

Key Findings and Summary of

# 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

### AGE

**21** Average age

**16-26** Age range

### EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION

**84%** currently studying in University/TAFE

**37%** employed on a casual basis

### YOUTH WORKERS

**5** Interviews

### GENDER

**76%**  
Female

**4%**  
Non-binary

**3%**  
Transgender

### 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**

**&**

## **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.

# 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.

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.

## 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'.

## 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.

## 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.

## 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.

3

## 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.

## 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.

## 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 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.

## Key Considerations

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

## 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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Published by the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, Deakin University

May 2022

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This report was produced as part of the research project Building Activist Capacities of Young People through Issue-Based Campaigns funded through the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS), Deakin University.

This work was supported by the Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victorian Government.

Read the full report: [www.crisconsortium.org/publications-2/young-peoples-social-justice-concerns](http://www.crisconsortium.org/publications-2/young-peoples-social-justice-concerns)

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