lives and brought about new challenges and possibilities for their role in society. Under ongoing COVID-19 restrictions such as extended lockdowns, physical distancing and others, we have seen high levels of youth under/unemployment, disrupted education and

isolation that have led to an amplified mental health crisis (Batchelor et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021).

The 2020 Mission Australia Youth Survey also featured the COVID-19 pandemic as the second most important issue in Australia (39%), alongside equity and discrimination (40%) and mental health (31%). This survey also found that from 2019 to 2020 equity and discrimination as an issue of national importance had increased by 15%, evidence that confirms other research showing that the pandemic has widened inequality, with particular countries and groups bearing the brunt (Couch et al., 2021; van Barneveld et al., 2020). While this data provides us with an important understanding of young people and their attitudes towards social issues, it does not give a nuanced and in-depth look into what or how these issues are linked or how they manifest in young people's lives, particularly for those aged 19 to 25.

This current research captures young people's perceptions and responses to these volatile social, political, economic and health shifts, but also provides insights into the spaces young people create and desire to be part of – to learn, to belong and to be heard. The majority of data (interviews) was gathered within the first 6 months of the pandemic; thus, it does not account for the ongoing and cumulative effects on young people's lives, including how their understandings and experiences of major social issues and participation in social change activities has played out with ongoing restrictions. We know from a number of studies, however, that young people have been using digital technologies, specifically social media, to organise, mobilise and push for change, but also to create spaces to belong, learn and challenge deficit representations of youth (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021; Harris & Johns, 2021; Jenkins et al., 2018). Thus, exploring young people's engagement in digital spaces was a key thread in this research as it is woven into every aspect of their lives.

Importantly, this research offers young people's experiences of systems and conditions that many have argued were failing as a result of neoliberalism, seen as responsible for increasing global inequality (see van Barneveld et al., 2021). A number of researchers point to an in-between moment', with the COVID 19 pandemic acting as "…a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" that has "forced humans to break with the past and imagine the world anew" (Roy, 2020, n.p., as cited in Sonn & Stevens, 2021, p. 5). The knowledge that young people offer through this research, captured during a coalescence of crises, provides not only a picture of what was and is still broken, but also what could be done differently as we move forward.

Aims

The aims of this first phase of the research project were to:

1 identify the key social issues of concern for young people

2 examine young people's understandings of complex social issues and their implications for social cohesion and collective wellbeing

3 bring young people's experiences of voice to the forefront and critically examine the conditions in which young people can develop their voices for social change efforts

4 take a closer look at the social change strategies and approaches young people believe can elevate their voices and create social change.

This research also aimed to pay close attention to young people's use of digital media, as a way to understand more about complex social issues, engage in public discourse with others, voice beliefs and initiate action.

Methodology

Methodology and timeline

This research employed a mixed-methods approach to explore young people's views of social issues, and how and what social change strategies could improve some of the complex problems we face in our communities and beyond. Mixed-methods research combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure both an exploratory and an in-depth understanding, in addition to breadth (Johnson et al., 2007; Wilson, 2016). An important underpinning in our methodological approach was the notion of *mapping*, which allowed us to understand how differently positioned young people understood and made sense of particular social issues, connected to both voice and participation/action. We also drew on social cartography, which involves "[...] the art and science of mapping ways to see" and showing "[...] the profusion of narratives" that make up the social landscape (Paulston, 1996, p. 18). This approach draws on the metaphor of maps to sketch out how young people's experiences, perceptions, understandings and visions of the local and global bring together important knowledge that is often not part of academic, public and service discourse. Social cartographies are an analytic approach closely linked to phenomenology, which aims to explore personal experience and individuals' perceptions of their social worlds. In centring the knowledge, experience and, ultimately, the voices of young people, this report is extensive, and it includes a significant number of quotes from young people that provide context and depth.

Mapping Methodologies

114 Young people aged 16 - 26 surveyed

5 Youth workers interviewed

29 Interviews

Data collection timeline

DEC - FEB 2019	MAR 2020	APR - MAY 2020	JUN - JUL 2020	OCT - NOV 2020	JAN - MAR 2021
Australian Black Summer Bushfires	COVID-19 National lockdown begins for 6 weeks	COVID-19 National lockdown eases. George Floyd murdered by police	COVID-19 Greater Melbourne and Victoria reenters lockdown for 4 months	COVID-19 Gradual reopening of regional and metro Melbourne	COVID-19 Snap lockdowns in effect on state by state basis

Wave 1
n = 77
Surveys

Wave 2
n = 38
Surveys

n = 7
Interviews with young people

n = 14
Interviews with young people

n = 5
Interviews with youth workers

n = 5 in one arts-based workshop

Data collection snapshot and participant portrait

In our research we used a range of data collection methods (see Table 1), including:

A survey.

An online survey was administered, consisting of 60 questions in 9 areas (Demographics, Social Issues and Social Justice Orientation; Social Justice Action and Future Action; Youth Voice and Agency; Participation, Information, Consumption and Social Media). The survey was conducted in two waves: Wave 1 in December 2019 and Wave 2 in March 2021. These two timepoints allowed for some exploration of how young people's social issues and responses have/have not shifted as the pandemic progressed.

Arts-based workshops.

Three facilitators (two researchers and one youth worker) led 3-hour arts-based workshops. These were in-person and took place before COVID-19 restrictions. Each workshop included discussions and prompts and moved through three areas of focus with creative activities aligned with each one: (1) unpacking key social issues young people face, (2) critically exploring how these issues influence collective wellbeing and social cohesion and the role of young people in tackling these issues, and (3) taking action and creating change (connecting back to the pressing issues identified by young people). Young people drew and developed collages to capture personal experiences in relation to broader social issues. A young artist was present to visually document the key themes that were discussed (see Image 8 and Table 5 in the Findings and Discussion section).

Interviews (one on one) and focus groups (with two to three young people).

Interviews and focus groups were conducted with young people (aged 16 to 25) from across Victoria to gather their perspectives on social issues of importance and to provide insights into their sense of social justice, voice and capacity to act for social change. These interviews were semi-structured, guided by approximately 20 questions and lasting 60 to 90 minutes on Zoom. We also interviewed five professional staff who worked with young people in a range of capacities and contexts (see Table 2). These interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted online using Zoom.

Analysis of the quantitative (survey) data was undertaken by generating descriptive statistics such as means and percentages. Qualitative data was analysed through in-depth thematic analysis, following the six steps of Braun and Clarke (2006) including familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and defining themes and the write up.

29 young people (aged 16–26) participated in interviews (n = 5), small focus groups (n = 19) or arts-based workshops (n = 5).

Eight of the 29 young people were involved with and recruited through youth organisations. Many held positions as lived-experience consultants or volunteered for a particular social justice cause linked to their lives.

Table 1: Summary of the quantitative and qualitative data collected during the project

Quantitative Data Collected	Qualitative Data Collected
Survey Wave 1 77 young people aged 16–25	Five professional staff working with young people in local councils and organisations were interviewed.
Survey Wave 2 38 young people aged 16–25	Five professional staff working with young people in local councils and organisations were interviewed.

Table 2: Professional staff interviewed for the project

Pseudonym	Position	Organisation
Jorge	Youth Development Officer	Local Council (Metro Melbourne)
Pheobi	Senior Manager for Youth Engagement	Youth and Family Service Organisation (Metro Melbourne)
Sheniz	Project Administrator	Youth and Family Service Organisation (Metro Melbourne)
Sally	Youth Development Officer	Local Council (Rural)
Hazel	Multicultural Youth Worker	Multicultural Youth Service (Rural)

While a demographic profile often explores the composition of participants based on particular characteristics, we have taken heed of the recommendations from the young people we interviewed in this research. They implored researchers and those working with young people to consider their intersectionality and complexity when describing themselves, their experiences and other life circumstances. Intersectionality takes into account the many unique ways individuals define and develop a sense of self. There is a specific focus on understanding how multiple social identities and experiences converge and shape individual and collective experiences, and how these are also dependent on the environment or context (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Rodó-de-Zárate, 2017; Shields, 2008). Tables 3 and 4 present the demographic data on the participants involved in our study.

Table 3: Individual participant demographics from qualitative data gathering*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender and Sexual Orientation	Country of Birth	Religion	Self described cultural identity	1 or more parent born overseas	Education	Employment Status	Location
Alisa	23	F	Australia	Atheist	British/Macedonian	No	Completed university	Part-time	Metro Melbourne
Ben	23	M	Germany	Agnostic	German/Australian	Yes (Germany)	Full-time university student	Casual	Metro Melbourne
Sophia	23	F	Australia	Agnostic	Australian of Anglo-Italian descent	No	Full-time university student	Casual	Metro Melbourne
Talia	21	F	Samoa	Christian	Samoan	Yes	Full-time university student	Part-time	Greater Melbourne
Roshni	25	F	Australia	Baha'i	Iranian/Pakistani	Yes (Iran and Pakistan)	Completed university	Unemployed	Greater Melbourne
Kara	20	F	Australia	None	"I think I don't really have a culture or an identity, but I think I'm wanting one"	No	Full-time student TAFE	N/A	Greater Melbourne
Taylor	24	Non-binary	Australia	None	Mixed – Chilean/Maltese	Yes (Chile)	Completed University	Casual	Rural Vic
Zoey	21	F	Australia	None	Australian	No	TAFE student	Casual	Greater Melbourne
Lucas	26	M	Australia	None	Australian	No	N/A	Private consultant	Greater Melbourne
Faiza	18	F	Thailand	Islam	Thai/African	Yes (African and Thailand)	High School	Unemployed	Greater Melbourne
Sarah	24	F	Australia	None	Feels she doesn't have one	No	Deferred	N/A	Greater Melbourne
Luna	23	F	Philippines	None	"Third culture kid"	Yes (Philippines)	Completed BA	Volunteering	Metro Melbourne

Name	Age	Gender - Sexuality	Country	Religion	Ethnicity	Migrant	Education	Employment	Location
Shay	23	F - Queer/bisexual	Australia	Atheist	Caucasian/White Australian	Yes (South Africa)	Full-time Post grad student (Master's)	Casual	Metro Melbourne
Mia	24	F -Bisexual	Australia	Agnostic	White Australian	No	Part-time Honours student	Casual	Metro Melbourne
Eleni	20	F - Heterosexual	Australia	None	Greek-Australian	Yes (Greece)	Full-time undergrad	Casual	Metro Melbourne
Stacey	23	F - Heterosexual	Australia	Atheist	Vietnamese-Australian	Yes (Vietnam)	Recently completed university	Full-time	Metro Melbourne
Olivia	23	F - Heterosexual	Australia	None	Chinese-Croatian	Yes (China)	Not in education	Full-time	Metro Melbourne
Melissa	23	F- Pansexual/Queer	Australia	Agnostic	Italian-Australian	Yes (Italy)	Not in education	Casual	Metro Melbourne
Emmi	23	F -Straight	Australia	Non-religious	Anglo-Australian	No	Not in education; recently completed	Casual	Metro Melbourne
Genevive	22	F- Bisexual	Australia	Agnostic	Australian	No	Recently completed university/TAFE	Casual	Metro Melbourne
Sion	23	F- Queer	Australia	N/A	Anglo/Irish European Australian	No	Full-time university student	Not employed	Metro Melbourne
Ava	23	F-Heterosexual	Australia	Christian	North English and Australian	No	Full-time Master's Student	Casual	Metro Melbourne
Ivy	22	F-Heterosexual	Australia	Born Greek-Orthodox, now agnostic	Greek-Australian	Yes (Greece)	I am not currently engaged in education	Full-time	Metro Melbourne
Kayla	22	F- Bisexual	Australia	Atheist	White Australian	No	Full-time University Student	Casual	Metro Melbourne

Tom	18	They/Their	White	N/A	Australian	No	I am not currently engaged in education	Casual	Metro Melbourne
Summer	18	F (Trans)	Pasifika	N/A	Pasifika	Yes (New Zealand)	I am not currently engaged in education	Part-time	Metro Melbourne
Lachlan	17	M	Australia	N/A	Australian	No	High school student	Casual	Metro Melbourne
Yazmin	23	F	Somalia	Muslim	African Australian	Yes (Somalia)	Full time post-grad student	Part-time	Metro Melbourne
Faith	16	F	Aussie	N/A	Pasifika	Yes (New Zealand)	High school student	Casual	Metro Melbourne

*The colour groupings indicate participants who were in focus group interviews or arts-based workshops together.

In the next section, we draw on the numbers, descriptions and analyses young people provided throughout the research project to craft a picture of their dynamic identities, their experiences, the types of communities they locate themselves within, and the places and people they belong with at this point in time.

Being and becoming in a time of crisis

Young people of this generation have grown accustomed to navigating complexity, crisis and precarity. The neoliberal era has impacted young people through underemployment, the rise of global fascism and ongoing environmental degradation. Dramatic social change over the last decade has also formed a consistent backdrop for young people aged 16 to 25, with recent key social movements around marriage equality, climate change (spearheaded by Greta Thunberg), Black Lives Matter and gender inequality through the MeToo movement. It is important to acknowledge this context as it is the backdrop and context for which young people navigate social justice issues and figure out their position and place in the world and in their communities.

Young people aged 16 to 25 face a different set of challenges arising from transitions between school and post-secondary education and work, something which was identified across the data we gathered. Young people in our research saw this period as a time of transition, and as 'identity work' exploring values, commitments, education, career paths and friendship groups:

"I think young people, especially young adults, we're starting out either in our careers, like Alisa is, or we're finishing off our degrees, and it's still a process of trying to figure out what we want in this life … Young people in this age is [sic] experiencing it differently. And always the dreaded existential angst of ending up alone, things like that. We joke about them on the internet, we joke about them in person, but they're very real, like we genuinely struggle with that." (Ben, 23)

In this study the average age was 21 years and the total age range was 16 to 26 years of age. A couple of participants were still in secondary school and the majority were studying fulltime at university and/ or working.

Intersecting identities and experiences

When young people in this study were asked to describe their identities, many drew attention to plurality and complexity across gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and experiences that had shaped who they were, like being a survivor of abuse or experiencing migration. This plurality emerged among interviewed youth who are navigating non-normative sexual and ethnocultural identities from those participating in the interviews:

"I would say I'm not sure if you've heard the term 'third culture kid'. But, yeah, I grew up travelling with my parents and going to various international schools, so I would say it'd be like pretty global. I'd be Filipino through the culture of birth and my parents and then lived in Cambodia, Kenya, Fiji, New Zealand and now Australia, and Pakistan as well. So, it's quite relatively mixed from all the places that I've lived at." (Luna, 23)

"I identify as being mixed race because Dad's Chilean, Mum's family's [Maltese], so I'm a mixed baby. In terms of identity groups, I identify as Queer, I identify as Neurodivergent." (Taylor, 24)

Similarly, in the survey responses we asked young people to describe their cultural identity/background:

"A real mix. Ethnically Dutch and Mauritian and grew up overseas so very much a third culture kid, but leaning towards Australian now being back at university here."

"Australian, New Zealand, Samoan and Tongan."

"I'm not sure."

The word clouds below (Images 1 and 2) include some of the responses participants provided to this question in the survey.

Image 1: How would you describe your cultural identity/ background? (Survey Wave 1)

Image 2: How would you describe your cultural identity/ background? (Survey Wave 2)

Young people identified and discussed a number of life experiences as an important part of who they are. Later in this report we will explore young people's concerns about particular issues; these lived experiences often link closely with their focus on voice and action. This included lived experiences of:

- family violence
- out-of-home care (including foster care)
- sexual assault
- homelessness
- economic precarity and poverty
- un/employment instability
- being middle class
- being the carer of a parent
- mental illness
- drug use
- racism and exclusion (bullying)
- migration and being a 'third culture kid'
- being an international student in Australia.

Education and employment circumstances

Young people identified that they had been struggling with issues of underemployment, specifically having multiple short-term casual jobs, many of which were lost when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Australia in March 2020. The implications for this instability and the possibilities for young people's futures are discussed in more detail in the Findings section, but many young people described themselves as being "the jack of all trades" and needing "up to five jobs" in order to sustain themselves and, in some cases, those around them.

The demographic information gathered from the survey and the interviews indicated that the vast majority of participants were working casually or part time (37% and 52% respectively). Survey respondents were overwhelmingly engaged in full-time study at university (an average of 87% across both waves); however, these numbers were lower for the qualitative group with 41% in full-time study, 24% having completed university/ TAFE and 21% not engaged in education (see Table 3).

Belonging, connection and participation in groups and organisations

Young people in this study spoke extensively about the importance of feeling a sense of belonging – specifically ties to particular interest or identity groups as sites of belonging – as well as what hinders and facilitates this. They identified a number of reasons why they felt at times like they did not belong to their peer group or as part of broader society:

"We're all looking for where we belong, we're all looking for that group that we belong to." (Lucas, 26)

"I think that people blame young people for individualism a lot, which I think is ridiculous, because from the communities I'm involved in, I see a real want for community. We want to connect and support each other through what we share and through what we have in common." (Taylor, 24)

Some young people feel that particular identities or experiences have excluded them from belonging or having a particular anchoring identity. When asked about cultural background or an important aspect of identity, one young woman said:

"I think it's hard to have a culture and an identity if your family's kind of like a bit broken or it looks different to other people's families. I think I don't really have a culture or an identity, but I think I'm wanting one. Like, I desperately want to be a part of something, and I think that's why I really love [program name] because that's my culture, that's my identity. I can have my [program name] family and get along with other young people." (Harper, 20)

"...when I felt that I don't belong is because of my English, it wasn't as strong as others. But as soon as it started to improve, and I started to join multiple community groups locally, then I started making more friends, and I got more confident in joining the friend group, making friends with peers from different backgrounds." (Faiza, 18)

The survey data also highlighted some of the most important communities young people belong to. We asked participants "What are the two or three most important communities you belong to?" and their responses are shown in Images 3 and 4.

Image 3: The most important communities young people belong to (Survey Wave 1)

Image 4: The most important communities young people belong to (Survey Wave 2)

Key issues of personal importance

Young people interviewed for the study identified a number of different groups, organisations and networks they belonged to in general, but also specifically related to the social justice work they were doing. These included:
- Arts collectives and groups
- Queer groups
- Writing groups
- Unions
- Sexual education awareness raising
- Youth organisations advocating around issues of family violence, abuse, out-of-home care, racism and LGBTQI rights (e.g. Y-Change, Centre for Multicultural Youth, Berry Street, local council youth initiatives and committees)
- Youth incarceration advocacy groups

In addition, young people also identified specific issues of importance for them in terms of their experience in advocacy and activist work; some drew on personal experiences in doing this work. These issues are pictured in Image 5.

Image 5: Issues of importance for young people in relation to advocacy and activism

Findings and Discussion

Young people's critical readings of their social worlds

To preface this section on social issues, we want to draw attention to young people's critical readings of the social world and their place within it. The young people who participated in our project are diverse across their identities and experiences; we note the complexity they bring to these readings, being clear that they see the dynamic power relations that shape our society and how different forms of privilege can impact individuals and communities. While we present these social issues through the lens of broad topic themes, it is important to recognise that young people discussed and analysed these issues with a strong focus on:

- the complexity of social issues and recognition that they are intertwined and cyclical
- historicity – tracing back how some of these 'issues' have their roots in historical processes that have created an architecture of inequality across a number of axes
- public discourse and narratives – how the narratives of the media and politicians play a role in creating particular understandings of social issues and considering how this has shaped the lives of young people
- power and privilege – how they disadvantage particular individuals and communities, and operate through particular institutions and systems (i.e., structural intersectionality[1]).

The young people we surveyed were very confident in their understanding of global, national and, in particular, community issues. As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, two thirds of the group felt that they understood political issues easily and were particularly confident that they understood issues in their local community/neighbourhood.

[1]Structural intersectionality is Crenshaw's (1991) term for the ways in which multiple social systems intersect and shape people's experiences and, in particular, how they serve to oppress particular individuals and communities.

Figure 1: Young people's self-reported understanding of social issues – Survey Wave 1
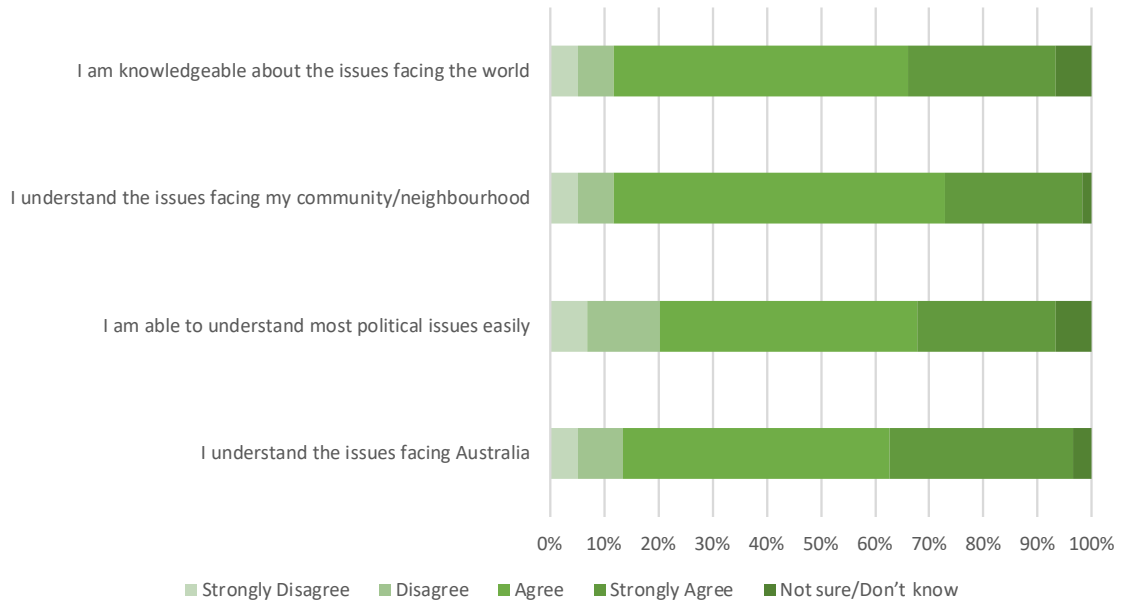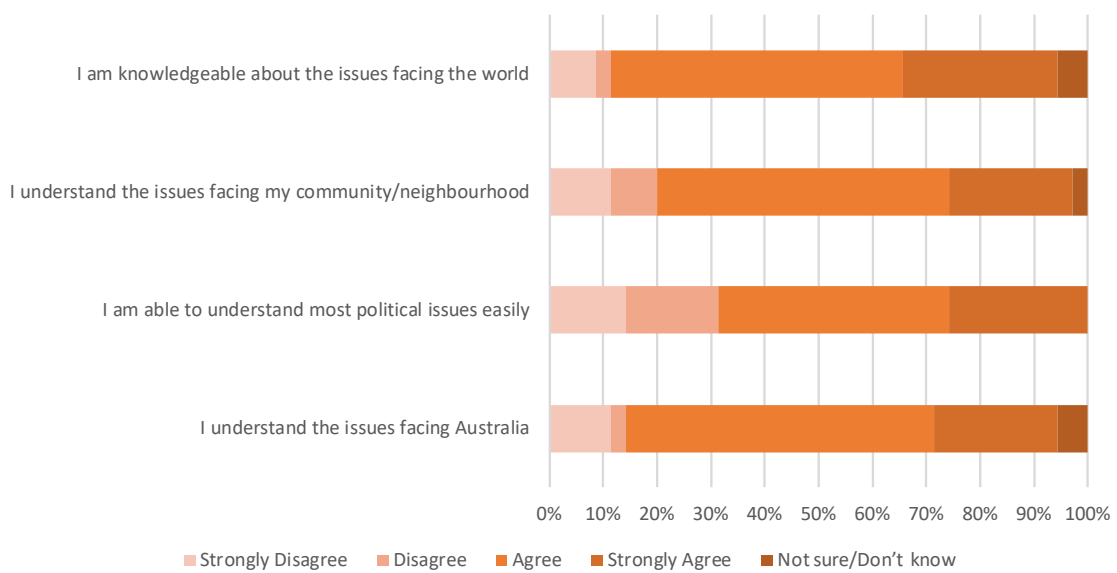

Figure 2: Young people's self-reported understanding of social issues – Survey Wave 2

The intersections and complexity of social issues were captured visually in the 'eco-collages' created by young people in arts-based workshops exploring wellbeing and social cohesion. Image 6 captures social issues from the standpoint of Yazmin, a 23-year-old from a Somali background who migrated to Australia as a child with her parents. Yazmin highlighted concerns about race, gender, belonging, wellbeing, the environment and modern forms of colonialism, highlighting issues of racial discrimination faced by Adam Goodes and shown in his recent documentary, The Australian Dream where he talks about belonging and race. She pointed to the "colonial impact that Britain had on Kashmir and their sovereignty," the protests in Hong Kong, recent climate strikes, the lack of visibility in Australia of Aboriginal culture and language and how "all these things that are happening in our world affect our wellbeing and have a direct impact on us." From her perspective as a public health student with a focus on social justice she said "when we look at the world events that are happening around us, it's really distressing to see so many people around the world that don't get to live their lives to their best potential."

COVID-19 Spotlight – Trust in the government

As part of the Wave 2 data collection in early 2021 we asked young people the extent to which they trusted our current two levels of government on a scale of 1 to 100.

The Victorian (State) Government

59.42

0   100
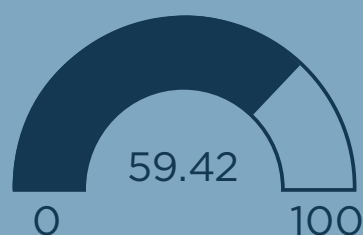
The Australian (Federal) Government

45.96

0   100
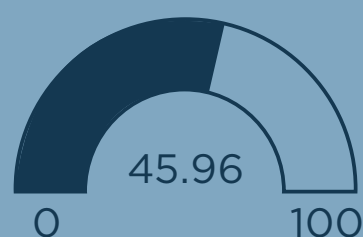
Image 7 narrates the nexus between the environment and wellbeing from the vantage point of Summer, who described herself as a transgender woman. She pointed to an issue that was consistently identified by young people interviewed for this project: being able to 'slow down, tune in', be mindful and to rest. Her collage also points to the importance of nature, connecting to animals and expressing creativity.

Image 7: Summer's eco-collage on social issues and wellbeing

The arts-based workshop was documented by a young artist named Faith who visually captured key conversation threads and emerging themes; these were shown to the participants to confirm their discussions and reflections (see Image 8 and Table 5), particularly those linked to individual and collective wellbeing. This drawing, whilst capturing one workshop serves to show the dynamic dialogue that took place, showing a discussion about key social issues, the role of social media and what is needed to move towards collect wellbeing.

Image 8: Artist depiction of conversation threads and themes during the arts-based workshop

Table 4: Artist interpretation of threads and themes during the arts-based workshop

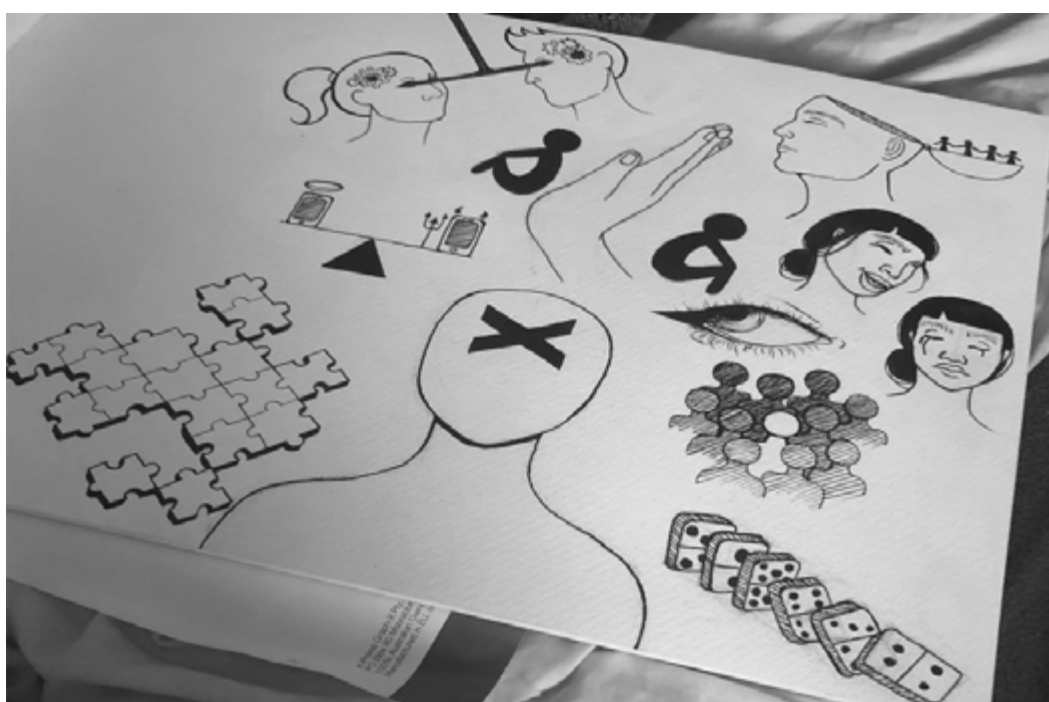| Image	Artist Interpretation
The falling dominos	The dominos in the image reflect the discussion about the ongoing impact of colonisation with the artist "talking about what happened in the past with Aboriginals… [causing] a domino effect".
A person with an "X" on the head	The image of the person with the cross on their head is a representation of people who are "not open-minded; they're close-minded".
Hand in the middle of two people	In this image "there is a big hand that's blocking two people who are on their phones, from each other" showing how our focus on technology can lead to separation and disconnection.
Mobile phones balancing on a seesaw	In this image of the two mobile phones balancing on a seesaw, which Faith, the artist describes as "then there's going to be a balancing thing of a phone being a devil and a then phone being an angel, because of what you've said; it's got negative parts and positive parts."
Happy and sad faces	This image shows two people's emotional expressions, it represents "talking about mental illness … you can be smiling or you can be sad."
Puzzle with missing pieces	This unfinished puzzle reflects the discussion about wellbeing and that young people not always being included in the decisions. The artist noted, "I've got puzzle pieces because it's not a finished puzzle, like this piece is missing, society [is] still missing gaps to help young people be able to grow up and feel safe."
One person in a crowd	This image shows someone "feeling alone in a crowd", reflecting the discussion about social isolation – people not being connected socially or emotionally.
Two people making eye contact	This image reflects the dynamics in the workshop discussion. Faith noted "So, at the start [of the workshop] everyone was talking to each other, getting to know each other, and everyone was giving each other eye contact, and I think that makes your brain function a bit more, makes you want to listen a bit more."
Open head, with people holding hands	The motivation for drawing was articulated by Faith, "when we were doing the guidelines for the discussion you said being open minded, so I've drawn an open mind and then having people holding hands, being connected."

Throughout the following sections we weave together findings from the quantitative and qualitative data to further illustrate young people's beliefs, analysis and connections to social issues, where and how they work to develop their voices, and how they take action and participate in social change efforts.

The findings are presented in four sections that also contain themes.

Section 1: Mapping social justice issues

- Economic inequality and youth under/employment
- Mental health, social isolation and a breakdown of collective wellbeing
- Climate change and environmental destruction
- Whiteness, racism and discrimination
- Gender, sexuality and heteronormativity
- Sites, spaces and resources for understanding social issues

Section 2: Cultivating voice, social action and change strategies

- Cultivating voice with self and other
- Brave spaces: Growth of voice through dialogue
- Being heard: Where voices are received and where they resonate
- Mapping participation in social change
- Activist burnout: Choosing between feeding yourself and fighting for a better world

Section 3: Institutional conditions for developing and supporting youth voice

- Consciousness raising: Young people naming their experiences
- "We shouldn't have to change ourselves": Accepting the whole young person
- Organisational conditions for elevating youth voices: Mentors and creating an inclusive space
- Organisational culture and barriers to youth participation
- 'Fluffy co-design' and the uneven terrain of youth participation and voice

Section 4: One unbroken note: Young people reimagining solidarities and futures

- Sustaining one's self and collective care in social justice work
- Working alongside young people for social change

1) Mapping social justice issues

Mirroring national surveys undertaken with other youth cohorts, we asked participants in our study to identify their top three issues of concern for Australia, for their community and for young people.

Mental health was identified as the top issue of concern for the nation, for young people's communities and for young people.

At a societal level, participants identified mental health, environmental issues and racism and discrimination as the primary issues of concern. For young people specifically, participants identified mental health, alcohol and drugs and unemployment as the most important issues. Figure 3 shows the issues concerning young people in regard to Australia, both before (in February 2019) and during (in March 2021) the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 4 presents their top issues of concern 12 months after the pandemic began in Australia (in March 2021) – for the country, for the community and for young people.
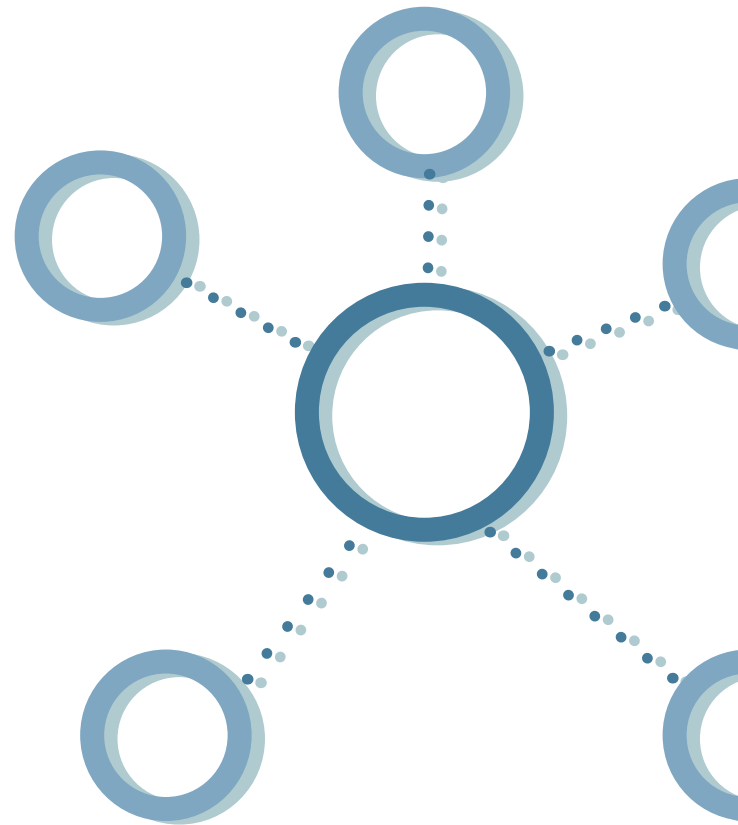
Figure 3: Young people's top issues of concern for Australia (before and during the COVID-19 pandemic)
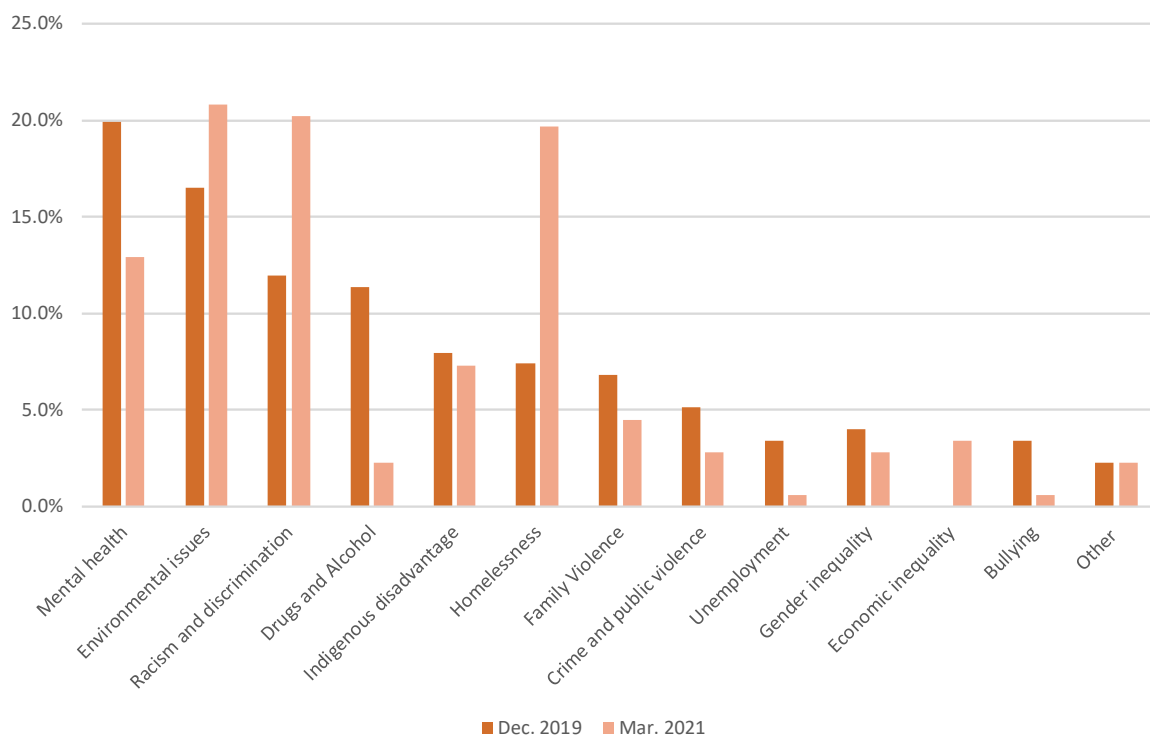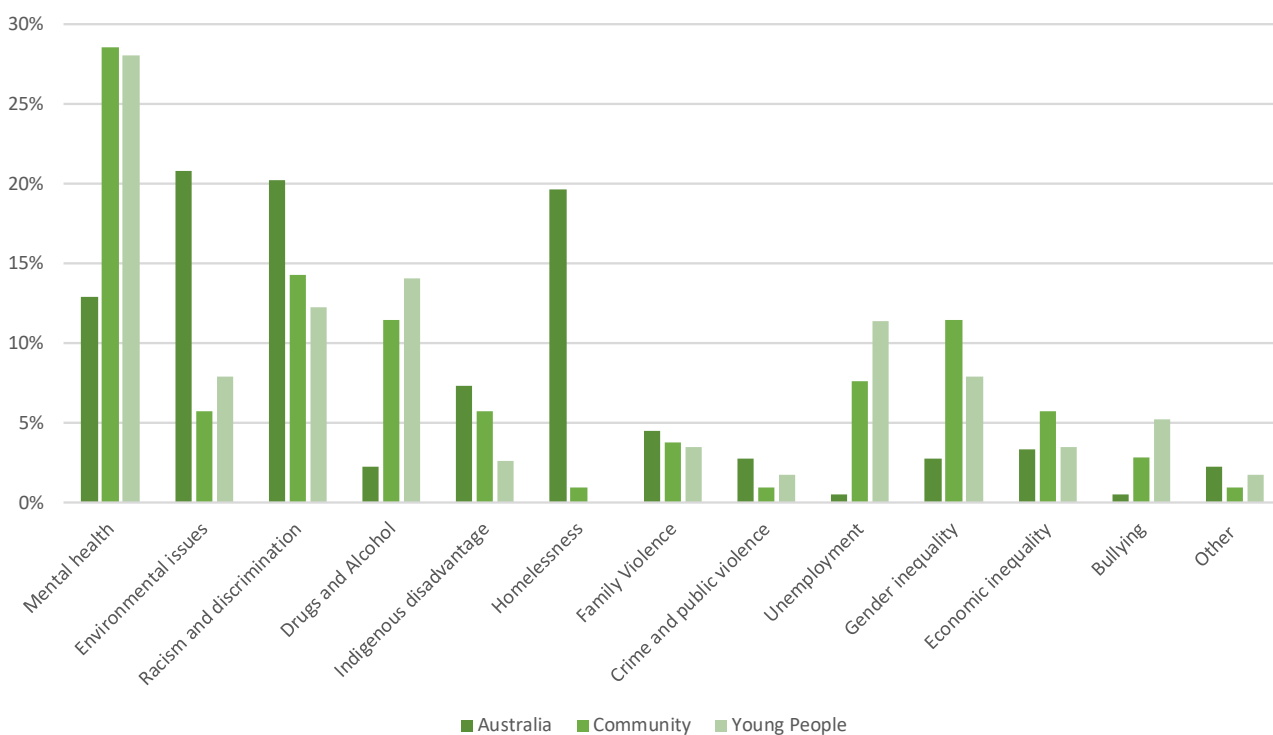

Figure 4: Young people's top issues of concern for Australia, the community and youth (as at March 2021)

Interestingly, while alcohol and drug issues were ranked highly by young people who took the survey, it was not discussed in interviews in relation to young people or their communities.

During interviews, young people also identified the social issues that were most important for them. These included:

• economic inequality and youth under/employment

• mental health, social isolation and a breakdown of collective wellbeing

• climate change and environmental destruction

• whiteness, racism and discrimination

• gender, sexuality and heteronormativity

• sites, spaces and resources for understanding social issues.

In the interviews, young people were also able to identify the key relationships between particular issues, such as those that were 'upstream' like capitalism (corporate greed), colonisation and patriarchy. They saw these issues as creating different forms of inequality that can lead to 'downstream' issues such as youth underemployment and casualisation of the workforce, oppression of Indigenous Australians and experiences of gender inequity (including family violence).

Economic inequality and youth under/employment

Young people discussed under/unemployment as a major issue facing Australian youth today. Specific aspects of this issue that were brought up have clear links to youth un/underemployment, including struggling with the high cost of living, bureaucratic barriers to support and the systemic failures of Centrelink for many young Australians. A number of young people also discussed work culture as being problematic with a focus on 'outputs' rather than wellbeing and connection as it valued profits over people. Young people also felt that the work culture our society leads to social isolation and is linked to the mental health crisis among Australian youth. Even those young people doing activist work in organisations with a strong social justice focus felt that productivity was prioritised over relationships and that the wellbeing of young people was not an important consideration in those spaces. In addition, young people also spoke extensively about the gendered forms of economic inequality faced by women of all ages.

Capitalism and poverty

Woven through their discussion of economic precarity and youth unemployment were understandings of the root causes, particularly a capitalist system that has led to forms of economic exploitation and casualisation of the workforce. Both of these patterns of inequality have disproportionately affected young people who are more likely to work in industries where this type of corruption has been common recently (e.g., hospitality and retail):

"I think to the heart of it, both of these issues come from the prioritisation of profit over people. Governments and institutions, they support, more than anyone else, big business, they support – through tax breaks and stuff like that, and that means that people can cut corners and destroy the environment and not be held accountable. It means that people can pay their workers an amount they cannot live off, and it's fine because the government says it's fine. I think that's the core of all of the issues – not all of them, but a lot of the issues that young people – even just people in general, people who aren't part of the wealthiest brackets, are facing." (Taylor, 24)

Taylor also discussed how the casualisation of employment has put a lot of pressure on young people, with few avenues or options for recourse:

"Well, I do think that part of the economic uncertainty that young people face, and this is something very unique – well, not unique to young people, but they're disproportionately young people that have to deal with the casualisation of the workforce, that is something that is far newer in our society. The majority of young people, in the workforce, are on casual contracts; I had five casual jobs [before the pandemic]." (Taylor, 24)

As casual workers, young people have fewer rights and benefits and are not able to campaign against exploitative practices. Taylor said that one practice many young people experienced is being given fewer shifts without reason, even though at times they were possibly being discriminated against. Alisa echoed these points:

"I guess the casualisation of the workforce, and just that insecurity. And I know before this, every week there was, 'Oh, this restaurant is underpaying its workers', and it's like, 'Oh, this is the norm now every year'." (Alisa, 23)

"I do a lot of odd jobs. One of my main jobs is working in a local toy library in Maribyrnong. And I really enjoy it; it's a really good community job. I also work as a nanny in the local area, and I do some odd jobs like photography work, and just whatever is going." (Alisa, 23)

Both Taylor and Alisa went on to trace the uncertainty that young people face as a result of hegemony – power that is consolidated among particular wealthy elites and politicians. Alisa identified that this power remains unchanged in Australian politics: "…even when there's reshuffles of power, it reshuffles horizontally not vertically". Shay, who identifies as a Marxist, noted the complex intersections of structural oppression linked to race and gender and their ties to capitalism. Her statement reflects a sense of hopelessness in uprooting these systems and beginning anew:

"I think like there's no way we can really tackle things like sexism or like entrenched racism within the capitalist system that we're currently in which is like something that I'm still grappling with because like the thought of overthrowing the whole system is like extremely daunting and like I can't even imagine a world that isn't capitalist, you know?" (Shay, 23)

A number of young people in our study identified how this would affect their futures, particularly making it impossible for them to do things other generations could, like own a home or support a family. It also affects their ability to reimagine a future where gendered and race-based discrimination and violence are not eroding wellbeing and social relations. In the next section, it becomes clear that poor mental health – the most significant and commonly identified social issue by young people – is at, least partly, the result of heightened anxiety and uncertainty about the economic and environmental future.

Institutionalised gender inequality and employment

Young people expressed concerns about gender inequality in the workforce and identified the gender pay gap as a social issue. Currently, the national gender pay gap in Australia is 14.2%, meaning the full-time average weekly income for women is 14.2% less than their male counterparts (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). Sophia explained that she had made a career choice that will negatively impact her opportunity to make money:

"I want to do something that changes the world in my life, but also knowing that working for NGOs [non-government organisations], you're not going to make as much money as working for different organisation might." (Sophia, 23)

Melissa attributed the gender pay gap in the same occupation to the unequal number of men in senior leadership positions:

"[The] first thing that comes to mind when I think of gender issues, is the pay gap. Even with [company name], which is a really progressive company, there's still a pay gap, or sorry no, there's still a gap in seniority. There's a gap in how many people are at the lower levels and how many executives are male." (Melissa, 23)

Melissa further argued that the gender pay gap is driven by educational attainment and gender-based discrimination:

"There were a few women that approached me on LinkedIn, most of them did arts degrees. I feel like arts degrees are mainly a female-dominated space. And I feel like, not only because they did arts degrees but because they were women, they had less of a chance at getting into that industry. And that was just really disheartening." (Melissa, 23)

Shay rejected the argument that women make 'voluntary' career choices that are low paying and argued that the real issue is that female-dominated professions are lower paying because they are not valued equally to male-dominated professions:

"Everyone blames the gap ... on choice? Even, like, the pay gap, 'Oh women naturally choose lower paying jobs like nurses'. And it's like, maybe if you valued nurses, they would be paid the same. Like, is an engineer more beneficial to our society than a nurse? Arguably not." (Shay, 23)

Alisa explained that working "for free sometimes" is prevalent and normalised in the community and childcare sector and that, because these are female-dominated occupations, it is the labour of women that is particularly being exploited:

"I think an issue that I've encountered in my line of work as a woman, especially in the community sector, which is very dominated by women, is I think there's this expectation that we would work for free sometimes. So, there's an expectation that even though we're paid to do some work, there's some work that, it's not overtly communicated, but it's like, 'Oh, can you help out with this?' And it's kind of unpaid work. And I'm like, 'Oh, I don't really want to do free work. I want to get paid to do work'. And I think that's quite a big issue in the community and also childcare services, I think, because traditionally they weren't really seen as work; they were more home duties." (Alisa, 23)

Overall, these quotes demonstrate that young people identify the gender pay gap as a systemic institutionalised issue that is shaped by enduring gender stereotypes and discrimination.

COVID-19 spotlight: Employment and the pandemic

COVID-19 created space to see the broader picture by slowing things down

Fearful for health working in frontline jobs

Work insecurity and increased political participation in context of Black Lives Matter movement and more broadly

How has the COVID-19 affected young people's economic situation?

Need to continue to financially support young people (most are precarious workers)

Many jobs won't open back up to young people when this is over

"We are in this together" – we are not on equal ground (with politicians/ celebrities)

The COVID-19 pandemic was seen by young people to have a magnifying effect, putting them in unsafe situations as essential workers or losing their jobs in hospitality, which had a direct impact on their mental health. In addition, many noted that the pandemic raised awareness of the precarity of work for young people, who are primarily in casual positions and who lost their jobs and were therefore ineligible for government coronavirus support payments. While concerns around gender inequality emerged as an area of concern which we attend to in the section above, it is important to point out that many young people also expressed the gendered impact of COVID-19 on employment. Sophia explained:

"There are way more women involved in casual labour and so that has an influence in terms of who COVID-19 is most likely to be harming." (Sophia, 23)

Shay also reflected on the differential impact of COVID-19 on male and female academics:

"Since COVID came out, like, all of these old white men were like 'this is the perfect time', like and actually tried to say that COVID was beneficial for their careers because they just got time to write. They didn't have to deal with like people interrupting them and stuff and then some dude had the audacity to be like 'interestingly, women are not achieving the same output in COVID'." (Shay, 23)

Mental health, social isolation and a breakdown of collective wellbeing

The survey data provides a broad mapping of these issues that lines up with other studies with a younger cohort (see the Mission Australia Annual Youth Survey, for example). Mental health continues to be ranked as the top concern for young people, their communities and the nation. In discussions, young people explicitly wanted a voice and more power on this issue and how it is addressed. As reflected in Table 6, young people identified a number of different aspects of this issue that they believe are important. Social media was noted as a source of stress for young women we interviewed, particularly in promoting unrealistic standards of beauty and health.

In relation to the mental health system, young people discussed concerns around access and seeking help, and the need to tailor services and support for different age cohorts, cultural groups and young men.

Consistent with their discussion of other social issues, young people identified particular root causes; in relation to mental health, there was attention to societal structures, value systems and ideologies and how these play out for young people in their everyday lives. There were also a number of times that young people spoke about the breakdown of collective wellbeing and the absence of a sense of community as contributing to mental health issues. Young people also spoke extensively about the link between gender and mental health, touching on the role of social media, but also stigma faced by young men. In the next sub-section, we focus more on the link to mental health, and in Section 4 we discuss young people's understandings and ideas for restoring wellbeing through social justice work.

Social isolation and disconnection

Young people consistently referred to the ways in which they felt a sense of social isolation or loneliness, which was a contributor to poor mental health. During a discussion of social issues, Taylor pointed to the rise of mental health problems and a breakdown of collective wellbeing for young people being a direct result of a capitalistic system where there is a "prioritisation of profit over people [and] governments and institutions support big business over everyone else". The participants felt that COVID-19 exposed this issue for many people:

"We need to start with less focus on work; COVID's really thrown that into the light. When we structure our entire lives around work, something like this happens and everyone's fucked. You know what I mean?" (Taylor, 24)

Luna, similar to Taylor, discussed society's focus on time, work and productivity, alongside limited attention to collective care, even in non-profits where there is a social justice and humanitarian mission. Luna's life experience gave her insights into different cultural contexts, she described herself as "Filipina through the culture of birth and my parents" and then said that she had lived in Cambodia, Kenya, Fiji, New Zealand and now Australia, and Pakistan. In her opinion, the cultural norms of surface-level pleasantries she had observed in Australia, leave little room for people to be heard and seen beyond their work role. Her comments also reflect the realities of many young people we interviewed, who are balancing multiple casual jobs, education or training, and who have significant family or other responsibilities and find themselves with little time or spaces to connect with others.

This attribution of mental health issues to societal and systemic failures lines up with literature that states that neoliberalism and capitalism lead to an erosion of social connection and community-making and can result in social suffering (Moncrieff, 2014). Drawing on Bourdieu (1999), Frost and Hoggett (2008) point out that social suffering is "the lived experience of the social damage inflicted in late capitalist societies on the least powerful and the intra psychic and relational wounds that result" (p. 440). In our study, Luna pointed out the lack of attention to creating connections within organisations but also within the city of Melbourne:

"I think of a lack of time. I feel like Victoria – or maybe the city life here in Melbourne's quite – there's a lot of hustling, a lot of multi-tasking and a lot of hard work in what people are doing that doesn't give much time to fostering and really connecting with the people in your communities, go in for a meeting and it's like, 'Okay. Let's talk about this heavy thing. Follow this agenda and go through it and we'll feel some stuff', and then it'll be the end of two hours and it's time to skedaddle and do that next thing." (Luna, 23)

Luna believed that one of the main causes of social isolation is the focus on work over wellbeing, specifically that we are judged by our outputs or what we can accomplish:

"So, yeah, I just – I feel like sometimes we're measuring each other up for what output we have and what we're doing and all these measures that people put onto one another without having the time to care for one another, to put in that time to care about what's currently happening in that person's life and maybe family life or relationship life. There's not – you have your tight knit group of friends for that. It's not really to your activist-y friends or to your – these people that you vaguely know. There's no time to build those connections and I think it's a pity when there is this boundary. It's also like pleasantries. There're lots of like, 'Hi, how are you?'. And apparently that's like you're not really asking how are you, you're just asking – it's more like a greeting." (Luna, 23)

A lack of social connection, isolation and, consequently, increased struggles with mental health, were also amplified by young people from particular identity groups, who faced marginalisation. For example, young people from newly arrived and migrant backgrounds often face language barriers that can lead to isolation on top of trauma as a result of their own or their family's experiences. Faiza explained:

"Yeah, it could be also like intergenerational trauma. Like, the people whose parents are already here, they're used to Australia, they have friends who are here. But people who move here, they have to go out and make their new friends, or either choose to stick with their own communities and somehow like isolate themselves from others. And, that kind of makes them like, they get so depressed not being able to branch out and just going beyond what they know." (Faiza, 18)

Challenges accessing services and cumulative disadvantage were also raised as issues for young people facing mental health challenges in rural areas:

"Living in a rural [or regional] area [has] some disadvantages but people that are living in a very rural, rural area, mental health [services] for those people is non-existent … they have 10 hurdles to get over, rural people have an additional 10 so they have 20 issues to gain access, so they just struggle or have more hurdles to overcome than city people, but of course they both have their [access] issues." (Zoey, 21)

In the arts-based workshop, which took place before COVID-19 intensified social isolation in Australia, loneliness was identified as a significant threat to our individual and collective wellbeing. One young person demystified loneliness as something not only the elderly face, but that also affects young people, who often feel unable to have meaningful social connections:

"I had the idea of loneliness being a threat to our wellbeing, because we hear a lot about how often it's very young people that are affected by loneliness, and very elderly people that are affected by loneliness. So, I think because of things like mental health and just not feeling socially connected with the people around you, that results to a lot of people feeling lonely and retreating to themselves, and not having any outlet or anyone they feel comfortable talking through things." (Summer, 18)

Rigid gender scripts and men's mental health

Alongside isolation, young people identified connections between rigid scripts around masculinity and mental health. They noted that these scripts prevent men from speaking about their feelings and being vulnerable. The following extract from Olivia is an exemplar of these discussions:

"I have so many men in my life who are just failing from the masculinity that they've been brought up on, and don't know how to navigate that feeling. And that spans from men who are my age to men who are 70 years old that I know, or 60, and they just don't know how to deal with their emotions, never really developed their emotional quotient, don't really know how to deal with their life, and it's really so sad that I see it so much." (Olivia, 23)

Similarly, Sophia drew on the archetype of the 'macho man' to describe the men in her family. The macho man is a colloquial concept used to characterise men who perform masculinity in ways that are bound and restricted by hegemonic understandings of masculinity – for example, as stoic, dominant and in control (MacDiarmid et al., 2017).

"I think that also ties into the macho man Australian identity side of it where it's like, 'emotions are bad, ra, ra, ra...' I think the fact that – this is what I experience anyway, the fact that Australian men are taught not to cry and that that's weakness and everything." (Sophia, 23)

Sophia also noted that girls and women also learn that expressing emotions is a sign of weakness and often supress them so that they didn't become the 'emotional woman' or seen as 'hysterical'. Ben explained that these hegemonic expressions of masculinity, which govern and limit men, are detrimental to men's wellbeing. He drew the link between hegemonic masculinity and men being at greater risk of suicide and suicide ideations. Ben's observations on the link between hegemonic masculinities and increased psychological conflict among men is in line with existing research (e.g. King et al., 2020; Pirkis et al., 2017; see also Gill et al., 2014). Ben further reflected on the difficulty of transcending these understandings of masculinity; despite his conscious efforts, during the course of the interview he continued to be bound by dominant and oppressive understandings of masculinity:

"Perhaps one of the biggest social issues that ties in with mental health; the leading demographic of suicide is young men, and it's because we just don't talk about our feelings. Even now, I'm trying to be open, but like I'm guarding certain things, just out of habit, and I don't necessarily know how to stop that. Not knowing that this particular friend is struggling until you're attending their funeral. And you're like, 'Well, what happened?'." (Ben, 23)

Representation, social media and mental health

As a young person who identifies as queer, 'mixed race' and neurodivergent, Taylor identified Australia's 'diversity problem' – a lack of representation and depth of portrayal in media and organisations – as a persistent unwillingness to acknowledge and show intersectional identities. They stated that this, in addition to services not being set up to support particular groups of young people experiencing marginalisation, contributes to poor mental health among many young people:

"I think a lot of young people experience terrible mental health because of the world we live in, and I think the fact that those systems aren't set up to be very supportive is a massive issue. I'm probably biased as a person with many adjectives, but I think identity and respect for various identity groups has always been an issue, and it's an issue for many generations, not just young people, and that's very important as well." (Taylor, 24)

Many young women also spoke about the impact of narrow and unrealistic representations of beauty on mental health, particularly body image:

"Honestly, mental health and body image [were] probably my two biggest issues growing up. And I guess it's kind of confronting to be honest about this with people, but I feel like it's important to end stigma. I was so anxious after I left school. I had Instagram in the last few years of high school and then, when we left high school, I deleted it because I realised that it was just shit. It just made me stressed, it made me think there's all these things that I should be doing with my life. I realised how much I was spending even reading through magazines, and obsessing over healthy meals and healthy diets, and I was just constantly looking up stuff to do with that." (Ava, 23)

Ivy's account demonstrates the impact of gender and race on her mental health:

"I think it began for me when I was 13, and a Victoria's Secret. Miranda Kerr, then I became obsessed with her. Like I genuinely became obsessed. I was like, 'She's beautiful, I want to be her.' But I'm 5'2" and I'm curvy and I don't look anything like her. So, I started to Google, 'Will I grow to 5'11?'. <laughter> My mum was like, 'No, we're all 5'3 and from Greece and a lot smaller'. I'm like, 'This is not going to happen'. But I was just desperate to be tall and thin, and it just started from there, and then just Instagram and Facebook had all the models and stuff." (Ivy, 22)

Given that mental health was such a significant issue for young people, there were many dimensions discussed in interviews. These are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Unpacking the issue of mental health from young people's perspectives

Issue	Description	Key insight
The role of technology and social media	Social media cannot 'sustain' you	Technology is great and very useful, but it cannot replace in-person connections
	Gender and body image	Big social media corporations control representations (about women, etc.) and it is damaging to mental health
		Social media portrays particular beauty ideals and creates stress and obsessing over body image and diet
		Social media is a source of stress in that it constructs and normalises unrealistic lifestyles and expectations which young women cannot achieve and which also distracts from exploring 'other' aspects of one's life
	Space of affirmation	For young people with a range of identities (i.e. transgender)
Sociocultural norms and power dynamics	Lack of focus on building connections and care	There is a boundary to connection (it's just pleasantries, no time for depth)
		Melbourne life (hustling/multitasking and busy) leaves us unable to make connections
		Social justice organisations don't often foster deeper connection or place importance on relationships – they focus on 'the cause'
	Rigid gender scripts	Social norms around gender negatively impact mental health of men and women
	Youth perspectives excluded	Young people are left out of mental health messages and campaigns by politicians and the media
Services not fit for purpose	Ignore intersectionality	The systems are not supportive of young people's identities and experiences
	Access for rural young people	Young people from rural areas face difficulty with access and there is not a diverse range of services
	Do not account for cultural complexities	Services are based on a one-size-fits-all approach and a homogenisation of 'diversity' and cultural communities in mental health services (i.e. all Pacific Islanders without attention to diversity within groups)
		Seek mental health support from GP that is not from (cultural) community because of confidentiality
		Need for psychologist from own cultural community that is young, can relate and ensures confidentiality
	Need to reach young men	Young men are staying silent and it links to higher rates of suicide
		Some young men are seeking help more but there are not enough services for them
Seeking help	Seeking help in schools	Mental health support provided by teachers in high school, young people not comfortable speaking to them

COVID-19 spotlight: Young people on the pandemic and mental health

"And always the dreading existential angst of ending up alone, things like that. We joke about them on the internet, we joke about them in person, but they're very real, like we genuinely struggle with that. And in a time like this, it's very easy to fall back on, 'What's the point? … What's the point of trying to achieve this goal if it can all be taken away from us in an instant?'. So, it's very easy to fall back into that doom and gloom, because you can't just call someone and go, 'Can you come over? I'm feeling crappy'. It's the case of video chat, or nothing." (Ben, 23)

"Mental health has declined because everyone is losing their jobs." (Kara, 20)

"Everyday ways of connecting are lost due to social distancing, that impacts mental health of young people." (Stacy, 23)

"COVID is particularly challenging to those who have had stable life." (Taylor, 24)

"COVID has shifted focus from [environmental to mental health] on social media and awareness raising." (Ben, 23)

"Social interaction on technology doesn't sustain you." (Alisa, 23)

"Mass unemployment and more competition so it's harder to get a job and that really affects mental health." (Taylor, 24)

"COVID has exacerbated loneliness and existing mental health challenges." (Sarah, 24)

"Stress and anxiety among high school students working from home is a big issue. Access to internet and family stress and depression in the household." (Faiza, 18)

"Year 12 stresses plus COVID – it is making us sad and depressed." (Faiza, 18)

Climate change and environmental destruction

The majority of young people interviewed for this research identified the importance of environmental issues, particularly climate change. They felt that because they are young and will be most affected by this issue in coming decades, that it is not surprising they are leading the change on this issue and drawing on inspiration from other young people:

"We are in a very volatile age." (Ben, 23)

"I think climate change is kind of the first [social issue] that comes to mind when you're talking about young people; they are the biggest community that's going to be affected, and every subsequent generation. It's more and more pressing as an issue because it's your future." (Sophia, 23)

"I think like with Greta Thunberg, like she's the young lady in Germany, like the one with the environmental issue, climate change. Like yeah, young people should have a say in that, because we've seen what young people can do with our voices. And, more things relating to social issues and the environmental changes." (Faiza, 18)

Young people in the interviews and focus groups identified feeling overwhelmed by climate change and environmental destruction. Sion described their reactions, and how young people can feel helpless, which can then erode agency against climate change:

"I get incredibly overwhelmed by bad things and learning about it constantly. There's literally nothing you can do about it in some ways. Even – sometimes when you read things about climate change especially, you will read something about it that will just knock you out for a bit and you can't think about anything else for the rest of the day and that really gets me – I get really overwhelmed." (Sion, 23).

However, many of the young people who were interviewed explained that they had adopted a vegan or vegetarian diet in response to their concerns about the environment. The following quote is an exemplar of youth response concerns relating to the environment:

"I really care about the environment and I love animals and I'm practising being a vegetarian and stuff, and I want to be vegan." (Alisa, 23)

Sophia, who is vegetarian, explained how taking small individual actions can restore hope and sustain ongoing action:

"I feel that with even just doing something really small that's good for the environment, I'm like, 'I know me using this bamboo toothbrush instead of a plastic one is not the thing that's going to save the icebergs from melting', but it makes me feel a little bit closer to the hope because I do the same thing. I get overwhelmed by the sheer scale of how bad things are or how small I feel in comparison to whatever it is but definitely doing things like that, they do really help and getting to feel that practical hands-on side of it totally just reconnects you to the hope that makes you actually able to participate in change, whereas if you're too focused on the other side, you give up and then you're not helping anybody which is fair enough." (Sophia, 23)

These findings are consistent with a Melbourne-based study by Costa et al. (2019) which found that veganism and vegetarianism and related lifestyle choices among young women were motivated by concern for the environment. This study also explains that diet choices, despite being an individual level of resistance, can be read as 'political diets' which enable young women to exercise agency, resist a capitalist world system and heal fractured connections, including relationships with animals and the environment.

Zoey, who also identified as vegan for environmental reasons, felt that small individual actions were not something we could count on to shift issues of environmental degradation, and that the government needed to push people to change:

"If you put the responsibility in the hands of everyday people, nothing's going to change. So that's when I understand that you do need the government to do something otherwise nothing's going to happen, they still need to enforce it, I think." (Zoey, 21)

Everyday practices young people discussed in relation to environmental concerns and climate justice included:

- being vegetarian
- being vegan
- making conscious choices when purchasing commodities
- supporting agencies fighting for animal rights
- supporting other youth-led movements on climate change
- making connections between the environment and mental health and wellbeing
- reading to understand the connection between the environment and the COVID-19 pandemic
- questioning practices and government policies (i.e. around mining, mass production).

COVID-19 spotlight: Environmental awareness and the pandemic

A number of young people identified how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people interact with nature, and how this could motivate a broader level of awareness and action:

"I'm hoping that out of coronavirus, people have a new perspective or a new relationship with nature. Because I definitely know I'm out exercising more, I see everyone out at the park, and some people I know that have not really exercised much in their life are doing so much exercise. I'm like, 'Wow, this is really cool, and really connecting and appreciating nature'." (Alisa, 23)
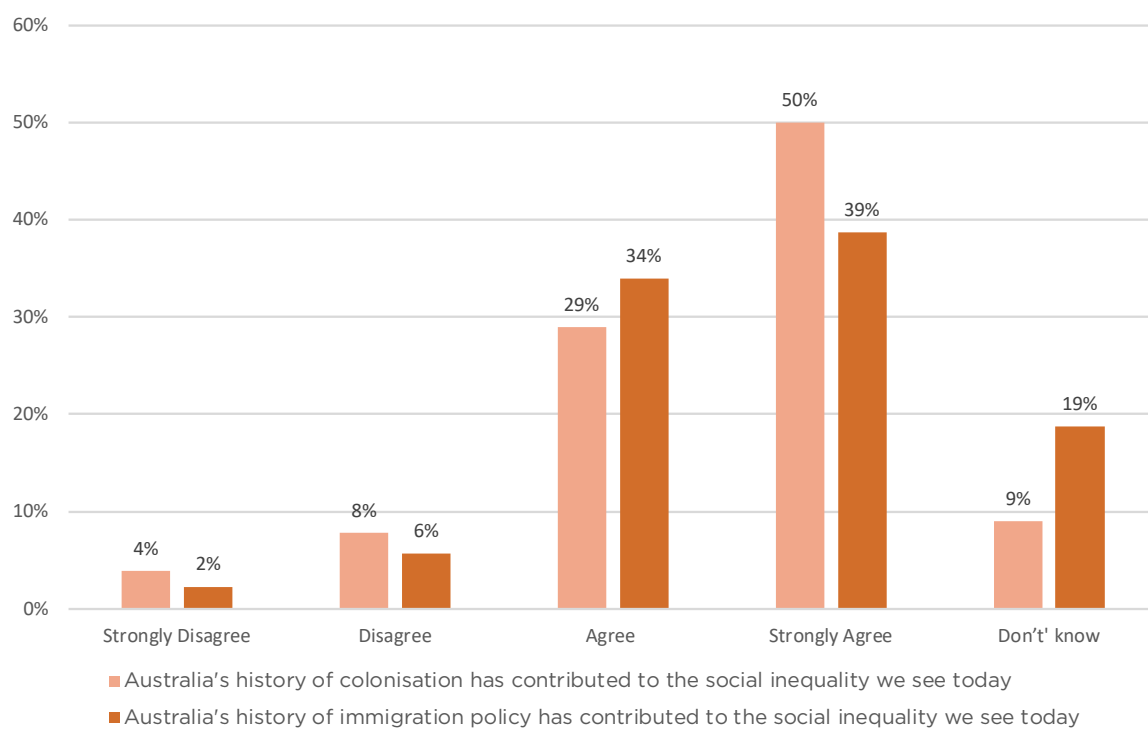
Whiteness, racism and discrimination

In this section, we hear from young people about issues of racism and discrimination for people of colour, specifically migrant communities and Indigenous wAustralians. Young people from a range of 'racial' and cultural backgrounds discussed these issues from their own vantage points, which included lived experience of forced migration (i.e. came to Australia on humanitarian grounds), second generation migrants (e.g. their parents came through on humanitarian grounds or chose to come to Australia for other reasons) and young people who identified their cultural heritage as non-European. We did not have any young Indigenous Australians involved in this study, which leaves a silence in voicing concerns across a range of issues. A significant number of participants identified themselves as 'white' 'Anglo Celtic' Australians and we hear their 'readings' of these issues too. We have included whiteness in this section to address the ways in which Australia, a settler colony, has afforded privilege and power to white people that in turn creates individual and systemic disadvantage and racism. Whiteness accounts for "… the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 236), and we use this lens to make whiteness visible in young people's accounts of the racial landscape in Australia. Many young people who identified as white, spoke about their awareness and understanding of white privilege and systems in Australia being built upon white supremacy.

Some of the key threads in this section include:

- Australia's history of colonisation and how that impacts Indigenous people today

- racism in all its forms (interpersonal, structural), including how it works through the media and impacts young people of colours' wellbeing

- white Australian's struggles with and reflections on anti-racist allyship, understanding whiteness and what it means for their own positionality, and resistance and defensiveness in relation to racism

- some of the specific challenges faced by young people of refugee and migrant background in relation to culture, language and past experiences in a new and racialised landscape in Australia.

Figure 5: Australia's history of colonisation and immigration in contributing to inequality

Australia's history of colonisation has contributed to the social inequality we see today

Australia's history of immigration policy has contributed to the social inequality we see today

This attention to historicity, identifying the impacts of colonisation and racialised forms of disadvantage was also identified and spoken about in our interviews and focus groups. In the excerpt below, young people participating in the arts-based workshop discussed this history and the trauma it has caused across generations.

Participant 1: "...throughout history this has been a thing, because when [inaudible] Australia, they discriminated Aboriginals [sic] for their colour, and pretty much tagged them as a lower class of society."

Participant 2: "They were classed as not human. They were classed as the fauna."

Participant 3: "They were just [considered] animals."

Participant 2: "That's why they said Australia was uninhabited."

Participant 1: "...that kind of pisses me off a little bit as well."

Participant 1: "It's definitely something that's ongoing. You hear about things like intergenerational trauma and how that's passed on from generation to generation, and still impacts on a lot of people to this day."

Many of the young people spoke about the importance of racial justice, decolonisation and self-determination for Indigenous Australians. The murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in the United States occurred on 25 May 2020. This triggered a number of protests globally and attention to racial justice through the Black Lives Matter movement. Protests held in Australia, focused on the high proportion and number of Indigenous deaths in police custody. Many of the interviews and focus groups for this research took place just after this and young people discussed racism as a major issue and many had attended protests. Stacey, a 23-year-old woman whose parents migrated from Vietnam as refugees, reflected:

"I personally feel extremely motivated and connected to the Australian Black Lives Matter movement and standing with Indigenous communities because that work has been going on our entire lifetime but now finally major platforms are acknowledging and giving space for it and I think that wasn't present when we were younger." (Stacey, 23)

Both Stacey and Sophia remarked on the importance of formal education to race relations in Australia. Sophia identified that throughout her schooling there was no history about colonisation being taught. In her interview she said it was in her post-secondary education and through her own exploration that she gained a better understanding of the impacts of colonisation on our society today:

"There is no real history being told about Australia, and therefore no way to understand the current systems." (Sophia, 23)

Stacey, in her reflection, said that in schools today there were advances being made in the curriculum in terms of including a range of perspectives across ethnic and cultural lines:

"If you look at like our reading lists that we had when we were in primary school or high school, I compare that to my younger brother, who is only 5 years younger than me; he was reading Bruce Pascoe and … what else was he reading that I was really impressed? Um, An Doh's 'The Happiest Refugee' so really acknowledging a more modern multicultural Australian identity rather than the one that was taught to me which was a colonial identity." (Stacey, 23)

Genevive, a 22-year-old bisexual woman who described herself as white Australian, discussed how important it was for white people to educate themselves, not placing the burden on Indigenous Australians:

"An Indigenous person shouldn't have to be educating every white person. There's information out there for everyone". (Genevive, 22)

A number of young people also expressed the importance of white Australians (including themselves) learning about Australia's colonial past and how that continues into the present. Responses to learning about these issues and trying to grapple with their position as white people in this country included navigating guilt, shame and confusion, as well as being interested, motivated and changed in learning about racism:

"I also think Indigenous rights, definitely here in Australia, as being long lasting, which is quite a difficult one because there's a lot of rhetoric which is like pay the rent or white silence is complicit and I think – I have quite a lot of white friends who are trying to navigate with those and trying to understand whether it's intended to be inclusionary or whether it's actually quite exclusive and it's shameful. It makes people feel ashamed and, yeah, those kind of – making sense of what are we as a community? I think in Victoria, there's a lot of people who like to throw the community word around, but I don't think people really also know what that is and what are these movements?" (Luna, 23)

Alisa, a white Australian, said that being able to learn about race in the university context changed her understandings of herself and how issues like racism were structural:

"Racial literacy units, and I think my favourite units were the ones that were very eye-opening and really changed my whole thinking around social issues. And really challenged me and my identity and how I think about social structures and things like that. So, I felt that was really interesting." (Alisa, 23)

Conversely, Ben, a German Australian, who was also taking a university class on Indigenous history and culture, said:

"I leave every class feeling very guilty about what non-Indigenous Australians have done, which is a good thing, but not if it keeps people awake at night, I think. Probably not the most ideal." (Ben, 23)

Emmi, a 23-year-old heterosexual white woman, identified the importance of Black Lives Matter and Indigenous rights, but prefaced her reflection by noting that these issues did not personally affect her:

"Obviously, it doesn't really affect me personally but definitely as we've seen this year with Black Lives Matter coming, it's always been really important but it's really come to the fore again this year, and decolonisation and self-determination for First Nations people here and, also, people are well aware of racism." (Emmi, 23)

Emmi's reflection and distancing in terms of her personal experience (i.e. thinking about it as only being the 'target' of racism) reflects Taylor (2004), who described "participating in whiteness-as-invisibility", which means "denying that one has a perspective on or stake in the racial terrain. It means rejecting, or ignoring, the burden of identifying – of conceptualizing, of seeing which words apply to – one's place in a system of social forces and relations" (p. 232). Similarly, Ben's reflections around guilt and it not "being ideal" also points to inequities in who should carry the burden in relation to racial history. DiAngelo (2011), in his writing on white fragility, also identifies the entitlement of racial comfort that many white people become accustomed to, something which is shown through these discussions.

COVID-19 spotlight: BLM and the pandemic

During the COVID 19 pandemic the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in the United States sparked outrage and protests around the globe. Young people in this study spoke about attending protests in Melbourne, posting online and considering the issues of Indigenous deaths in custody in Australia. In her reading of the recent Black Lives Matter activity, issues of racism and COVID-19, Zoey (21), who is a white Australian, stated:

"At the moment, racism is trending, so all the other issues that aren't spoken about, like how the Centrelink Booster[2] is about to end, no one's talking about that. And I think that's – I'm not saying the Australian protests are not important, but I don't know how to say this appropriately or nicely. But it's like, the Aboriginal people that died in jail, they're already dead, we need to focus on the now – I think that issue can be sidelined and we can focus back on corona because it's still not ended and everyone's acting like it is." (Zoey, 21)

"There is [what happened] in Ireland – I am traumatised from the video [circulating on social media], I wasn't expecting that to happen, but the Irish guy who's – Irish people as white as white, they're shiny white and he was stabbed and a black man kept coming up to stabbing him and they were chanting 'stab the white people'. Yeah sure this is 1% of the protest, like 99% of the protest are peaceful and are full support that, it's the violent ones that go around in cars and say stab the white people, like that video – I had a nightmare about it, it was disgusting. There was the black people there trying to stop him and pull him off him and they were trying to help this guy with stab wounds all over him and he came back and stabbed him again..." (Zoey, 21)

Zoey went on to speak about her own struggles with Centrelink and financial insecurity, saying that these issues were not receiving airtime because of the Black Lives Matter protest coverage in the media. Her disregard for the lives of Aboriginal Australians and 'disgust' for the stabbing of a white protester makes visible who she deems is worthy of sympathy and grief. The deaths of Indigenous Australians in custody are rooted in our colonial past as a penal colony; it is a systemic issue, one that continues (Moreton-Robinson, 2020). Again, DiAngelo's (2011) points about white responses of defensiveness and discomfort around issues of racism, which results in evoking a victim position that "enables whites to avoid responsibility for the racial power and privilege they wield" (p. 64) are relevant to Zoey's reflections.

[2]Centrelink Boosters were economic support payments provided at various points throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to individuals who were eligible as a result of losing work or their jobs due to lockdowns and restrictions. Initially these payments were only to be given from March 2020 to July 2020.

Racialised migrants in Australia

Many young people in this study had experiences of migration, either forced (i.e. humanitarian grounds) or chosen in order to pursue education or career opportunities in Australia. A substantial number of participants also had parents who had migrated from Europe, Asia or African continents, and many spoke about challenges in navigating a new culture, experiences of racialisation and how young people dealt with these issues. Faiza, a young woman of Thai and African heritage, recently came to Australia. She outlined a number of challenges young people of refugee background faced in relation to trying to connect to other young Australians and the implications of being isolated:

"...it could be also like intergenerational trauma. Like, the people whose parents are already here, they're used to Australia, they have friends who are here. But people who move here, they have to go out and make their new friends, or either choose to stick with their own communities and somehow like isolate themselves from others. And, that kind of makes them like, they get so depressed not being able to branch out and just going beyond what they know." (Faiza, 18)

Faiza went on to talk about how young people in high school who come to Australia often feel isolated and then experience disruption in their schooling as a result. She said that feeling excluded and facing racism in school spaces also impacted on success and the importance of initiatives to increase and celebrate cultural representation:

"I think recently, the most current topic is the Black Lives Matter movement, so that one, because in high school, sometimes I feel like people from African background are really underrepresented. And, that's why CMY [Centre for Multicultural Youth] even hosted a program in our school to begin with, so that we can feel more represented, we can embrace our culture. So yeah, that's one of the things, as well as belonging in education, because school should be a place to study as well as belong. If people don't feel like they belong, they wouldn't want to succeed in that environment." (Faiza, 18)

Faiza also spoke about experiencing discrimination in a job interview. She said she just went elsewhere, because "we wouldn't want to work for someone who has that kind of mindset, where she just discriminated based on your country, where you come from or your gender".

Faiza and two other young women – Talia (who is of Pasifika heritage) and Yazmin (who came to Australia as a refugee from Somalia) – spoke about the disproportionate number of young people of African and Pasifika backgrounds who were being incarcerated. Both young women expressed how migrant or ethnic groups' wellbeing is affected when they witness other young people from their background or other culturally/linguistically diverse backgrounds being overrepresented in youth justice or in media discourses:

"Definitely. I think it's mostly by young people who are from diverse groups, because they know you feel tense, you could feel sad by seeing people who are from the same community as you are going to prison or suffering these things. Why aren't they seeing the same success as you are? Why aren't they going down the same path as you are? Why are they straight with the negative side?" (Faiza, 18)

"But, yeah, with – in terms of like social justice I like to focus a lot on the Pacifica voice and it being heard and our young people in the justice system and more education around access to resources and how to go about applying for certain things and what their rights are, especially in Australia if they're not an Australian citizen but they're recognised as a permanent resident due to their New Zealand citizenship. That is me." (Talia, 21)

Young people of colour from a migrant background also spoke about the importance of cultural identity. Ivy spoke about how, after rejecting her ethnic culture in her formative years, she is now finding herself needing to reclaim her cultural heritage:

"I think when I grew up I was very much averse to anything traditional, because I just – I don't know, maybe it was like an inner rebellion or something, but I don't really know where it came from, in retrospect. For me, that manifested itself as a complete aversion to my culture, which is something that you mentioned as people not really having a culture to subscribe to at the moment, whereas I felt like I only had culture, being from a Greek background. That meant Greek School on Saturdays, that meant grandparents, family, everything … And only now that I'm 22/23 do I realise the importance of that, because I used to just reject it." (Ivy, 22)

Gender, sexuality and heteronormativity

In the previous sections, we saw the ways in which young people's concerns about mental health, racism, representation and belonging, intersect with gender. In this section, we further map out concerns youth raised about gender and sexuality.

Concerns relating to gender and sexuality were multifaceted and informed by the participants' experiences and various intersecting relations of power.

With this being said, these discussions were all centred around heteronormativity. The term heteronormativity was first coined by social critic Michael Warner, who defined it as "the belief that there are two separate and opposing genders with associated natural roles that match their assigned sex, and that heterosexuality is a given (van der Toorn et al., 2020). These areas of concern are mapped in Table 7.

Table 7: Heteronormativity from young people's perspectives

Issue	Description	Key Insight
Heteronormative understandings of gender and sexual identity	Belief that there are two binary genders and sexuality	Many young people spoke about their sexual and gender identity beyond dominant heteronormative narratives of gender and sexuality, including non-binary, queer, transgender and bi- and pan-sexual.
		Despite increasing efforts at raising awareness and acceptance of gender diversity, youth explained that this is not adequately being translated into practice. Beliefs about gender and sexuality as binary are pervasive and insidious. They operate in institutions through programs, service provisions, infrastructure design and even programs that recognise non-binary identities.
		Many young people who expressed non-normative understandings of gender and sexuality are selective with when, where, how and who they share their non-binary sexual and gender identity with.
		Reluctance to disclose through social media and perform non-binary sexualities to others.
Heteronormative representations of beauty and whiteness	Beauty norms are gendered and racialised	Lack of diverse representations of beauty in mainstream media and social media.
		Beauty is equated with femininity, being white and with heterosexuality. These narrow representations were also constructed as "mainstream looking", "generic beauty standards" which meant "slim", "tall", "long hair".
		Young people mitigate the impact of social media by controlling feeds, but the consensus was that it was hard to "not fall into the loop" – meaning being influenced by these images despite their efforts.
		Social media has also been a platform to challenge heteronormative understandings of beauty and gender. For example, female body builders challenge gendered binary scripts of masculinity and strength.

Issue	Description	Key Insight
Heteronormativity and gender roles	Belief that each gender has innate 'traits' and prescribed roles, which position women as less superior to men	Women are seen as unable to lead because they lack masculine qualities.
		Young people rejected traits defined as masculine and showed a preference for feminine ways of leading that is compassionate and collective.
Heteronormativity and sexual harassment/violence	Sexualisation of gender and regulating bodies in public spaces through violence	Many of the young women and women-identifying young people spoke about feeling unsafe and experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces.
		Young people identifying as non-binary identifying reported experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace.
		There is a silencing of sexual harassment among young women, particularly in situations involving alcohol consumption by women.

Sites, spaces and resources for understanding social issues

The spaces and resources that young people come to learn about, investigate and discuss in relation to social issues were explored through the survey and interviews/focus groups. As seen in Figures 6 and 7, young people who took the survey identified a number of sources and spaces they go to, to find more information about social issues. Unsurprisingly, the internet was at the top of that list (19%), with other online media (such as social media platforms) also being close to the top sources. Friends (14.5%), and then teachers and lecturers (8.5%), were identified as two of the main sources young people went to for information on important social issues.

"I say that in a very general way; there are great journalists who do great work, but bloody – just yesterday, I think, thousands of regional newspapers and investigative reporting have been cut and people are losing jobs left, right and centre. So, that quality is decreasing at a rather alarming rate. It doesn't help when the government is raiding journalists and stuff, as well." (Taylor, 24)

Figure 6: Where young people go to find information on important social issues
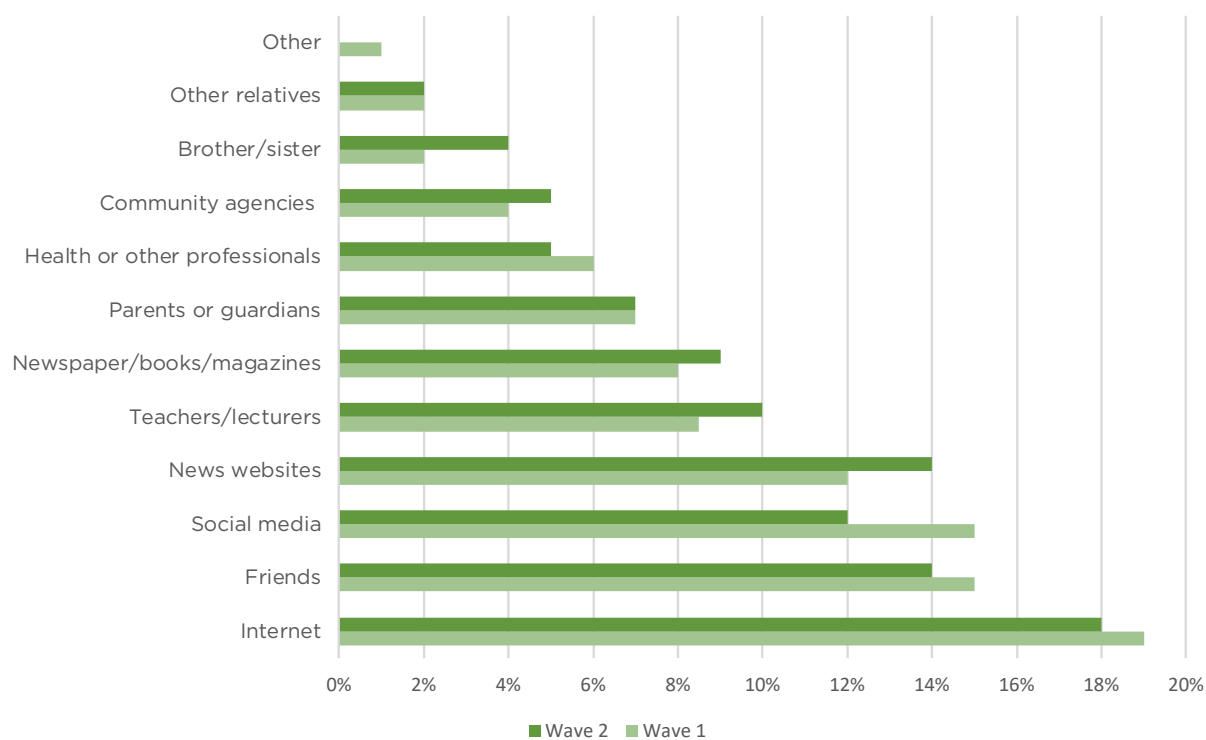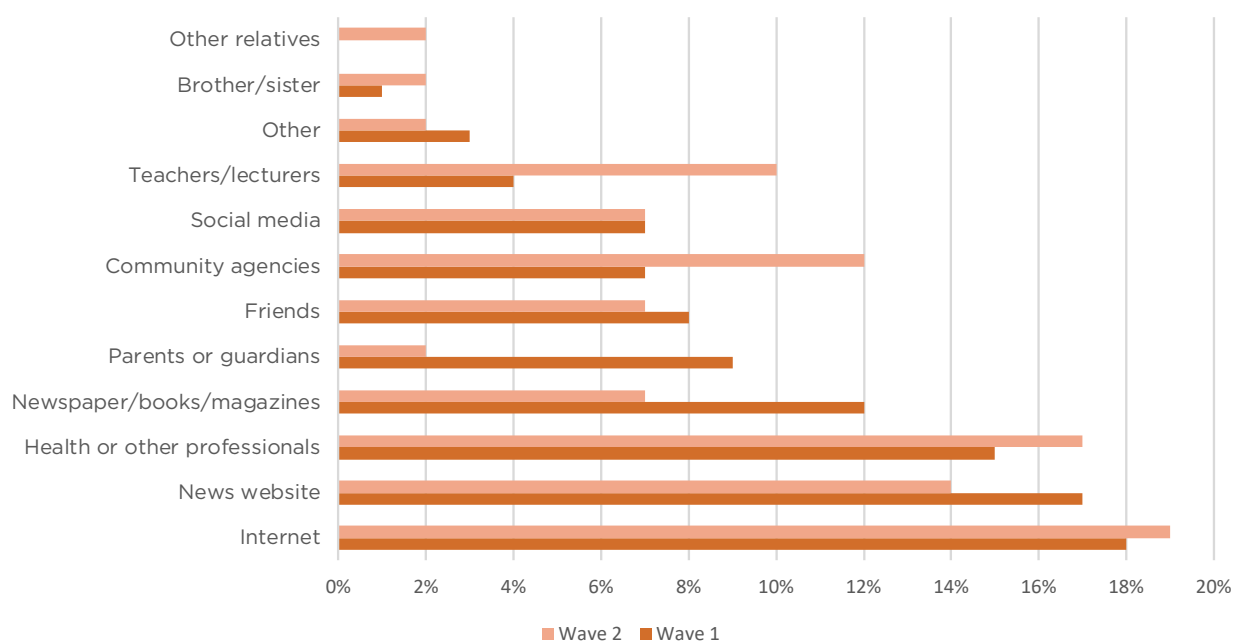

Wave 2 Wave 1

Figure 7: The most trusted information sources on social issues for young people
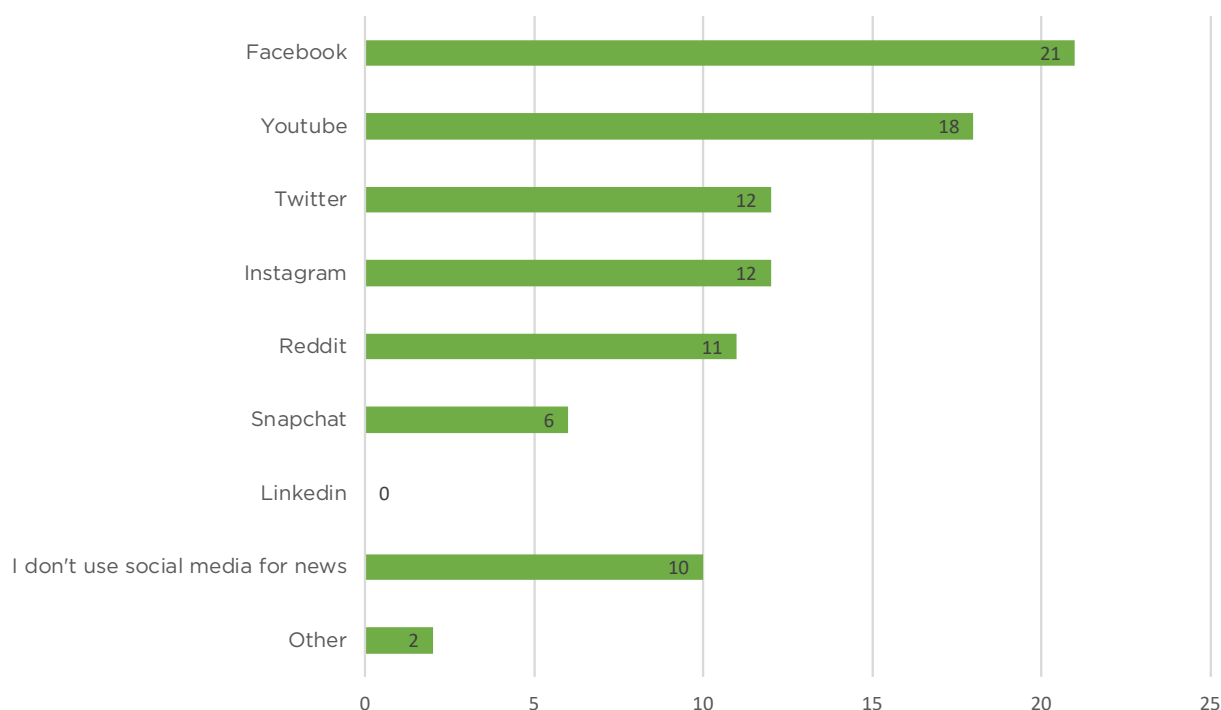

Wave 2 Wave 1

Accessing information on social issues through social media

The use of technology and social media in particular to access information quickly and frequently is something that has been and continues to be an important part of young people's socialisation, learning and expressing their views. In Section 2, we take a deeper look into social media as a space for learning, connecting and engaging in dialogue across differences, to increase knowledge and reflection in order to 'have a voice' and 'make a difference'. Here, we primarily focus on how young people learn about different issues using social media and online sources (see Figure 8). The survey data shows that young people read about social issues on social media sites; they also use it to show support by sharing political campaigns. Fewer young people indicated that they use social media to express their own sociopolitical views, which was echoed in interviews, primarily because they feared backlash as a result of:

• friends or family having differing views

• cancel culture, fearing that they did not know enough or might say the wrong thing and be dismissed in social media spaces

• hurting/offending someone.

Figure 8: Social media sites young people use to find information and news

Site	Value
Facebook	21
Youtube	18
Twitter	12
Instagram	12
Reddit	11
Snapchat	6
Linkedin	0
I don't use social media for news	10
Other	2

Genevive, 22, identified the humiliation young people often experience when they try to engage in discussion on social media about social issues:

"I think almost everybody I know has – and like me included – has had experience of trying to say something in an online like comment section debate that you're seeing or whatever, and having somebody misinterpret what you've said, or having like said something when you didn't actually know enough about the issue. And so people are able to call you out on that, and point out why it's wrong. And the kind of like pain that everybody feels naturally when they're like – feel the like humiliation of being wrong or the – like all of the kind of negative emotions that you feel." (Genevive, 22)

Many young people also highlighted how social media and other sources online have given them a space to belong and learn, particularly those who have experienced exclusion, who want to learn more about a particular identity group (i.e. exploring other people's experiences of being transgender) or who want to learn about an issue. Alisa felt that learning about other women's stories, and their articulation of them, provided her with a language and framework for making sense of her own experiences:

"But just by virtue of there being the internet, it's a lot easier to connect, and a lot easier to see people who are voicing things that you're like, oh, I never was able to articulate why that made me feel uncomfortable. But now I'm seeing a whole bunch of women who have articulated why this is uncomfortable. And so instead of then being like this feels wrong, this dynamic feels wrong, I am able to say, oh, I get why. I get why this is sexist now, even though it's not you saying something like incredibly easy to point out why it's sexist, if that makes sense." (Alisa, 23)

However, there was also a critical awareness about the funding, agendas and silencing of particular groups of young people, as Taylor articulated:

"Even things like YouTube and Tic Tok [sic], they're owned by massive corporations too, and you see Tic Tok is silencing queer people, they're silencing people with disabilities; YouTube's been doing it for a decade, at least. People fight against it and sometimes things happen, but – yeah, it's really hard." (Taylor, 24)

Accessing information on social issues through education

Young people also spoke about the inadequacy of the education system for learning about particular social issues and systems of power or how history has led us to the present. Many explained that the education system was wrought with racism and that there were no opportunities to learn about complex issues around racism or colonial history. Sophia articulates her experiences in different points of her education below:

"And then in terms of actually being in school, I guess I would just say similar to like actually teaching history of Australia that isn't just from a white colonial perspective, is just being taught more about the natural kind of instincts or also the kind of society setting that tells people about in-groups and out-groups, and that makes people – that sets people up like that.

High school is just like – yeah, even though – it's even an issue in terms of understanding the political system. Leaving aside systems of power and dynamics between social groups, we also just don't – we're not taught anything about politics or – like there's no mandatory civil like – I'm not thinking of the word.

And so I think that kind of knowledge came from going to university, or even just getting out of high school where all of your modes of education aren't rigid, and enforced onto you by people. But instead – and so what that means is that there are obviously a lot of people who don't get education in those areas." (Sophia, 23)

Young people also explained that they were not able to raise political issues, particularly around gender, during high school:

"I feel like high school can be such a transformative but also damaging – so, it's hard to be like, 'What would've made me become more over political – have pride in my political views or willingness to discuss or willingness to do something about it?', because I think high school is such a minefield and trying to dodge labels and trying to dodge being dismissed and … I didn't discuss my political views much except for in really close-knit scenarios." (Sion, 23)

"Especially talking about feminism was not really – unless you were talking to a specific person from school, it wasn't really something I ever felt entirely comfortable with because it was definitely still something that was disparaged, especially by men and boys at school … you just feel instantly shut out and it's just so frustrating … my views and my willingness to speak especially specifically about feminism around men has changed, I'm a lot more outspoken about it." (Genevive, 22)

Young people identified universities as a site where they are able to question and learn more about social issues:

"But I found it difficult, sometimes [in high school], to talk about my idea of feminism and have my voice heard. That kind of came through Uni, as well, talking to people; that was difficult as well, because if I had a different idea of what I thought a woman was or whatever that even means, or what feminism was for me, sometimes I was shot down." (Kayla, 22)

2) Cultivating voice, social action and change strategies

In this section, we delve into young people's experiences and reflections on voicing their concerns about particular social issues, as well as how they conceptualise and take social action. We draw on both interview and survey data to better understand how young people go about cultivating their voices and taking action in a range of ways. The threads that tie this section together include:

- the inner work that young people are doing at this crucial time in their lives as they begin to define who they are and what they believe in

- the importance of safe and brave spaces to learn about social issues and work towards voicing their beliefs in different spaces and to different 'audiences'

- the challenges in navigating social media, voice and representations of self through their beliefs about social justice

- where voices resonate, and where young people believe their voices can be influential and affect change

- the motivations and strategies for change and participation

- the approaches, tools and resources that are important for young people to mobilise, form collectives and take action.

Starting points and stories

Participants in this study pointed to two main starting points and motivations for social change. First, a number of young people's stories about coming to activism and advocacy were traced back to their lived experiences of inequality and oppression. For example, a number of young people doing advocacy work had experienced several layers of trauma through family violence and abuse, and/ or being in State care and feeling invisible within that system. Other young people in this study who identified as LGBTQIA+, young women who had experienced gendered violence, and youth who had been racialised and experienced discrimination, spoke about how intersecting oppressions pushed them to take action. These young people talked about coming to value their own experience as a site of knowledge, something that was pivotal in their struggles for survival and social change for themselves and others (collective experiences). This position of "I have something to say and it could make a difference" meant that they mobilised their oppression as fuel for social change and used their stories as tools to challenge systemic failures and dismantle deficit scripts and representations of 'damaged' young people. They also spoke about the lack of understanding and inadequate service provision by social service providers to support particular skills that would allow them to further amplify their voices and tell their stories. We expand on this in Section 3, which explores institutional conditions for supporting young people with these experiences who seek to do activist work.

Second, another group of participants' starting points and motivations were linked to the discomfort of witnessing, understanding and even vicariously experiencing (i.e. friends, colleagues or family) impacts of inequality and oppression. Many young people, while not directly experiencing oppression themselves, spoke about awareness and feelings of discomfort with gender inequality, social inequalities and climate change. These young people spoke about the importance of educating themselves, finding spaces to discuss and unpack issues with different people, and considering how they might use their own privilege as a site for action. This was illustrated by Stacey, a 23-year-old woman of Vietnamese-Australian heritage:

"Or even in a personal sense, like am I going to risk the comforts that I have for the greater good? And it takes a like a real reckoning with your values and like some confidence in you to be like, yeah! And I don't know that I don't think we could expect people to do it, but I don't think a lot of people would. We live at such a comfortable level of wealth in Australia." (Stacey, 23)

Cultivating voice with self and other

One of the clear threads through the individual stories of young people who were already doing intensive advocacy and/or activist work was the importance of finding both safe and brave spaces to cultivate their voices. Similarly, other young people who were navigating spaces in which they could learn, grow and further understand and unpack particular social justice issues and develop their beliefs, needed a framework and language before they could use their voices to influence others. Many young people spoke about the inner work that needs to be done before mobilising and taking action. This inner work, and developing a clearer understanding about self and issues that matter, are also developed in relation with others through dialogue. Alisa illustrated this process from her vantage point:

"I think for me, I feel like for me, I feel like I'm still at the stage where you have to work on yourself and your own beliefs, at more of a personal level, before you go out and mobilise some change. For me, for example, I'm very passionate about environmental issues, and an action that I took towards that is becoming vegetarian. And I think it's a very small action, but I think it definitely does change people's perceptions. Because people aren't going to listen to you if they're not ready to listen to you. So, if people are interested, they can ask me, 'Oh, why are you vegetarian? Blah, bah, blah', and stuff like that. And then it's kind of like I'm ready, they're ready to have a productive and engaging dialogue. So, I think that's changed some stuff." (Alisa, 23)

For young people who have experienced particular forms of abuse, developing awareness of the power of their lived experience was important. Lucas and Kara explained that inner work was required to confront trauma and understand their experiences in order to move into a space where other skills related to advocacy could be developed. Lucas highlighted the importance of developing his voice with critical support, emphasising the inner work as part of this process:

"Having people listen to you; having the supports and skills. Doing the inner work – can mean facing traumas, processing what it means as it becomes a focus of change … I'd had this sense of, if I didn't speak up, then who would? I started exploring going, where can I learn how to create the changes that need to happen in this, and I got involved with places like the Reach Foundation, Whitelion, did some youth leadership training there, learnt how to find my voice, how to facilitate small workshops, be a leader on camps." (Lucas, 26)

For Kara, this inner work meant moving through a process of understanding and making sense of what has happened to her:

"I think you have to kind of go through a process to be able to advocate and understand what's happened to you and why it's happened. I think that it's important to children and young people, but it wouldn't be at the top of their minds if they still are in that space of it's my fault and everyone blames me. Like, I think that they may not feel capable or they may not understand." (Kara, 20)

For Kara, part of this work also involved others listening to her, valuing her voice and seeing that in herself and growing her confidence within to speak out:

"I think understanding what it [abuse] is and then realising that what I was saying was valuable and that other people would actually listen. I think that was a big thing because going through systems and services you're often not listened to and it's like, 'Well, we know what's best for you, and we know what you need and you have to listen to us', and there's this big power imbalance and authority over you. Then I think when you remove that and listen to what people are saying and try and understand what they're saying and why they're saying it. Like, they've got lived experience of it, this is why they're saying it. I think once I felt that I had value in what I was saying, it kind of just took off from there and I now feel confident in what I'm saying, and I feel confident in myself that I do know what I'm talking about and that I can actually have value and add to conversations." (Kara, 20)

Both Kara and Lucas were part of programs within organisations that took a holistic approach to supporting young people who have experienced trauma. They both emphasised the importance of having the right kinds of support and resources, particularly strong relationships with adult mentors in these organisations, in order to be able to do this inner work.

We also want to make clear that the focus on 'inner work' in this section does not imply that young people should move their voices into the public space for the purpose of social change, on their own.

It is quite the opposite and reflects Freirean (1993) understandings of the importance of dialogue and being with others in order to make sense of experiences. Both Kara and Lucas identified how other people listening to them has been part of developing awareness and finding value in their own voice. These findings echo the work of others (i.e. Baker, 2019; Gilligan, 1995), who assert that particular (supportive) spaces are needed where young people can strengthen their truth and practise their voice, particularly those experiencing trauma, which can result in a buried self and voice. The next sub-section, and also Section 3, delve deeper into these spaces, both in and out of organisations.

Brave spaces: Growth of voice through dialogue

Inextricably tied to inner work in cultivating a voice was the emphasis young people placed on dialogue with others and the spaces in which they could learn, be challenged and continue to develop. Friere (1993) conceptualised dialogue as relational and beyond everyday conversations; rather, the focus is on a "process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorising about the experiences shared in the dialogue process" (p. 380). In this critical framing of dialogue, the focus is on moving to 'how?' and 'why?' questions, examining the world in order to read and understand it. Much of this was echoed in young people's discussions about how they learn more about particular social justice issues, including those forms of oppression that personally affect them. However, just as Freire points to the important conditions for dialogue such as love, humility, trust and hope, young people in this research detailed the types of spaces and conditions they felt were important for learning and growing their own voices. These conditions included similar relational ethics as those mentioned above: a sense of safety, connection across difference and a diversity of voices and ideas, and understanding and reflecting about your own positionality and how it can create blind spots in understanding other's experiences. It was also about listening and witnessing others' voices and gaining 'self-confidence', 'bravery' and being able to make mistakes and work through discomfort.

The young people in this study expressed concern about the lack of spaces to grow their understanding of particular social justice issues, like sexism and racism. There were concerns about cancel culture in online spaces and that generally there are a limited number of places where you can have those conversations. For example, Kayla noted:

"Any time that I've had a conversation with someone where I share a differing opinion – which is quite often, but also not often because I deliberately choose not to share my opinion on a lot of things, because you just get told that you're wrong, shut up. They don't want to hear a conversation with you, ever. There's a lot of people that will seriously just turn away from you, or they'll say, 'If you think this then un-follow me. If you do this then un-follow me'. And it's like, 'Alright <laughs>. Fine, okay, I guess we're not going to have a conversation because you can't actually have one'." (Kayla, 22)

Many of the participants in this research noted that conditions for growing their voices and understanding meant dialogue was across difference – of identities, experiences, ways of seeing the world. For example, Sion said:

"If you're in a community in a group of people where you have really similar values and you have really similar outlooks and worldviews, there's not a lot of motivation to change the way you think, I think." (Sion, 23)

This idea of sameness and homogeneity as stunting learning and growth of voice, and subsequently action, was commonly brought up by participants. Many young people said that in friendship groups and social media circles there was a danger of creating 'silos' in which a person's ideas, beliefs and voice become part of an echo chamber, preventing young people from learning across and through difference. Both Sion and Alisa noted the importance of connecting across and through difference:

"People were from all walks of life and I think in many ways, that is how change happens, is when you have different people with different ideas coming together, especially in a space that is safer and you are more allowed to express yourself and your values and your ideas." (Sion, 23)

"Because I feel like sometimes when I have conversations about gender with people that have a few different opinions to me, it's kind of more productive in a way, because your own ideas are challenged in ways that are not really challenged by your friends." (Alisa, 23)

Both Sion and Alisa identified how important it is to be among those with different experiences and ideas; they also referred to these as being 'safer' spaces where you are 'challenged'. The work of Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens (2013) on 'safe spaces' to 'brave spaces' in their book The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators, is particularly relevant to thinking through the complexity of these spaces where voices can grow. These authors describe safe spaces as those in which marginalised groups can experience an actual sense of psychological, social and emotional safety. Further, Ali (2017) purports that a

…safe space allow[s] marginalized individuals opportunities to retreat from the very real threats and demands they face by their very existence and the kind of space to allow students to process new and uncomfortable ideas productively. (p. 3)

These spaces are also essential in building social movements and strategies for social change.

In contrast, Arao and Clemens (2013) say that the term 'brave spaces' more accurately describes the "transformative learning and disorientation" (Stanlick, 2015, p. 117) that reflects the 'risky' work of discussing issues of power and privilege laced through social justice issues. "Emphasising the importance of bravery instead, … help[s] students better understand – and rise to – the challenges of genuine dialogue on diversity and social justice issues" (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 136). Such spaces can often be uncomfortable because they are more like 'contact zones', which Pratt (1991) describes as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 4). In our study, Luna articulated this clearly:

"I think it definitely has affected me personally because it's like old people talk about when they're – when they care about social justice and I think that starts from – from my personal experiences, from also conversations with friends and in the organisation I am involved with [a gender-based violence non-profit], it becomes the identity. The issue itself becomes the identity and it becomes as competition of what are we saying, who's saying what and what is the best move forward or like – and then it becomes about politeness, not wanting to offend another person, but it's also conversations. If we're having discourse and dialogue, it's not supposed to be personal. It just – it's supposed to be this back and forth, trying to tackle what's being said and coming to problem solve it. But it becomes this personal issue and I think that – I've seen in my organisation and among friends that it's like you see the differences between people more than the desire to do something together, like collaborate." (Luna, 23)

Navigating these spaces can be difficult. It requires deep reflection about a person's own position as well as the burden placed on those who are experiencing oppression to educate others – across, for example, racial power lines:

"I think it's a resilience that you have to build up to be accepting of your own mistakes. Because wherever you come from, you're not going to have a personal experience of every single group. I'm never, as a white person, going to understand the experiences of a Black person in Australia. That's not something – like I can try and be informed about, I can read, and I can listen, and I can do all of that stuff. But ultimately the chances of me never ever doing something racist is slim. And so you have to be – instead of like, 'I'm not like that because I'm good, because I know about this stuff', accepting of when people are trying to point out where it is that you have incorporated the system that you were taught to." (Sophia, 23)

"So, I've been able to witness on these forums, people actually gently getting their minds changed and it happening and then those people becoming advocates for things like Black Lives Matter, going, 'Okay, I've been given some information and I've been given it in a way that didn't berate me so now I feel informed and I've changed my mind', but I also think that people shouldn't always have to be kind when educating people. So, that's hard as well. I can imagine for someone who's an Indigenous person, they shouldn't have to be educating every white person. There's information out there for everyone. You just need to go and educate yourself, so it's been interesting to witness it in a way that some people have taken the time to explain it gently and then people have changed their minds." (Genevive, 22)

These two quotes highlight the complexity of 'brave' spaces and link back to Freire's ideas of humility and trust as being important parts of dialogue about social justice issues. Luna, who is heavily involved in activism through her participation in the union movement, echoed the importance of being able to learn through mistakes, rather than being cast out of a movement or space:

"I think that is something that – like the ability to make mistakes, and learn from them in a way where you don't take it personal, and it doesn't like take you out of that space. I think it's something that people struggle with as well at our kind of age because, yeah, it's just very easy to try to do something that's helpful, and end up in a position where you like are exposed to something you didn't know, and like realise that there's this area where you actually might be contributing to the problem that you're trying to be helpful about. So I guess in terms of like activist spaces, that is also something – like those spaces being safe for people to make mistakes, and for people to – not to have those mistakes be justified but, be able to learn from them rather than feeling like just criticism." (Luna, 23)

When drawing on their own experiences of oppression or inequality, young people also noted that others' listening was extremely important for feeling that they had a voice. When relating her experiences as a young African woman, Faiza said that it was essential that her teacher heard her:

"…[was] just hearing us, rather than like try to debate what we were saying, or like, 'What you're saying is wrong. You should think of it in this way'. But she let us like fully express what we were saying." (Faiza, 18)

Sophia said that she needed to hear and bear witness to the voices of others who had experienced gendered inequality similar to her own, in order to gain the confidence to speak up. This points to the importance of relationships and stories in building the voices of young people:

"But I think things that make me feel like I have a voice or am heard. I guess like what I was saying before about seeing people who are talking about these things, and validating these things. I think slowly the more that you engage with that kind of stuff where you're seeing people who are brave enough to talk about things, the more you feel like you're capable of doing that yourself." (Sophia, 23)

Sophia also noted how she needed this type of bravery and self-confidence to voice her own experience in conversations. She spoke about being able to 'give' and 'receive' this education to others, hinting at the importance of open and reciprocal relationships:

"I definitely feel that though, about being strong enough to educate people in your life or to be receiving that education as well and it's about having relationships in your life where you're comfortable talking about it and having the self-confidence and self-strength to do things to support the things that you do believe in, that you do value." (Sophia, 23)

Being heard: Where voices are received and where they resonate

In this section, we explore young people's experiences and perceptions about where their voices are valued and heard – where they resonate. Evans (2007) writes that resonance is strongly tied to identity, belonging and place through the development of voice, power and social action. He states that "for young people to fully experience voice, it requires resonance – some signal that their contributions are being heard and actively considered" (p. 70). Other literature has noted that youth voices resonating means that their ideas and opinions are respected and that they feel comfortable to voice them (Brown & Gabriel, 2019; Fredericks et al., 2001). In the current study, the conditions in which young people felt they could voice their concerns, ideas and experiences reflected this literature. Young people who experienced forms of marginalisation spoke about being uncomfortable, weary and careful about speaking up in certain contexts.

For example, Faiza, a young woman who came to Australia as a refugee, spoke about how a friend 'having a say' was intimately tied to belonging, something that was often denied to young people 'like her':

"My friend, she was really smart, she was one of the students who always get A's, but she never raises her voice in class, because she feels it's an Australian class, kids like her don't belong in it, so they shouldn't have a say in it. Like all we have to do is be quiet, and work hard and let our results show, rather than engaging and performing with others." (Faiza, 18)

In this study, the survey data shows that young people believe that, as a group, they have a strong voice and that their voices can influence systems (Figure 11). However, where their voices are heard, with whom and the conditions for exercising their voices, show that there is a lot of variation in terms of feeling heard or seeing change occur as a result of their 'voice'. Also captured in participants' discussions about where their voices would be heard were ongoing reflections and considerations in relation to 'speaking up'. Many with lived experience of particular systems (i.e. out-of-home care) weighed up the consequences of remaining silent versus speaking up which could potentially change the system. Kara, who had experienced homelessness as a result of family violence, said:

"I've never really felt like I've had a voice in my care or in – like especially in the adolescent unit and then the adult inpatient unit. Not really feeling like I had a voice there. When I've been in other services and systems, I haven't felt like I had a voice there." (Kara, 20)

Some young people in this role of advocacy felt that even if their voices were not heard and substantive change did not happen, they were still paving the way for other youth to come in and take up powerful roles as advocates, challenging the system and ensuring they were integrated into decision making. Lucas, for example, noted that this type of change takes so much time; it is important that other young people continue to speak up. For those doing activist and advocacy

work, the publicness of their role also means having to navigate the emotional burden of others' responses and reactions to their own stories and experiences.

Young people also considered the reactions and stigma that could result if they shared their views about social justice concerns such as gender inequality, particularly with friends and family. Such considerations were in relation to how others would perceive them, if they would still belong in particular circles and what the consequences were for other aspects of their lives, like their future career prospects. It was clear that this concern was heightened for young people from rural areas, where communities were smaller and it was very difficult to speak out or voice solidarity without many aspects of their lives being impacted.

In our survey, we asked young people about whether they believe they have a strong voice as a cohort. In both waves of the survey, over 80% of young people agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (80% in Wave 1 and 82% in Wave 2). We also asked whether, as a group, young people feel that they can influence others (i.e. organisations and government) to change systems that are socially unjust: 82% agreed or strongly agreed in both survey waves.

Figures 9 and 10 show where young people believed that their voices were valued.

Figure 9: Young people's belief that their opinions are valued by the community
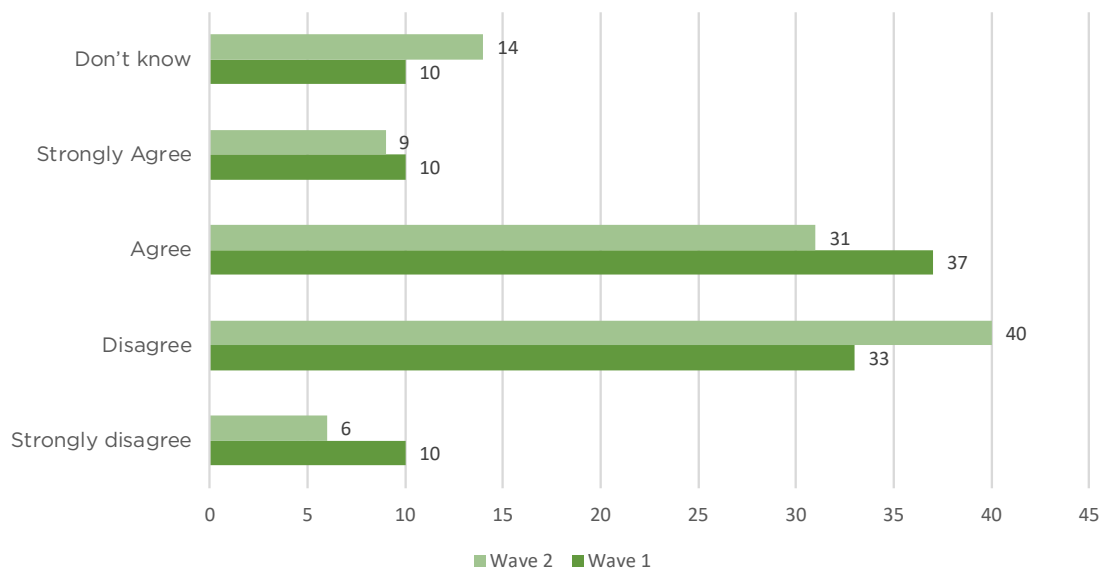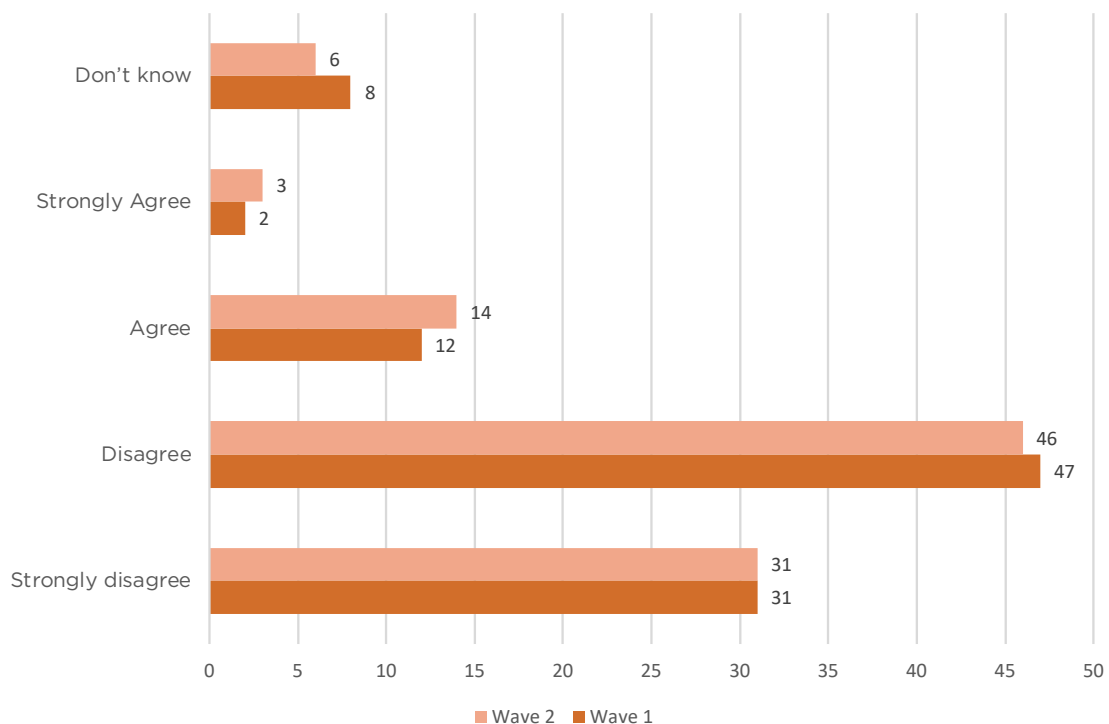

Figure 10: Young people's belief that their opinions are valued by politicians

Figures 11 and 12 provide some indications of where survey respondents felt that they had a say, consistent with other literature where young people felt they had a say and could influence change in their immediate spheres (Sarah, 2018).

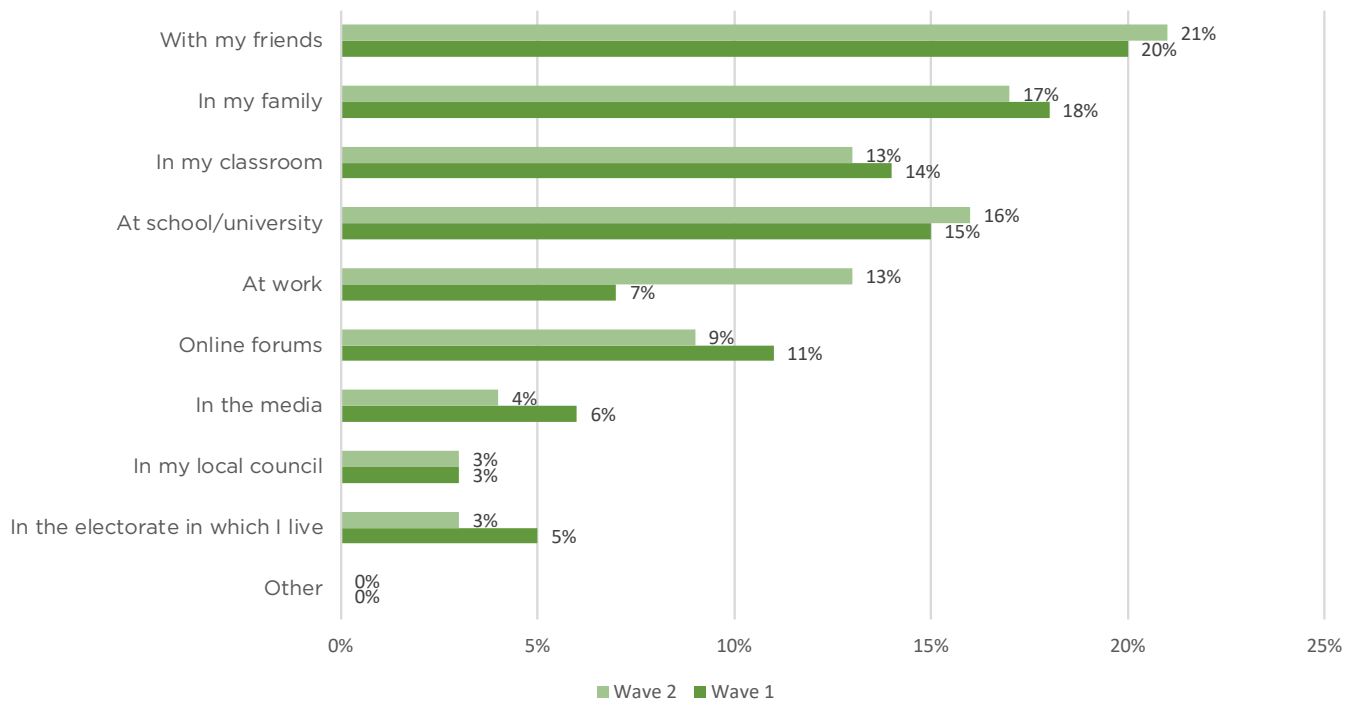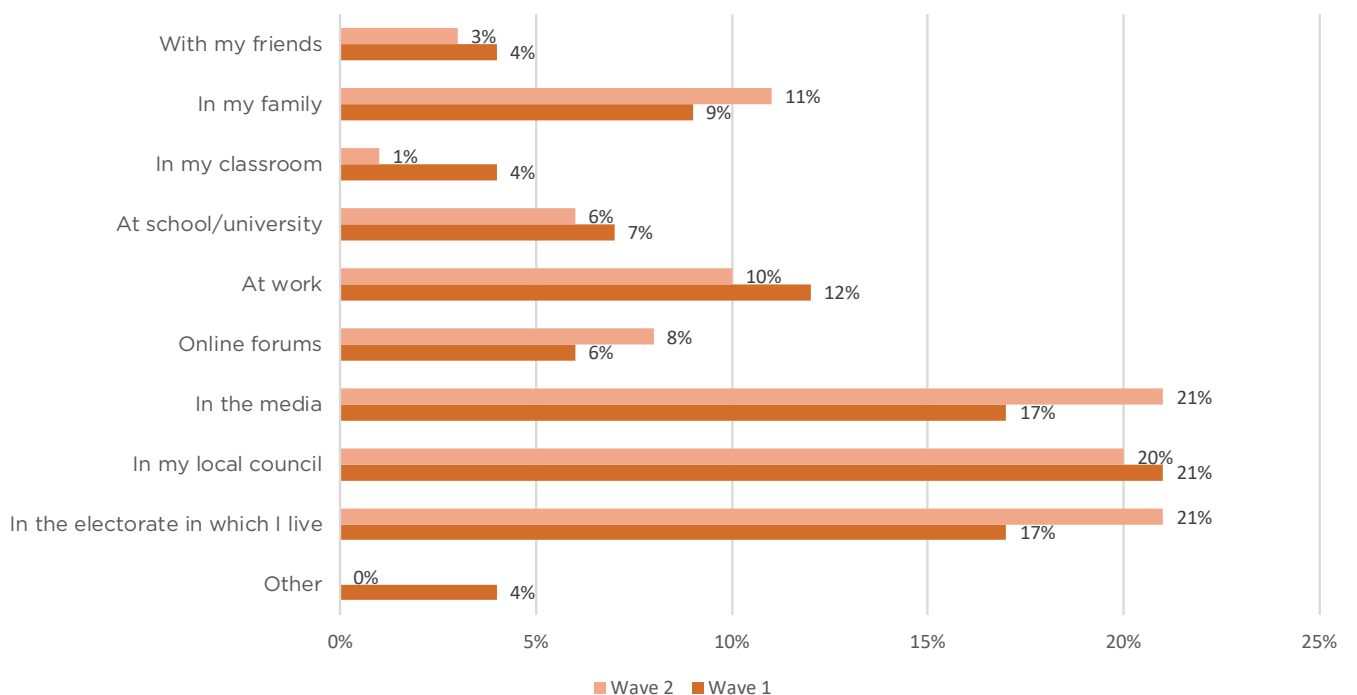## Figure 11: Places/groups where young people feel they have a voice

Figure 12: Places/groups where young people would like to have more of a voice

Interviews and focus groups mirrored the survey findings, with young people detailing their experiences of having a voice across a number of contexts and with particular groups, like friends. Some indicative quotes are included in Table 8.

Table 8: Young people's experiences of having a voice in different contexts

With Friends
"Well I like to think that I've changed some of my friends and some of the people's ideas about the environment and the impacts of being vegetarian on the environment, on other people." (Alisa, 23)

In Institutional Contexts (i.e. Classrooms)
"…[to use your voice] even if you do not belong to that marginalised group because you have common sense and if you are an ally, if you are listening you intuitively know some things which are right and wrong and like you can step in at points … we had a lab meeting [at university] dedicated to talking about how we could make our research more inclusive … it's like I'm not an Indigenous person but it first came from an Indigenous person but then it was on us as white people to be like 'Oh, they said that and this is an action we can take'. We didn't have to wait for [name] to tell us personally 'you're an environmental science group, you should be doing this'. You can advocate for those people if they're not in the room." (Shay, 23)

Through Research and Consultation
"Not everyone can get up and speak, it's not a skill or trait for everybody. However, there is an important part of youth voice that does include them, and that's providing feedback, it's being involved in smaller stuff, like focus groups or interviews, or whatever; and then someone who does have a voice can go and use that information." (Lucas, 26)

Mapping participation in social change

In this section, we explore the landscape of young people's participation, including more traditional civic engagement activities (i.e. belonging to clubs), as well as newer modes of sociopolitical action and activism through social media. This section shows the diversity of participation in social change activities young people are engaged in across institutional contexts such as education and work settings or in local council, doing creative and/or community activist work. We also explore young peoples' reflections and theories on how and where change takes place, in addition to some of the key motivations that drive them, building on the previous section which identified young people's starting points, either through lived experience as a driver of, or as a witness to, social injustice.

The survey data provided a portrait of the types of traditional and well-known forms of participation for social change. As shown in Figure 13, signing petitions or supporting online campaigns were the most common forms of participation, and using social media to voice an opinion on an issue was also popular. In the second wave of our survey, a number of online activities had higher rates and volunteering was less likely (see Figure 14), both possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns affecting the participation of young Victorians.

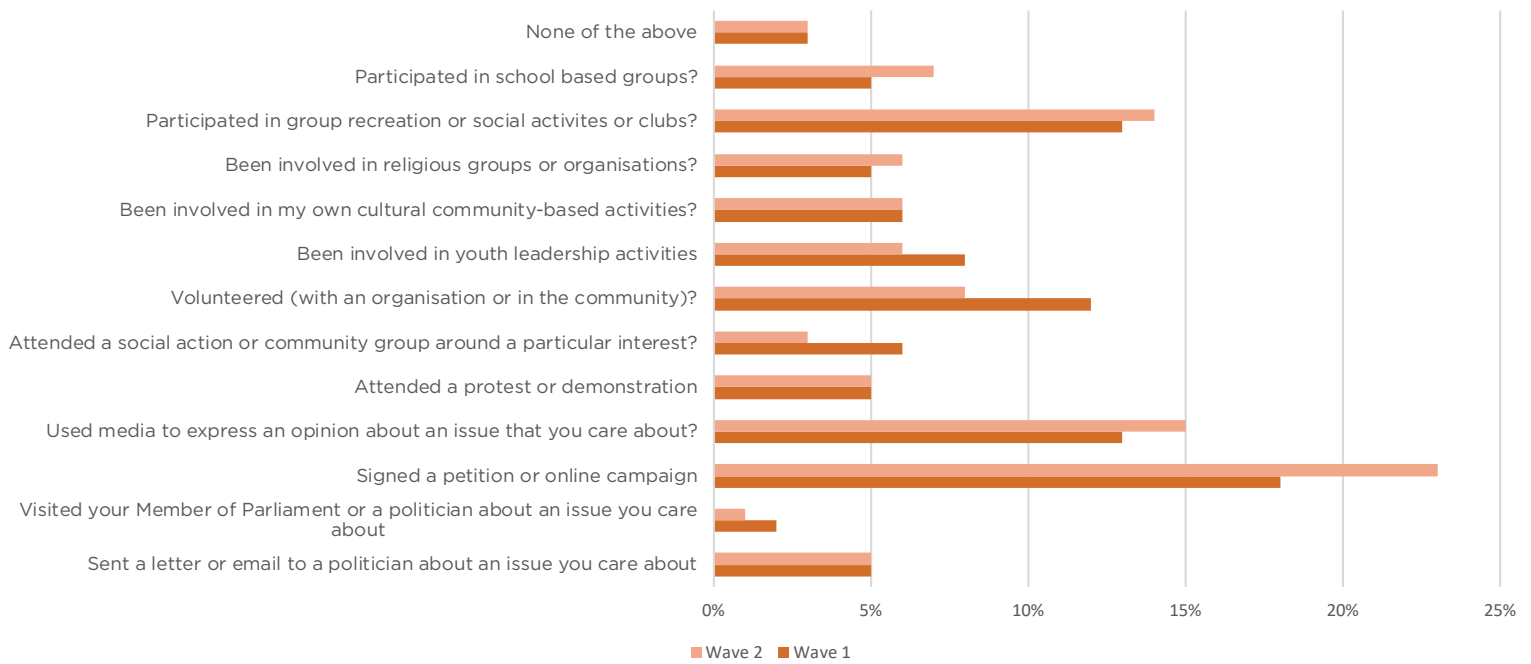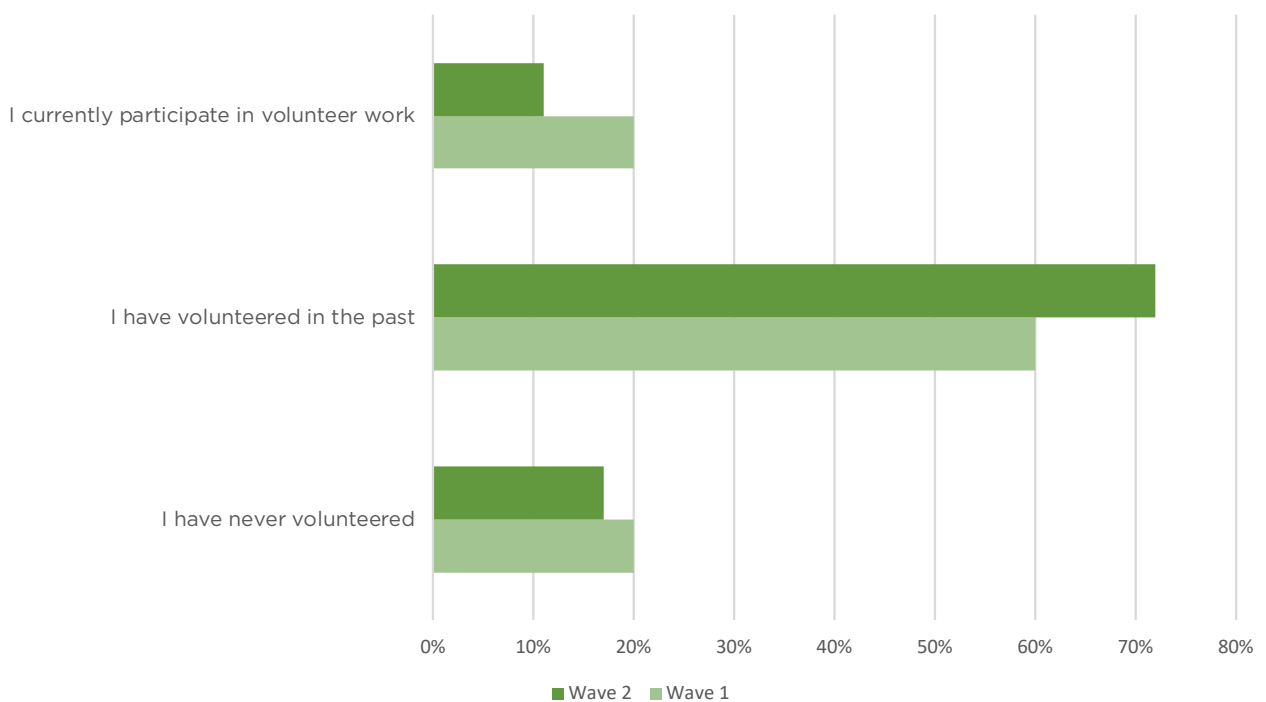## Figure 13: Social change activities young people have been involved in

Figure 14: Young people's experiences and intentions with volunteering

As highlighted in the demographic portrait, young people in our study are connected in local community and interest groups (online or in person), and a substantial number have volunteered in the past 12 months (an average of 63% across Waves 1 and 2, shown in Figure 14). Luna highlighted that young people are participating in formal channels, like committees, but also wanting to create new communities and structures outside of traditional political modes of participation:

"I've seen a lot more young people join in various committees. My partner joined in the Active Transport of Maribyrnong and he was the only young person there. And so I think breaking into those roundtables that tend to be quite exclusive are the ways in which young people are doing that, joining like gardening groups and doing stuff that is not necessarily considered in the normal sense political, but it is political because it is trying to shape something new." (Luna, 23)

Sophia, who was studying psychology at university, highlighted how those taking up professions and careers in service and other areas are doing so as a commitment to creating social change:

"I also think I would probably argue that all of us, by virtue of what we're studying, are working towards social change because we're all going into it in our own way, caring professions that are like, 'These are the social issues. We're trying to tackle them', and that's huge. Yeah. I guess it's interesting that we all chose to do that as well. I know a lot of people obviously care about a lot of different issues but their work isn't…" (Sophia, 23)

When discussing social change at a variety of levels – individual, group, societal and global – young people theorised some really important ways that change takes place. Some pointed to everyday actions as an important site for change such as personal choices and volunteering (dedicating time and knowledge) to create change:

"I feel like personal is political and so my everyday life and the stuff that I do within it tends to really show my – how I feel and the choices that I make in terms of my political leanings are like my social preferences … For example, I currently volunteer at Undercurrent, which is a sexual educational program run by volunteers – still in my training stages, but we're kind of –we've created a community resource that aims to educate people what to do during COVID-19 if they had a friend in domestic violence situations or, give people and empower people with the skills to know how to handle it themselves while maintaining physical distances and what they could do in terms of safety planning. There's just various small little things that doesn't have a really strong cohesive identity except for what I'm doing, but it does have like a pattern…" (Luna, 23)

Along the same lines, Alisa spoke about how becoming a vegetarian needed small shifts in knowledge and understanding that accumulated and led to change:

"I know with me how change in perspective and ideas, like how change has affected me in my ideas, is that I think it's very accumulative … And I think learning about it from multiple different sources and in multiple different ways, and being around people that support that a lot, and seeing it in action, was like a cumulative effect where it reached a certain threshold. And then I was like, 'All right, it's time to change this'." (Alisa, 23)

Taylor, who is extremely active across a number of social issues, particularly using community arts, noted that the diversity of participation in social change was positive for young people in this generation:

"I love the diversity in approach, that some people are out there reading government policies and posting summaries so that they're more accessible for other people. And some people are out there organising rallies, and some people are writing music, and some people are talking to their grandma. Each of those things is really important, and the fact that my generation, and generations to come, are ready and clued in enough that all those things are important, and working all of those areas, I think, is really positive." (Taylor, 24)

A number of participants also noted the ways in which the social change activities of young people had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. They spoke about the increase in online community organised activities and protests, but they also discussed how the pandemic had led some to have more time to learn about and act upon particular issues. Both Alisa and Ben pointed to the ways in which the pandemic had created possibilities for significant shifts in power and how society operates, reflecting a number of studies that have conceptualised COVID as a portal for change:

"…if people can keep that pressure continuing when COVID is on that downward slope and things are getting back into normal, I think that then change can happen in that critical time period." (Alisa, 23)

"It's very strange, and the social issues, it's been quite interesting. Because in this time it's almost like support for the social issues has been ramped up quite a bit, because we all have a little bit more time to focus on what we believe in ... But I think we [young people] need to take the charge a little bit more, realise that and hope that older Australians have realised that everyone's more equal than perhaps they first thought. Those in power as well. And they're able to give us, as young adults, a bit more of a platform to advise on certain things. I'd love if they asked our opinion on things a bit more often, instead of just going, 'But I want, therefore, this is what everybody wants'. I certainly think we're the leaders of tomorrow. When tomorrow is, is a good question, and I think this [COVID] will, it's sort of shaken us up, shaken society up enough to hopefully make those changes. But again, anything can happen, and I just hope we come out of this a little bit stronger than we came in." (Ben, 23)

Generally, these reflections show that while the pandemic has opened up opportunities to change, Ben's comment hints at an ongoing issue for young people working for change: the role of power. This topic came up a number of times when young people spoke about using their voices for change, and noted the limits they experienced in making change happen. This is detailed extensively in Section 3, where we unpack the ways that organisations often aim to incorporate young people's voices into their focus, but fail to create meaningful change for the individual and lasting impact on the system. Luna articulated this point:

"I think it's different because there's young people [who are] really vocal in social media and then there's the young people who are not represented and it's – I don't think – I think there's some interesting bits to that, but I also don't think – it's like young people are given enough of a – given power, I guess. They're not really just given any power and trust that they can try new things and fail. They can make stuff happen. I don't think that they're given much leverage to change society." (Luna, 23)

Finally in our broader mapping of what young people participated in and how they believed change occurred through their varied actions, we also asked them what stopped them from getting involved. We mirrored our survey questions after the Centre for Multicultural Youth's survey for their Active Citizenship, Participation and Belonging study (see CMY, 2014). Our results were very similar to their findings (see Figure 15), showing that the top reasons young people don't get involved in social change activities is because they don't have enough time, aren't sure about what is involved or what opportunities are available. Interestingly our study showed that a primary concern in the cohort surveyed before COVID-19 was that they wouldn't be accepted or welcomed, extending their uncertainties to include issues of belonging.

Figure 15: What stops young people from getting involved in social justice issues

Wave 2 ▪ Wave 1
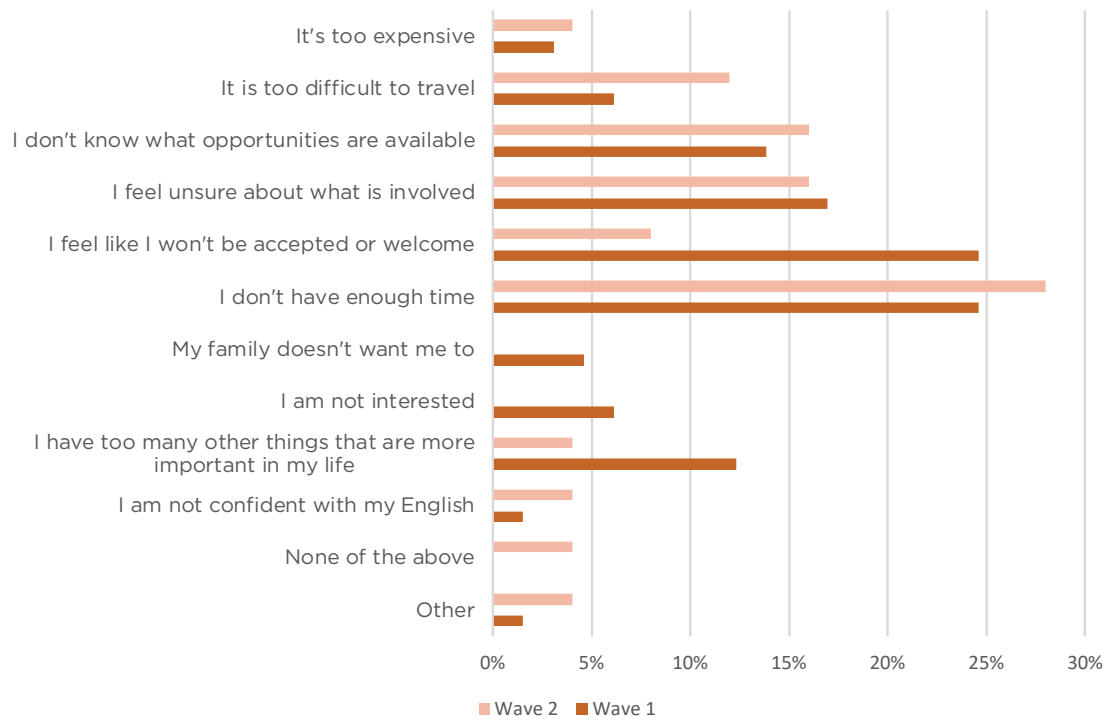
Mobilising social media for activism and change

Young people spoke at length about the role of social media and technology in relation to activism and social change activities, including how it is used as a tool or platform for speaking out, and how reposting helps organise and create awareness around an issue. In Wave 1 of our survey, young people were asked about how they use social media to engage in social justice issues (see Figure 16). Reading posts was the most frequent type of participation, in addition to supporting campaigns through sharing. When coming across offensive posts on social media (see Figure 17), the majority (26%) of young people said they 'ignore it' if it offends them on a personal level. When it was offensive toward other people or groups, the main strategy was to try to report the author of the comment/post (22%) or ignore it (20%). Other strategies that were employed were trying to share the correct information (14–16%) or to speak to a friend about the post/comment (14%).

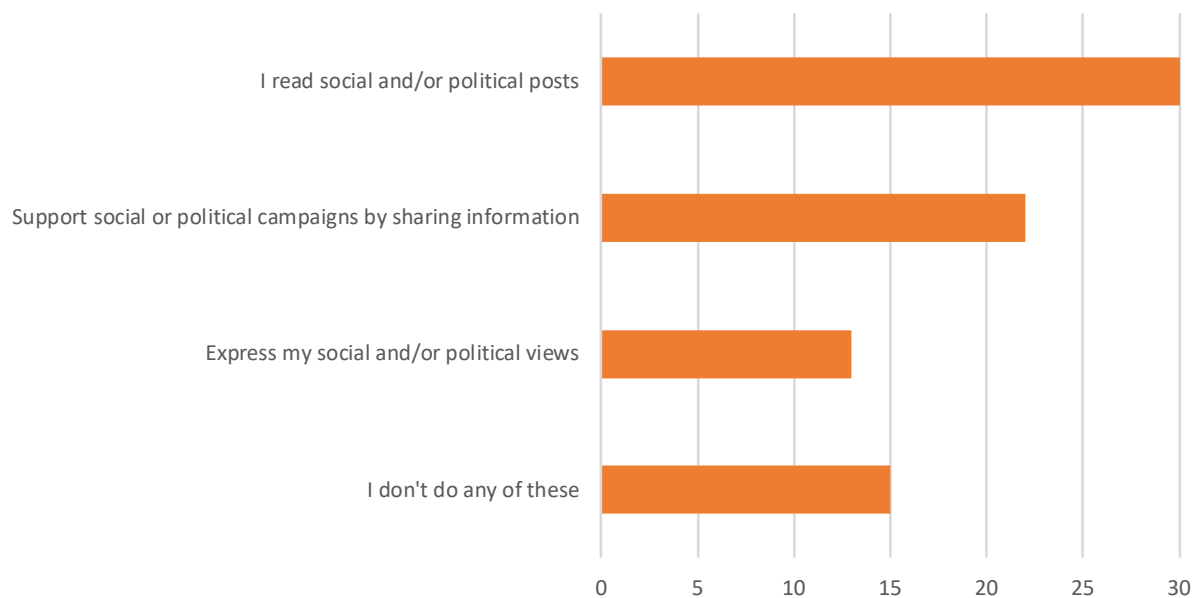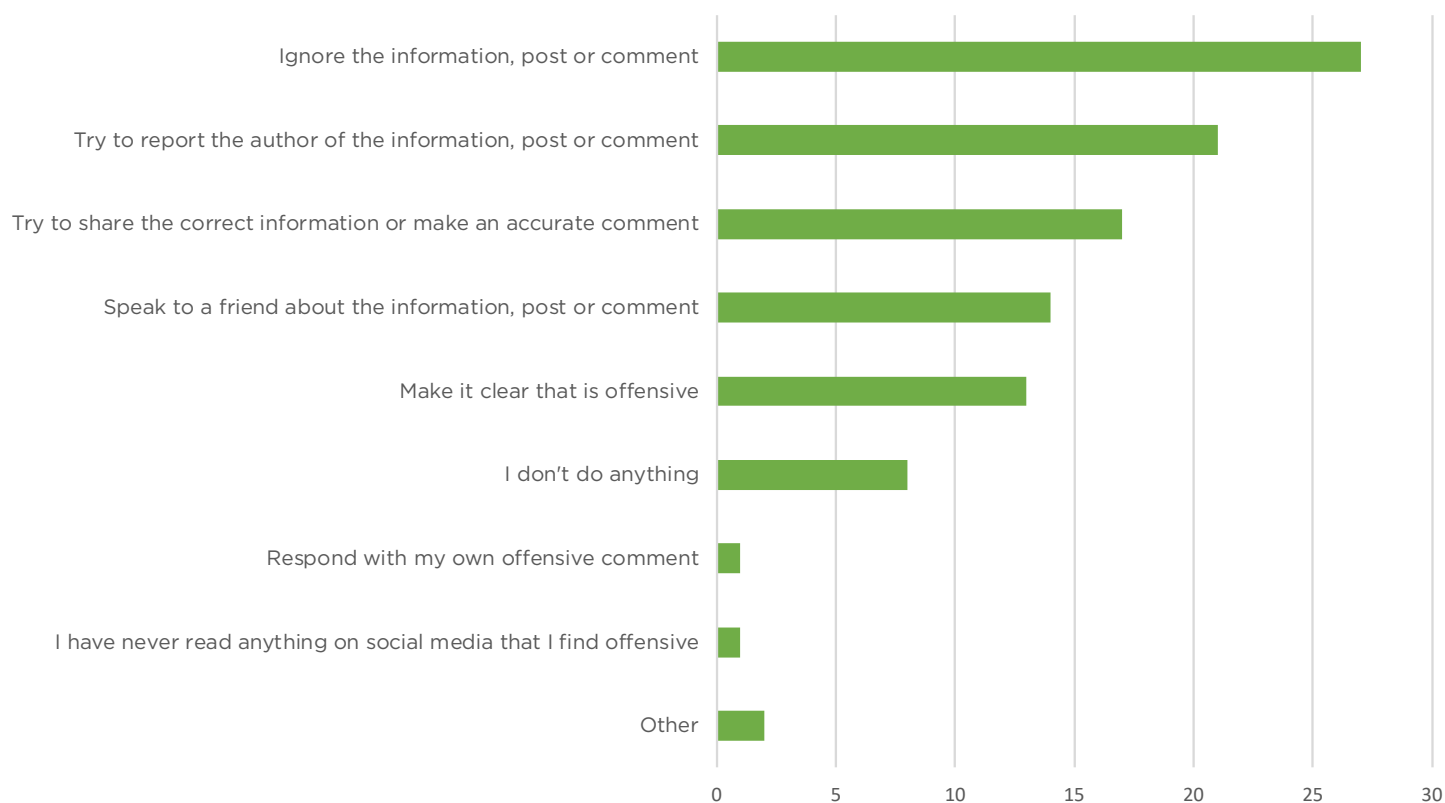Figure 16: How young people use social media to engage in social justice

Figure 17: Actions young people take when reading offensive social media posts

Shay spoke about using social media as a way to get more young people to engage in and feel safe to protest:

"I use social media a lot, usually Instagram, and I try to make a post like I am going to go to this protest, if you want a friend, come with me, like I am experienced, and if I'm taking new people, I always make sure we go to safe spaces … I've done it with friends; I do it in my workplace now like with my uni people we're all environmental scientists – we care about the climate and the planet and so I was like 'yeah, I'm involved in the climate rallies I'm helping organise some stuff, if you want to get involved let me know', and I've had people do that and it's only if once you start actually being vocal about these things and offering yourself as like a guide I suppose." (Shay, 23)

Mia noted how posting on social media about sociopolitical issues was important, but she also highlighted how it could be viewed as 'performative allyship', something which led her to be hesitant about posting:

"I am so the opposite and I've been struggling with it a lot because everybody's past month has been talking about BLM [Black Lives Matter], obviously, and it's something that I care about a lot but I haven't made a single post about it and that is mostly because I don't really post much anyway. Definitely not on Facebook I don't post much. I post pictures on Instagram and I've seen so many people doing posts and you're just there and you just know that they're doing it because they think they have to and I'm trying to grapple with that too, like maybe I do have to! Maybe I do have to say something but I've never really said anything political on my social media and I just I don't know if there's a right time to start without making me feel like it's disingenuous." (Mia, 24)

Mobilising lived experiences and creativity: Experience as a site of knowledge for activism

Many young people spoke about centring their lived experiences both in everyday interactions and/or within particular institutional contexts to challenge stereotypes and shift people's perceptions. Central to this section is the importance of stories and storytelling to resist and challenge discriminatory beliefs and institutional structures/policies, but also as a way to build understanding and empathy in a campaign for change. Sion shared her experience in the workplace, where she tries to humanise and break down harmful stereotypes about 'junkies':

"I had – I broke my own anonymity at work the other day with my manager because she was going on a rant about junkies in the flats and I outed myself and I'm like, 'Hey, this is what a junkie looks like. I was an intravenous drug user. This is what a junkie looks like. I don't do that anymore but I'm a fucking human being just like every single person in those flats is a human being and the viewpoint that you have is actually quite disgusting and toxic, I'm a human being and if you want to call people junkies, then you're talking to one'. That might've been counterproductive because it's my place of work and I probably shouldn't have outed myself like that but I felt like that was able to – because it stopped her in her tracks and made her think about those things. It made her go like, 'But you don't look like a,' 'Of course I don't because what does a person look like? Does a child look like they're going to become one?'. I just like being able to debunk those things." (Sion, 23)

Sion's story points to the everyday ways that young people mobilise lived experience to restore dignity and create understanding. Kara, who had experience with abuse and domestic violence and was extremely active in the advocacy space for young people in state care, highlighted the creative ways that storytelling can be used to develop campaigns and movements, despite not using it as her main method of activism:

"I think once it's on Facebook, you can't control where that goes from there. So, I think I wouldn't share any of my lived experience or do any storytelling through Facebook. I do share at conferences and through my writing. But I think a lot of young people do, do activism through TikTok, through Facebook but it may not be like, 'I am doing activism here look at this'. They may not even be able to identify that it's activism. But yeah, there's a video going around on TikTok, like a trend where girls who have been sexually assaulted, they get red paint on their hands and put on their bodies where a male has touched them, or a perpetrator has touched them without their permission. I do storytelling through that, and I know from the MeToo movement a lot of people have come forward and say, 'Hey, this happened to me', and shared their stories through that hashtag. So, I think that a lot of children and young people do activism through social media because that's, you know, they can kind of hide behind the screen and they're putting themselves out there but maybe not like, you know, just in a different way." (Kara, 20)

While Kara pointed to the safety of social media as a way to share stories, Taylor saw social media as a place and strategy for 'counter-storytelling'. Counter-storytelling involves mobilising stories as a site for challenging "social and racial injustices by listening to and learning from experiences of racism and resistance, despair and hope at the margins of society" (Yosso, 2013, p. 171). A number of researchers have highlighted the importance of spaces in which stories can affirm experiences but also lead young people to act against institutions and systems that marginalise them (Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). Taylor noted that the mainstream media was one of these institutions and articulated a common response from young people:

"So, it's just like, 'Who's telling the stories? Who's being supported to tell the stories?'. Because yeah, there are young people who are telling stories, but they're doing it on their own platforms via YouTube, Tic Tok [sic], which is why those platforms are really popular with young people. Because they can listen to people with that experience telling those stories, whereas, in mainstream media that's really, really hard to come by. It might be represented but I don't think it's well represented; I think often it's misrepresented or underrepresented. In terms of the number of young people doing incredible things and have important stories to tell, more often than not, the media's going to want to, 'Shhh' to that rather than put a spotlight on it. It doesn't suit their agenda, because, like I said, the mainstream media is run by these corporations." (Taylor, 24)

These everyday forms of activism were spoken about by many young people in our study; some have specifically used arts as a way to tell stories or challenge or resist forms of oppression and violence:

"I think art is a very valid way of doing activism; a lot of people don't, necessarily, agree, but I think it reaches a lot of people in a way that taking to the streets, with a placard, can't. I think both are important, I think we need to support people to do as many things as we possibly can." (Taylor, 24)

Luna spoke about ways young people use art in combination with training as a way to mobilise around social issues and create change:

"And I guess creating their own collectives and creating art workshops is definitely the way I'm seeing quite a few people in Footscray do – trying to film other people from – people of colour backgrounds and doing their own video competitions and training each other for jobs and that I'm hearing – yeah. So with young people, training other young people who are struggling with employment and just having peer circles or doing barista training. I think all those ways in which – they don't seem like much, but they're definitely helping to build something new and to support each other is the way young people can do it." (Luna, 23)

Arts and creativity are also multifaceted. As expressed in the following quote from Summer, the body is seen as a site for creativity and make-up as a way to navigate the emotions that come with gender identity transformation:

"I have my lipstick, which represents to me my femininity and how I found myself – let me reword that. So I guess I'll tell a little story. Because I'm transgender, so I'm male-to-female, and back then I had very bad dysphoria and I hated myself, and make-up really has helped me with my emotions, like made me feel confident and able to express myself to the world, and connect with my mum, because she's a make-up addict like me. And it helped me express my femininity, gave me a creative outlet." (Summer, 18)

Activist burnout: Choosing between feeding yourself and fighting for a better world

A common theme in the stories of young people who were describing activist and advocacy work both within an organisation or system and in other contexts, was the toll this took on them, emotionally, psychologically and physically. A number of studies point to the heavy workload, emotional labour/toll (e.g. feeling guilt about not doing more) and lack of adequate support that activist roles can have on young people, resulting in burnout (Beilmann, 2020; Cox, 2009, 2011). This was evident in our interviews with young people doing activist work in community movements and those working in advocacy/activist roles within organisations. Taylor – who was involved in community organising, arts activism and change roles in organisations – spoke about how this type of work becomes all consuming, especially when coupled with the steady stream of information young people are often exposed to:

"And are living in [a] world which, in many ways, has changed for the better, but is, in many ways, changing for the worst. There's things like – fascism is happening again, and I'm like, 'Why? Why?' but it is, and stuff like that. People are just finding it really hard; we're saturated with information all the time. So, on top of there aren't any opportunities, it's very easy for people to become overwhelmed between, 'I need to feed myself, keep a roof over my head, and every time I open social media it's a flood of awful things and I feel like there's no way I could possibly do anything, it's too big', right?" (Taylor, 24)

Taylor speaks to a number of issues that accumulate for young people taking up activist roles, particularly the emotional weight they carry in wanting to create change, but seeing things get worse. They also talk about the lack of opportunities for paid roles in social change work and the well-documented difficulty of activism being voluntary and extremely time intensive, coupled with high expectations about what is possible in terms of the scope and scale of change (Cox, 2011; Slackers, 2007). Taylor articulated how, for them, this creates real issues financially, morally and in relation to their health:

"

Taylor: "If you have to choose between feeding yourself and fighting for a better world. You're going to have to choose feeding yourself, otherwise you'll be dead, and you can't continue fighting for a better world. And, for me, it was a choice between feeding myself, doing activist work and getting rest, and I chose not to get rest and so I burnt myself out. That's fine – it's not fine, but it's the world we live in, and it's not fine, no. But we can only do what we can do, you know."

Interviewer: "What have been the consequences, if any, for yourself in terms of some of these big issues, and has it had an impact on your own wellbeing, as a young person?"

Taylor: "Oh, 100%. I get burnt out at least three times a year, to the point where I have a month where I can't do anything, like I won't be cooking for myself, I might be missing weeks at a time of work because I just get so ill because I push myself to breaking point.

But I only do that because I really care about these issues, and I really care about telling these stories and stuff like that. And also, because I have no concept of what I am capable of doing and what I am not; but that's a separate issue. It happens pretty damn regularly because to create the world I want to see I need to put in X amount of work, right? But say I only have X amount of working hours in me; I also have to pay my rent, so it's always a struggle, it's always a struggle."

"

Taylor's story shows that dedication and motivation for a better world drives many young people to continue, but with negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing.

A number of young people pointed to the specific 'pressure' they felt was placed on young people to challenge negative discourses, representations and stereotypes. Kara (20) highlighted this as an issue in organisations: "I find there is a lot of pressure, especially on young people because we're constantly needing to prove ourselves", and that advocacy work requires you to "be your best selves, all the time". Sarah (24) explained that this was embedded into everyday contexts and spaces in activist work, but also more generally:

"I feel like, as young people, we challenge it on the daily, regardless. All the young people that I know, they're always trying to actively say to people: 'This is not who we are. This is not what's happening. You don't understand the full situation. You don't understand the full context as to why a young person is doing this and also you don't know me so don't make assumptions'." (Sarah, 24)

While many young people are engaging in more traditional grassroots activism which is voluntary and community-led, there are also paid opportunities with many organisations and services hiring young people to co-design and create change within (this is covered in Section 3). Young people from both these avenues of activism spoke about the toll over an extended period of time and that you don't often see change immediately. Lucas' story echoes Taylor's, pointing to the protracted change-making process and the psychological and emotional endurance required to both begin and to continue:

"[I] think the biggest barrier, when you're trying to speak up about something new or take a lead on it, is not knowing, it's about stepping into the unknown, not knowing how it's going to go. And then you also, for some reason, I don't know why it is, but we get this idea in our head that, yeah, we're going to get it up there, we're going to fight for this, and we're going to make it happen. What we don't consider is how much time it actually takes. So, then all of a sudden, after a few months or after a year, we kind of look at it and go, 'Well are we actually making progress on this? What's the point in keeping going?'. Important changes take the longest amount of time I've noticed, and it's just about holding that belief and going, 'Yes, okay, there's little wins here, there's little wins there, we're getting somewhere'. Maybe not the same direction that we originally planned, but we're still moving in that general direction." (Lucas, 26)

Lucas has a long history of activism and advocacy in relation to out-of-home-care, supported by non-government organisations. He described it as "a massive project that's been ongoing; campaigning, speaking to government officials, speaking to media, building up that community awareness". His reflections on his activism also highlight the intensity of this work:

"Everyone gets tired, but if I had three gigs on in one day, then yeah, you've got to be on the ball the whole day, and you come home and you're wrecked, anybody would be wrecked. But even in between that, you have that mental break going, crap I've now got to refocus and get ready for the next one, and the one after that. And you've got to go, okay that happened, I shared that, I may be overexplaining myself, because I'm a bit tired on that second one, but let's go to the third and we'll do better on that one…" (Lucas, 26)

Something that is really apparent in Lucas' story are his reflections about the ways in which activism and trauma intersect. Young people who have lived experience of various forms of individual and collective oppression and trauma often deal with both the intensity of activist work and the potential retriggering of painful experiences – an issue that is well documented in the literature (Carmen et al., 2015; Cox, 2011; Haglili, 2020a, 2020b).

"The other thing is, when people get up online or on the news and share this real sad story, it's impactful, but it makes me wonder, what is that doing to you, and how are you going to cope with that after you've shared that? Once it's out in the media its out." (Lucas, 26)

These reflections, and the experiences of other young people, highlight the importance of collectives, mental health support and access, and the need for self-sustainability strategies, in addition to the activist work and movement.

COVID-19 spotlight: Reflections on social change

"…discussions we're having like, for example, all the Black Lives Matter protests, It feels like they were bigger than you know the last round of those kind of protests at the last person that sparked them, and I kind of think that maybe that's because we're all so starved of things to do, and the majority of things on the news are all COVID-related and so it's … it might just be a moment in time where when things happen, everyone can pay attention to them a little bit more than like when we all have lives going on." (Sophia, 23)

"I think we're potentially … less exhausted by our lives that we have the energy to put into BLM or something like that." (Mia, 24)

"People don't have jobs that are draining them as much, they have reduced hours, or they're not working at all, and they're able to channel any sort of anxiety or depression that they're already having into this movement as well I think." (Mia, 24)

"It's also that you don't have to worry about losing your job. Like, so many people have lost jobs or have realised that their jobs were so flawed that they just don't care." (Shay, 23)

"It's very strange, and the social issues, it's been quite interesting. Because in this time it's almost like support for the social issues has been ramped up quite a bit, because we all have a little bit more time to focus on what we believe in. So, there's a lot of friends that I have on Facebook and things who are pushing, for example, there's demonstrations going on in Poland at the moment, anti-LGBTQ protests going on, and a whole bunch of my friends caught onto that and are organising a Zoom rally, and all sorts of weird and whacky things." (Ben, 23)

3) Institutional conditions for developing and supporting youth voice

"I feel like there's a lot of responsibility for me to push the system to make sure that they're doing the right thing but also making sure that I'm not breaking down those places for young people to be able to, in the future, sit. And at any point in time, I may be an advocate that has gotten to the point where I have been at a state level, but that doesn't mean I have any power and at any point in time the system can tear me down, if they really wanted to. So, the only reason that I'm still standing where I am and that these platforms are still open is because I feel like the system still sees a use for me and when is that going to expire? And I feel like I've been walking on eggshells just waiting for something to happen, where they say 'no more, we're not going to look at youth participation for this area anymore'." (Sarah, 24)

Sarah, a young woman with extensive experience as an advocate in family violence and living in out-of-home care, illustrates in the quote above how fragile her role is and has been over the years that she has been a 'voice' to change the system. Much of what Sarah spoke about resonates throughout this section, and also previous sections, about where power lies and how opportunities for young people to be heard and to initiate change are few and far between, and can even be exploitative.

In this section, we explore the contexts of organisations as sites and spaces for young people to develop their advocacy and activism. This section is different to the previous section on voice because there is specific attention to young people's and youth workers' reflections on organisations and, more broadly, on the service sector's structures for supporting young people to take up leadership roles for social change. Close to one third of the young people interviewed in this study had a significant level of involvement in these different leadership and advocacy programs, and just over half had participated in youth-focused co-design programs or activities aimed at elevating young people's voices in order to tackle significant social issues. Much of this involvement was based on bringing youth 'voice' into organisations or sectors to understand their experiences and improve services and systems. Young people involved in this work were brought in to speak about domestic violence, sexual abuse, homelessness and living in out-of-home care. Some were also living in rural areas and spoke about issues related to this; others were from refugee or migrant backgrounds, with experiences of discrimination and knowledge about support services that they could bring to organisations.

Young people in this study discussed a number of important programs and organisations that supported them in developing the skills, knowledge and confidence to move their lived experience or passion for a particular issue into activism and advocacy.

Consciousness raising: Young people naming their experiences

A number of young people who participated in or were still engaged with a particular local organisation noted the six months of training in critical media literacy, campaigning, storytelling, activism and self-care that was required. Young people involved in this program often had lived experience of family violence and out-of-home care, among other challenging circumstances. Kara described how the program begins by working through these personal experiences and unpacking them:

"One thing that really came through for [organisation name] for me is it was a strong emphasis on it's not your fault. Like, it's not your fault, you're a kid, you can't – there's people out there that are meant to protect you and that they weren't protecting you … Like, I was blamed like I was a problem kid, but it was actually just my reaction to what I was experiencing. I think once I understood that, it really, really helped me. Oh, I've only experienced sexual assault, and then as I learnt about what family violence is and mental health, and what family violence is and what homelessness is and what this is and what that is. I'm like oh shit, this has all happened to me, I didn't know that that's what it's called, because I wasn't educated. So, I think that was something that like, it really helped me to kind of grow there and change into the person that I am now." (Kara, 20)

"We shouldn't have to change ourselves": Accepting the whole young person

One of the common threads in young people's reflections about their experiences in organisations was that the types of support, whether characterised as leadership programs or activism training, needed to be holistic in their approach to working with young people. This meant accepting their diverse experiences and identities, and building flexibility into programs to give young people the space and time to step away and process or recover from difficult times. In this section, we examine what young people said about the kinds of support they received that had worked, but also what organisations needed to do to support youth in their journey to become change agents.

A number of young people spoke about the difficulties of participating or being accepted in programs that had particular criteria in addition to challenges around accessibility. As Taylor highlighted, they faced a number of barriers to participation in advocacy programs and organisations:

"In just terms of being non-binary there are issues with I go to this building and there's no bathroom there, I can't use it. In terms of being neurodivergent there's things like you're expected to make phone calls and connect with people, and fill out all of these forms that I can't even read because they're too long, and stuff like that, and it often means that I can't access programs or services. I can't share my story because there are all these structural things that make it inaccessible to me … it's not that I'm being excluded from this process, but literally, there is not a place for me that would force me to conform to something else … I can't participate, but it's like I can participate but not as myself." (Taylor, 24)

Taylor's experience surfaces the ways in which dominant cultural practices and norms are embedded in organisations that prevent them from entering a space or program as themselves. Luna, who described herself as a third culture kid born in the Philippines but having lived in half-a-dozen countries, reflected on her experience in organisations, highlighting organisational culture that focuses more on outputs than people and relationships:

"I feel like there's this feeling of lack of time or that – maybe prevents some organisations from feeling more holistic or more about relational – relations with one another and more about the causes and what we're doing. I feel like sometimes we're measuring each other up for what output we have and what we're doing and all these measures that people put onto one another without having the time to care for one another, to put in that time to care about what's currently happening in that person's life and maybe family life or relationship life." (Luna, 23)

Kara identified the key issue she felt when she entered the advocacy space and worked with a number of organisations, reflecting on the adult-youth power dynamics:

"Yeah, I think we shouldn't have to make ourselves any different or change ourselves to fit in with these adult controlled spaces. I think that we shouldn't have to change our language and we shouldn't have to fit in with them. I think it needs to be both adapting." (Kara, 20)

Kara's point speaks to the pressures that many young people face from organisations that seek to hear the voices of youth and create change through their stories. This pressure to 'change' and 'fit in' is echoed later in this section when young people reflect on co-design processes and organisations that use the stories from youth for their own agenda. Kara also spoke at length about needing to use certain language and to present in a particular 'professional' way:

"Yeah. I find there is a lot of pressure, especially on young people because we're constantly needing to prove ourselves. We're constantly needing to be like, this is why I deserve to be here and be our best selves all the time to be accepted into these kinds of spaces and into the sector. Of course, we're going to fuck up a lot of the time. But it's just about moving on from that and learning how to do better next time, like kind of everyone. But yeah, I definitely think there's added pressure on young people to always be their best selves and always be pushing to be accepted into spaces." (Kara, 20)

Conversely, when Kara was in a long-term leadership and advocacy program that she said was like a 'family' to her, she felt their approach created a space for her to evolve:

"I understand that you're [a] whole person and that things change and that I want to know how to best support you as a whole, not as just this one-sided professional kind of way that people think that they need to be." (Kara, 20)

Organisational conditions for elevating youth voices: Mentors and creating an inclusive space

Young people who worked within organisational contexts emphasised some of the key supports and structures they believed were needed for youth to further develop their voices and stories, but also how they felt they could be heard. Adult mentors that young people had worked with over a long period of time and thus trusted were important in both developing their voices and change capacities, but also in giving 'strength' and legitimacy to what they said. Peer mentors were also mentioned as really important because they could pass on their knowledge and experience, while also being relatable and more in tune with the constant change that young people face in today's world:

"I honestly feel like that could even stem from having a mentor, like, an older sibling, an older cousin, you know just, a babysitter, whatever, just someone who's older that you can show a paved path that may not necessarily be the one that you think you're supposed to take, and they're essentially showing you, you can do this. Like yeah this is a bit different, but you can do it, because I'm doing it. It shows you like a different … a different idea of where you're meant to go." (Melissa, 23)

Kara spoke about the importance of adult mentors with organisational and lived experience guiding young people doing advocacy work:

"I was really lucky to have very strongly, yeah, being a part of the whole process and having a voice of how everything should run and what kind of things we want to teach and yeah, I think working alongside [program staff member], and now Pheobi, is really good because they have the knowledge and they have the access to spaces that we wouldn't be able to get without having them and they have the connections. I think by working together we kind of can get more strength behind our voices and stuff like that, if it makes sense. I think if it was just me going into a space and saying, 'This how you need to do things', they would just be like, 'Whatever'. But because I have Pheobi there saying, 'She's okay to listen to', kind of giving me that vouching, if that makes sense." (Kara, 20)

While Kara emphasised the need for adult voices to legitimise and 'give strength' to young people's voices within organisations, Faiza also spoke about this in relation to the high school context:

"I think yes, but I also think that if you have someone who's older backing you up, or an adult backing you up, then it's more valued, because sometimes people look at young people and they're like, 'You don't have the mental capacity to understand what it is that you're doing'." (Faiza, 18)

Interestingly, both of these reflections speak to young people's consciousness around the ways in which their voices matter and what they need to be taken seriously depending on the context. Lucas spoke about the need for and importance of peer mentors, particularly in the context of co-design and co-production, as this provides young people with an inclusive space to learn and relevant mentors who understand their experience, their journey through organisations as a channel for change and the specific issues young people of this generation face:

"So I think until we have a clear understanding of the words we're using, we're not going to get to that next part. I think once we work out what we're doing, then you can work on that co-production side, and from that you have a group of people with lived experience, who are experienced, who can then guide another group to come forward as they feel they're moving. We're all going to have a lived experience forever, but we're not going to be up to date with the world, the world changes all the time, so it's important for the changeover in those groups." (Lucas, 26)

Lucas noted that this needs to be a careful process with a deliberate transition to ensure those leaving the advocacy space pass on their knowledge and guidance to other young people:

"But what I think would really help would be having a transition period where you've got the older group, or the group that's been doing it for a while, help bring that new group up to date. That creates an inclusive environment, and really supports youth voice, because then you have a new member that doesn't have to feel so frightened or nervous, because they've got someone who's been doing it for a while that can help them, and guide them along that process, kind of like a mentor/mentee sort of thing. But it doesn't have to be put in those formal brackets." (Lucas, 26)

Throughout their interviews, Lucas and others spoke at length about creating the right kind of spaces for young people. Adult and peer mentors were central, but the process of supporting young people was also extremely important because many had had traumatic experiences both in the home context but also through their involvement in 'the system'. It was clear from these reflections that young people needed a program and supports that moved at their pace and that built trust, perhaps to offset their negative experiences with institutions:

"And yes you try and provide the opportunity for them to speak, but I think if you force it then you're going to get a very basic answer from them. Whereas if you build it slowly and let them feel comfortable, then they're going to share their real thoughts on it, and they're going to be quite open; and all of a sudden you've created a conversation and a movement from everyone else, because you've given them the space to feel comfortable for them to speak up on something really relatable ... I think it's a bit about facilitation, to a degree, but it's also about the individual knowing when's the right time to sit there with it, and when's the right time to speak out about it, but not feeling pressured to have to do either of them. It needs to be a personal journey that each individual takes." (Lucas, 26)

Organisational culture and barriers to youth participation

The professional staff and youth interviewed in our study identified many practical and logistical barriers to youth participation in change, as mapped in Table 9.

Table 9: Barriers to youth participation in social change

Barrier	Youth	Staff
Phone credit		x
Internet access		x
Access to transport and programs	x	x
Financial stress	x	x
Employment commitments	x	x
Limited hours and areas of operation		x
Family responsibilities (i.e. caring)	x	x

In addition to these barriers, both young people and staff identified the following institutional cultural barriers to meaningful and sustainable youth participation in youth organisations. Some of these reflect young people's experiences in this section thus far, such as the 'professionalisation' of spaces and power dynamics between young people and adults. Importantly, organisational culture was also reflective of white middle class culture, operating in ways that were not welcoming to all young people.

Exclusive language excludes young people

A number of youth workers and young people spoke about the issue of language in organisations and the service sector more broadly. These reflections highlighted that the 'professional' language used made it difficult for young people to clearly understand and speak about their experiences in ways that can create change. Youth worker Pheobi and others called for 'deprofessionalising' spaces so that young people could be heard:

"...because trying to be a young person that doesn't have a degree, but has all this lived experience and expertise to engage in a space with people who have PhDs and all of this experience, have been working for 15/20 years, trying to kind of come into those is difficult, it's really challenging." (Pheobi, Youth Worker)

"There's so many times we're in rooms and we just cannot make sense of the language being used, because it's just so overly professionalised. So I think that is the number, for me that's the thing that undercuts all of this, is how are we going to start deprofessionalising some of these spaces, so these young people can come up through the ranks and really start shifting culture." (Pheobi, Youth Worker)

Youth worker Hazel noted that the use of professional language made it difficult to participate:

"...[young people] not feeling like they're valid enough to be in those spaces because they don't necessarily know the words and the lingo." (Hazel, Multicultural Youth Worker)

Importantly, young person Kara also identified the need for organisations to support young people's voices and actions, and to help them learn the language of services and systems so that they can both articulate how they are affected and access spaces where they can make a difference:

"I think as well, learning, because there's like a language that systems and services and people have and I think as a child or young person you don't have that language, you're not able to communicate how you're feeling or how it's affecting you. So, once I learned the language to be able to be in these spaces and got access to these spaces through Y-Change, now I feel like I have something to say and I want to say it and I'm really passionate about the work now and I couldn't imagine doing anything else." (Kara, 20)

Youth organisations and youth participation: "A very white-washed space"

An important barrier to participation is the white institutional culture that reflects Australia's past and present as a settler colonial country. As Khan (2021) points out in her most recent study into young people of non-European migrant backgrounds in leadership roles (i.e. youth advisory groups) in local organisations, "whiteness was experienced … as a cultural orientation that defined the institutional worlds in which they were expected to perform as leaders" (p.6).

In the current research, youth workers spoke candidly about these institutional cultures, specifically the processes and practices, but also the implications for participation for young people. For example, Pheobi highlighted that while lived experience has potential to be used in a transformative way in program and service design, (white) middle-class staff were most often in positions of power in institutions:

"I don't want to simplify it by saying lived experience is kind of the silver bullet. We've had people from middle-class lenses designing programs for people that they're not actually listening to the voices of the communities affected to design more effective policies." (Pheobi, Youth Worker)

Pheobi also spoke extensively about the exclusion of young Aboriginal Australians, pointing to the 'dominant way' that organisations operate:

"It's, yeah they're just, they're excluded from so many spaces because the ways in which we're operating in a dominant way, they're just so excluding their voices and their experiences, their connection to Land." (Pheobi, Youth Worker)

Pheobi's reflection shows how organisations often position the dominant white culture as the way things are done, making little room for Indigenous young people's ways of knowing, doing or being. She expanded on this by saying that there isn't space created for young people to speak back to or point out how whiteness operates in institutions and, for this reason, it remains a 'white-washed' space:

"But also just how they're not able to talk about the white fragility inside of that and the white supremacy inside of that. And, how that's impacted and how colonisation has impacted on them so extraordinarily … Youth participation in my view is still a very white-washed space. So I think it's, again there is a lot of work to be done to be educating us about how to make this work more inclusive." (Pheobi, Youth Worker)

Pheobi mentioned the need for education for those within organisations who facilitate youth participation and voice. However, Hazel recognised that the burden of educating others often unfairly falls on the shoulders of non-white young people to be 'teachers' of culture in these organisations:

"The onus is always being put back on young people [of Indigenous background] to teach white people or to teach people who are meant to be in positions of power to represent communities." (Hazel, Multicultural Youth Worker)

Khan (2021) made a similar finding in her recent study: young people often juggle multiple roles as participants, leaders, cultural community representatives and change-makers.

Finally, Jorge spoke about the colonial power dynamics that arise in spaces in which young Indigenous women were hoping to participate:

"So the young ladies that wanted to participate in the activity. But if that activity is run characteristically by a white male and they know everything, and you have this person who comes into that space and feels so vulnerable because first, they have to navigate the language. Two, have to navigate this relationship with a man that feels superior to them." (Jorge, Local Council Youth Worker)

Jorge's reflection links to the previous section about exclusive language, showing that the barriers to participation stemming from organisational culture are often layered, dynamic and complex. In this section, the 'white-washed' space is an important metaphor because it shines the light onto organisations, rather than problematising young people or simply identifying the practical barriers that are spoken about most frequently. Instead, it identifies what often goes 'unmarked', as Khan (2021) points out, like where the power is concentrated, who has input into program design and development, and the ways things are done in organisations. These aspects reflect a worldview that is not safe for young Indigenous Australians specifically. In the next section, organisational culture is also addressed, but specifically how it manifests through co-design and co-production with young people.

'Fluffy co-design' and the uneven terrain of youth participation and voice

Co-design is a process that has recently gained traction in organisations as a way to bring community members together with other stakeholders to solve complex issues. In this process, equal value is given to expertise through lived experience and expertise gained through education or in one's profession. Over the past decade, service organisations and government institutions across Australia have begun to use co-design approaches with young people as a way to tap into youth 'voice', seeking to involve them as partners in decision making, service design and the improvement of programs, practice and policies (Dimopoulos-Bick et al., 2018; Lenihan & Briggs, 2011; Mullins et al., 2021; Victorian State Government, 2020). A number of state governments have also used this approach more recently.

The NSW Council of Social Service (2017) has identified the key principles of co-design, including that it is outcomes-focused, inclusive, participatory, respectful and iterative. In the co-design process, young people and community members who have particular lived experiences (i.e. unemployment, homelessness or discrimination) are engaged in a number of phases (Discover, Define, Develop, Deliver – see the UK-based Design Council, 2021) aimed at moving from identifying and unpacking the problem to creating solutions. Orygen, a youth mental health service, has been engaging young people through co-design to improve the mental health systems that support them. They have identified important principles and elements of co-design that have been informed by evidence, practice and co-created alongside young people (Orygen, n.d.). They cite Slay and Stephens' (2013) "alternative Ladder of Participation", pictured in Figure 18, which informs and distinguishes between types of participation in relation to co-design. Much of what the young people in our study spoke about in terms of their co-design or co-production experiences was more along the lines of consulting or engaging, although some had been involved in long term, intensive co-production programs.

Figure 18: Alternative ladder of participation (Slay & Stephens, 2013, used with permission)
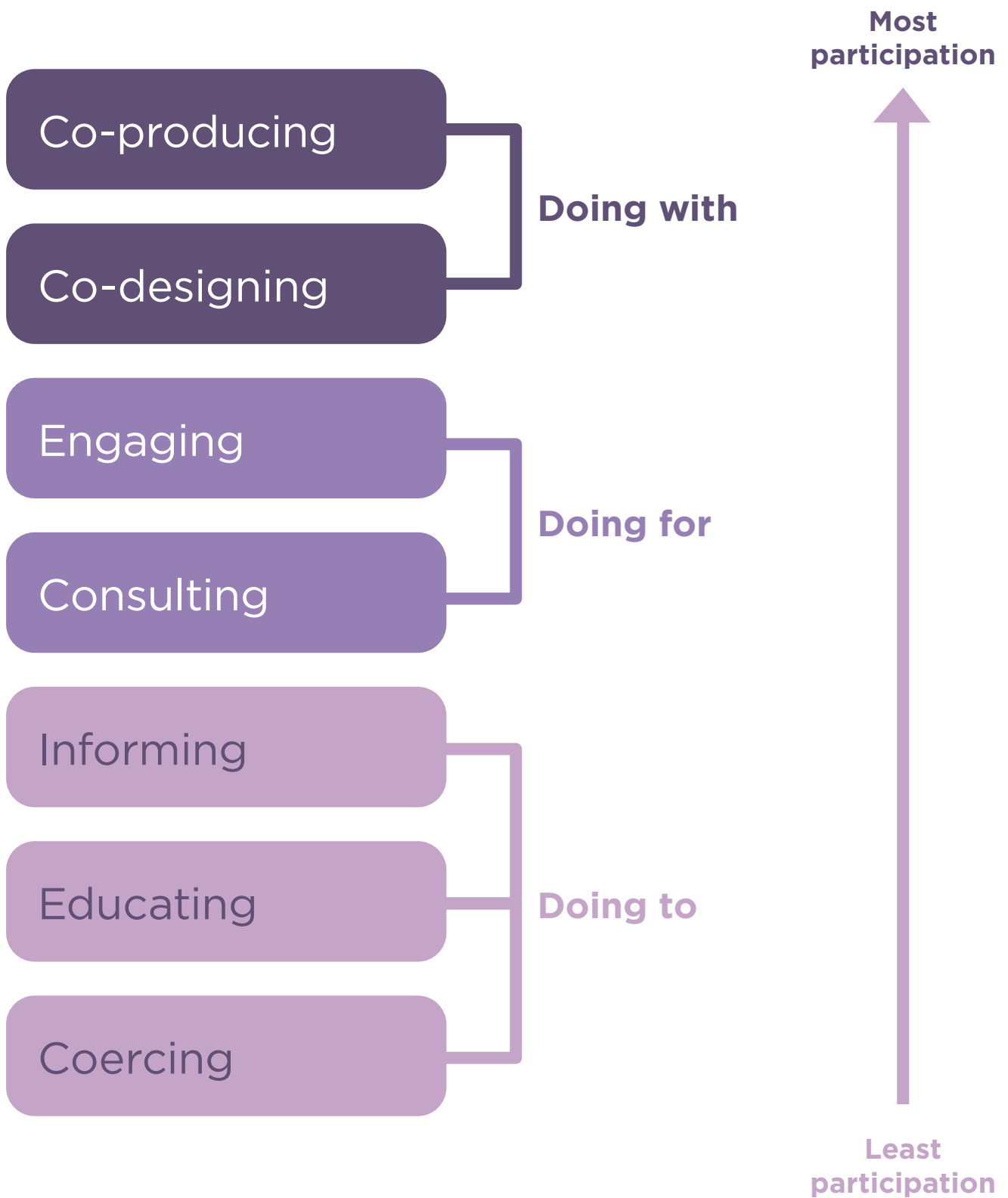
In this section, we draw on young people's experiences of engaging in co-design programs across a range of organisations. Young people and youth workers alike spoke about the challenges they face in undertaking this type of design, which is resource and time intensive, requires institutional and other forms of support, and is often a process that favours the goal and agenda of the organisation over the development, wellbeing and activist capacities of young people. Lucas highlighted how the push to include youth voice has led to many organisations engaging young people in tokenistic forms of co-design, which he calls 'fluffy co-design':

"There is a movement at the moment, people trying to involve it [youth voice], such as co-production and co-design. The issue with those words is, people need to understand them, and at the moment I feel like organisations are just fluffing them around going, 'We do this', without actually doing it. I challenged an organisation the other day, because they put it in a document that they were going to upload and go, 'This is how we're working with young people'. And I went, 'Okay, your document reads that you do co-design in order to plan supports for the young person. How do you do that, how do you define co-design?'. 'Oh, we have a meeting with our staff and that young person.' That's not co-design, that is a consultation." (Lucas, 26)

In Tables 10 and 11, we present the voices of both youth workers and young people about the specific issues they have encountered in the co-design programs they engaged with in organisations. Their experiences speak to the dangers of 'capturing' youth voices but not co-creating change with them, or young people never seeing or being part of the 'outcome'. Power dynamics between adults – who have education qualifications, professional experience and are in positions to make decisions – often overshadow young people's lived experience and their ability to voice their ideas. Concerns were raised about co-design being both tokenistic and extractive, and short term and project-focused rather than integrative and systemic, resulting in youth voices being an appendage. Other concerns raised were around organisations not being ready, prepared or having the right resources or processes in place to do co-design well. This closely links to some of the other elements already discussed as part of fluffy co-design, such as using gift cards or even not paying young people, sometimes because of institutional bureaucracy, but other times because young people's input was not seen as valuable.

Table 10: Fluffy co-design practice

	Youth Worker Voices	Youth Voices
Co-design with no outcomes or change and disregarding youth voice	…the rural voice of young people from diverse backgrounds and sit on a lot of roundtables and a lot of committees and stuff, but never really feel like they see that genuine change coming from that. You know, there's always the question, what actually happens with this information? Where is that going? And when do I see the direct impact in my community? (Hazel, Multicultural Youth Worker)	I said, 'Ask the young people – that's a good idea, but why don't you do this?'; they just kept disregarding everything I said and I was like 'why am I at this meeting?'. And I thought I would have had more standing than a young person because I was at work placement and I was more in a – I wasn't just a young person, I don't know how to describe it, more authority in terms of, I was more staff than someone off the street. And they just kept on disregarding everything I said. (Zoey, 21)
Co-design without attention to power	I think that's something a lot of people struggle with, engaging with people because they're feeling like they're getting spoken down to, as opposed to working alongside with people. I think, also, that lived experience is still not seen as a form of expertise … and I think things more like degrees are seen as an expertise, as opposed to lived experience. (Sheniz, Project Administrator)	Even the four years that I've [been] doing this, I still don't feel like a lot of what young people say is getting through to the people in power, or the systems themselves and a lot of the time it's more about inspiration than it is about actual change and it's more about reminders than it is about acting on the voices of children and young people and so on who was in spaces that young people have never been before. That became very obvious. I was more in that room for them to be reminded that they were accountable for young people rather than a voice that would help drive change (Kara, 20)

Youth Worker Voices	Youth Voices
Co-design and youth voice as an appendage	I feel like organisations are trying to find a place for youth voice. I'm not sure the right way they're going about it is long life, but I can see that organisations are trying in that regard. Depending on the topic as well though. I know Orygen does get young people group for them, mental health research, and the Youth Research Council will work for a year or two doing research around mental health; they've also got a consultancy advocacy group that they've got going on there. But again, you're only there for a few months or a year, and then you're out to the next project; and that's how I found my journey as well. It's like, organisations want youth voice involved, but the flip side is, you're just doing it on such a short term, and not really capturing the importance. You build up these skills, they get comfortable, they feel like they're finding their voice, and your time's finished, off you go. Then you've got to try and find another one. (Lucas, 26)

	Youth Worker Voices	Youth Voices
Tokenistic co-design	Sometimes it's the loudest people that get the most of their voice heard, and not necessarily the way that it should be. And you know, things get skewed based on what's easiest sometimes. What's the easiest thing to hear, what's the easiest thing to take action on. So it's just so important to capture voices in different ways. You know, as well as we've got young people in our YAG [Youth Action Group] that some are way more vocal than others. Some are way more active in the space than others so that, you know, it's important to still be capturing the thoughts and the voices of those other young people as well, that don't express themselves in that same way. (Hazel, Multicultural Youth Worker) I think there is a real risk of it getting quite tokenistic within a council, so I like that our kind of young leaders program is really about them having something that they own. I think sometimes as adults in organisations we have – we run the risk of making youth voice and youth participation tokenistic. I do feel like working in local government, we're not even a specialist. We're not a youth service. We're like a whole of community type service...I think we unfortunately are not really well-placed to do that. (Sally, Youth Development Officer) From the very, very start, even before we thought of an idea, like the idea stems from those sessions and it's having that kind of co-design and collaboration from the very start to the very end. Not bringing people in for a small bit and then pushing them back out, it's valuing them from the start to the finish. (Sheniz, Youth Worker)	Overcoming barriers in terms of like, the people that do want you to speak, they usually listen to make you feel good about 'oh your voice was now heard, like go away and we're doing our own thing'. Or it's a 'we the organisation need to feel good, so we're going to make you say it how we say it to you'. So it's never about, this young person has ideas and can help us, it's always about, let's make them feel better about themselves and that's only the people who do invite young people to talk. That's the 1% of organisations, the other 99% don't let young people have a platform to speak at all. (Zoey, 21)

	Youth Worker Voices	Youth Voices
Organisational preparedness and resources for co-design	So yeah, one of the barriers would be the organisational side of things, like people don't feel like they're equipped to engage with young people, or they don't feel like they have expertise to do so. But that is how you work alongside them, and be like, 'How do we do this? How should the organisation approach this?' (Sheniz, Project Administrator) I never want to pretend that this stuff is not hard. There's only two of us, I'm four days a week and [Sheniz] is three days a week. It's a huge labour for us. I think the sector just needs to get its head around how to resource this well so we don't have huge amounts of people burning out because they don't understand the complexity of co-production. It's a very, just doing passive engagement is so easy. You don't have to scaffold around it so much. But once you're moving up to co-design and co-production, it's huge amounts of labour. (Pheobi, Youth Worker)	I've met a lot of youth workers or people who work with young people or want to engage with young people and they really have the right intentions and they want to do the right things and they talk about the barriers that they face within their organisations and within their workplaces and a lot of the time it's like, 'This has never been done before. We've never had to include young people'. They're scared, they don't know how to do it, they don't have the funding, they don't have the resources. They don't have people trained up to do it because it hasn't been a necessity before. (Kara, 20)

	Youth Worker Voices	Youth Voices
Payments are patronising: Exploiting knowledge and labour of young people	But I think with the whole gift card situation, I think it's quite controversial [laughs] in that sense. Having that conversation with them and saying, 'This is actually the only way we can pay' … when people start to become consultants and senior consultants, it's like how do you value that piece, what's the dollar figure that you can put against that? I think it's a conversation that needs to keep happening. Because one of the biggest barriers last year for our new recruits was, they couldn't prioritise our training because they had to prioritise paid work and that made perfect sense. If we're trying to support young people from disadvantage, overcome some of these barriers and actually take these barriers away so they can fully participate, money is the number one issue. So they have rent to pay, they have food to eat and they've got so many things that they're constantly up against in the mental health system, in the homelessness system. So not exchanging that with actual money, is just kind of further disadvantaging those young people. (Pheobi, Youth Worker)	A lot of labour expected without any return investment from the people asking it, which can be fine, but it can be exhausting if you're asking all of these people in these underrepresented communities to do a lot of work and then they don't get anything from it. It just means people get burnt out faster and people can't continue to do the work they need to do. So, that was part of what I hoped with what [this program] is doing is about trying to put value to that sort of lived experience, which is great. (Taylor, 24) They pay in gift cards and I was like, that's another issue because we're not – I don't know how to explain it, it's gift cards, because it feels like we're not good enough for employee salary, that's what it's called or wages, it's very condescending. (Zoey, 21) It's almost insulting to get a gift card, it's like you're not valuing my time, you think I'm like a child who, like for Christmas you don't know what to get them so you get them a gift card and then it's $20 and they're so excited because it's $20 is so much but it's upsetting in that way. (Zoey, 21)
	Yeah, so I think part of when we say your voice is valuable or your expertise is valuable. If we're saying that people have to do that for free, that's contradiction in and of itself, it's saying, it's valuable, but probably not valuable enough for us to value it monetarily. So that shift is profoundly important and it's actually great because when we have opportunities now where gift vouchers are happening and things like that. There's such a big push back on that stuff now. I think co-design has really helped that conversation be shifted quite far. Because what we're basically saying is we cannot do this work without their voices inside. We can't do this without partnering with the people who are affected. But it doesn't mean we're allowed to utilise their wisdom for free. (Pheobi, Youth Worker)	

Another important finding that emerged through analysis of youth workers' and young people's stories about co-design, and youth voice and social change work, was in relation to whose voices are included and excluded and why. In Table 11, we have analysed and organised interview data from youth workers and young people talking about voices, experiences and stories that are most often excluded in co-design endeavours aimed at capturing youth voices. These findings are concerning as they point to the ways in which co-design can end up becoming a form of co-option, deciding who speaks, for how long and what they are able to say.

For example, some young people said that their stories were often turned away if they were too raw or too critical of the organisation. Lucas reflected how one young woman's story was too raw because it included references to suicide. She was guided to have a story that included "30 seconds of the dark place and then 10 seconds of the good place". It was also clear across a number of young people's experiences that their stories were used to uphold a redemption narrative, in which organisations and agencies could, as Zoey noted, tell "a fluffy story about how they saved me".

Khan (2021) also found this in her research with young people of migrant backgrounds who were using storytelling as a way to raise awareness about a range of different issues. She notes that "the institutional spaces which seek out these stories invite a linear, extractive relationship whereby young people impart knowledge to white publics as part of institutional agendas of inclusivity and awareness raising" (p. 7). Our research highlighted similar extractions of youth voice and inclusion of certain groups and stories – those which can uphold particular institutional narratives for the purpose of gaining additional funding, maintaining a positive and inclusive image, and ticking the box on 'youth voice' and participation.

Table 11: Young people's voices, experiences and stories excluded and included in co-design

Excluded voices	Illustrative quotes
First Nations people and racially marginalised youth	So First Nations, that they're operating themselves and the kind of dominant youth participation narrative is leaving them out. It's, yeah they're just, they're excluded from so many spaces because the ways in which we're operating in a dominant way, they're just so excluding their experiences, their connection to Land. But also just how they're not able to talk about the white fragility inside of that and the white supremacy inside of that. And, how that's impacted and how colonisation has impacted on them so extraordinarily. So I think that number one, is what we'll need to be looking at. Definitely culturally diverse young people. Again, and absolutely the migrant and international student experience. (Pheobi, Youth Worker)
Regional voices	A lot of our young people feel like a lot of metro young people get way more opportunities to engage in this sort of stuff than we do. And I have to agree. And I think a big part of that is that regional voice isn't captured as often. And we just have such a – it's so different a young person living in Ballarat to being in Melbourne. It's just completely different in so many ways that we're not really reflected in a lot of research or projects or committees that are going on. (Hazel, Multicultural Youth Worker) So urban people, when there is a chance to get their voice heard, it is, even though it's them and then rural people are completely out of the picture. So the reason some of them go there, I was the only rural person there, but I had to travel to Melbourne, stay a couple nights and stuff, which was a big hurdle. (Zoey, 21)
Raw voices	I know a young woman who tried to share her story, and about how she'd tried to take her life several times, and couldn't get the help she needed. But everywhere she went to share it they turned around and went, 'We can't share that. We want a story that someone's tried to take their life, and now life is looking a lot rosier for them'. They want that kind of, sense of overachievement coming out of it, that sense of going, 'Yeah, someone's been in a dark place and now they're out here. We'll show 30 seconds of the dark place and then 10 seconds of the good place, but that's what we want'. Otherwise it looks like we're stuck in that dark place, even though that's what they're going to show a majority of, they still need that finisher, on a positive. And if they're not getting that from someone, then they're just going to go, 'Yeah, no, sorry we'll find someone else'. (Lucas, 26)
Critical voices	Rather than taking that advice onboard and learning from it, a lot of them will just go, sorry, we'll find a different person for our youth advocacy group, or whatever. You're going to send them away, because you don't want to hear the negatives about your own organisation. So then there's a number of different platforms that people get excluded from. (Lucas, 26)

Included voices	Illustrative quotes
Loud shiny voices	Sometimes it's the loudest people that get the most of their voice heard, and not necessarily the way that, you know, it should be. And you know, things get skewed based on what's easiest sometimes. What's the easiest thing to hear, what's the easiest thing to take action on. So it's just so important to capture voices in different ways. (Hazel, Multicultural Youth Worker) They can say that young people don't want to be involved, but the fact is that they haven't provided the spaces for us to be involved in the first place, so they can't expect that young people are going to engage if the spaces aren't there and when the spaces are there, generally it's only catering towards the bright-and-shinies. (Sarah, 24)
Middle-class voices	I mean we just keep having young people from more privileged backgrounds on pedestals or privileged having their voices privileged because they're the ones that can show up in these spaces because they can be there ... It's how do those spaces start to actually interrogate the ways in which they're showing up and creating these – so many barriers to participation because of it. So, yeah that's the number one thing for me, access to internet, access to phone credit, access to transport, to even get to the place where you can do your participation. This is massively overlooked all the time. People from a middle class are still the ones making the decisions and they're not realising how many barriers young people from disadvantaged communities are having to deal with to just get there. (Pheobi, Youth Worker)
Traumatised voices	...especially when they do a fluffy story about how they saved me. That just really annoyed me. I was so angry because the majority of the time when they want a young person speaking it's to make them feel good about themselves. It's like, we're not just a bunch of sad sob stories, we're people. (Zoey, 21)
Obedient voices	We the organisation need to feel good, so we're going to make you say it how we say it to you. (Zoey, 21)

To conclude this section of the report, we draw attention to the importance of organisations that are seeking to include young people and their voices. As many of the youth workers and young people discussed, we are at a transition point across the sector, and including young people in these organisations and institutions has only recently gained traction. A number of the young people interviewed spoke about how well certain organisations had done this through co-design or youth leadership and social change programs. The important elements of these programs were the youth workers themselves and their relationships with young people, the focus and balance on individual wellbeing and learning new skills and capacities for advocacy and activism, and working in ways that valued young people's experience and growth.

4) One unbroken note: Young people reimagining solidarities and futures

"I heard someone refer to activism in a way like a choir trying to sustain a note that's too long for one person to hold. Someone will have to drop out to breathe, but others will be carrying on the note, and then they'll come back in and let someone else drop out. It doesn't sound like there's gaps in it, it sounds like one unbroken note. Right?" (Taylor, 24)

Young people in this study went beyond speaking about their understandings and experiences of social issues, voice and social change. They used this knowledge and experience to fuel hope and dream of new ways of working together and taking action collectively to create a more connected and equitable society. This was clearly articulated by Shay:

"It's like I have nothing to lose and because we're in a state of flux, there is a chance of like …we have a … there's hope, I think there's more hope than normal of like changing the system because pre- Covid, the system would seem so entrenched that any kind of like to radically change it would have been such a… task it would have seemed overwhelming." (Shay, 23)

In this section, we bring this knowledge and experience together to better understand what is needed to forge these solidarities. We first recap what previous sections have covered in order to contextualise and link these reimaginings.

In Section 1, young people identified mental health and isolation as key issues, that had worsened as a result of COVID-19. Racism and discrimination were also named as very important, alongside capitalism, gender inequality and environmental degradation. Young people demonstrated a deep understanding and sophisticated analysis of social issues, paying close attention to the historical roots, the structural, cyclical and intersectional nature of these issues and how they impacted individual and collective wellbeing. The internet, including news sites sources and friends were sought out most frequently to learn about social issues. Many young people said they hadn't learned about important social issues like colonisation and racism in school, but in university they were exposed to these issues much more.

Similarly, in Section 2, young people discussed important conditions for cultivating their voices, discussing the importance of doing 'inner work,' in order to be able to speak up about social justice issues. Young people also spoke about the difficulty of finding spaces to cultivate and exercise their voices, recognising that learning through dialogue with others was crucial but difficult to find. The challenges and tensions of engaging in social media were also identified, cancel culture and the fear of backlash narrowed possibilities for many young people to use this as a way to speak out on issues of social justice. This section also relayed the many different ways that young people participated in change, ranging from more traditional forms of activism like protests to challenging stereotypes and discrimination in everyday settings like schools and workplaces. Creative arts, storytelling and personal experience were important forms of activism for many young people, with social media an important platform to tell the stories mainstream media will not. Finally, this section also included a focus on the intensity of advocacy and activist work, bringing light to the detrimental effects it can have on young people's emotional, mental and physical wellbeing.

In Section 3, we mapped the perspectives and insights from both young people and youth workers, identifying a number of practical barriers, but also some fundamental issues with organisational culture as a mechanism of exclusion. Specifically, young people felt that the language was exclusive and could be addressed by 'de-professionalising' these youth voice programs within organisations, but also young people wanted to be supported to build this capacity. Adult allies and mentors, peer mentors and strong relationships were identified as central to breaking down some of the conditions in organisations

that were preventing young people from participating as 'wholly themselves'. Organisations were also seen to be 'white washed' and still centring ways of working and operating that excluded many young people, specifically Aboriginal young people and those of migrant background. As many of the youth workers and young people discussed, we are at a transition point across the sector, and including young people in these organisations and institutions has only recently gained traction through co-design and co-production.

There were a number of issues that pointed to the problematic way in which this process was being undertaken including being tokenistic in the depth of engagement with young people, not compensating young people fairly, lack of organisational preparedness and attention to power dynamics.

Finally, this section also identified the voices that are most often included; loud shiny voices, middle class voices, traumatised voices and obedient voices. Those that were excluded were; First Nations and racially marginalised voices, regional voices, raw voices and critical voices.

In their most recent work, Bronwyn Wood and Milica Homolja (2021) draw on the work of other scholars to define solidarities as "strategic alliances and social relationships that are 'forged through political struggle which seek to challenge forms of oppression' [citing Featherstone, 2012, p. 5] and advance political gain". They refer to Bauder (2020), who describes how these new linkages and strategic relationships can be important conditions for "those who experience oppression, marginalization and exploitation to speak, act and belong" (Bauder, 2020, p. 1068). Smith (1999) notes that this collective reimagining can "bind people together politically … asks that people imagine a future, that they rise above present-day situations which are generally depressing, dream a new dream and set a new vision" (p. 152). This section describes the moves that are needed – both between differently positioned young people and in addition to the important changes that adults and organisations need to make – to support and work alongside young people in social change work.

Sustaining one's self and collective care in social justice work

Young people's insights in this study point to the importance of individual and collective wellbeing in and out of social justice work and what is needed for healing and sustainability.

One clear direction that young people pointed to in this study was a focus on deepening relationships generally, but also specifically in social justice spaces. For example, a number of young people broadly spoke about the solitary lives people led and the need to create community and reach out to others. The quote below from Luna was made only a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic, but it reflected on city life in Melbourne before the pandemic:

"People are living very solitary lives. I've noticed when I came here, I was like, 'Where are the community centres? No one's around. It's so empty'. Are people just working all day every day?" (Luna, 23)

Luna felt that reaching out to others was a central starting point. She said:

"Helping others beyond your demographic group with older people or with families. Or maybe just you don't even have to help. You could just be there with someone." (Luna, 23)

Taylor also felt that the most important next step was valuing people and relationships over work, but that this required structural change to allow for collective care for those who needed it:

"So yeah, I think, to begin with, we need a society that is more focused on people and less focused on work. Then, in terms of how we get that, that's harder, but what that could mean is it means better healthcare, it means better access to accommodations and support for disabled people, it means that we're telling our stories and that our communities are less isolated and, I guess, distanced from each other." (Taylor, 24)

Both Taylor and Luna pointed to the need to create relationships, communities and collectives as an antidote and a path through the widening forms of isolation people were experiencing and as a way to create change from the bottom up:

"And you just yearn for that connection … You just want some simple time and I think – I just feel like that's really necessary for cohesion, it's just I know how other people are doing … we've offered to read their kids some stories because I'm sure they've gotten very tired during the COVID-19 to be around their kids all the time. And mutual aid groups. We created a mutual aid group within our community for an app and just put a few resources down and offered some veggies. I think those are some small ways that you feel like you're bridging things together." (Luna, 23)

"I think, what we can do, as a collective, is so much more than what we can do as individuals. So, seeing so many young people really, really eager to work together and to create change together, that makes me really happy." (Taylor, 24)

Importantly, a number of young people's reflections identified the need to slow down and connect to nature as a way to care for both self and the environment. Many young people in the arts-based workshop included images of animals, nature and the outdoors as spaces of healing and regeneration (see also Image 9):

"things that ma[k]e me feel at peace … animals make my soul feel calmer … I have two quotes: 'the most important thing in the whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths' … 'creativity … slow down, tune in, mindfulness'." (Summer, 18)

Image 9: Tom's image of finding peace in nature

Lachlan spoke about his collage, which focused specifically on nature, animals and the outdoors (see Image 10):

"A lot of nature. If I want to be in a quiet place, I think nature, just to relax, find my balance, and from day to day I would also travel to the city a little bit, if I ever got time, which I barely ever do. School stuff, and all that." (Lachlan, 17)

Image 10: Lachlan's collage about finding balance in nature

Working alongside young people for social change

Kara's reflections below speak to the importance of moving past old ways of approaching 'voice' and 'participation' to carving out horizontal modes of working together which value young people's knowledge, ideas and work:

"I think we're at a point now where we need to go beyond voice and beyond participation and move into mutual learning and exchanging between a young person and someone working in the sector [an adult]. Understanding that we both have valuable things to contribute and working alongside us, working together and supporting people to gain the skills that they need to do the work…" (Kara, 20)

"We just want a seat at the table, we just want to be listened to equally and respected equally and not all the times, our view is going to be – it's not like you need to do this because a young person said it. It's like, 'No, you need to listen to it and find out what other young people think and then work together to find some way in the middle'." (Kara, 20)

Importantly, Sarah said that in these spaces where young people and adults work together there is a need to be clear about constraints, but not closed to possibilities:

"A lot of the time I hear, 'But these young people will come up with massive ideas that we can't even do'. And it's like, if there's restrictions and boundaries just communicate that like you would with anyone else and say, 'Hey, these are the boundaries, these are restrictions, this is our timeframe, these are our resources, what do you think?' Is it just because you've only been able to look through a certain lens and a certain view of the world that there's only a small possibility and is it about opening that up and getting ideas that may not be possible, but it may lead to something else, like just getting everything out on the table." (Sarah, 24)

Sarah also pointed to the potential for young people to reach beyond their local spheres of influence in social change work, but noted that support was needed to break into these spaces:

"But a lot of the time there's not a lot of capacity for those young people to have a voice bigger than just in their local community or with their family and so it's not heard." (Sarah, 24)

Sarah also said that in much of the advocacy work she had done, young people were having input and voicing their concerns, but there was a need for those in power to act on these accounts at a higher level:

"When the opportunity comes, yeah, there's young people I know who've made videos about family violence and about the fact that they're not just simply witnesses. And there's young people who go into conferences and they speak and they're talking actively about youth participation and about the fact that young people deserve to have a voice and if you don't hear them nothing will change. There's a lot of young people who are actively trying to change opinions of people but whether people listen or not is a whole other thing." (Sarah, 24)

Finally, Taylor articulated that one of the strengths of young people doing social change work is the many different ways they are engaging in creative and traditional activities. This reflection was included in a previous section, but is really important in considering ways of working alongside young people that values intersecting identities, experiences but also forms of participation and activism:

"I love the diversity in approach, that some people are out there reading government policies and posting summaries so that they're more accessible for other people. And some people are out there organising rallies, and some people are writing music, and some people are talking to their grandma. Each of those things is really important, and the fact that my generation, and generations to come, are ready and clued in enough that all those things are important, and working all of those areas, I think, is really positive." (Taylor, 24)

This reflection has important implications for those working in solidarity with young people, particularly formal organisations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the main aims of this research was to inform the design and focus of the YouthCAN project to be undertaken with four groups of four young people in Melbourne from August to December 2021. The graphic below maps out the findings, key considerations for young people, organisations and others working alongside them. We have included some of the actions taken in the development of the YouthCAN project in the planning and implementation of the program in Melbourne.

Key Considerations

Building a sense of community and connection through activism in a time of complexity and crisis.

Prioritising the wellbeing of individuals and the collective above social change 'work'.

1

Key Finding

Mental health emerged as the most significant concern for young people generally and for the participants we interviewed. Social isolation has worsened since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but young people also spoke about these concerns in relation to living in a complex and fast-paced world in which productivity was valued over wellbeing and relationships with others. In addition, many young people doing social change work were often on the edge of burnout and exhaustion. Connecting with nature, animals and people was identified as important elements of self and collective care.

Action for the YouthCAN project

A focus of the YouthCAN project will be to create spaces/collectives for support and dialogue that can sustain activist efforts. This means ensuring that the focus is not always on tasks, and structuring time to allow for organic connections and relationships to form. Building a culture of individual and collective care will be a central element, ensuring the program is flexible and responsive.

2

Key Finding

Young people in the interviews identified that many programs situated within organisations tackling social justice issues do not adequately devote time and resources to building relationships with facilitators or other program members. Many young people expressed the desire to be part of a community or collective doing this work as it provides a place to learn more about social issues but also to build capacities such as self-confidence, networks and an understanding of social systems and storytelling.

Action for the YouthCAN project

We will include in-person sessions before the content delivery begins for participants to get to know each other (within and across groups) and form close connections and create a safe space.

The local coordinator and lead researcher will facilitate sessions, including building connections through place-based activities, sharing their personal social justice journeys and work, and reflecting on their learning and experiences throughout the program.

External community organisations will provide workshops to build capacity around storytelling through social media, campaigning and community organising and specialist expertise linked to participants' social justice campaigns.

Key Considerations

Building strong relationships and connection in young people's social justice work/groups to facilitate learning and create conditions for voice and action.

3

Key Considerations

Honouring and valuing young people's diverse and intersectional identities, experiences and knowledge.

Redeveloping programs alongside young people to create more inclusive spaces that reach out and include those facing significant barriers, stigma and exclusion.

Key Finding

Across youth and adult stakeholders there was concern about the 'white-washing' of spaces and programs within organisations. A number of young people also felt that they were not able to "participate as themselves". Power and privilege were often not explicitly discussed in relation to people's identities, experiences and positions in the projects/ organisations. This led to exclusion of certain young people, which silences particular groups and can block them from being involved in change efforts.

Action for the YouthCAN project

In-person sessions will focus on unpacking issues of power and inclusion. As a project that aims to reduce hate, discrimination and enhance social cohesion across groups, we will discuss these issues and how we work together (and beyond – i.e. in their professional practice or community social justice work) to model how we can develop diverse collectives for social change.

The voices of young people from this research and the local program coordinator (also a young person) will be used to design this program to create a space where all young people feel included.

We will include a focus on First Nations justice in the delivery of this project, getting participants to think through what this looks like for their campaigns.

4

Key Finding

Young people already doing activist and advocacy work identified the importance of other youth mentors and activists in their journey. This included brief connections (hearing their stories, tips and advice) and extended mentoring with deeper engagement. Importantly, adult mentors who valued reciprocity, horizontal relationships and listening were central to young people feeling supported and confident to begin and sustain advocacy and activist work.

Key Considerations

Encouraging exposure to and support from key local youth activists, adult and peer mentors, and organisations.

Action for the YouthCAN project

We have set aside funding for youth activists to come and speak to the program participants (i.e. The Foundation for Young Australians, Youth Affairs Council Victoria [YACVic]). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many young adults working in social justice organisations were left unemployed, thus it is important we pay them to share their expertise and ideas in workshops with our participants.

5

Key Finding

Young people and stakeholders identified a number of practical barriers to participation in this study, including:

- financial stress
- employment commitments
- education and training commitments
- mental health issues (stress, anxiety and depression)
- phone credit
- internet access
- access to transport
- limited hours and areas of operation
- family and carer responsibilities
- institutional barriers
- COVID-19 (which presents additional barriers and stresses for many participants including unemployment, increased mental health issues and family crisis situations).

Action for the YouthCAN project

We have dedicated contingency and participant support funds to address some of these barriers. Developing the program with a focus on relationship-building will ensure participants are supported and are able to approach the facilitation team for support.

The online component involves self-directed learning and young people have up to one week to complete each learning module, working in teams and sharing the load. One-on-one and team meetings, regular check-ins and wellbeing strategies will form part of our approach.

Key Considerations

Addressing the multitude of challenges and circumstances that can compromise participation.

6

Key Considerations

Developing clearer policies, processes and practices linked to co-design with young people in organisations.

Key Finding

Young people and youth workers both identified significant issues with how co-design is implemented and used to increase youth participation and voice in organisations. Organisations often exclude particular groups of young people, specifically First Nations young people. These organisations value and prioritise young people that can, and will, speak to their agendas rather than looking for genuine collaboration. Their approach narrows young people's opportunities for feedback, or to tell their stories with complexity, with some practices identified as coercive and even traumatic.

Action for the YouthCAN project

Enhancing organisational culture and practice around participatory and co-design approaches with young people. Examples include increasing knowledge and capability through professional development opportunities, toolkits, and communities of practice.

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Appendix

	Quantitative Participant Group			Qualitative Participant Group
Demographic	Wave 1 (n = 76)	Wave 2 (n = 38)	Total Average % (n = 114)	(n = 29)
Age (Mean)	20.5 years	21.3 years	20.6 years	22 years
16-20 years	39%	40%	35%	24%
21-25 years	61%	60%	65%	76%
Gender				
Male	20%	18%	19%	10%
Female	78%	75%	76%	86%
Non-binary	2%	7%	4%	1%
Transgender	…	…	…	3%
Education				
Study full time (Uni/TAFE)	92%	76%	84%	41%
Study part time (Uni/TAFE)	3%	9%	6%	0%
Completed Uni/TAFE	1%	3%	2%	24%
Recently completed high school	0%	3%	2%	n/a
Currently in high school	0%	3%	2%	10%
Not currently in education	2%	3%	3%	21%
Postgraduate qualification	0%	3%	2%	n/a
Not recorded	…	…	…	4%
Employment				
Part-time	35%	25%	30%	17%
Full-time	8%	6%	7%	10%
Casual	26%	47%	37%	52%
Not employed	31%	22%	27%	21%

Geographic Location				
Metro Melbourne	91%	71%	81%	65%
Greater Melbourne	…	…	…	24%
Rural Victoria	9%	13%	11%	3%
Place of Birth				
Born overseas	18%	12%	15%	21%
Born in Australia	72%	88%	80%	79%
Parent Birthplace				
One or both parents born overseas	45%	36%	41%	52%
Born in Australia	55%	64%	60%	48%
Religious Affiliation				
Not religious	49%	36%	43%	48%
Catholic	21%	9%	15%	0%
Other Christian	8%	15%	12%	3%
Islam	5%	21%	13%	7%
Hinduism	5%	0%	3%	0%
Buddhism	3%	3%	3%	0
Agnostic	4%	0%	2%	20%
Other	5%	15%	10%	3%
Unknown/Not Recorded	…	…	…	17%