

Submission to South Australia's Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence

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Commissioner
for Children &
Young People

251 Morphett Street, Adelaide, SA 5000

08 8226 3355 | commissionercyp@sa.gov.au

Introduction

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, I welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to South Australia's Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence.

My mandate under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* is to promote and advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. It is also my role to ensure that South Australia meets its obligations in relation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC sets out the rights of all children and young people, including the right to have their views taken into account in all decisions that affect them (Article 12) and to live free from violence (Article 19) and discrimination (Article 2).

I commend the Royal Commission for the work you have undertaken to date and your commitment to seeking the views and experiences of children and young people. Designing a system to 'better meet the needs of those who interact with it'¹ and to 'end gender-based violence in one generation'² means designing a system that effectively and meaningfully recognises and responds to children and young people's rights and experiences.

The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032 recognises children and young people as victims of gender-based violence in their own right. However, children and young people's unique perspectives and experiences continue to be overlooked in policies, systems and services generally and in the context of domestic, family and sexual violence specifically.

Overview of this submission

This document makes several recommendations for child-centred systemic reform. It forms part of my submission and is intended to be read alongside the attached publications. Together, these contributions draw on my extensive engagement with children and young people since 2017, as well as a more recent targeted program of work undertaken in response to and in collaboration with this Royal Commission. This work includes:

Teenagers and Safety report: Views and experiences of South Australian young people in relation to safety

The Teenagers and Safety report focuses on my safety survey with responses from over 900 teenagers in South Australia. The report unpacks the different meanings of safety as it is understood by teenagers, including how safe teenagers are feeling and what needs to be done to improve safety. The report has a specific focus on safety at home, in school and in the community.

Recommendations from this report include the need to develop a comprehensive overarching legislative framework for children's safety, for state and local governments to work together to create more youth friendly communities, for schools to work on creating safer environments for students, for schools to work

with external partners on evidence-based violence prevention programs, and for schools to work with their student bodies to conduct diversity reviews.

Unseen and Unheard report: Listening to the voices of young people with lived experiences of violence

I engaged consultants, Jodie Evans and Belinda Lorek, to connect with young people with lived experience of family, domestic and sexual violence through 1:1 conversations. The attached Unseen and Unheard report centres the experiences of eight young people aged 19 to 24 years old and their insights for systemic reform.

Young people shared diverse experiences of growing up in homes that featured violence, experiencing violence in their own intimate relationships and/or witnessing violence in the relationships of their peers or siblings. While their experiences varied, the impacts of violence on their identity, self-esteem and relationships were similar. Young people shared consistent ideas about what needs to change to better support others who have experienced violence.

Policy position: Realising children and young people's rights to positive relationships, and sexual health and wellbeing

This policy position highlights the systemic changes needed to fully realise children and young people's rights to positive relationships, sexual health and wellbeing. This includes ensuring school cultures consistently respect rights and promote gender equality, scaling up consistent, comprehensive, positive school-based relationships and sexual health education programs, and developing a statewide strategy that specifically meets children and young people's reproductive and sexual health rights.

Missing Voices postcards booklets

These booklets draw on responses from students aged 8–12 years who participated in my annual Student Voice Postcards initiative via their school. Written responses and drawings are unedited and are in response to open-ended questions about their lives.

- **Domestic and family violence as described by primary school children**
The purpose of this booklet is to bring children's perspectives and experiences of domestic and family violence to the fore. It is clear that we must actively consider and respond to children's experiences and needs in their own right.
- **Sexism and gender stereotypes as described by primary school children**
One of the enduring themes raised by children is the impact that sexism and gender roles and gender stereotyping has on their lives. It affects their aspirations, relationships and wellbeing. From what they have told me, we still have a long way to go to address the behaviours and environments that enable and reinforce sexist attitudes, jibes, derogatory comments and

harassment.

- **Physical punishment as described by primary school children**
Although addressing physical punishment is recognised as critical to eliminating all forms of violence, physical punishment has received little attention in policy and conversations about family violence prevention. By focusing on the impacts of physical punishment from children's perspectives and experiences, this booklet highlights the need for law reform to fully prohibit physical punishment (see recommendation 6 below).

Postcards snapshot for South Australia's Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence

This snapshot summarises children and young people's responses to a postcard designed specifically for the Royal Commission to engage with children and young people who are not usually heard. The postcard asked when children and young people feel safe, what would make them feel safer, what they would do if someone they knew needed help to be safe, and what SA should do to prevent domestic and family violence. Postcards were distributed to a range of service providers in metropolitan and regional South Australia. More than 110 children and young people aged 7 to 23 years participated.

Policy position: The need for a system response to harmful sexual behaviours in children

This policy position highlights opportunities for changes to law, policy and services to prevent children displaying harmful sexual behaviour and to provide for consistent, joined-up therapeutic responses to children displaying or impacted by harmful sexual behaviour.

Principles and recommendations for child-centred systemic reform

This Royal Commission is an opportunity to consider how all systems can respond better to the unique and diverse perspectives and experiences of children and young people. This responsibility does not fall on one service or system but rather requires collaboration across systems and shifts across legislation, policy and planning, as well as practice, culture and workforce training and support.

This submission highlights the importance of focusing on children and young people across all domains: prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing. It also recognises that these domains intersect and important opportunities to prevent violence (from occurring, reoccurring and/or escalating) exist across all domains.³

We need to ensure all policies, legal frameworks and services are consistently promoting the rights of all children and young people. This means building the capacity of all systems to listen to, value and act upon children and young people's experiences and perspectives. The best interests of the child (Article 3 of the UNCRC) can only be met if

their right to be heard (Article 12) is respected. We must therefore focus on systemic changes to ensure children and young people are protected *in* rather than protected *from* participation.

We also need to consider the broader contexts in which violence is more likely to take place by investing earlier to support families and build trust and connections between key systems and services. This includes addressing high rates of child poverty, food insecurity, housing insecurity and homelessness. We must actively avoid criminalising children and young people and prioritise early, therapeutic, child- and youth-specific support and responses to problematic behaviours.

Specifically, it is recommended that the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence:

- 1. Improve collaboration across all systems to:**
 - a. Prioritise prevention, early intervention and listen to and value children and young people’s perspectives and experiences.**
 - b. Build the capacity of all systems to understand the dynamics of family, sexual and domestic violence and support children, young people and families earlier.**
 - c. Support coordinated and consistent approaches to family, domestic and sexual violence, and address contradictory approaches to safety across family violence, family law and child protection systems.**
- 2. Invest in universal and targeted prevention from an early age, promoting positive relationships and behaviours, and addressing sexism and gender stereotypes.**
- 3. Prioritise specialist child- and youth-specific recovery and support responses for children and young people who have experienced violence, with particular regard to:**
 - a. Groups of children who are at greater risk of experiencing violence and face additional barriers to support.**
 - b. Children and young people escaping violence and seeking support without an adult.**
- 4. Prioritise earlier, tailored and therapeutic systemic responses for:**
 - a. Children and young people using violence at home.**
 - b. Children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours.**
 - c. Children and young people using and experiencing violence in intimate relationships.**
- 5. Improve the capacity of the family law system to better listen to and support children, and to understand the dynamics of family, domestic and sexual violence.**

6. Recognise the impacts of physical punishment on children and repeal the legal defence of 'reasonable chastisement'.

Yours sincerely



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People
Adelaide, South Australia

1. Improve collaboration across all systems to:

- a. **Prioritise prevention, early intervention and listen to and value children and young people’s perspectives and experiences.**
- b. **Build the capacity of all systems to understand the dynamics of family, sexual and domestic violence and support children, young people and families earlier.**
- c. **Support coordinated and consistent approaches to family, domestic and sexual violence, and address contradictory approaches to safety across family violence, family law and child protection systems.**

We must improve communication and collaboration between key systems and ensure all systems are accountable for children and young people’s rights, safety and wellbeing.

A recent report prepared by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Australian Human Rights Commission consolidated evidence and recommendations from over 3,000 recommendations made in 61 state, territory and Commonwealth reports between 2010 and 2022. Consistent with my own regular engagement with children and young people, the report identified the following systemic barriers to evidence-based reform to support children and families:

- Limited opportunities for child voice and participation
- Inadequate focus on prevention and early intervention
- Inadequate cross-system information sharing, collaboration and coordination
- Lack of mechanisms for oversight, monitoring, accountability and transparency.⁴

The systemic safety and wellbeing of children depends on them having opportunities to be included in the processes that affect their lives. When children talk about being safe, they talk about feeling valued, known, heard and understood. Recognising children’s participation rights alongside their rights of protection must be a key part of system reform. This includes listening to and acting upon what children and young people say makes them feel safe at home, at school and in the community.

Child safety and wellbeing is too often seen as the remit of the child protection system alone. We need to consider the responsibility and intersection of all systems and strengthen investment in ‘upstream’ prevention and early intervention efforts across health, education, and other community services.

Children and families are affected by issues that cut across a range of portfolios and jurisdictional boundaries. Yet key departments and agencies are developing policy, collecting data and delivering services in a siloed manner. This fragmentation of systems is most harmful and difficult to navigate for children and families who are vulnerable, including in the context of family, domestic and sexual violence.

In South Australia, families experiencing violence come into contact with many services and organisations, many of which operate in isolation from one another and have their own unique focus. This includes health, mental health and homelessness services, police, courts, and child protection services, as well as many others. This is time consuming and

confusing to navigate and can lead to an increasing number of referrals without them accessing the support they need.

We need to build the capacity of all systems to identify and understand the dynamics of domestic, family and sexual violence, particularly the impacts on children and young people, as well as ways to support children and young people experiencing or using violence. This includes universal health and education services such as prenatal, maternal, child and adolescent health services, early childhood education and care settings and schools, as well as police, courts and the justice system.

Effective responses to domestic, family and sexual violence require a shared understanding of the dynamics of domestic, family and sexual violence across the community and key agencies and services. Yet systems for responding to families affected by domestic, family and sexual violence are fragmented. The Commonwealth is responsible for family law while state and territories primarily deal with child protection and family violence.

Contradictory approaches to safety are perhaps most evident at the intersection between family violence, family law and child protection systems. Each system has different policies, laws, cultures, timeframes and language, and different thresholds for responding to risks of harm. Approaches to safety across these systems differ so greatly that they have been described as three different ‘planets’:⁵

- The ‘domestic violence’ planet, where domestic, family and sexual violence is considered a crime and the focus is on containing predominantly male perpetrators of violence while supporting the safety of women and children.
- The ‘child protection’ planet, where protective parents – usually mothers – are seen as responsible for removing themselves and their children from a perpetrator. When they are unable to do this, they are seen as ‘failing to protect’ children and the tool are children are removed from their care.
- The ‘child contact’ planet of family law, where victim survivors who have tried to protect themselves or their child by contacting the police or removing themselves from the situation are now ordered by the federal Family Court to allow contact between the violent partner and children.

Various reviews and inquiries have highlighted the systemic issues and the significant confusion and distress for children and families navigating complex cross-jurisdictional systems.⁶ The system should be focussing on holistic and coordinated responses to ensure children, young people and families have access to services and supports.

We should be seeking to transform current approaches that remove or separate children from protective parents and/or familiar environments. This includes working with and building trust with families and maintaining connections with people who already know the child. This also includes recognising that the reality for children and parents or carers escaping violence is often precarious, unsafe housing and financial insecurity, and that children do not have choice or control or access to support that is designed for them.

2. Invest in universal and targeted prevention from an early age, promoting positive relationships and behaviours, and addressing sexism and gender stereotypes.

All children and young people should have access to information and support to understand and communicate their feelings, make informed decisions, understand their own rights, protect the rights of others, reflect on power dynamics and challenge gender stereotypes. Prevention through education is currently falling short in South Australia, and is inconsistent in terms of accessibility, timing, quality, content and relevance.

School-based prevention initiatives need to be validated and supported by whole-of-community efforts that embed a culture of respect and equity across all systems and settings, including sports clubs, community groups, youth organisations, parenting programs, workplaces, and the media. Prevention efforts must also challenge the normalisation of violence in families and communities, including by eliminating the use of physical punishment (see recommendation 6).

The attached policy position on Realising children and young people's rights to positive relationships, and sexual health and wellbeing highlights the need to:

- scale up and improve oversight of consistent, comprehensive and positive relationships and sexual health education.
- address the way school environments enable and reinforce gender stereotypes, sexism and other forms of discrimination.
- develop a statewide strategy that specifically meets children and young people's reproductive and sexual health rights to promote universal access to services and information and help ensure all services are child- and youth-friendly.

My Missing Voices postcards booklet on sexism and gender stereotypes as described by primary school children 8-12 years highlights the importance of engaging with children early and consistently over time to address these issues and behaviours. The ANROWS National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey surveyed 16-24 year olds. The younger age group (16-17 years) were often less likely recognise items in the survey as domestic violence when compared to the older age group (18-24 years).⁷

It is concerning that improvements to gender equality have not translated to a downturn in gender-based violence. As backlash against gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights continue to grow and undermine prevention efforts globally, we need to consider how and why these messages are targeting and resonating with boys and young men.

We need to ensure information, education and support meaningfully connects with boys and young men. While holding boys and men to account for violence, we also need to invest in approaches that focus on building empathy and supporting emotional regulation and avoid reinforcing shame, stigma or trauma.

My Teenagers and Safety survey included an additional question on attitudes which is included here rather than in the final report. The nearly 900 teenagers (12-19 years) largely viewed behaviours relating to issues like unwanted sexual behaviours and control in relationships as 'not ok'. Some responses may reflect that they knew the socially acceptable responses to these types of questions. However, of concern was that several

unacceptable behaviours were less likely to be seen that way by teenage males than females. Young people were asked whether a range of behaviours were ‘always ok’, ‘sometimes ok’, or ‘never ok’. The following responses are those who responded ‘never ok’ for the following:

- ‘Comment on someone’s physical appearance online’ (males 35.9%, females 50.1%, total 42.9%)
- ‘Tell sexual jokes and stories’ (males 51.7%, females 62.8%, total 56.3%)
- ‘Tell a partner what they should wear’ (males 54.3%, females 74.1%, total 65.5%)
- ‘Stare at or wolf whistle at someone you don’t know but think is hot’ (males 74.9%, females 85.8%, total 81.0%)
- ‘Repeatedly asking someone to go on dates after they say no’ (males 79.7%, females 90.3%, total 85.7%), and
- ‘Make sexual gestures behind someone’s back’ (males 84.8%, females 94.0%, total 90.0).

Some young people highlighted the importance of context, suggesting some of these behaviours were okay in certain circumstances. This highlights the need for more communication with children and young people as well as more education and broader whole-of-community prevention efforts.

The language and images used in current violence awareness and prevention campaigns and support services are not relatable to young people. There needs to be contemporary approaches to prevention and education that are co-designed with young people for messages to reach and resonate with them.

3. **Prioritise specialist child- and youth-specific recovery and support services for children and young people who have experienced violence, with particular regard to:**
 - a. **Groups of children who are at greater risk of experiencing violence and face additional barriers to support.**
 - b. **Children and young people escaping violence and seeking support without an adult.**

Data and information about children and young people’s experiences of violence is limited. Current service systems, policies and practices for people who have experienced violence are adult-focused. For example, South Australia’s Family Safety Practice Manual refers to a ‘person at risk and their children’ but specific references to children are limited other than the inclusion of ‘liaison with school staff regarding children’s safety’ as an example of ‘positive actions to decrease risk’.⁸

Crisis response services tend to focus on the wellbeing and safety of women and families. While children may benefit from this support, there is a lack of dedicated specialist support tailored to children and young people’s needs and experiences.

Services that work more directly with children, including education and health services, are not always well equipped to identify and respond when children and young people

are, or are at risk of, experiencing or using violence. It is important for these systems to be better informed and equipped to provide support rather than just refer on to other systems that are unfamiliar to children and young people.

Young people with lived experience of violence want to be heard, understood and engaged with in their own right. They emphasise the importance of familiarity, consistency and stability, and better coordination and communication between services to reduce the need for young people to retell their stories multiple times. They also highlighted the need for programs and supports that are specific for young men.

A lack of appropriate child and youth-specific support is in itself a barrier to accessing help.⁹ Other barriers and issues specific to children and young people accessing help that must be addressed include:

- Lack of clear information about support, processes and resources.
- Not being believed.
- Parental consent processes that require young people to contact the perpetrator or a non-offending parent who may be fearful of the implications of their child seeking support.
- Emotional and/or financial reliance on the perpetrator of violence.
- Fear of being removed or ‘taken away’ and insufficient support to prevent removal.
- Lack of trust arising from negative interactions with the very the systems that are supposed to keep children and families safe, including police, child protection and/or legal systems.
- Lack of understanding of violence or abuse and inability to communicate, including due to lack of information, safe spaces or opportunities.
- Lack of safe and affordable housing options, including motels, refuges and crisis accommodation that are inadequately resourced for children and young people.
- Issues of accessibility, including the cost of support, long waiting lists, or narrow criteria for accessing support services that do not consider violence.
- Limited duration of support, which limits the chance to build trust and be known by professionals and fails to recognise the lifelong impacts of violence.

Responses to children and young people must build trust rather than fear, and recognise that violence affects people of all genders, cultures, ages, and across all postcodes. We need to ensure systems are equipped to consider the diversity and complexity of each individual’s experiences and needs, and to challenge assumptions that all people’s experiences are the same. Child-led, play- and activity-based approaches have been shown to help younger children process trauma, build trust and connections and communicate their feelings and experiences.

a. Groups of children who are at greater risk of experiencing violence and face additional barriers to support.

We also need to consider tailored responses for certain groups of children and young people who are at greater risk of experiencing violence, face additional barriers to support and may be falling through gaps. This includes young people who are LGBTQIA+, with disability, from refugee and migrant backgrounds, disengaged from school, Aboriginal and/or living in regional areas.

These young people's experiences of inequality, marginalisation and/or discrimination make them vulnerable to exploitation. Tailored responses can draw on evidence and frameworks from ANROWS, including the Connecting the Dots strengths-based framework for working with children and young people with disability who experience domestic and family violence.¹⁰

b. Children and young people escaping violence and seeking support without an adult.

Children and young people experiencing violence are often seen as an extension of their parent or carer. If we are to truly recognise children and young people as victims in their own right, we must address the significant barriers and gaps in support for children and young people who may seek safe housing and financial support without an adult.

This is evident in the lack of appropriate accommodation options for young people who are forced to leave their home, as well as the exclusion of children and young people aged under 18 from the Leaving Violence payment.¹¹

In 2022-23, 20% children under the age of 18 who sought help from homelessness services approached services alone, unaccompanied by a parent or carer. Many of these young people were fleeing violence. In South Australia, there was a 16% increase in children remaining homeless after seeking assistance in 2022-23 compared to the previous year.¹²

4. Prioritise earlier, tailored and therapeutic systemic responses for:

- a. Children and young people using violence at home.**
- b. Children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours.**
- c. Young people using and experiencing violence in intimate relationships.**

There are significant gaps in systemic responses and support services for children and young people who use family violence, display harmful sexual behaviour, and use intimate partner violence. While not every young person who displays these behaviours has a history of trauma, there is a high level of overlap with unacknowledged and unaddressed trauma, including experiences of violence or abuse. Importantly, the 'pathway between childhood and adult experiences of violence is not inevitable', particularly with earlier tailored and therapeutic support.¹³

This reinforces the importance of prioritising holistic, child- and youth-centred recovery and support (see recommendation 3). In the absence of early child-centred therapeutic support, interventions tend to involve police, youth justice and/or mental health response.

Services and supports that are primarily designed for adults are unlikely to engage children and young people and may actually escalate harm.¹⁴

a. Children and young people using violence at home.

There are significant gaps in systemic responses and support for young people using violence against a parent, carer, sibling or other family member in the home. Often, there is no clear avenue for children, young people and families to access support until they come into contact with the justice system. This highlights missed opportunities to address the issue earlier and before behaviour escalates.

The KIND program is one of the only specialist responses in South Australia, which aims to reduce adolescent family violence and dating violence by providing tailored support to young people involved in the youth justice system and their support network. An initial pilot was well-received, and the program was expanded in 2022.¹⁵ In 2024, the federal government committed further funding for one-on-one mentors to work with young people engaged in the KIND program.¹⁶

The federal government has also recently committed \$23 million for programs aimed at boys and young men who are at risk of using violence.¹⁷ While this is welcome, existing support is not available early enough. For example, the recent federal funding is aimed at 12- to 18-year-olds. However, a 2022 national study of adolescent family violence funded by Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) indicated that the average age when young people started using violence was 11 years old, with 42% of respondents who provided their age indicating that they were 10 years old or younger.¹⁸ Feedback from the pilot of the KIND program also highlighted the need for earlier support, with comments from families such as 'we were too far gone'.¹⁹

The 2022 ANROWS study found that almost 9 in 10 young people who had used violence in the home had either witnessed family violence or directly experienced abuse themselves.²⁰ Young people who had used violence in the home highlighted that they needed support earlier for themselves and their families. This included the need for a safe space or place to go, someone to talk to, professional support, education around violence and emotional regulation, and supportive school environments and staff.²¹

Children and young people using violence, or at risk of using violence in the home, require tailored and therapeutic responses that:

- Consider the factors underlying the behaviour and the vulnerability of children or young people, including trauma or distress, difficulty regulating emotions, and adverse childhood experiences.²²
- Focus on families and communities, and engage with children, young people and families early in flexible and individualised ways, noting that many parents are reluctant to seek support.
- Recognise that positive outcomes in cases of young people using violence tend to involve keeping the family together rather than separating them.²³
- Acknowledge that violence can also be towards siblings and provide tailored support for siblings that is different to support for adults in families.

- Consider particular groups of children and young people who are at higher risk of experiencing and using violence, including young people with disability and LGBTQIA+ young people.

The Act for Kids Safe Families Program in Queensland is a holistic ‘multigenerational ecological’ service model that provides therapeutic in-home and outreach support tailored to all family members. It aims to identify and address the underlying issues contributing to violence and uses intensive intervention with families in the first few weeks, often for hours a day. This service predominantly works with families where the person using violence remains part of the family unit and is required to coparent, or where adolescents are using violence. The program provides tailored support for each family member, both those using and affected by violence. Feedback from Queensland Police in relation to the first family to receive support through the Safe Families shows there was a significant reduction in the volume of calls to police within six months of support.²⁴

b. Children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours.

My 2023 [Policy Position on the need for a systemic response to harmful sexual behaviour in children](#) highlights the need for changes to legislation, policy and services to address the gaps in current responses to children who are displaying or impacted by harmful sexual behaviours.

South Australia needs a state-wide and multi-agency response to ensure that we adopt a preventative and early intervention approach to sexually coercive, aggressive or violent behaviours towards children from other children. Responses must be timely, accessible, therapeutic and non-stigmatising, in line with the recommendations made by the 2017 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA). Therapeutic and rehabilitative approaches will provide a basis for intervening earlier to help prevent behaviour escalating into ongoing and more serious sexual offences.

The state government should develop a state-wide policy framework that provides a consistent, joined up and therapeutic response that prioritises supporting children and families outside of the justice system. This must include services for individual children and young people, families, communities, and schools. This should include:

- establishing a lower threshold for access to primary and secondary health responses to support treatment for children displaying behaviours at the lower end of the spectrum.
- Expanding resourcing for statewide services and training for frontline staff working with children and young people across a range of sectors.
- Reviewing legislation to address barriers to appropriate responses and ensure children are supported rather than criminalised
- Developing guidance for agencies to ensure that police intervention is used as a last resort, and ensuring SAPOL has the power to divert children displaying harmful sexual behaviours away from the child justice system and toward interventions

that provide therapeutic treatment and wrap around support for the child and their family.

- Developing resources for families and children to raise awareness about the spectrum of sexual behaviours and making these available at all childcare and family health centres.
- Reviewing the implementation and effectiveness of the Department for Education's new harmful sexual behaviour procedure and guideline to determine whether school responses have resulted in better outcomes for students, educators, families, and communities.

c. Young people using and experiencing violence in intimate relationships.

Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) indicates 29% of 18-19 year olds reported having experienced some form of intimate partner violence.²⁵ While South Australia's KIND program addresses adolescent dating violence as well as adolescent family violence, this support is only available to young people once they are involved in the youth justice system. This highlights the need for prevention efforts and early intervention to minimise the impacts on victim-survivors and perpetrators.

This must include scaling up comprehensive relationships and sexual health education that is grounded in human rights, including gender equality (see recommendation 2 and attached Policy position on Realising children and young people's rights to positive relationships, and sexual health and wellbeing). My Sex Education survey found that sexual assault and violence are among the topics least likely to be covered in school-based relationships and sexual health education. Where it is covered, there is a lack of practical guidance on where and how to seek support before or if it occurs.

The LSAC data highlights that friendships and supportive relationships with parents during adolescence are key protective factors that reduce the risk of later emotional abuse victimisation.²⁶ As such, we need to provide all adolescents, families and practitioners with information to respond to disclosures. At the same time, child- and youth-specific support services exist and are accessible (see recommendation 3).

It is also important to increase awareness of the prevalence of intimate partner violence among health and community services to be able to identify and refer to appropriate supports. This includes recognising that young men are just as likely to be victim-survivors of emotional abuse and physical violence as young women, whereas young women are more likely than young men to be victim-survivors of sexual abuse within intimate partner relationships.²⁷

5. Improve the capacity of the family law system to better listen to and support children and young people, and to understand the dynamics of family, domestic and sexual violence.

While it is critical that all systems better listen to and support children and young people and understand the dynamics of family violence, the family law system requires

particular attention. Children and young people, families and professionals continue to raise significant concerns about the failure of the federal family courts to give sufficient consideration and weight to family violence and to the views and experiences of children, which further compromises the rights, safety and wellbeing of children.

Family Court data shows that 83% of matters in 2022–23 involved allegations of family violence, with 69% involving allegations of four or more risk factors.²⁸ The key challenges of the family law’s response to family violence are well-documented, and many problems arise from the inconsistency with other jurisdictions such as the state and territory family violence legislation and child protection systems (see Recommendation 1).

The recent national report of the Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches highlights the need to improve data collection about the impacts on children affected by family law processes and prevent perpetrators from weaponising and manipulating systems to further victimise children, particularly the family law system but also child support, immigration and taxation systems.²⁹

My [2018 report](#) on children and young people’s experiences of family separation raised significant concerns about the family law system. Children and young people with experience of formalised family court proceedings highlighted the need for:

- Access to clear and easily understandable information on the family law process and the adults involved in the process.
- The opportunity to choose the extent to which they are involved in the process and the opportunity to attend court.
- People in the system to be kind, listen and believe what they say.
- Someone who is there just for them, from the start.
- The opportunity to have decisions reviewed and to monitor outcomes when circumstances changed.

Currently, determinations of best interests do not consistently prioritise, and in some cases are used to justify overriding, children and young people’s rights to express their views and participate in decisions affecting their lives. Family law decisions have a significant impact on children’s immediate and long-term wellbeing and safety.

The fact that children and young people’s preferences will not always be accommodated is not a reason to negate their right to be heard. When children and young people are supported to understand why certain decisions have been made, they are more likely to accept the outcome, including when a decision does not reflect their wishes.

Several initiatives have attempted to improve the Family Court’s early identification of and response to family violence, including the Lighthouse project and the Evatt list. Other reforms to address family violence and improve the focus on children include:

- Child Impact Reports that consider the child’s experience and needs during the initial stages of proceedings to inform decision makers.³⁰
- The rolling out of Safe and Together Training for registrars and court child experts to understand family violence and improve decisions related to children.³¹
- Better information sharing with child protection and law enforcement agencies through the Family Law Amendment (Information Sharing) Act 2023.³²

While I welcome recent amendments to the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) that strengthen requirements for Independent Children’s Lawyers to meet with children, further action is needed to bring the focus on to children. Greater monitoring and evaluation of these reforms is needed to determine whether they are resulting in better outcomes for children and their families.

6. Recognise the impacts of physical punishment on children and repeal the legal defence of ‘reasonable chastisement’.

Physical punishment is the use of physical force against a child with the intention of causing pain or discomfort to discipline or punish them. It typically involves hitting, smacking, slapping and spanking children with the hand or with an object.

Addressing the widespread acceptance of physical punishment and eliminating it is recognised as ‘a key strategy in reducing all forms of violence’.³³ Despite this, physical punishment has received little attention in conversations about family violence prevention in Australia.

My 2023 [Missing Voices Booklet](#) highlights the experiences of physical punishment as described by primary school children. My annual [Child Rights Progress Reports](#) and my 2024 [Smacking and Physical Punishment Fact Sheet](#) provides further information about the adverse effects of physical punishment and positive alternative approaches.

This Royal Commission is an opportunity to consider the impacts of physical punishment on children and the current legal defence of ‘reasonable chastisement’, which appears to contradict Australia’s commitments to end all forms of violence and uphold children’s right to live free from ‘all forms of physical and mental violence, injury or abuse’ (Article 19 of the UNCRC).

There is a growing body of research indicating that physical punishment is not an effective method of changing children’s behaviour over time.³⁴ Physical punishment is associated with a range of adverse outcomes for children and can:

- Normalise violence and fail to teach children prosocial alternative behaviours.³⁵
- Escalate into physical abuse and can be a contributing factor to becoming involved in intimate partner violence in adulthood, as a victim or perpetrator.³⁶
- Harm a child’s social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive development and be associated with mental health challenges, low self-esteem and increased risk of substance abuse and antisocial behaviour, with implications for a child’s schooling and academic engagement.³⁷
- Have a similar negative effect on a child’s brain development as other forms of abuse.³⁸
- Reduce trust and negatively impact parent-child relationships and other interpersonal relationships.³⁹

Intentionally applying force to a child, or threatening to do so, is assault under section 20 of South Australia’s *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935*.⁴⁰ However, a common law defence of ‘reasonable chastisement’ allows parents or guardians to justify the assault if

it was ‘moderate and reasonable’ and applied ‘for the purpose of correcting behaviour and not out of rage or malice or for personal gratification’.⁴¹

Determining what is ‘reasonable’ may consider the age, size, health and cognitive ability of the child, as well as the nature and severity of the punishment. However, there is confusion and uncertainty among parents, law enforcers and the wider public about what is acceptable, including where physical punishment ends and child abuse begins.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly called for Australia to fully prohibit the use of physical punishment and ensure children have the same legal protection as adults when it comes to assault. As at June 2024, 67 sovereign states have fully prohibited physical punishment and a further 26 states have committed to reforming laws to achieve full prohibition.⁴² Legislative reform has been shown to be most successful alongside public health campaigns that raise awareness about physical punishment and support parents to adopt alternative, non-violent strategies.⁴³

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study indicates that physical punishment is prevalent in Australia, but that beliefs about its necessity may be changing.⁴⁴

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8 November 2024

Re: Additional publications for South Australia's Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence

Following on from my [earlier submission](#) and discussions at the Royal Commission's Student Summit on Friday 1 November 2024, I am writing to provide South Australia's Royal Commission into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence with additional publications relating to children and young people's safety on public transport and in workplaces.

If we are to make South Australia a safe place for all children and young people, we must address their concerns about safety on public transport. We must also ensure that all workplace practices and environments respect the rights of young workers.

As you are aware, my work as South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People is directly informed by my regular engagement with children and young people across the state. My *Teenagers and Safety* report, which formed part of my main submission, highlights what currently makes children and young people feel safe as well as what would make them feel safer, with a focus on safety at home, at school and across the community.

I have attached the following reports, which provide more detailed insights from children and young people specific to safety on public transport and in workplaces:

[Safe and Sound](#): Views and experiences of young people on public transport

My 2023 *Safe and Sound* report focuses on survey responses from more than 1,000 young people aged 13 to 20 years old about their views and experiences on public transport. Young people reported that experiences of sexual harassment and anti-social behaviour deter them from using public transport. Particular groups of young people were more likely to report feeling unsafe on public transport, including young women, young people who are LGBTQIA+, from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and/or living with a disability.

The report's recommendations focus on improving the safety, accessibility and affordability of public transport. Better lighting, safer shelters, CCTV

monitoring and access to wifi and charging stations can all help young people feel safer while waiting for and using public transport.

When transport is lacking, unreliable, unsafe, or unaffordable, it has a disproportionate impact on the quality of children and young people's lives, including their ability to maintain education, employment, and connection to services, family and friends. Limited transport options in areas create additional barriers to accessing facilities, services and support that are essential to children and young people's education, social lives, health, wellbeing and safety.

Teenagers and Work: Views and experiences of teenagers on work and workplaces

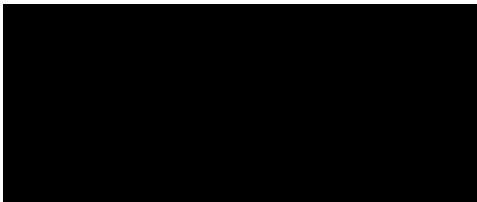
While many teenagers in South Australia are engaged in some form of employment, very little is known about their experiences of work and workplaces. I launched a survey to gain a deeper understanding of teenagers' experiences of workplaces. My 2024 *Teenagers and Work* report is based on survey responses from more than 900 young South Australians aged 11 to 19 years old.

The report provides insight into the challenges teenagers face at work, the impact of work on their lives, where they seek support for work-related issues, and what makes a good workplace for teenagers. Recommendations focus on changes to law, policy and regulation to improve access to information and support and reduce the vulnerability of young workers.

Once again, I commend you for your work and your commitment to engaging with children and young people's perspectives and experiences as a critical part of systemic reform in South Australia.

I hope these additional resources will be useful as you prepare your report and recommendations. Please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss anything further.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People
Adelaide, South Australia

South Australian
Commissioner
for Children and
Young People
2023

ccyp.com.au

Safe and Sound

Views and experiences
of young people on
public transport

PROJECT REPORT NO. 36 | JUNE 2023





The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*.

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people.

This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes, services and practices that affect their lives.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the South Australian children and young people who shared their experiences and insights. Throughout this report we have used unedited quotes from children and young people to ensure their views are faithfully communicated.

Suggested Citation

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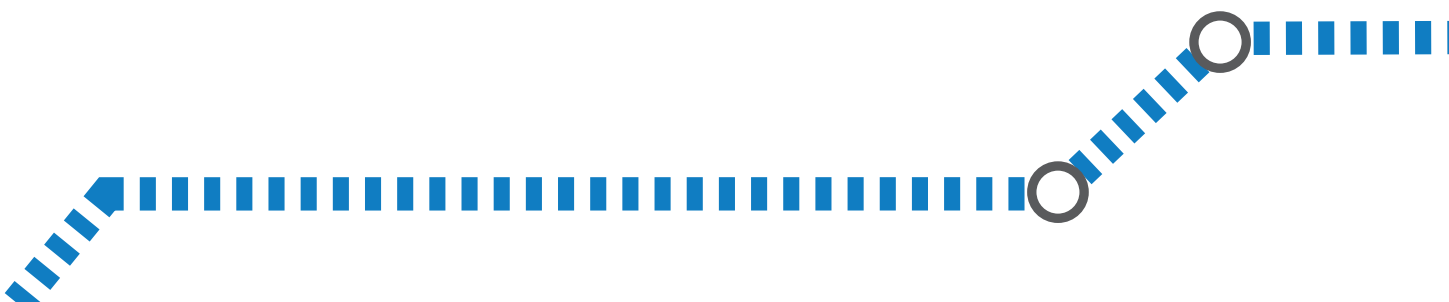


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To fully participate, young people need to be able to get themselves to all the activities they have committed to, regardless of their personal circumstances or geographical location.

Commissioner's Foreword

Transport is central to how young people experience their community and affects almost every aspect of their lives. Young people's access to a full range of reliable, consistent and integrated transport options is not just a 'nice to have' – it is an essential component of their full participation in society as active and engaged citizens.

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, a key focus of my work is raising awareness about systemic issues that impact on children and young people's rights, development, and wellbeing outcomes.

My advocacy is directly informed by my regular conversations with children and young people. It seeks to place their voices front and centre in public policy and ensure they are engaged, healthy, safe, valued, and have a positive view of their future.

Transport consistently features in the top five issues raised by children and young people across both metropolitan Adelaide and regional South Australia.

In preparing this report 1,124 South Australian young people aged 13 to 20 years participated in a survey about their experiences using SA public transport. The three major challenges young people face in relation to public transport are its cost, accessibility, and safety.

The availability and affordability of public transport underpins children and young people's capacity to engage with school, employment,

key services, sport, hobbies, interests, and other social and recreational activities they enjoy.

When transport is lacking, unreliable, unsafe, or unaffordable, it has a disproportionate impact on the quality of their lives.

Adults often forget that young people have complex busy lives and can be as time poor as they are. To fully participate, young people need to be able to get themselves to all the activities they have committed to, regardless of their personal circumstances or geographical location.

Public transport routes in towns and cities across South Australia primarily travel along major arterial routes in a hub and spoke configuration. Many young people have expressed the need to travel against the grain, both within and between suburbs, often for relatively short distances. They can lose hours from their day when having to take two buses, or a bus and a train, to travel just three or four kilometres to a rehearsal, training session or part-time job undertaken after school. This can mean a commute of over an hour is required either side of a two-hour training session or three-hour work shift.

The same young people being hampered by these longer travel times on public transport are less likely to be called in for extra hours during a rush period, or be able to take up opportunities they may be offered at short notice in a sporting arena, hobby, or other recreational setting.

There are strong links between children and young people's mobility and their overall social inclusion and wellbeing. Children and young people are among the most transport disadvantaged members of their community.¹ Without alternative modes of transport (such as having a driver's license or parents, friends, and caregivers to give them a lift), children and young people can become socially excluded or isolated.

Transport disadvantage has a demonstrable impact on school attendance, gaining and maintaining employment, as well as on a child or young person's capacity to make and maintain their social connections. This is further exacerbated for those who have a disability, low socio-economic status or geographical remoteness.

Most survey responses were from children and young people living in Adelaide metropolitan areas. In comparison with their regional counterparts, these children and young people have greater access to transport services and accessible alternatives, such as walking or cycling. Earlier consultations undertaken with children and young people living in rural, regional and remote areas of South Australia, have already identified their varied experiences of transport disadvantage. They include reduced mobility due to the need to travel longer distances and the risk of social exclusion that they face because of this.

Many young people reported that limited public transport in the regions impacts significantly on other aspects of their lives, including getting and maintaining a part-time or full-time job, travelling to the nearest place of study, or allaying ongoing concerns they have about relying on others to drive them. This includes their inexperienced driver mates or overstretched family members who often have several transport commitments to fulfil.

Worries about personal safety on all forms of public transport are a concern for young people across South Australia, regardless of their economic and social circumstances.

These worries extend to walking through, or waiting in public spaces, especially at night. Young people have described how important night-time lighting is, and how reassured they are when they see businesses open late so they can be confident there are some responsible adults around in case they need help. For young people who rely on public transport at all hours of the day and evening, travelling on empty train carriages and waiting around deserted bus compounds can lead to significant feelings of anxiety and vulnerability in relation to their personal safety.

My recent survey findings are consistent with what was reported in my *Public Transport – It's Not Fine* report. In this 2019 report I heard that young people sometimes feel unsafe and unwelcome on public transport, particularly at times when they have forgotten their student identity card, or don't have enough money for their fare (but really need to get home).

In these situations young people described how the transport system can be “cruel”, “unfair” and “unkind” to them.

Over recent years the SA Public Transport Authority has been making more active efforts to not “punish” students for not having their student identification card on them while travelling home on the bus from school whilst wearing a school uniform. However, this is far from universal and young people continue to face ongoing challenges while on public transport.

The views expressed in this report have been gathered directly from young people across the state. They include both positive and negative experiences along with suggestions about what needs improving. Although many of the issues are shared by adults, young people have valuable insights to offer that are unique to them and their lived experiences. Their contributions should inform efforts made to increase the confidence and comfort of young people using public transport. In doing so we can simultaneously contribute to providing an increase in individual use and system sustainability.



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children
and Young People



Context

Adelaide's public transport system consists of buses, trams, and trains, made mostly available in the Adelaide metropolitan area. The patronage on public transport remained steady between 2016 and 2019, but despite the government's aim to increase usage overall, has decreased significantly year on year since 2020, mainly due to the impacts of COVID-19.

In the 2021–22 financial year, there were 47,529,517 passenger trips on public transport. Bus services were used by 72% of patrons, followed by trains at 16% and trams at 12%.²

Children and young people make up a significant population of Adelaide Metro patrons. Almost 1 in 5 of all patrons are primary or secondary students. Only 25% of patrons are classified as 'regular' full fare paying customers. Other patrons could be described as those who are on lower incomes, 29% on concessions (this includes tertiary students), 19% classified as students (primary and secondary students), 11% who are Seniors, and 15% of passengers who take free travel to special events, including New Year's Eve, the footy express, and tram travel within the Adelaide CBD.

Under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*, each State authority "must, in carrying out its functions or exercising its powers, protect, respect and seek to give effect to the rights set out from time to time in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child".

Particular rights relevant to public transport involve agencies always doing what is in the best interests of the child (Article 3), including keeping children safe.

Similarly, under the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* and the *Children's Protection Act 1993*, statutory bodies (including those bodies who administer passenger transport services on which children are carried for a fare) must comply with provision of child safe environments. To support child safe environments, South Australia established a Child Safe Environments, Principles of Good Practice Guide, which has been in place since 2012.

This guide contains overarching principles that organisations must follow to ensure creation of a child safe environment. These include but are not limited to embedding child safety and wellbeing into organisational leadership, governance, culture, and training, with an emphasis on best practice in creating child safe environments.

Best practice includes engaging children and young people in the development of public transport policies taking into account their views and experiences utilising public transport services across the community. The principles are designed to operate as the baseline for how children and young people should be experiencing public transport every day.

Whilst we commend the action plans developed by the government as part of the public transport diversity and inclusion framework on transport (including a plan dedicated to students and young people) there is still scope to apply a child safe and child friendly focus on improving overall access to safe 'active' transport.

Consistently, children and young people have said they want safe, affordable, efficient and convenient public transport services, safer roads and alternate transport corridors for cyclists, skaters and pedestrians. They recognise that the better these alternative modes of transport and their associated infrastructure are, the fewer cars will be on the road, leading to safer streets overall, especially in urban areas.

Young people who use bicycles as their connective transport describe how they struggle taking bikes on and off trams and trains. The ticketing requirements and lack of understanding from adult passengers and transit staff make the experience unpleasant and inefficient. The fact that bikes cannot be taken on buses at all shuts off another transport option and hampers their mobility.

Children and young people highlighted the need for transport services to be trustworthy, welcoming, regular, and efficient.

This includes those public transport services operating within regional areas, with the strong need for better links between these and Adelaide, including those to Adelaide's CBD. These links would better enable children and young people's participation in their education, work, recreational and social activities essential to their health, wellbeing and citizenship.



Recommendations

1

Address children and young people's safety concerns through better street lighting at shelters and near bus stops, and by offering more frequent bus, tram and train services. These need to come with synchronised connections so that they're not left waiting for long periods or forced to walk extended distances in the dark because timetabled services are not meeting their travel needs.

2

Upgrade public transport infrastructure and facilities, including bus, train and tram stops, stations and shelters. These upgrades should include a modernised and environmentally sustainable transport system with air conditioning and USB charging ports.

3

Introduce free travel to and from school and sport for children and young people from low-income families by expanding the government School Card Scheme.

4

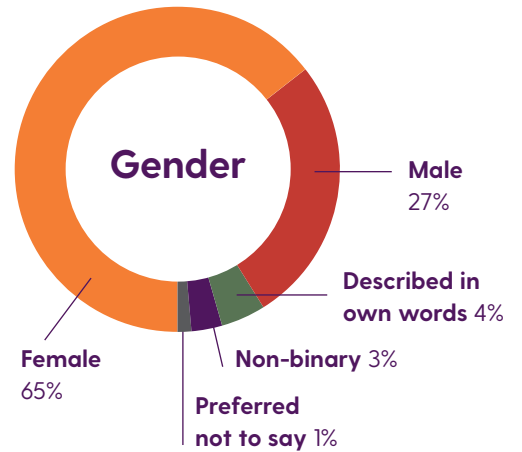
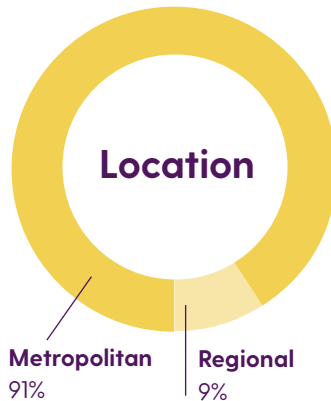
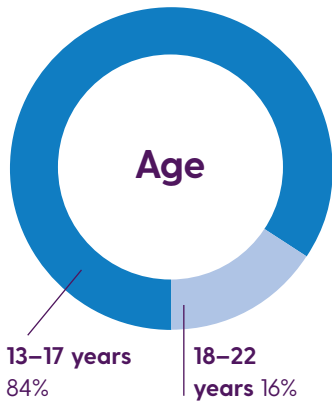
Increase digital accessibility for those travelling on public transport through provision of free Wi-Fi on all public transport and at train stations. This will enable children and young people to make the most of their travel time, while simultaneously improving the accuracy of timetables and tracking services via mobile applications, which they increasingly rely upon.

Key messages

- 1** When transport is lacking, unsafe or unreliable it has a disproportionate impact on children and young people's lives.
- 2** Affordable and accessible public transport underpins children and young people's capacity to engage in education, employment, sporting and other hobbies and recreational activities. It offers a convenient and cheap way for children and young people to travel without needing a car and a driver's license, or relying on parents, friends, and caregivers for their transportation needs.
- 3** Regular users who are most likely to report feeling unsafe on public transport include young women, LGBTQIA+ young people, young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and those with a disability.
- 4** Some of the issues that made young people feel unsafe on public transport included interactions with "creepy" adults, experiencing or witnessing sexual harassment, antisocial behaviour, and violence or threats of violence.
- 5** Transport access issues in regional areas significantly limits and restricts regional young people's study and work opportunities.
- 6** Young people's expectations of a positive "transport experience" are often not met due to challenges with routes, timetabling, connections, and ticket payment options.

Key findings

Of the 1,124 young people surveyed:



94% of respondents were secondary school students.



23% of respondents were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.



29% of respondents also had a part-time or casual job alongside school.



23% of respondents belong to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Use of public transport:

41% of respondents used public transport every day or most days (49% of females and 42% of males).

8% of respondents report combining two forms of transport in one trip as part of their short commute journey.

81% of respondents said that public transport is an important way of getting around.

76% of respondents used the bus, the most commonly used form of public transport by respondents.

86% of respondents said that it was important that they were able to easily connect between buses, trains, and trams.

11% of respondents used the train the most.

92% of respondents said that it was important that public transport was reliable.

4% of respondents reported trams as their most common form of transport.

Safety and public transport:

Young people are concerned about their safety on board and waiting for public transport.

93% of respondents said it was important to feel safe on public transport.

91% of respondents said it was important to have safe spaces to wait for public transport.

Female respondents more frequently felt unsafe walking to, waiting for, and using public transport than their male counterparts.

83% reported feeling creeped out by adults and 33% reported this was "almost always a problem".

58% of respondents only felt "somewhat safe" while waiting for public transport.

12% of respondents reported feeling unsafe while waiting for public transport.

The most common problems young people experience while using public transport:



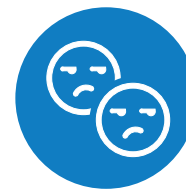
Feeling "creeped out" by adults




Low phone battery



Feeling judged by adults



Feeling judged by other young people



“Public transport allows me to go from one place to another without having to drive as it is often difficult to find parking. I also like that there are a large number of public transport points which allows me to get from one place to another in a relatively simple manner.”

(18, Female, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

Young people's experiences of public transport

Young people surveyed said that public transport is a vital part of their independence. It provides them with an accessible and affordable way to travel to school, training, or university, to meet up with friends, get to and from work, and enjoy sport, socialising and other recreational activities; all without having to attain a driver's licence or rely on a parent or caregiver to drive them where they need to be when they need to be there.

Not having to depend on their parents or carers for transport is critical to many young people's confidence and self-sufficiency, allowing them the freedom and independence they need to live their own lives.

Some young people said they use public transport because they have no other way of getting to school, work or to their social engagements. They said it meant they could "get to places they can't otherwise get to" in a way that is mostly safe, affordable, and accessible.

“ **[Public transport] provides a freedom for me to be able to get where I need to be without outside support.**” (17, Non-binary, Adelaide Western Suburbs)

ACCESSIBILITY, COST AND CONVENIENCE

Some young people said they enjoyed the accessibility and convenience of public transport. Whilst some expressed the usefulness of school and tertiary education concessions, they also felt public transport should be free for all students. Others see public transport as a cheaper and more environmentally friendly mode of transport than a car, with respondents citing the high costs of purchasing, maintaining, and fuelling cars, in addition to getting their licence, as some of the reasons they choose to use public transport.

“ *It allows me to go places I otherwise would not be able to go without completely disrupting the schedule of someone with a license. It also allows me to not worry about traffic, car maintenance, petrol, excess emissions, and essentially all the issues that come with owning and using a car.*” (18, Male, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

“ *It's convenient, often cheap and more environmentally friendly than individual travel.*” (18, Male, Eyre Peninsula SA)

ENVIRONMENT

Many of the young people who completed the survey, cited environment and sustainability as reasons they liked public transport. For them catching public transport is “better for the environment than driving” – especially with the introduction of hybrid buses.

- “ [I like that public transport] Helps save the environment by encouraging people to use their own cars less and to just have multiple people in one vehicle.” (14, Female, Adelaide Metropolitan Area)
- “ There should be big pushes to get people to take PT instead of cars. Trains, trams, and trucks are safer, more efficient, better for the environment. Better in almost every category except for convenience.” (20, Male, Adelaide Western Suburbs)

TICKETING, PAYMENT OPTIONS AND FINES

Young people said one of the major issues they faced when using public transport was Adelaide Metro’s ‘metroCARD’ system, which currently does not have facilities for ‘top-ups’ to be made enroute. Young people want to be able to use their phones as a back-up for their physical cards when this is needed – especially given single-trip tickets are no longer available for purchase on buses.

Although Adelaide Metro does offer metroCARD top ups online, young people reported that this facility was not user-friendly. They would also like to see instantaneous metroCARD top-ups made available.

TRACKING SERVICES

Further to the difficulties young people said they experienced in ‘topping up’ their metroCARDS, they noted that the Adelaide Metro website was confusing to use, and that transport tracking services were often inaccurate. They would like to see apps that show more accurate departure and arrival times, and a website that is easier to navigate, with information aimed specifically at young people as the largest single public transport customer group.

Incorrect estimates of how far away buses are, and outdated or incorrect timetables showing on mobile apps, meant some young people missed buses and trams. They reported incidents of buses having departed earlier or arriving later than timetabled, and how this results in them missing connecting services so that they would arrive late for classes and other commitments. They found this particularly frustrating given they had planned their routes in advance, to avoid exactly that outcome.



- “ They are always late and impact my learning by being late. They also make me late for work, leading to a large anxiety around getting yelled at for being late.” (15, Female, Adelaide Eastern Suburbs)
- “ [Public transport would be safer if there were] route checkers like in the city, or something was placed at [the] interchange so I wouldn't have to guess the buses.” (17, Male, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

TIMETABLING & ROUTES

Young people said that public transport services often arrive late and sometimes not at all – leaving them stranded so that they're late for school or work. This was especially true on weekends or outside peak travel times. They reported that this infrequent timetabling not only leaves children and young people waiting in unsafe, unsheltered stops and stations, it also poses considerable barriers to socialising, engaging in recreational and sporting activities, and maintaining casual, part-time or full-time employment.

In addition to this, young people noted that many Adelaide Metro services required transit into the city for inter-suburban travel. They expressed a need for better, more direct inter-suburban routes that went across suburbs rather than in and out via Adelaide City.

- “ The fact buses are late 9/10 times. There have been times I've nearly been late due to this. The longest a bus has been late for is 30+ minutes causing me to be late to school that morning.” (18, Male, Adelaide Western Suburbs)

“ I find that bus services around the northern suburbs are sparse and unreliable at times. The train is fine, but I have had plenty of difficulty getting to and from the station when I take the bus there.” (20, Female, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

“ I wish I could reach [public transport] easily and safely. I wish it were organised to maximise efficiency. It is a 20 min drive to my workplace but takes over an hour and two buses to get there using public transport.” (17, Non-binary, Adelaide Inner Northern)

- “ If I just miss the train, I have to wait an extra half hour and get home half [an] hour later.” (19, Female, Adelaide Western Suburbs)
- “ I cannot stress enough that it should be easy to catch connecting public transport without waiting 30+ minutes between services. I don't feel that it is easy or accessible to do this at the moment.” (20, Female, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)
- “ The amount of public transport is so minimal that I still need to drive to get to a station and it is extremely annoying.” (18, Female, Adelaide Southern Suburbs)
- “ ...Also, on the weekends the train only comes every hour which is a problem for safety because you could be stuck somewhere unsafe for a long period of time without a way out.” (19, Female, Adelaide Metropolitan Area)

ACCESSIBILITY

Survey respondents thought that public transport in South Australia needed to be upgraded. They said many of the buses were “old, smelly, dirty, or otherwise poorly maintained”. They wanted modernised, safe, environmentally friendly, and accessible transport services.

Young people also said they wanted increased accessibility for people with a disability. Respondents with a disability said they wanted better help from drivers and transport staff when getting on and off public transport, and more seats that were designed specifically for people with disabilities. One young person with a vision impairment reported that they often struggled to find a seat or felt judged for using dedicated disabled seating because their disability was not obvious.

SAFETY

Most young people reported that when using public transport, they ‘felt safe most of the time’. For these young people, catching public transport was often a safer alternative to walking long distances – especially at night.

Despite the accessibility, cost and convenience of public transport, and the independence it affords young people, some survey responses highlighted concerns young people have about the safety and hygiene of public transport, as well as the anti-social, and in some situations, criminal behaviour of other passengers they’ve witnessed. Some young people said they found public transport services unclean and littered with rubbish, chewing gum and graffiti.

They also noted how difficult it was to socially distance themselves from other passengers, particularly at the height of COVID-19 when many passengers boarded the bus without a hygiene mask and then sat next to or near them.

“ I am often scared one of the threatening adults will follow me and hurt me because I am a POC and/or visibly queer.” (17, Non-binary, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

“ The creepy people, the harassment I get for what I’m wearing (which isn’t okay). Feeling unsafe. [I] can’t listen to music because I need to be aware of the people near me.” (16, Female, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

“ I hate taking the bus every day. I am so scared on there.” (17, Non-binary, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

“ I have only experienced this 4 times, but it’s always incredibly uncomfortable when there are middle aged men holding their phone camera towards you since it feels like they are filming you, but you can’t [do] anything about it.” (15, Female, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

“ Sometimes it’s awkward because I have seen women get harassed by other men on the bus more than once, and when it happens everyone gets uncomfortable and I don’t know whether I should say something or not.” (13, Female, Adelaide Southern Suburbs)

Young people said that the behaviour of other passengers made them feel particularly unsafe. This included “creepy” adult passengers, “druggies” and strangers yelling, invading personal space, or striking up unwanted conversations, as the main reasons they felt unsafe or “creeped out” on public transport. Sexual harassment including cat calling and leering was also reported.

Alarming, some respondents reported instances of being filmed or followed by other passengers (mainly older men).

- “ *The things people seem to get away with near the back of the bus is kind of ridiculous, not limited to things like drug use and sexual acts. I would wish that there was less tolerance for that.*” (18, Female, Adelaide Southern Suburbs)
- “ *Some older people on the train are perverted and touch you when you sit next to them and it's uncomfortable and unsafe as a teenager.*” (16, Female, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

REGIONAL EXPERIENCES

Despite the small numbers of regional young people who completed the survey, their responses resonated with key messages from previous consultations undertaken with regional young people. For these young people, the lack of public transport options requires creative solutions that will ensure they can enjoy greater freedoms, independence and connectedness in the same way their metropolitan counterparts do.

“ **I enjoy the independence it has given me since I was a young teenager, and I wouldn't be attending university without it. That said, there have undoubtedly been times where it has been a barrier to my work and study, as I have been utterly exhausted by the process of trying to get home and waiting far too long for a bus to come (or to not show up at all), and events like the Gawler line closure lasted nearly the entirety of my undergraduate degree and severely hindered my ability to commute.**” (18, Female, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

Young people who came from regional areas expressed a need for greater access to transport services overall. They reported that the lack of mobility and transport disadvantage in regional areas is what drives social isolation and exclusion. Young people in regional locations, just like their city counterparts, want faster, more direct school routes to improve access to and from school.

Some young people are dependent on the school bus and do not have alternative ways to travel to school (such as walking or cycling) mainly as the distances are too great and the routes too isolated and risky. Instead of waiting for a school bus or other bus in exposed locations on the side of the road they want well-designed shelters where they can wait in a protected yet visible area.



“[I would feel safer on public transport if] bus drivers were trained in de-escalation or having a security guard (NOT a ticket inspector) on at late/midnight buses or trains.”

(18, Male, Adelaide Western Suburbs)

What would make public transport better

Young people had many suggestions for ways to improve the overall safety and accessibility of public transport for their age group. These suggestions included improvements to safety overall, along with youth focused timetabling, ticketing and payment options, improving stops and station infrastructure, and focusing on accessibility for people living with a disability.

IMPROVE SAFETY

To improve safety on public transport, young people said they want to see greater levels of security that include a stronger presence of Adelaide Metro staff on trains, trams and buses, as well as at stations, stops and platforms.

They believe this would discourage antisocial behaviour and keep younger and more vulnerable passengers safe. They wanted to know that a security guard, or the bus or tram driver could *and* would handle nuisance behaviour and manage threatening situations if they occur – especially at night. One young person's survey response noted that "trains with security guards or personnel in the carriages feel a lot safer".

Young people want to see drivers pay greater attention to what is happening on the bus and be trained to intervene in unsafe situations if these occurred. They want to see drivers given greater control over who is allowed to get on a bus or tram, so that people who were obviously under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or otherwise behaving anti-socially, could be

denied entry by the driver, or removed from the service by the driver or public transport personnel if this was deemed necessary.

Young people said that increasing safety measures for children and young people should also include improving safety measures for women, CALD and gender-diverse people, and those living with disability. They proposed more school buses be introduced so school students can travel safely and separately to adults.

Young people reported that buses were often cramped and overcrowded – often to what they believed were unsafe levels. They wanted more seating and more frequent services made available to address this issue. This observation also raised feedback relating to issues of safety and accessibility for passengers with a disability.

“ [I would feel safer on public transport if] bus drivers were trained in de-escalation or having a security guard (NOT a ticket inspector) on at late/midnight buses or trains.” (18, Male, Adelaide Western Suburbs)

“ [Public transport would be safer if] Bus drivers had better authority to be able to get someone off a bus. For example, one

time I was on a bus and about 4 teenagers got on. They refused to pay and started being racist towards the bus driver, making fun of people on the bus and playing music out loud. The bus driver tried asking them to get off, but they of course refused.” (13, Non-binary, Adelaide Eastern Suburbs)

“ Often the social environment on the bus feels unmanaged and undisciplined. Social rules are often overlooked, and many individuals make the environment uncomfortable without any sense of repercussions.” (17, Non-binary, Adelaide Western Suburbs)

“ I think there should be another worker on the bus that could watch the people because sometimes I see people doing really weird stuff and I don't feel very comfortable or safe.” (12, Female, Adelaide Western Suburbs)



STOPS AND STATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Young people want to see safer, better designed waiting areas for public transport. Approximately ninety percent of young people surveyed said it was important to them that they have somewhere safe to wait for public transport services, particularly at night or in remote places.

They want to see better lit and more protected shelters designed and installed throughout the outer suburbs of Adelaide and particularly in regional locations.

“ Better lighting, especially at night, would make users, especially young people, feel safer as they would be able to see what's happening around them better.” (17, Female, Eyre Peninsula SA)

“ It'd be great to have more shelters, as the shelter at my nearest bus stop was removed as it became damaged after time but was never replaced. During winter, especially when it's raining, it deters me from catching public transport as I do not want to get sick standing in the rain.” (18, Female, Adelaide Western Suburbs)

“ **[Public transport would be better if there was] more lighting, SHELTERS for bus stops as I've had to wait in wind rain and hail on a regular basis just to get home as the bus stop, I need does NOT have a shelter, the one on the other side does though.**” (18, Male, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

“ [Public transport would be safer if...] the stops could be designed safer somehow – when waiting under the bus shelter I get worried a car will come along and attempt abduction (I’ve heard a story about this happening to another girl my age).”
(16, Female, Adelaide Eastern Suburbs)

TICKETS

Young people were aware that in Victoria and New South Wales all public transport allows passengers to pay directly from their debit card or phone wallet. They wanted to see this method of payment enabled in South Australia. While trains and trams already host vendor “tap and pay” machines for payment by card or phone, Adelaide Metro buses currently do not.

The announcement that the government will be extending this infrastructure to include the O-Bahn and full bus network (announced 2 Feb 2023) is welcome – however it should be remembered that most young people do not have credit cards, and will need access to a debit card to make the most of this expansion.

Also, current “tap and pay” options are charged as a regular fare which costs more than a student or concession fare. Young people want to be able to host their metroCARD on their mobile phones – “like you can with proof of age cards or credit cards”. This would prevent there being a problem if they lost or forgot their metroCARD or ticket.

Young people who do not live near a news-agent, or who are rushing to meet a work or study commitment, and who haven’t realised their metroCARD or ticket has run out of trips or funds, are often caught out. While some bus drivers are understanding and allow young people to board regardless of their situation, others do not, leaving young people stranded

without transport and having to deal with the consequences of being late to work, school, or an appointment – thereby creating extra levels of stress and anxiety.

As covered in my *Public Transport – It’s Not Fine* report (2019), these are the types of challenges that often result in children and young people being unfairly fined for fare evasion. This has a compounding effect because young people often cannot afford to pay the fines in the timelines required, and will therefore also incur late payment fees. These grow exponentially the longer the fine remains unpaid, with young people becoming reliant on family members to pay them out.³

As a result of the recommendation made in my report and in the Nyland Royal Commission report, the Attorney-General’s office consulted with relevant stakeholders on the proposed reduction to the victims of crime levy. For young people, this culminated in a reduced levy for children and young people which commenced on 31 January 2023. However, there has been no reduction in the rate of fines for young people meaning they are still required to pay the same rate as adults. Young people said they would like to see fines for students scrapped or capped and outstanding fees reduced or eliminated altogether.

“ **The metro scanners (to tap on the bus) only accept metro cards which means if you forget your card, you’re kind of stuck. Other states (e.g., Sydney) have installed into their scanner machines that you can use apple pay to tap on as well. The fee is slightly higher (I guess as a penalty for forgetting your card) but overall, it’s a life-saver for when you don’t have your card which sometimes happens.**

Maybe adding this to Adelaide buses would be helpful to everyone.” (15, Female, Adelaide Eastern Suburbs)

“ Add metroCARD support to phones. And not the one that is on trams, because that requires you to pay for a single trip. I am an avid user of the 28 day pass so being able to have my metroCARD with that loaded on it available on my phone would be a life saver.” (17, Male, Adelaide Southern Suburbs)

TIMETABLING & ROUTES

In addition to young people's desire for up-to-date apps and tracking services, they would also like to see timetabling that reflects the needs of young people; particularly throughout inter peak times and on more direct routes. They would also like a greater frequency of bus, tram and train services at the times they're looking to use them.

Young people especially wanted more frequent transport services made available at night, so they aren't left waiting alone at stops and stations in the dark. They want to be able to rely on public transport services during inter peak times and at night in the same way they rely on these services at peak times during the day.

They also want services to 'sync up' with other routes, ensuring smooth transfers between trains, trams, and major bus routes, and without lengthy waits in between. Having their needs considered when timetabling decisions are being made would assist with this.

Young people were keen to see accessibility measures recently implemented across the network introduced on more Adelaide Metro trains, trams and some of the newer buses.

These include announcing the route and stop numbers, and letting passengers know when they were on an express service or not.

“ Some of the Adelaide metro buses are falling apart and being held together with tape.” (19, Female, Adelaide Metropolitan Area)

“ **While disability seating is available, I've often had experiences where I have been told to move because I don't look disabled. My disability is invisible and makes it so I am unable to stand for long periods of time. It can make catching public transport very difficult during peak travel times.**” (16, Female, Adelaide Northern Suburbs)

“ I think public transport would feel a lot safer with well-trained bus drivers who can help disabled people and are aware of unsafe situations.” (16, Female, Adelaide Southern Suburbs)

Many of the new metro buses and trains now have USB charging ports installed, with young people keen to see these installed on all public transport services, particularly given that low phone battery levels were a recurring problem for approximately 70% of respondents.

As children and young people rely heavily on their mobile phones to keep track of time, plan their journeys, and contact friends and family, they felt having the capacity to charge their phone on public transport was imperative to their safety. It not only enables them to contact friends, parents, or caregivers, before and when they arrive at their destination, it also allows them to contact police or security services if they feel unsafe.

REGIONAL ACCESS

Like their metropolitan counterparts, regional young people want their school bus route to be specific to school students. They want connecting buses between regional towns to improve social connection and access to school, employment and extra-curricular activities.

“ [Public transport would be better if...] Schools had their own personal and private bus for all areas – our school bus is for those who live where public buses don't go.”
(15, Female, Riverland SA)

“ I think having a focus on implementing public transport in rural and remote areas would be very nice, especially between towns which would be far away on foot. This would allow sharing of resources and convenience going from one town to another to be much easier, not to mention, safer for young people. This would also be beneficial for students who live out of town but would like to join an extra-curricular club or work in town.” (16, Female, Eyre Peninsula)



A way forward

To make public transport safer and more accessible and affordable, implementing the range of practical suggestions young people have made would make all the difference.

These suggestions include providing visible, well lit, well designed protective shelters that don't leave passengers exposed to the elements while they wait, and which ensure they're not 'passed by' when they do use them.

It means installing technology that enables mobile phones to be charged so that passengers of all ages can maintain communication with their support networks and access information about services they need.

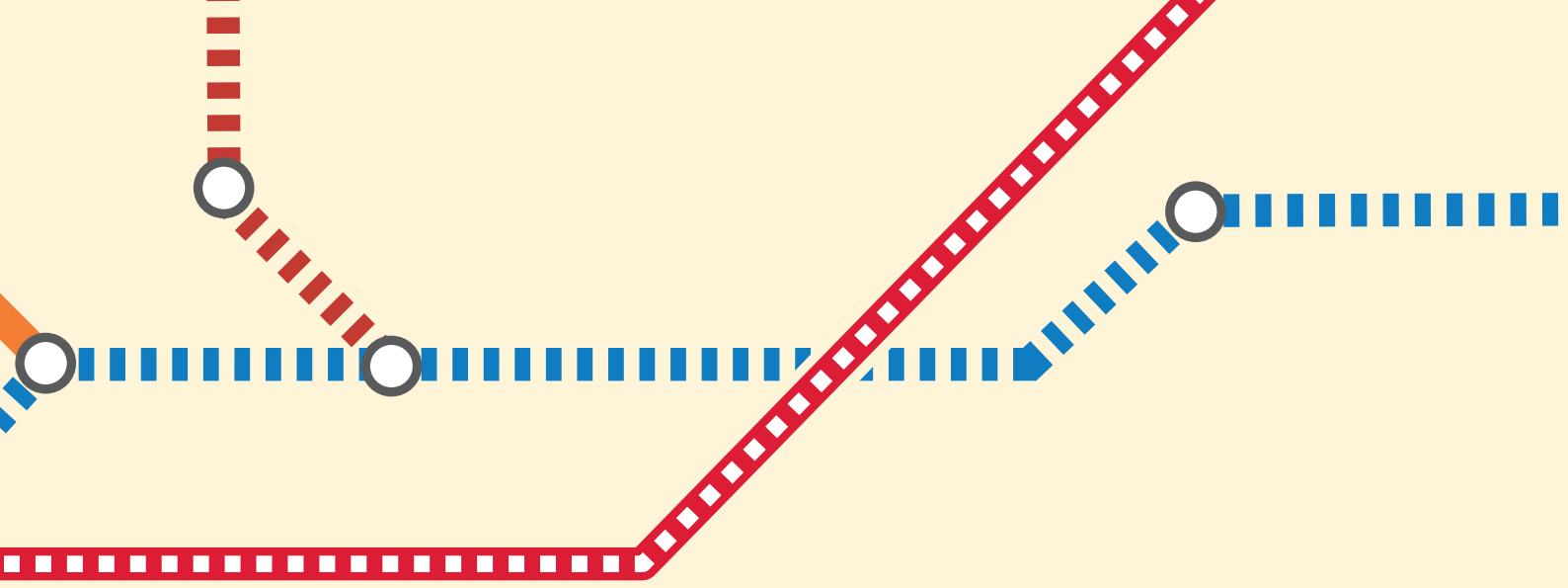
It means increasing security presence and CCTV monitoring on trains, trams and bus services and stations, so that younger and more vulnerable passengers feel safe at all times. Providing more frequent connections between stops, so that passengers are not left waiting for long periods or forced to walk extended distances between stops for different public transport services, are also needed, particularly at night.

Although the public transport needs of children and young people who are living in Adelaide and in other state metropolitan centres need to be addressed, it is the lack of public transport in rural and regional areas, that places the most significant burden on South Australian young people and their families. The lack of public transport services in these areas limits and restricts the lives of children and young people in ways that those living in metropolitan centres take for granted.

It is essential to find new and creative solutions that address issues of access and affordability in regional locations. As a priority, sustainable transport options that can be accessed independently need to be made available to more children and young people in regional locations.

Regional young people in particular often have to rely upon a parent or carer to take them where they need to go, and be able to collect them when it's time to leave. When this isn't possible, young people can't commit to group or team activities that would benefit them in myriad ways. If regional young people had greater access to affordable transport they would not feel as dependent, isolated, or limited in their choices. It would also enable them to seek part-time work, enjoy recreational activities in their own preferred timeframes, and increase their overall wellbeing and sense of independence. This 'connectedness' with those of their own age across their community is vital for them to thrive.





Endnotes

- 1 Stanley, John, Stanley, Janet, 2020. The humble school bus: An opportunity for improving regional mobility (Working Paper). Institute of Transport and Logistic Studies (ITLS).
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- 3 Commissioner for Children and Young People. 2019. *Public Transport – It's Not Fine* report.

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South Australian
Commissioner
for Children and
Young People
2024

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Teenagers and Work

Views and experiences
of teenagers on work
and workplaces

PROJECT REPORT NO. 38 | JANUARY 2024



The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*.

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people.

This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes, services and practices that affect their lives.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the South Australian young people who shared their experiences and insights. Throughout this report we have used unedited quotes from young people to ensure their views are faithfully communicated.

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Commissioner's Foreword

Young people's experiences of work impact their lives in many ways – not only in terms of their present and future workforce participation, but also in relation to their health, safety, wellbeing and education outcomes.

Laws, policies and practices across schools, industries and all levels of government should provide workplaces and work-readiness programs that uphold children's rights as citizens and workers, and better reflect and respond to their experiences.

While much of our society and schooling system focuses on preparing children and young people for their post school futures – including the 'future of work' – young people's current experiences of work, and workplaces, attracts far less attention.

From a young age, children are asked: 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' As children and young people get older this question often takes the form of 'What are you doing after school?' or 'What are you studying for?' Implicit in these questions is a view that the only decisions young people will make about work are those related to the work they do once they finish school.

However, young people's experiences in workplaces during their teenage years can influence their post-school plans, including what decisions they make about completing their school education, what further education they will consider, and the type of work they will seek and move into once they have completed school.

For teenagers, having a paid job during high school is an extremely common experience. This is clear from the hundreds of conversations I have had with young people over the past five years. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics also reflects this – the number of teenagers aged 15–19 years in employment in 2023 is at the highest level it has been since the ABS started collecting this data 45 years ago.

A strong labour market post pandemic, with cheaper labour costs for young people, and the growth in casual jobs, have all combined to cause this. Also, increasing cost-of-living pressures mean a growing number of teenagers are seeking entry to the workforce from a younger age.

Anecdotal evidence from children and young people with whom I have engaged suggests that they start paid work at a younger age. It is increasingly common for children aged 12 and 13 years to be working in casual jobs. Not only are they babysitting or doing 'odd jobs', they are also working in business and hospitality. As young people get older, their work tends to become more regular and formalised, often in a wider service sector beyond the informal networks of family and friends.

Despite the large numbers of teenagers who are working, very little is known about their experiences of work, including their relationships with supervisors and co-workers, their job satisfaction, and the challenges they face. Given that paid work is a significant part of young people's lives, it is critical that we engage with young people directly to address the gaps in our understanding of how they experience work.

There is debate within families, communities and experts, about whether paid work is good for young people and we need to understand what teenagers themselves say about the positive and negative aspects of work. This includes listening to their perspectives on what work provides them in terms of skills for adulthood and financial independence, as well as their vulnerability to exploitative work practices and injury.

By better understanding what makes a workplace 'teen-friendly', we can improve the information, training, and support being provided to young people in ways that can minimise the risks and maximise the benefits for younger employees and their employers.

Adults must provide the frameworks that keep teenagers protected while they're at work, ensuring they have clear information about their rights and responsibilities and are empowered to act when things go wrong. To do this policy makers and employers need to better understand the experiences teenagers have while at work.

This report follows on from other studies I have undertaken on the topic of young people and work:

- Off to Work We Go...preparing South Australian school students for their work futures;
- Spotlight on Parent/Carer Careers Advice;
- The Job Aspirations of 8–12 year olds; and
- Growing Confident, Connected, Creative Regional Kids.

The particular focus of this report is on the workplace experiences of over 900 South Australian young people aged 11–19 years who participated in my Teenagers and Work Survey. By exploring what these young people have told me, I am seeking to build a greater understanding of the workplace challenges teenagers face, while simultaneously identifying key opportunities to improve workplace practices, culture and environments for their benefit.



Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children
and Young People

Context

When it comes to working children and young people, South Australian legal and policy parameters are sparse. Many young people in South Australia do not know their rights in relation to work, nor do they know about the working conditions to which they are entitled.

Children's rights in relation to work are captured in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 32 of the UNCRC states that children should be protected from 'economic exploitation' and from work that is hazardous or which interferes with their education, or which is harmful to their development. This includes the need for a minimum age, or ages, for child employment, as well as regulation of children's hours and conditions, with penalties or sanctions put in place to enforce these rights.

Although Australia ratified the UNCRC on 17 December 1990, there are no federal laws protecting children's rights specifically in relation to their employment. In June 2023, Australia ratified the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Minimum Age Convention, 1973, indicating a commitment to protecting children from exploitation and to ensuring they complete their education. The Convention sets a minimum working age of 15 years with provision for 'light work' that can be undertaken from age 13. This will overwrite current state laws when it comes into force on 13 June 2024.¹ Australia also ratified the ILO Convention on child labour in 2006, and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) committing us to meeting the international standards set.²

At a national level, the *Fair Work Act 2009* covers the rights of Australian workers of all ages.

It outlines terms and conditions of employment (including the National Employment Standards) as well as the rights and responsibilities of employees, employers, organisations, and others, including independent contractors. Although young workers are specifically mentioned in relation to the need for junior employees to be paid minimum wages, there is no mention of a minimum working age.

All states and territories in Australia have legislation that restricts the conditions and types of work a child can undertake. Some of these are dedicated child employment laws, while others have provisions in relevant child-related legislation. South Australia does not have legislation specific to child employment laws.

South Australia's *Education and Children's Services Act 2019* sets out restrictions relating to children and young people who are of compulsory school age (6–16 years) so that they can't work during school hours, or work hours that may impact on their attendance and engagement at school.³

Some companies have their own minimum age while also abiding by different state or territory laws. The minimum age for these companies is often 14 years (eg McDonald's, KFC, Baker's Delight) or 15 years (eg Target, Woolworths Group, Coles Group). There are other companies known to employ a large teenage workforce that don't mention any minimum age, only making reference to the relevant state or territory laws (eg Kmart, Cotton On).

There is more regulation in place with respect to children's wages. Many wage levels are protected under awards and enterprise agreements. The amount that junior workers (those under 21 years) are paid depends on their award. In some of the key industries, wages for junior workers (under 16 years) can be between 40–50% of the adult wage, 50% for those who are 16 years, 60% for those who are 17 years, 70% for those who are 18 years, 80–85% for those who are 19 years, and 90–100% for those who are 20 years of age.⁴

There are junior rates in place for those working in children's services (below Level 3), clerical and office work, hair and beauty, health services, horticulture, and vehicles. Not all awards have junior rates, in which case juniors should be paid at adult rates.

Arguments have been made for abolishing junior rates of pay, noting that they are bad for the economy and discriminatory.⁵ Junior pay rates are based on assumptions that the work young people do is worth less, or that all young people have financial support from family, overlooking the fact that many young people need work in order to support themselves.

There have been moves in the past to establish a legislated framework that would specifically cover children and young people's employment in South Australia, but none has passed beyond the development of a Bill.



The Issue

Existing Australian research indicates that although paid work can be an important part of many teenagers' lives, with many balancing casual or 'gig' jobs alongside secondary school, there is surprisingly little research focusing on teenagers' experiences of work.⁶

There is no clear data around teenage workers in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) collects monthly workforce data in its Labour Force survey, but only provides employment data for workers aged 15 years and older. In June 2006, the ABS undertook a one-off Child Employment survey relating to 5–14-year-olds as a supplement to its Labour Force Survey, but this has not been repeated.

The limited number of Australian studies about teenagers and work rarely mention minimum age, wages, injuries, or other rights-based issues. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) do provide some background to teenagers and work in Australia, often focusing on patterns of work and the impact of work on other areas of their lives, with a particular focus on child development.

There are few studies which explore young people's experiences of work, including work injuries. This is despite reporting from Safe Work Australia that indicates workers in Australia under the age of 20 have a higher-than-average rate of serious claims for work-related injury and disease than older workers.

Workers under 20 years of age have a frequency rate of serious claims per million hours worked that is higher than the national total (7.5 compared to 6.5).⁷ In South Australia in 2014–2017, Return to Work SA reported that 8,129 young workers were injured at work and received income or medical support throughout this period. Some of these young people died or had long-term impacts from their injuries.⁸

It is important to recognise that young people are more likely to under-report injuries and workplace incidents than their older counterparts. One South Australian survey found that young workers were less likely to report hazards or injuries or apply for workers' compensation.⁹ Approximately three quarters of survey respondents were concerned about stress at work, not being trained to do the job, fatigue from work, lifting heavy things at work, and illnesses caused by work. This survey also found that more workers who are aged 17 years and under, felt 'too scared' to report work health and safety concerns, compared to those aged 18–25 years (63% compared to 27%).

In addition to suggesting teenagers may think only serious injuries can be reported, another Australian study shows that many teenagers do not know their rights in relation to work.¹⁰

While the Fair Work Ombudsman and relevant unions can provide support for young workers, these organisations are often viewed as not being accessible by teenagers. One South Australian survey found that young workers were unlikely to report issues to a union or to SafeWork SA.¹¹ Another Australian survey found that 13–16-year-olds had very little knowledge about unions, and in many cases did not know they had a legal right to join a union.¹²

While some states have young worker associations or unions, South Australia does not have a full time dedicated legal advocacy service for young workers. Whilst SA young workers can access Youth Law Australia, Legal Services Commission and the Working Women's Centre SA, these services are not specifically targeted at, or designed for teenagers.

Young worker associations are often focused on workers who are under the ages of 25 or 30 years rather than in their teenage years. Therefore, these sources of support may not account for the specific circumstances relating to having a first and often short-term job as a teenager. They're more likely to focus on older young people in the context of work undertaken post-school or post-graduate jobs or careers.



Key messages

- Teenagers have varied engagement in paid work. Some have one or more paid jobs, and jobs spanning different roles and industries, most commonly in food and hospitality, fast food, supermarket and/or retail and sales positions.
- Teenagers need more guidance, education and training to understand how to protect their health and well-being at work, including knowing where they can safely raise concerns and increase their confidence for the future.
- Teenagers have a range of aspirations and desires when it comes to their ideal jobs and employers. Some are very focused on particular industries or specific people, or on companies they would like to work for. For others it is the culture, practices and environments of an ‘ideal’ workplace or employer they seek.
- Teenagers often experience challenges in relation to their paid work, including pressure to work after they said they were unavailable, or when they are sick. Other challenges include pay and working conditions, balancing paid work with school, study, and other commitments, as well as navigating relationships with managers, co-workers and customers.
- Teenagers often find themselves in unsafe work environments and experience instances of bullying, discrimination or sexual harassment and disrespect, which are commonly not reported.
- Teenagers want workplaces to be welcoming, encouraging, and physically and emotionally safe. They highlight the importance of friendly co-workers, opportunities to learn, and space to make ‘mistakes’. They also look for supportive and professional management, and fair and flexible work conditions.
- Teenagers want workplaces and employers to understand and value them as young people and to engage them in creating better workplaces that consider their best interests and needs.
- In terms of issues or worries relating to work, teenagers are least comfortable seeking help from their boss, supervisor or manager; a union; or another worker who is an older adult. They are most comfortable seeking help from a friend outside of work, a family member, or another worker of a similar age to them.

Recommendations

1

In implementing the ILO's Minimum Age Convention, 1973, Australian governments must establish mechanisms to collect data and hear directly from teenagers to ensure Australia's future labour market is fair for workers of all ages.

2

The South Australian Government must monitor any unintended consequences of the increase in the minimum working age. This includes the vulnerability of children in low-income families who may have no choice but to turn to work that sits outside formal systems, to supplement their household's income.

3

In addition to setting a minimum working age, Work Safe SA should consider other changes to law, regulation, or policy with respect to children's workplace rights and conditions. This includes, but is not limited to, children working as independent contractors; differential minimum working ages, or parental consent for specific work; abolition of junior pay rates for those over 17 years; superannuation for all workers; and living wages for trainees and apprentices.

4

To empower young workers and reduce risk of exploitation, high school career and work-readiness programs and curriculum must be mandated for all students in Year 9 and above. These programs should focus on workplace health and safety training, broader workplace rights and responsibilities, as well as where and how to access support and advocacy services produced specifically for teenage workers.

5

Formal industry and employer bodies should actively engage with teenage workers to co-design a charter that supports and inspires businesses to become and be recognised as 'employers of choice for young workers'. This would involve demonstrating a commitment to providing quality workplaces and opportunities for young people that includes seeking their input into shaping what these are.

The Good

“ I enjoy working and the feeling of being independent.” (14, female, Eastern Adelaide)

“ It’s good. I have good co-workers.” (14, gender-queer, Eyre and Western)

“ I love working where I am. I wouldn’t change this fact ever, because I am well settled and supported in my workspace.” (15, male, Eastern Adelaide)

The Not-So-Good

“ That it can be stressful at times, and good at times. But often it is just a means to an end.” (16, male, Eastern Adelaide)

“ I have been in work for the past 2 years so I enjoy it, but sometimes it gets really rough.” (15, female, Northern Adelaide)

“ Going to school, then going to work is a very long day.” (16, female, Eyre and Western)

“ Forced to count total and close. I am a minor. That is illegal.” (15, non-binary, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island)

“ Expected to staff the department by myself a lot of the time.” (15, male, Eyre and Western)

The Bad

“ Fast food is a terrible place for people to have their first jobs. The companies don’t care about the young people enough and neither do the customers. I recommend it to no-one. There also needs to be more options for young people, especially [those of] us with sensory issues and who are LGBTQIA+.” (16, Trans Masculine, Northern Adelaide)

“ Racist comments were made by a co-worker.” (16, female, Western Adelaide)

“ We use chemicals including one that is called Gorilla to clean ovens. Often we breathe it in when we are meant to wear masks, but haven’t been provided one. [It] gets in our eyes too.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)

“ Another time a co-worker who’s known to be a bit creepy came up behind me while I was stacking the shelf (I was having to bend over to do this) and he continued to get very close to me and try to talk to me.” (16, female, Eyre and Western)

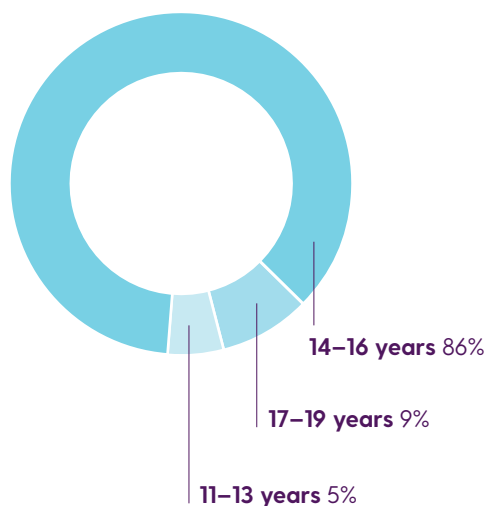
What we did

Building on many conversations with young people about their experiences of work, teenagers were surveyed to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences of work and workplaces.

A total of 907 South Australians aged 11–19 years participated in the Teenagers and Work Survey that was undertaken between November 2022 and March 2023. Their responses provide insights into the challenges and experiences they face in the workplace and the impact work has on their lives, as well as what they are looking for in a teenage-friendly workplace.

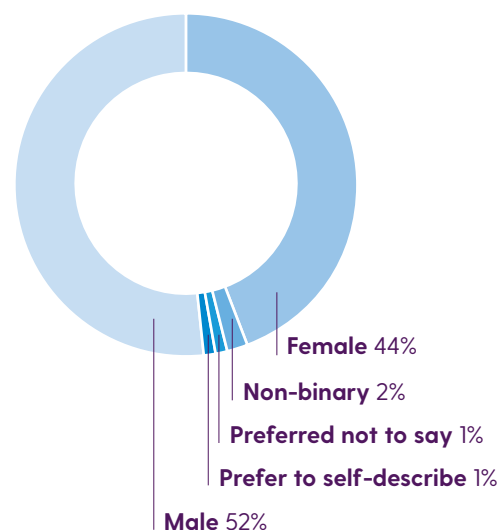
Respondents live across metropolitan, rural, and regional locations throughout South Australia and have diverse experiences of work spanning many roles and industries. The teenagers who responded were also diverse in terms of their age, gender identity and sexuality, ethnicity, and personal circumstances.

Age



The survey was completed by 11–19 year olds across South Australia. Most were aged 14–16 years (86%).

Gender

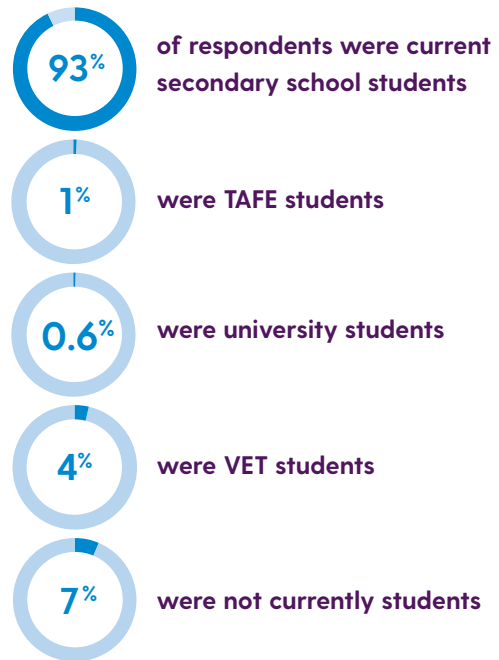


More males completed the survey than females (52% compared to 44%). Other participants were non-binary (2%), preferred not to share their gender (1%), or chose to describe their gender in their own words (1%). Self-described genders included genderfluid, gender-queer, Demigirl, and Trans Masculine.

Of the young people who responded:



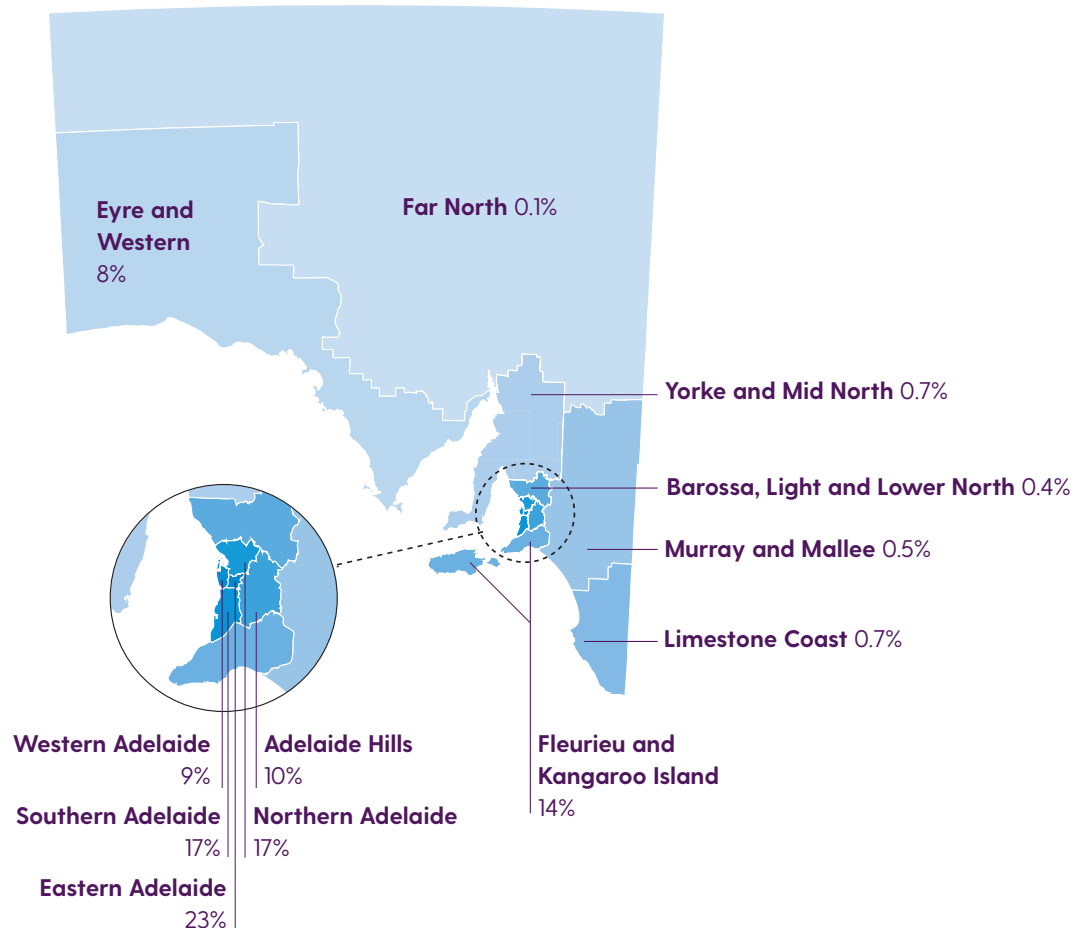
School and study



A small number reported more than one study type.

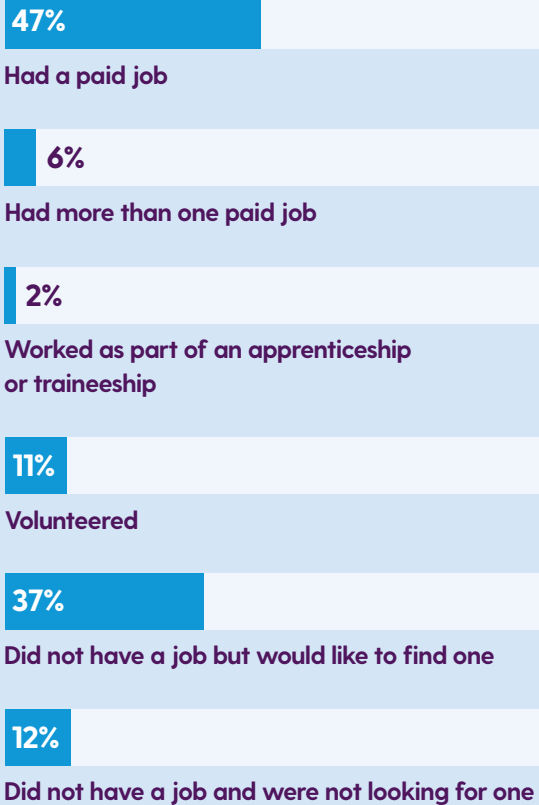
By region

Responses were received from teenagers living within all 12 regions of South Australia.

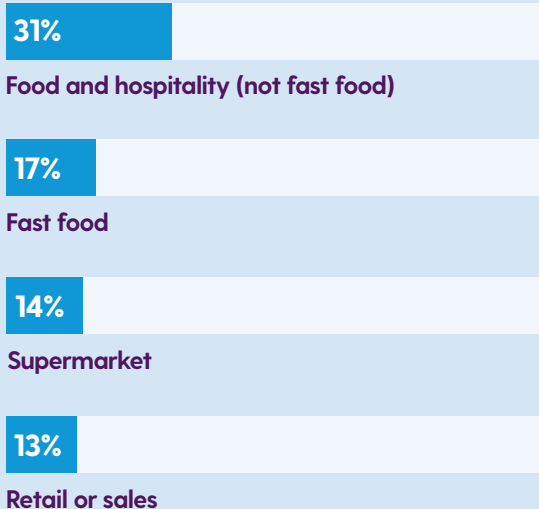


Survey results

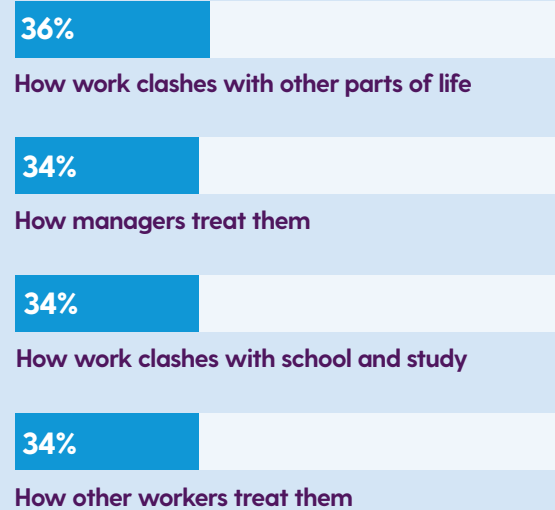
Work status of survey respondents



Most common industries of work



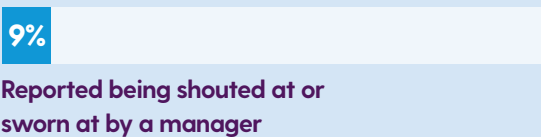
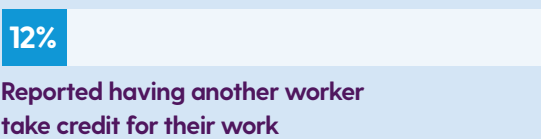
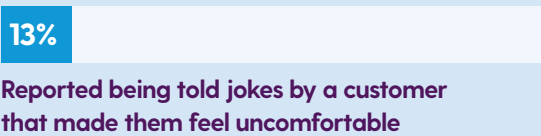
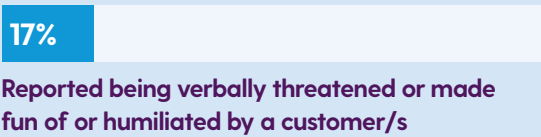
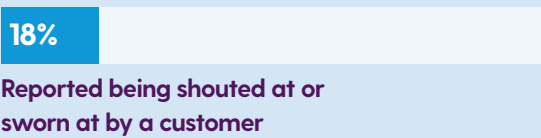
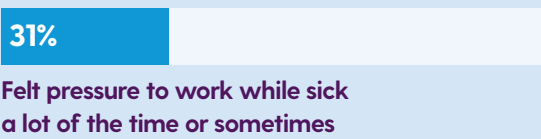
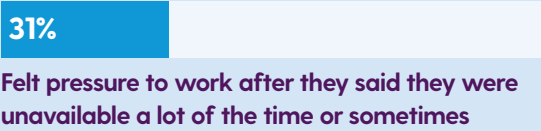
Aspects of work which had the biggest impact on young people's lives ('a lot of impact')



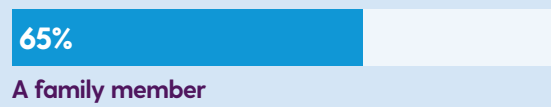
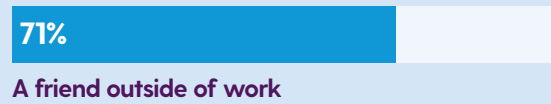
Influences on experiences of work



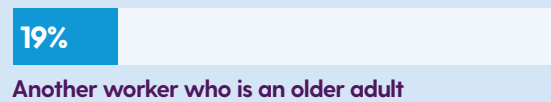
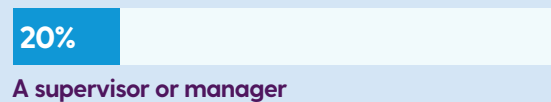
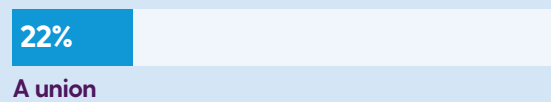
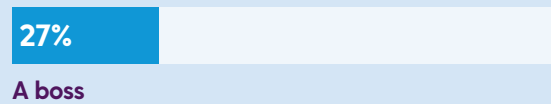
Challenges in the workplace



If young people were worried about something, they were most comfortable talking to:



Young people reported feeling not comfortable talking to:



What we heard

Teenagers work in a range of settings, including larger chain stores, smaller local businesses, family business, or their own business. The type of work being done by teenagers varies. The day-to-day experiences of teenagers at work can vary as much as the nature, location, and hours of work they undertake.

Many young people say they enjoy their jobs, particularly their relationships with co-workers, earning their own money, and gaining independence and new skills. They describe their workplaces as being well suited to a teenage workforce. Others have mixed views on work; they enjoy some aspects of their work, but also find it stressful and challenging.

For some teenagers, work can be a very negative experience. They may find it difficult to balance their paid work with school, have poor and unsafe work conditions, or experience discrimination, harassment and abuse from employers, co-workers, or customers.

Beyond reflecting on their current workplaces, many young people are looking to the future and thinking about how the work they do now will build their skills, experience, and connections for later employment opportunities. Many of those who like their current job indicated that they would like to continue working where they are. Others are thinking about their 'dream jobs' or about the specific places in their local areas where they might be able to find work.

Some young people surveyed have their sights set on working for national or international companies such as the 'FBI', 'Google', or a 'famous sports team' or 'famous person'.

Others want to be self-employed by either establishing their own business, or by being a writer, author, plumber, speech pathologist, occupational therapist, or game designer.

More than 1 in 3 respondents (37%) did not have a job but would like to find one. A smaller proportion (12%) did not have a job and were not looking for one. Many teenagers are seeking more guidance and resources to feel more confident about preparing for work and applying for jobs, including how to write resumes and respond to interview questions. They saw this as being an important part of 'work readiness' programs alongside learning more about workplace expectations, culture, safety and wellbeing, and what to do if things go wrong at work. Some noted that it can be difficult 'to get experience in order to be hired, if people don't hire because you don't have experience'.

Pay rates and work conditions

Some respondents shared their concerns about their pay rates, particularly about being underpaid. Some were concerned about the fairness of junior rates, especially for those who had been working for a few years in one role and believed they were as productive as their adult co-workers. Teenagers are often fearful of losing their job if they raise the issue of pay, and do not always know where to go to get the correct information about what their wages and entitlements are at various ages and levels of experience.

Beyond pay rates, some teenagers raised concerns about not receiving all their entitlements, including those in relation to breaks, sick leave, superannuation, and access to a union or other form of information and support. Others highlighted issues with excessive work hours, overtime, safety, and poor workplace practices where young workers were given too much responsibility, or were left alone without either adequate training, appropriate support, or proper supervision.

“ I shouldn't get paid significantly less than people who I work at a higher level than.”
(16, female, Eastern Adelaide)

“ They paid me half the usual pay when I was on trial.” (16, female, Eyre and Western)

“ Why should a teen get paid far less than an adult who does the exact same work with the exact same qualifications. Note this is mainly about the food industry.”
(16, non-binary, Southern Adelaide)

“ A good workplace for young people would be a place where we can make money and also not being underpaid.” (15, female, Eyre and Western)

“ For people to understand that we can't work ridiculous hours and that we are still teenagers.” (14, female, Northern Adelaide)

“ Fair and equal pay, enforce breaks, understand that some workers can't drive, or always make it to work.” (15, female, Barossa, Light and Lower North)

“ I always get just 15 minutes short of a break on my shifts, even ones that go over usual dinner times.” (16, female, Adelaide Hills)

Pressure to work

It was relatively common for teenagers to report feeling pressure to work while sick or after saying they were unavailable. Young women were more likely than young men to report these pressures and to be experiencing negative working conditions more broadly.

Many teenagers reported a lack of understanding among employers that young workers have busy lives outside of work and are often balancing paid work with their other commitments, especially school. Of particular concern was how much notice they were given about shifts, and how often they were expected to work, as well as how these late changes impacted on their need to change arrangements for transport to and from work.

Teenagers highlighted the importance of flexibility and that navigating the expectations of workplaces and their employers can be difficult. They said this was particularly so when work commitments clashed with other parts of their lives, or impacted on parents, carers and other on whom they rely for transport.

“ Asked to me work overtime even though I said I couldn't.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)

“ I find it hard to get all my studies done with work as well.” (14, male, Eastern Adelaide)

“ I would like to be alerted of my work shifts before the week starts, so I can prepare for places I might have to attend, like sport.”
(14, male, Southern Adelaide)

- “ This year in particular has been harder for me to balance work and school, and I haven’t had support from my manager or area manager in this case.” (16, female, Western Adelaide)
- “ The workplace needs to be flexible and understand that we can’t control that we have assignments, tests, and have school at a set time every day.” (14, female, Southern Adelaide)
- “ I think that a place that knows that younger people such as high school students do have study and extracurricular activities so they cannot work as much as an adult.” (16, female, Eastern Adelaide)
- “ Accept that their busy school lives are inevitable and accept when sick days need to be taken.” (16, female, Eastern Adelaide)

Bullying, harassment and negative interactions with managers or bosses, co-workers and customers

The way managers, supervisors, and bosses treat young people can have significant impact on their experiences of work, as well as on their health and wellbeing. Most negative experiences with managers or bosses relate to being shouted or sworn at, or being unfairly punished for a mistake.

Respondents reported that how their co-workers treat them also has a huge impact on their experiences of work. Some young people wrote positively about their co-workers, highlighting that they had good relationships and trust them. Others reported negative experiences that included other workers taking credit for their work, making them feel uncomfortable, shouting or swearing at them, making fun of them, or humiliating them in front of customers or colleagues.

Many young people have jobs which involve regular interaction with customers. They reported that these interactions have a significant impact on their experience of work. Several young people reported negative experiences that included customers shouting or swearing at them, making jokes that made them feel uncomfortable, being verbally threatening, making fun of them, or humiliating them in front of others. Others said they enjoyed interacting with customers and found this to be a good part of their job.

- “ I did get asked by a customer if I wanted to join them for a beer. I said No.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)
- “ A customer got right up in my personal space, and I essentially was cornered by him and was then asked if I was in my 20’s because he was interested in me and once, I said “no, I’m 15” he went to my co-worker “why can’t I talk to women?” (16, female, Eyre and Western)
- “ I wouldn’t say unfairly punished for a mistake, however, my boss yells and overreacts to some mistakes.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)
- “ Where I work [fast food], the managers are very supportive and protective of their crew, and I have never felt uncomfortable talking to them. I know that they will listen to what I have to say and almost always take some sort of action.” (15, female, Northern Adelaide)

Key findings

1

Teenagers have diverse engagement with the paid workforce across a range of roles and industries.

- Almost half of the young people who took part in the survey (47%) had a paid job.
- 6% had more than one paid job.
- 2% were working as part of an apprenticeship or traineeship.
- One in 10 (11%) were volunteers. Half of those who reported volunteering also had a paid job.

2

Teenagers reported a range of challenges at work, particularly in relation to:

- pay rates and work conditions
- pressure to work after saying they were unavailable or sick; and
- bullying, harassment and negative interactions with managers, bosses, co-workers or customers.

3

Teenagers most commonly reported working in the following industries:

- Food and hospitality (not fast food) (31%)
- Fast food (17%)
- Supermarket (14%)
- Retail or sales (13%)

4

Teenagers are least comfortable seeking help from:

- their boss, supervisor, or manager
- a union; or
- another worker who is an older adult.

5

Teenagers are most comfortable seeking help from:

- a friend outside of work
- a family member; or
- another worker of a similar age.

6

Teenagers want workplaces to understand and value young people and commit to providing them with:

- environments that are welcoming and encouraging, as well as being physically and emotionally safe
- learning opportunities and space to make mistakes
- supportive and professional management; and
- friendly team environments.



Where teenagers seek support for work issues

Teenagers have mixed views about whether they are comfortable talking to their boss or manager/supervisor if they are worried about something at work. Some expressed that those ‘higher up’ were unapproachable, or felt that they would react negatively if they shared their worries with them.

Some young people said they chose not to talk to their boss because they found them to be ‘intimidating,’ ‘scary,’ ‘mean,’ and ‘rude,’ and ‘you would get yelled at’. Others highlighted that ‘bosses feel so far away and not involved’ and ‘I haven’t met them much’ so they would not be easy to approach. Some felt that people ‘higher up’ would not understand their concerns or not ‘fully, truly care as much as I do about the thing I’m worried about’. They highlighted the power imbalance that exists between young people and their bosses, feeling they would not be listened to or know if ‘the managers and bosses would take criticism well’. They also presumed that ‘bosses are always on the same side as other bosses’.

Others noted that if they were worried about something at work they felt more comfortable talking to their direct manager or supervisor, rather than to someone who was ‘higher up’. They also noted that it depended on the individual person and the relationship they have with them.

Those reporting positive experiences with a boss, said they trusted and felt comfortable raising issues with them. Others saw bosses as being important to talk to ‘since it’s their job to deal with employees and issues’.

Others similarly highlighted the importance of talking to managers because they are in a position to take action in response to any issues raised.

“ Any leader of a company or business should be responsible for helping you learn and achieve. But it’s your responsibility to ask them about your worries. Bosses are typically very experienced and would understand since they probably went through similar experiences before becoming the boss or head of a company.” (15, male, Eastern Adelaide)

“ I feel like because I am younger, I’m not really in the position to talk to my boss about changing things and stuff like that.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)

“ Because I feel that the higher power people have, the more worried I would feel to talk to them.” (15, male, Northern Adelaide)

“ It’s hard to tell as it really depends on the person. There are some bosses that I would feel comfortable to speak with, and some who I don’t.” (16, non-binary, Southern Adelaide)

“ I trust my boss and manager more than someone who doesn't work there.”
(15, male, Northern Adelaide)

If they had worries, most teenagers reported being more likely to feel comfortable talking to a co-worker of a similar age than to their boss, supervisor/manager, or adult co-worker. Their shared age meant they felt this co-worker might be more approachable and understanding of their situation because they may be 'facing the same things'.

Some young people did not feel comfortable talking to co-workers at all, noting that they would not know what their response would be, and that 'another worker might tell everyone'. Others indicated that they could talk with co-workers, but acknowledged that this was unlikely to lead to any change given their lack of power and influence.

“ I feel more comfortable with people I know I can relate to, eg people my age and people I already have a connection with outside of work.” (16, female, Yorke and Mid North)

“ I work with a lot of people similar to my age, which I am able to talk to. The adults are very kind, but I wouldn't be as comfortable talking to them.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)

“ Because friends or workers my age tend to have the same experience.” (15, female, Western Adelaide)

“ The co-workers are nice, but none of us really know how to do anything about it. Bosses are always on the same side as other bosses.” (15, female, Western Adelaide)

If they were worried about something at work, teenagers reported that they felt most comfortable talking to a friend outside of work, or to a family member. They viewed family and friends as people they could trust with their worries, were easy to talk to, and able to give them help and advice when it was needed. Being personally close to them, while being outside the work situation, was also viewed as beneficial.

“ Family are closest to me, and I feel like I could trust them and open up without judgement. To me, bosses feel so far away and not involved, so I probably wouldn't go to them over others.”
(16, female, Southern Adelaide)

Teenagers have mixed responses to unions and becoming members of a union. While a small number reported that if they were worried about something at work they would feel comfortable talking to a union member, there were many more who were either not familiar with unions, or did not have access to a member of one.

“ I don't know of any unions, so it would be difficult to talk to them.” (16, female, Northern Adelaide)

Most commonly, young people viewed unions with some apprehension and uncertainty. There were also responses about lack of access and action, and some held views that their town was 'too small to have a union' or that they were 'not paying for a union, so they probably won't do much'. Some were not confident to approach a union, sharing that 'unions scare me' and that they 'would find talking to the union a bit intimidating'. Of those writing positively about unions, they highlighted that they are important to talk to 'because that is what they are concerned about.' For these teenagers, unions were viewed as 'vital to every workplace'.



What makes a good workplace for teenagers?

Improving work and workplaces for teenagers begins with considering what they believe would make a good workplace for them.

Welcoming and encouraging

Teenagers most often shared that they want 'supportive workplace environments which are welcoming and inviting', and 'where they feel comfortable'. They value workplaces which are friendly and caring, that are positive places to be, are fair, and which uphold their rights as workers.

Young people want to work in places that are 'openly supportive of younger people' and where 'personal needs are accommodated for' based on encouragement and understanding. Some note the need for workplaces to be inclusive, accepting, and respectful of all people. They also want fun and happy workplaces where young people can laugh and make jokes and be in a 'vibrant atmosphere' that can make work more enjoyable and less stressful.

“ A welcoming workspace where colleagues are happy to help if you require, and just a generally friendly atmosphere, are what I find make a workplace a good workplace.”
(15, male, Southern Adelaide)

“ A place where everyone is comfortable and a place that has a sense of belonging, respect, compassion and kindness.”
(15, male, Eastern Adelaide)

“ Safe, welcoming, accepting a.k.a. not homophobic, racist, transphobic, etc. and open to new ideas.” (14, female, Adelaide Hills)

“ A welcoming family like workplace. Walking in and laughter filling the room eases the nerves on a first day!” (16, female, Eyre and Western)

“ More about their morals, how they treat their staff. If it's a nice place to work and the hours I would be expected to work every week – the business itself.”
(16, female, Southern Adelaide)

Physically and emotionally safe

Safety at work is a common concern for young workers. Their need for workplace environments where young people are both physically and emotionally safe is considered a key feature of a good workplace. Some respondents described safe workplaces as 'having safety procedures in place' and where 'employees always need to be police checked.'

A safe workplace is one that 'provides the ability to be able to anonymously report workplace incidents without fear that the perpetrator will find out they have been reported'. Creating safe workplaces also includes having managers and co-workers who young people can trust,

and who will listen to them when they have concerns or issues, as well as act on these when needed. Some young workers described creating workplaces which are emotionally safe, and that in particular this includes the need for employers to make workplaces safe for LGBTQIA+ young people and young women.

- “ An environment where you feel safe and get treated like humans, not robots.” (17, male, Northern Adelaide)
- “ Enforce the environment to be more supportive about mental health and the LGBTQIA+ community.” (14, genderfluid, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island)
- “ Ensure that female workers are more safe at work, especially in male dominated industries. Proper punishment for harassment and sexism.” (17, female, Adelaide Hills)

Learning opportunities and having space to make mistakes

Training provided before or when starting a job is a high priority for teenagers, including having a proper induction program and relevant ongoing training on the job. Teenagers want workplaces to be open to teaching them and to offer them help and explanations for how things are done, as well as ‘how to handle things that come up’. They want to be able to feel comfortable asking questions and seeking help when they need it. This means working with managers and co-workers who are approachable and willing to answer questions and show support for young workers who are learning and therefore more likely to make some mistakes.

In addition to formal training, opportunities for informal learning are also important to young workers. Young workers recognise that while they are learning they may make ‘mistakes’

and therefore need co-workers and managers to be patient and forgiving. Their responses emphasise the need to allow young people room to make ‘mistakes’ and not be criticised or judged when they do. They want employers to be empathetic towards young people, and to provide constructive feedback rather than respond to mistakes with punishment, anger, or yelling. Importantly, as a background to a good learning environment, they want to be given clear roles and instructions, where ‘they know and understand what is happening and what is expected of them’.

In addition to support for those who have a job, young people want more practical guidance and information on how to find work, how to apply for jobs, and how to become ‘ready for work’ too. They highlighted the importance of website resources for this, as well as learning through school lessons and the curriculum, as well as through practical work experience opportunities.

- “ A safe environment with adequate preparation for the job (not being thrown into it with no introduction).” (15, female, Eastern Adelaide)
- “ Not being too hard on them since they are just getting used to it. Making it a bit fun and helping them out. Or if they have a question to not get mad at them.” (15, female, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island)
- “ Somewhere you can feel safe, and comfortable. A forgiving place that accepts the fact that everyone is learning, especially teenagers.” (14, female, Adelaide Hills)
- “ Try not to get too angry. Be understanding, encourage them. Don’t yell if they make mistakes.” (15, female, Eyre and Western)

- “ Make sure their young employees have someone to help mentor and give direction when first starting.” (15, female, Yorke and Mid North)
- “ Try your best to explain everything because sometimes they are scared to ask a question.” (14, female, Adelaide Hills)

Supportive and professional management

Employers who help set the tone for a welcoming and friendly environment are instrumental in creating workplaces where young people want to work. Young people want workplaces where all workers are encouraged and supported in their work, and where learning opportunities are made available to all.

Ultimately, young workers want an employer or boss who is understanding and kind, but who is also a strong manager; someone who is both responsible and professional. This was described variously as ‘kind but tough,’ ‘patient but professional,’ and ‘fun but firm’. The relationship between teenagers and their boss or managers can be crucial to shaping their early work experiences.

They describe a good boss as someone who is understanding and supportive, providing them with ‘clear instructions and leadership’. They also want employers to be kind and approachable if they have questions or problems, and respectful and supportive of them in their new roles. Praise and encouragement were also viewed as being important to young workers. Teenagers want to know when they are doing a good job, and for this to be recognised and acknowledged.

Employers need to be open to working with teenagers and be prepared to show or advertise clearly that they are a teenager friendly workplace where young people’s needs and situations are being actively taken into account.

Teenagers want employers to understand that they are often balancing paid work with study and other commitments. As such, it is important for young people to be able to say when they are available or unavailable for shifts, to have flexible rosters, and to be given reasonable notice of a change in shifts. This includes not being expected to work too many late hours. They want employers to be mindful that shifts should not ‘compromise our sleep or homework time’ and that they may need to decrease their work hours around exam time.



- “ I would like to work for a business that is accepting of everyone and is understanding of my commitment to my education. I would like to work at a place that will give me experience in customer service and understand that I may struggle/make mistakes sometimes.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)
- “ Respect our boundaries such as work hours and mental well-being. Realise that most of us are still in school so we can't be overworked, or we won't perform well in either situation.” (16, Trans Masculine, Northern Adelaide)
- “ Properly instruct and demonstrate what they're supposed to be doing and make it clear that questions can be asked and issues can be brought up. Be accommodating/ understanding of someone's individual limits/ boundaries. Step in if a customer, or otherwise is potentially making them stressed. Create an open and safe space for all employees.” (16, prefer not to say, Adelaide Hills)
- “ Give employees credit for good work. Make the job a good place to be.” (15, female, Murray and Mallee)
- “ Advertise that they are willing to work with high school students.” (15, female, Eastern Adelaide)
- “ Co-workers who are 'good workers' and 'are willing to work' [with] you when you make a mistake.” (14, male, Western Adelaide)

Friendly team environment

Working with friendly co-workers in a positive team environment is important to young people's work lives as it is these experiences that reinforce their sense of safety and enjoyment. They want workplaces where they can comfortably interact with others in supportive ways.

For many teenagers, working alongside other young people, and not being the only young person in the workplace, is also important. Some young workers thought that workplaces with more young employees were more likely to be understanding and supportive of young people overall. Others enjoy mixed age workplaces and value the support of senior co-workers.

Many teenagers want to be part of a 'community of workers' in a 'collaborative environment'. They consider clear and open communication between co-workers as key to a workplace culture that has been built on trust and teamwork.

- “ A safe environment where your peers feel like a family away from home. Trust amongst all and use of constructive criticism.” (17, female, Adelaide Hills)
- “ A workplace that has clear and consistent online and in person communication between all workers.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)
- “ Feeling safe and comfortable in your working environment and having trust in bosses/other workers that you can communicate and learn with.” (17, female, Eyre and Western)
- “ Somewhere that is openly supportive of younger people, hiring many young people.” (17, female, Western Adelaide)
- “ Employ a diverse group where possible age-wise, meaning a young worker isn't the only young employee, but also there's enough experienced employees to help them out.” (16, male, Eastern Adelaide)

Conclusion

Teenagers want workplaces which understand and value young people. They want to be supported to learn new skills and gain knowledge that will help them throughout their working lives. They also want to be able to make ‘mistakes’ as part of this process. They view good workplaces as those that are welcoming and encouraging, physically and emotionally safe, with supportive and professional management, friendly co-workers, and which offer fair and flexible work conditions. These are things that workers of all ages are entitled to experience in their workplaces and should not be any different for the youngest members of South Australia’s workforce.

This report seeks to provide a greater understanding of the impact workplace cultures and practices have on teenagers in the workforce. It highlights the importance young people place on obtaining paid work when they are teenagers, with attention given to their current experiences, as well as to how these experiences may impact on the kind of paid work they will seek in the future.

As expected, teenagers are often found working in food and hospitality, fast food, supermarket, and retail or sales. They form an important part of the workforce, doing jobs aimed at meeting the needs of everyday South Australians.

Teenagers are also working in a wide range of jobs that can often be overlooked. These are jobs that include working in the family business, or in their own business, informal types of work, or occasional work. These employment types, where it is harder to monitor if their work conditions are fair, need to be considered as part of the overall experience of work for many teenagers.

While several young people reported enjoying their jobs, many mentioned challenging or negative experiences that they had encountered. This included the difficulties they have balancing paid work with school, study and other commitments, and how these are not always considered or taken seriously by their employers.

Young people have asked for more guidance and resources to increase their confidence in preparing for work and applying for jobs. They see opportunities for these skills to be taught more consistently while they are at school, and alongside more practical guidance about what to expect from employers and workplaces, including where they can seek support if it is needed.

If teenagers have worries about work, they are more likely to talk to their family or friends outside of work than to people at work. Bosses need to be more approachable if they want young people to come to them with their concerns.

Young people see their managers as those who are best placed to take action on a workplace issue, particularly when it relates to work conditions.

Young people had mixed responses to unions, indicating that they felt some unions needed to engage more proactively with teenagers, and be more approachable and accessible. Young people need to be taught which unions represent them, and how to contact them. They also need to know about the range of supports available to them, as well as how to access them.

The findings explored in this report have implications for schools, families, employers, and workplaces.

If we are to encourage more teenagers into the workforce we need to create the legal frameworks as well as the youth friendly environments they seek to ensure they know what they are entitled to and are supported and protected while at work.

Experiences working as teenagers will shape how young people approach work in the future, not just in terms of the jobs they choose, but also in terms of the relationships they will have with co-workers, supervisors and customers. It is important their particular needs are considered, and that employers who are interested to create teenage friendly workplaces be prepared to adjust their operations and conditions to better suit these needs. If they are to enjoy the benefits that employing young workers brings with it, they will need to demonstrate their desire to be flexible and adaptable, respectful and fair, ensuring that entitlements and conditions are upheld and that young workers are given the guidance and time they need to learn what is required of them with the right levels of support and understanding.

This report sets out the ways in which young people would like to see workplaces change. It is now up to businesses and employers to enact the recommendations it contains, which have come direct from young people themselves.

Endnotes

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- 8 Return to Work SA, *Young workers*, n.d., accessed 15 December 2023, <https://www.rtwsa.com/insurance/injury-prevention/young-workers>.
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- 11 Clarkson et al., 'Young, vulnerable and uncertain'.
- 12 McDonald et al., 'Knowledge is not power, but it's a start'.

