




# **Have Your Say Day - 2025 Report**

Voices of young people on the Northern Beaches



northern  
beaches  
council



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Northern Beaches and their Country. By these words we show our respect to all Aboriginal people. We acknowledge Elders past, present and emerging and the spirits and ancestors of the Clans that lived in this area.

## Contents

---

Introduction	4
Survey results	5
Demographics	6
What matters to young people	9
Top issues by age	10
Top issues by gender	14
Top issues by priority population	22
What young people are saying	30
Where young people get information	32
Presentation transcripts	34

---

## Introduction

Have Your Say Day is a youth-led initiative providing an annual platform for young people across the Northern Beaches to share their voice on matters important to them.

Now in its fourth year, Have Your Say Day includes conducting a survey to young people aged 12 to 24, with the results culminating in a presentation night given by school leaders open to the whole community and inviting all local, state, and federal elected representatives and decision makers.

Have Your Say Day is coordinated by students from high schools across the Northern Beaches, known as the Beaches Leadership Team, with the support of Northern Beaches Council and its Youth Advisory Group (YAG).

The following report provides a summary of the survey findings for 2025, together with transcripts from the 8 presentations shared on the presentation night to a full auditorium which included representation from all tiers of government, held at Northern Beaches Secondary College Freshwater Senior Campus on Wednesday 21 May 2025.

This report is available on Council's website and shared with local schools, youth services, community, and elected representatives to inform policy and strategic decision making relevant to young people.



## Survey results

To identify and raise the collective voices of young people, a survey was distributed to young people aged 12 to 24 across the Northern Beaches to identify their key concerns and to help inform the topics on which students present on the night.

The questions encouraged respondents to identify the top 3 issues that impact them as a young person on the Northern Beaches and to comment on why these are the most important issues.

The survey was open from 6 March to 27 April, and received 2120 responses from young people who live, work or study on the Northern Beaches.

This was a huge result, reflecting a 250% increase in responses compared with 2024, which received 606 responses. This reflects both the hard work of the young people involved, and the continued growth of this important program in raising the voices of young people.

In the weeks following this year's event, several MPs have used and referenced insights shared from the survey and student presentations in various parliamentary settings to influence decision making.

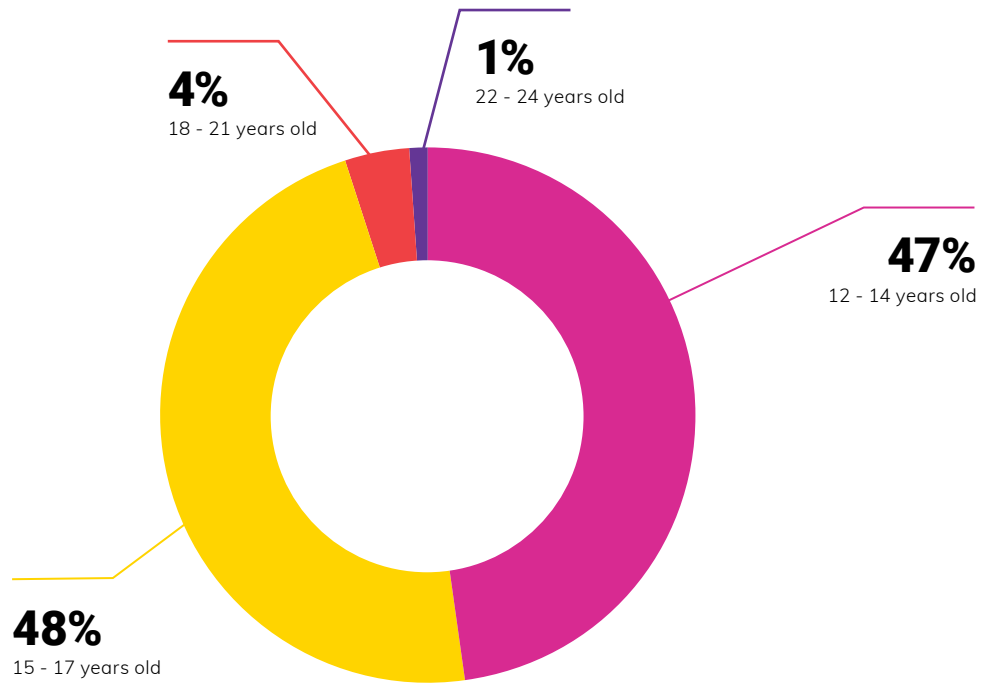


## Demographics

Based on 2120 responses from young people across the Northern Beaches

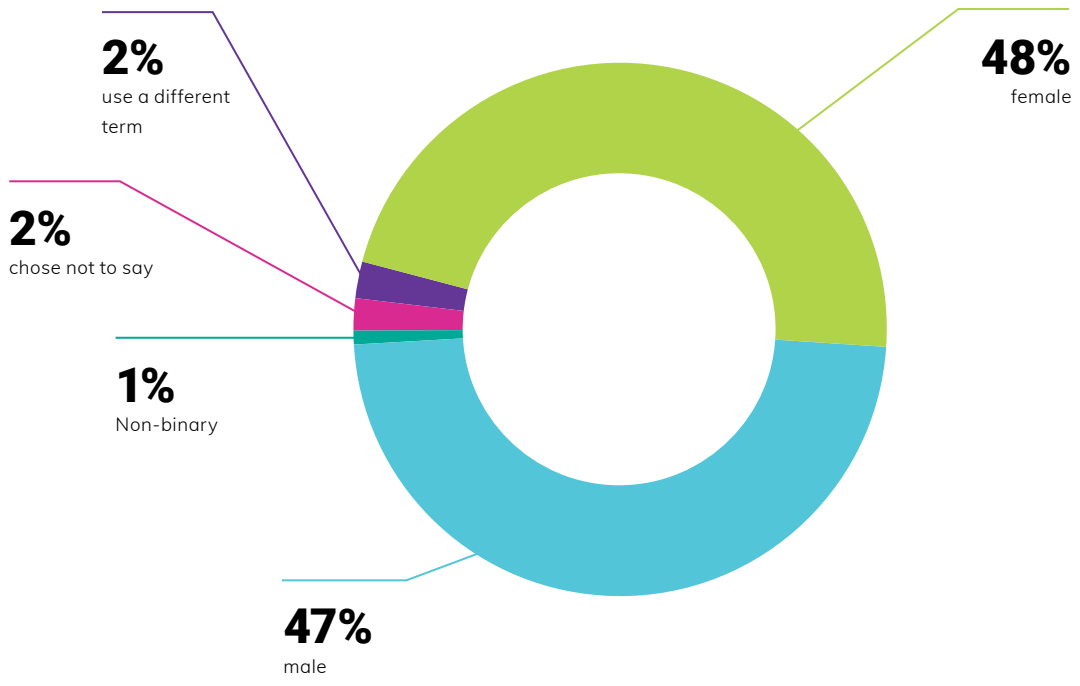
How old are you?

---



What gender do you identify with?

---



## Education and employment

---

### Education

**1871**

attend a local high school

**52**

attend a university or TAFE

---

### Employment

**12**

in full-time employment

**131**

in part-time employment

**468**

in casual employment

**7**

in a traineeship or apprenticeship

---

### Other

**47**

attend a day program

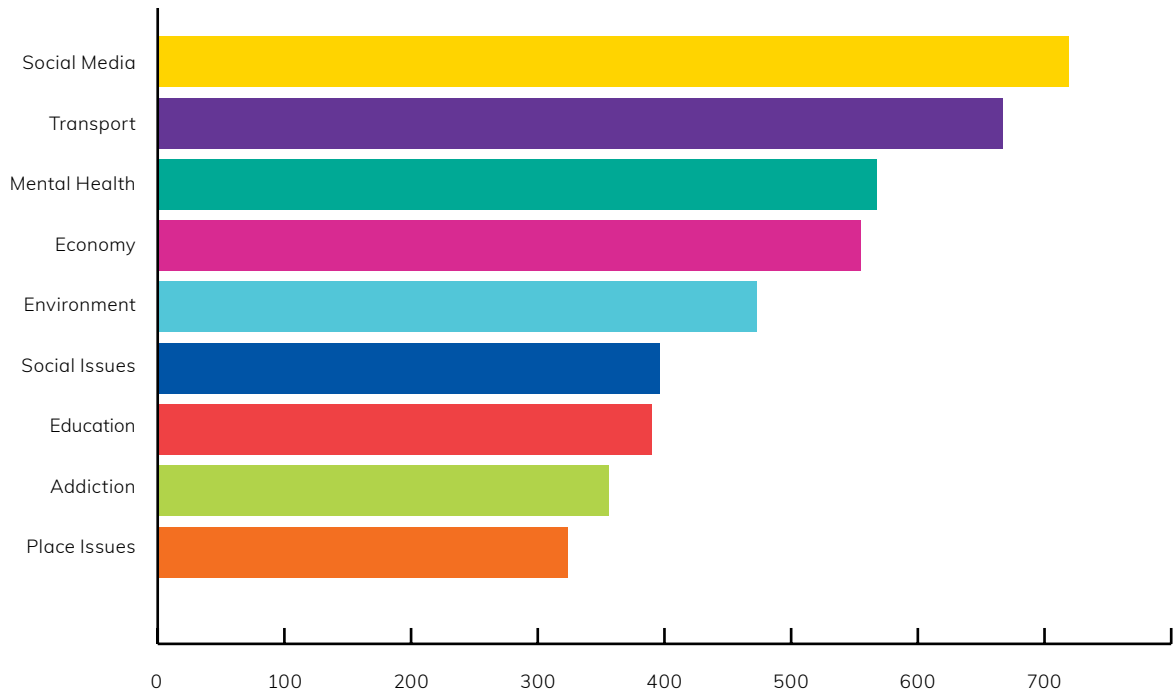
**15**

attend a skills program

---

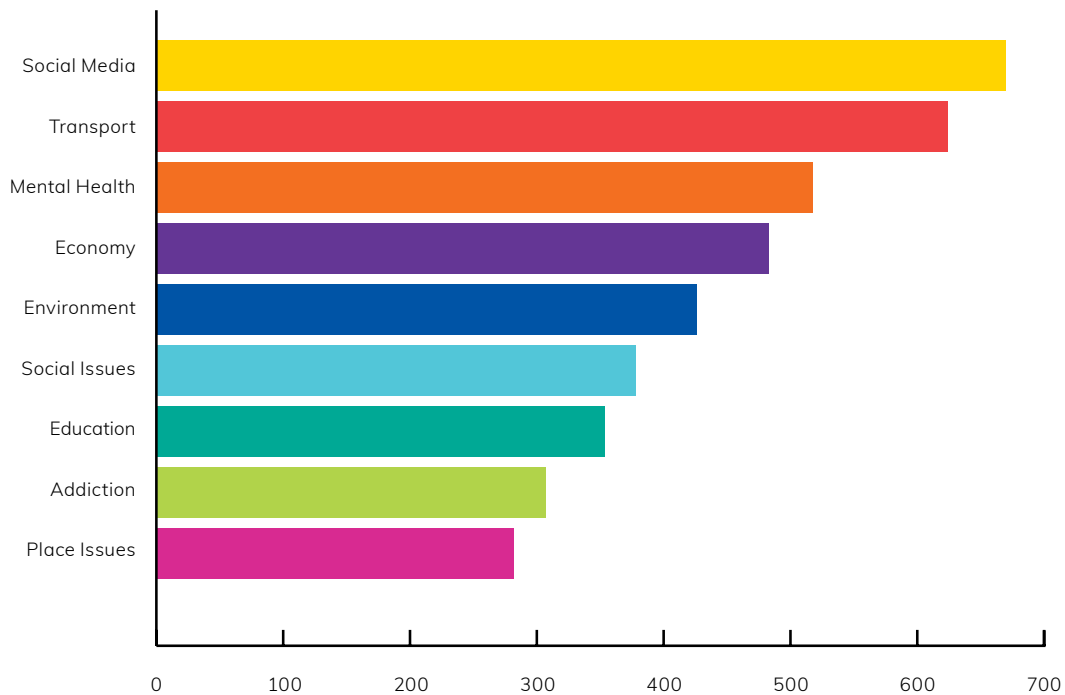
The top 10 issues selected by respondents were:

---



## Top issues by age

Young people aged 12 - 17 (1822 responses)



### Social Media

**670 young people aged 12 - 17 (36.8%) listed social media as a key concern**

**82** referred to the addictive nature of social media and its impact on time management and self esteem

**“Time off from my phone has helped a lot to not be under the influence of social media and by surrounding myself with the good people in my life who make me feel important, wanted and loved.”**

**21** stated social media exposed them to negative and harmful content including bullying and/or racism

**“I actually personally believe that the social media ban is a good idea.”**

**“Social media has had a really negative impact on a lot of aspects of my life.”**

## Transport

---

**624 young people aged 12 - 17 (34.2%) listed transport as a key concern**

**146** mentioned the poor timing of services or service cancellations

**“To make this situation better there could be more bus drivers. Better working conditions for bus drivers could encourage more people to become bus drivers.”**

**119** commented that there are currently not enough services to meet demand

**“Add more school buses per route.”**

**“Buses don’t come and when they do, they are late or full.”**

**“Public transport (especially on the Northern Beaches and in my area) has become sparse and unpredictable.”**

**“Transport has been really busy at the moment, and I feel like there aren’t enough vehicles going around to provide for the public.”**

---

## Mental Health

---

**518 young people aged 12 - 17 (28.4%) listed mental health as a key concern**

**47** mentioned they are negatively impacted by anxiety, depression or stress

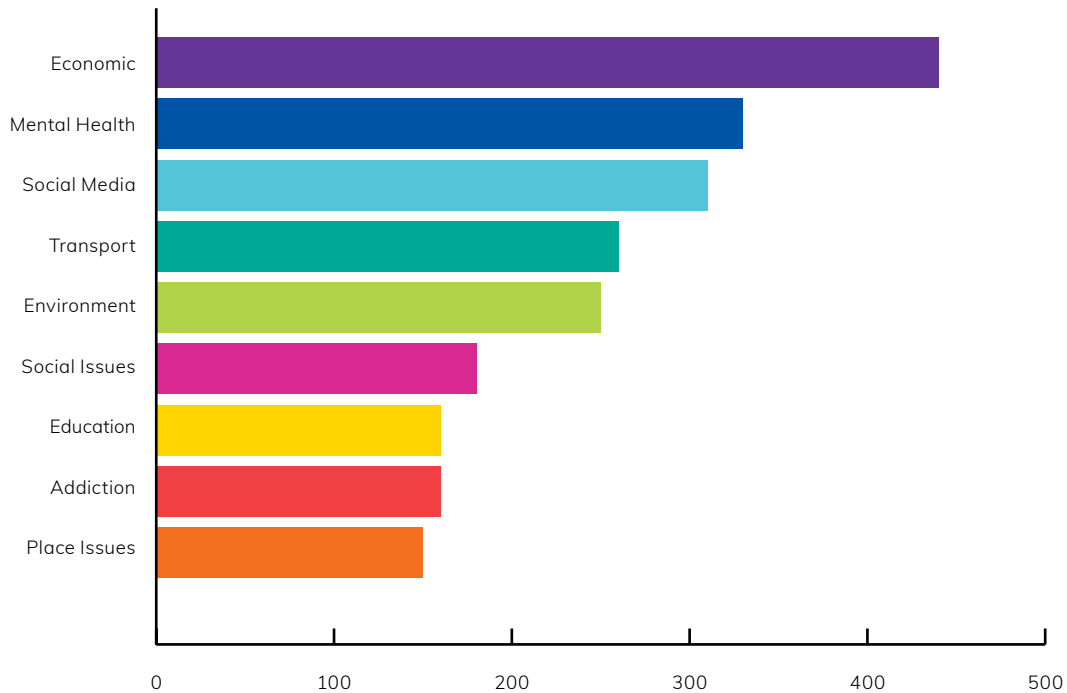
**“Anxiety makes me nervous to try new things. Depression makes me really sad and not want to do anything, go anywhere or give effort into the things I do.”**

**26** commented that public awareness of mental health could be improved

**“I see so many of my friends struggling with mental health to the point of anxiety and depression being normalised.”**

**“There needs to be mental health education for parents or anyone involved with young people to stop stigma.”**

### Young people aged 18 - 24 (88 responses)



Note: this section contains fewer than 100 responses. Use data with caution.

### Economy

**44 young people aged 18 - 24 (50%) listed the economy as a key concern**

**4** commented on the cost and availability of housing

**“Genuine low-cost housing or renting schemes that can be accessed by young people who have gained employment and are dedicated and working towards financial goals.”**

**“The economic housing problem may mean that there are more homeless people because of lack of income to afford appropriate housing.”**

**7** mentioned the cost-of-living crisis

**“Cost of living has a large impact on my life as prices for everything have increased by a lot.”**

## Mental Health

---

**33 young people aged 18 - 24 (8%) listed mental health as a key concern**

2 mentioned they are negatively impacted by anxiety, depression or stress

**“I feel as though we raise so much awareness nowadays in schools about mental health, and yet it’s always one step behind. I get it’s a difficult topic, it’s just that we are constantly told the same simple wellness techniques year after year - we hardly cover issues students are presently experiencing in schools.”**

5 commented that public awareness of mental health could be improved

**“There seriously needs to be better mental health awareness in schools. More say from students via anonymous, non-judgmental surveys, offering options to improve mental health lessons or awareness within schools would take the ease off being perceived weirdly. Mental health is not quirky, noir fun.”**

---

## Social Media

---

**31 young people aged 18 - 24 (35.2%) listed social media as a key concern.**

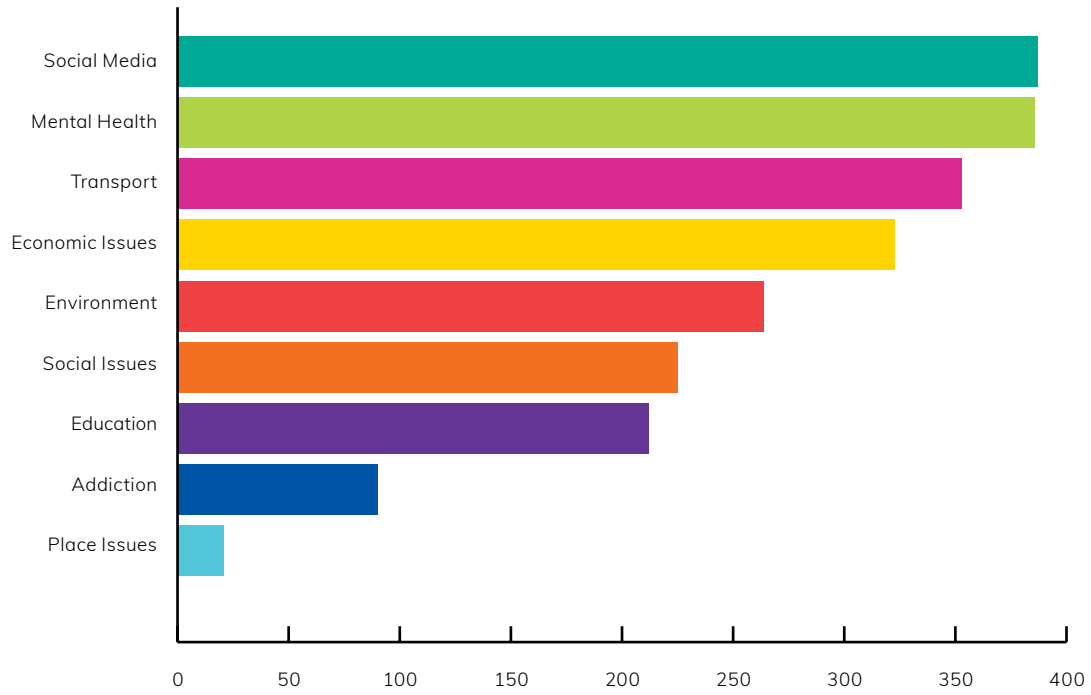
4 mentioned the addictive nature of social media and indicated it caused them to waste too much time.

**“Social media affects me because I’m compelled to check it every day and things that I wish didn’t come up on my feed do, and it makes me sad sometimes!”**

**“Social media changes how much time is spent studying and how people interact.”**

## Top issues by gender

Young people who identified as female (992 responses)



## Social Media

---

**387 young people (39.0%) listed social media as a key concern**

**22** referred to the addictive nature of social media and indicated it caused them to waste too much time.

**“Older people can be so critical of younger generations for being on their phone, but the problem is that our system has meant that we are actually more dependent on it. I think there needs to be more awareness on how younger people feel about technology, because for me personally I feel as if there is no other way to communicate with my friends because we’ve kind of been conditioned to use our phones to communicate.”**

**13** mentioned social media exposed them to harmful content including bullying and/or racism

**“Social media impacts my self-esteem greatly and also is a distraction.”**

---

## Mental Health

---

**386 young people (38.9%) listed mental health as a key concern**

**29** commented they are negatively impacted by anxiety, depression or stress

**“I hope people with mental disorders can speak out comfortably without the public discriminating against them or calling them overly sensitive or dramatic.”**

**“Having more accessible support for struggling kids, as well as teaching the impact of bullying, and not in a sugar-coated way, or dumbing it down.”**

23 commented that public awareness of mental health could be improved

**“Make seeing psychologists easier, medication cheaper and Medicare better.”**

**“Mental health affects everyone, and many people are too scared to reach out for help due to the toxic and negative nature society has created around the idea.”**

**“Finding safe, supportive spaces, both online and in real life, is important for feeling accepted and understood. Mental health issues, like stress, anxiety, and depression are real and need attention. It’s important to talk openly about mental health, reduce stigma, and get support when needed.”**

**“Learn more about mental health and have more open conversations about mental health in school.”**

---

## Economy

---

323 young people (32.6%) listed the economy as a key concern

7 commented on the cost and availability of housing

**“Knowing that in the future I may need to afford a house and food etc., which apparently won’t be possible until we are 40.”**

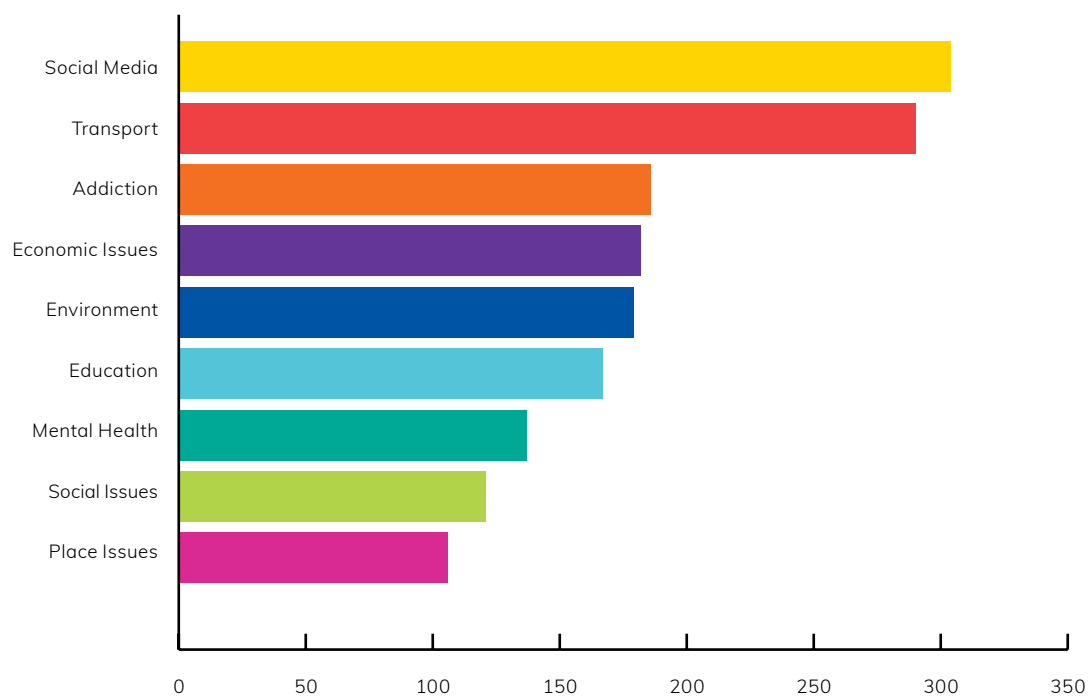
49 referred to the cost-of-living crisis

**“Programs on how to deal with these issues, especially economic and advice for young people in entering the ‘real world’ could be incredibly beneficial.”**

**“I want to be able to live where I’ve lived my whole life but in the future it will be wildly expensive and I’m not sure I’d make enough money to be able to do it.”**

### Young people who identified as male (859 responses)

---



## Social Media

---

**304 young people (35.4%) listed social media as a key concern**

**63** mentioned the addictive nature of social media and indicated it caused them to waste too much time

**“In schools, restrict device use more.”**

**“Spend my time more wisely and make better productive habits than wasting my time on technology.”**

**8** mentioned social media exposed them to negative and harmful content including bullying and/or racism

**“Try to lower cyber bullying.”**

**“The pressures and negativity from social media, along with various social and personal struggles, have made it difficult to cope.”**

---

## Transport

---

**290 young people (33.8%) listed transport as a key concern**

**62** mentioned the poor timing of services or service cancellations

**“Public buses are often cancelled or delayed, making some students who live further away spend an extra hour or so on public transport and limiting time available for leisure and study.”**

**“I can’t get to school on time some days when the bus is late or cancelled.”**

## Economy

---

**192 young people (22.4%) listed the economy as a key concern**

**10** commented on the cost and availability of housing

**“I am worried about my future opportunities including buying a house.”**

**“It feels like I won’t be able to ever have a house when I’m older.”**

**35** referred to the cost-of-living crisis

**“The cost of living is increasing, making purchasing important items difficult.”**

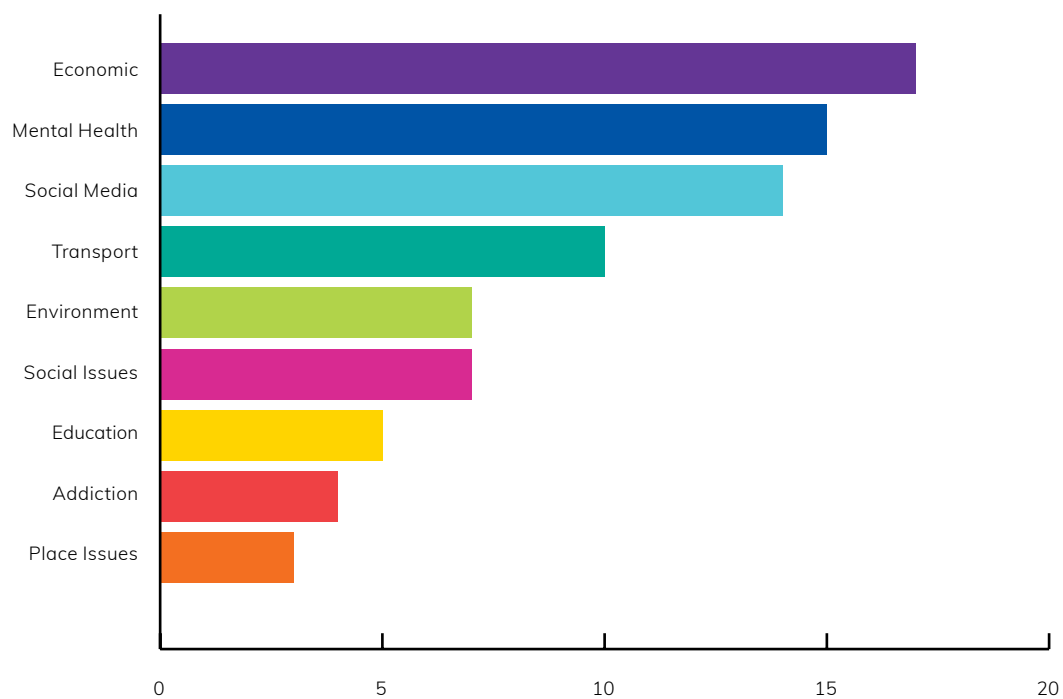
**“Cost of living pressures are compounded by the strain HECS and the housing crisis place on young people.”**

**“What is my place in the world around me and when I graduate? What will I become?”**

---



### Young people who identified outside the gender binary (29 responses)



Note: this section contains fewer than 100 responses. Use data with caution.



## Mental Health

---

**17 young people (58.6%) listed mental health as a key concern**

2 commented they are negatively impacted by anxiety, depression or stress

**“People don’t use my pronouns or understand my identity. I experience a lot of anxiety about that and about how people may perceive me socially. Also, the growing issues of climate change and global warming makes me feel hopeless.”**

3 commented that public awareness of mental health could be improved

**“I just really wish my identity wasn’t politicised.”**

**“A larger youth understanding of gender diverse people. I don’t want to have to explain myself or be embarrassed about my identity. I just want it to be normal.”**

**“I think there should be better accessibility for discussion of LGBTQIA topics and outreach for understanding of systemic issues of transphobia and homophobia in the public school system. I am lucky I go to a school where it is a minor inconvenience, but for most it is a threat to their existence. I think more must be done to constructively combat this issue so that our community isn’t marginalised.”**

---

**15 young people (51.7%) listed social issues as a key concern**

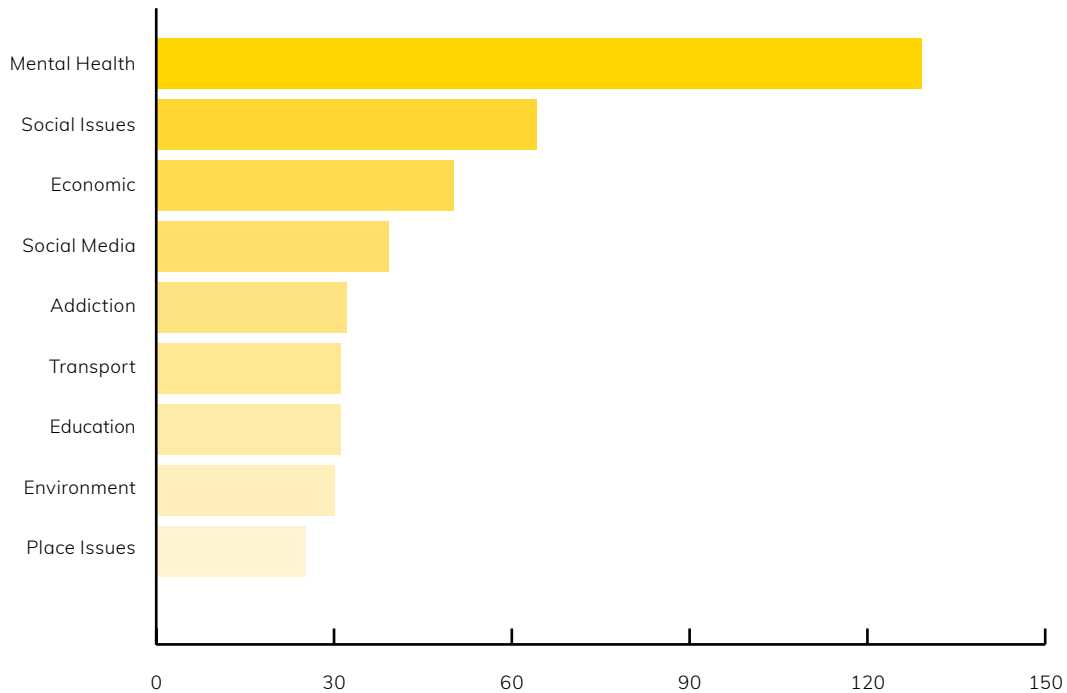
---

**14 young people (48.3%) listed addiction as a key concern**

---

## 22 Top issues by priority population

Young people who identified as living with mental illness (159 responses)



### Mental Health

**129 young people (81.1%) listed mental health as a key concern**

6 stated that their mental health had a negative impact on their life more broadly, particularly on their education

**“Mental health is a major factor for my education experience, as the quality of my work at school depends on if I’m doing well and have a clear head. Social issues are self-explanatory - bullying can affect anyone and everyone.”**

**“Casual homophobia is so extremely common in social situations, I receive back-handed compliments or just insults about my sexuality.”**

## Social Issues

---

**64 young people (40.3%) listed social issues as a key concern**

**8 commented on the impact of bullying**

**“Bullying is still far too common on the Northern Beaches for all demographics. More awareness has to be raised about this, and action must be taken to prevent it.”**

---

## Economy

---

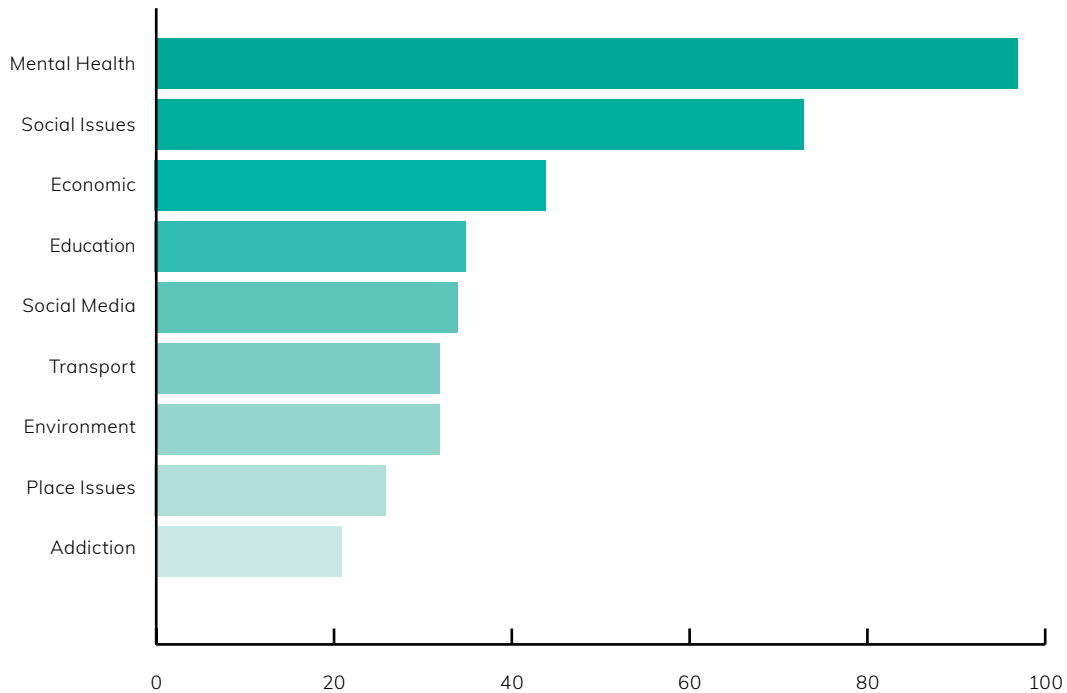
**50 young people (31.4%) listed the economy as a key concern**

**2 commented on the cost and availability of housing**

**“The economy right now is going to prevent me from ever being able to raise a family and buy a house here where I have grown up.”**

---

Young people who identified as belonging to the LGBTQ+ community (147 responses)



Mental Health

97 young people (66%) listed mental health as a key concern

9 mentioned they are negatively impacted by anxiety, depression or stress

**“I feel almost alienated from society. I find it hard to maintain friendships and I overthink it a lot. I just don’t know what it feels like to have that kind of best friend.”**

**“These issues affect me by putting me down with homophobia from people around me and it affects my mental wellbeing.”**

**“I don’t feel safe enough to come out and I have a lot of anxiety and depression from that.”**

## Social Issues

---

**73 young people (49.7%) listed social issues as a key concern**

**5 mentioned their experiences of homophobia**

**“Casual homophobia is so extremely common in social situations, I receive back-handed compliments or just insults about my sexuality. Anytime I mention my sexuality people act shocked.”**

---

## Economy

---

**44 young people (29.9%) listed the economy as a key concern**

**9 mentioned the cost-of-living crisis**

**“For economic issues, going out or purchasing food around school has become significantly more expensive, and makes it more difficult to enjoy myself with friends.”**

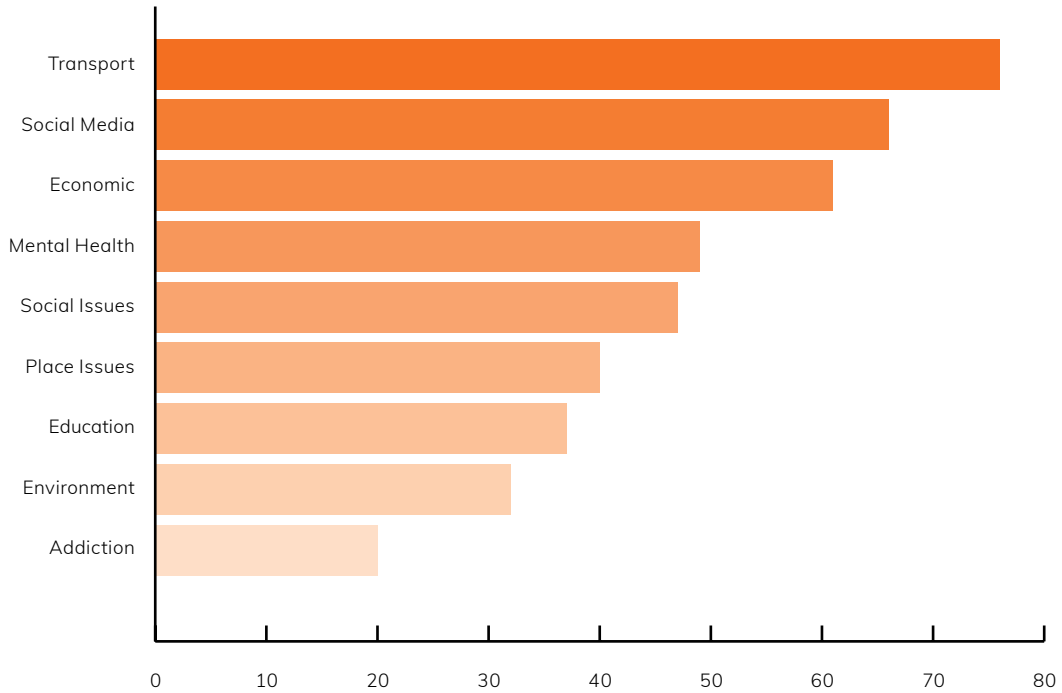
**“I’m wondering if I’m going to be able to get a job to afford living in the future.”**

---

---

**Young people who identified as being culturally or linguistically diverse (174 responses)**

---

**Transport**

---

**76 young people (43.7%) listed transport as a key concern**

**22 mentioned the poor timing of services or service cancellations**

**“My bus is always cancelled forcing me to either walk or take a later bus that makes me late to school.”**

---

## Social Media

---

**66 young people (37.9%) listed social media as a key concern**

**6** mentioned the negative impact of social media on the development of young people

**“Social media concerns me. On the way home from school even little kids all have their phones out, growing up faster than they need to and not spending quality time with others.”**

**“I feel that social media has really deep-rooted problems for young people e.g. self-image, phone addiction, etc.”**

---

## Economy

---

**61 young people (35.1%) listed the economy as a key concern**

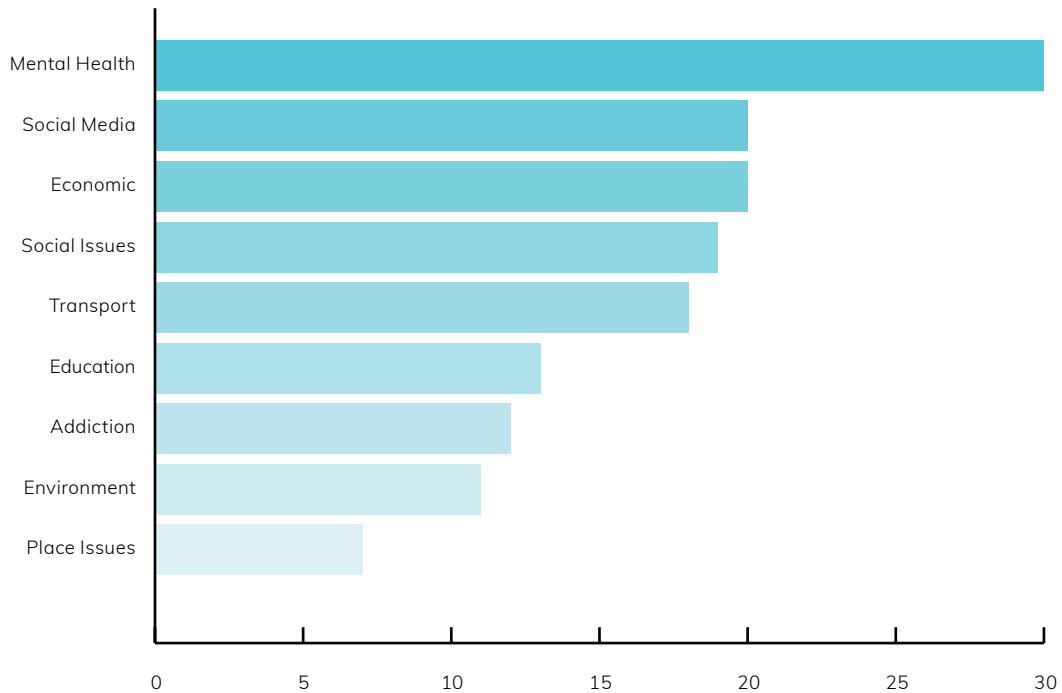
**3** mentioned the cost-of-living crisis

**“The economic future isn’t looking too good. I probably can’t afford my own place.”**

**“I am worried about my future opportunities - including buying a house.”**

**“My future could be, and probably is jeopardised due to factors outside of my control.”**

### Young people who identified as living with disability (62 responses)



Note: this section contains fewer than 100 responses. Use data with caution.

### Mental Health

**30 young people (48.4%) listed mental health as a key concern**

**2** commented on the impact of negative mental health on other diagnosed disorders

**“The economic future isn’t looking too good. I probably can’t afford my own place.”**

**“I suffer from anxiety and ADD which can affect my schooling and mental health.”**

## Social Media

---

**20 young people (32.3%) listed social media as a key concern**

**5** mentioned the negative impact of social media on the development of young people

**“Social media has impacted me in so many ways e.g. when I am scrolling on social media and something pops up, I want to do it. You can get really addicted and I can’t get out of it.”**

**“I am online on socials a lot, therefore it can cause some self-esteem problems.”**

---

## Economy

---

**20 young people (32.3%) listed the economy as a key concern**

**2** commented on the cost and availability of housing

**“Cost of living freaks me out, the increase in prices and decreasing likelihood of being able to afford living in the city I grew up in is terrifying.”**

**“Economic issues are very bad. The cost of living going up is bad because when I am an adult, I might be homeless.”**

## What young people are saying

Other identified issues

### Environment

---

“I worry about fossil fuel developments and relaxed tax policies in the industry.”

“Environmental issues just make me upset knowing that the problem is only getting worse.”

“I always feel extremely worried about my future with the problems of climate change.”

“Climate change makes me very sad because I want people to not live in a polluted world.”

“I worry about the future of the planet for not only my own well-being but also my children and their children and so on.”

---

### Place Issues

---

“It feels unsafe being alone anywhere past 7pm.”

“As a female I am always feeling like I am scared to walk around by myself when its nighttime.”

“There are less places for young people to hang out as opposed to how it was when our parents were young.”

## Education

---

**“I feel like sometimes the teachers are badly resourced and don’t have enough resources to teach effectively.”**

**“Everyone deserves quality education and facilities.”**

**“Adapt the education system to understand kids growing mental health and how they need to take things slow to fully grow up without being so stressed and overwhelmed.”**

**“Teacher shortages are very harmful to students in grade 12. If there are not enough quality qualified teachers, it greatly impacts learning.”**

**“For many classes last year, I didn’t have stable teachers.”**

---

## Addiction

---

**“They affect my day-to-day life because phones take away a lot of valuable time I otherwise could’ve spent on useful things.”**

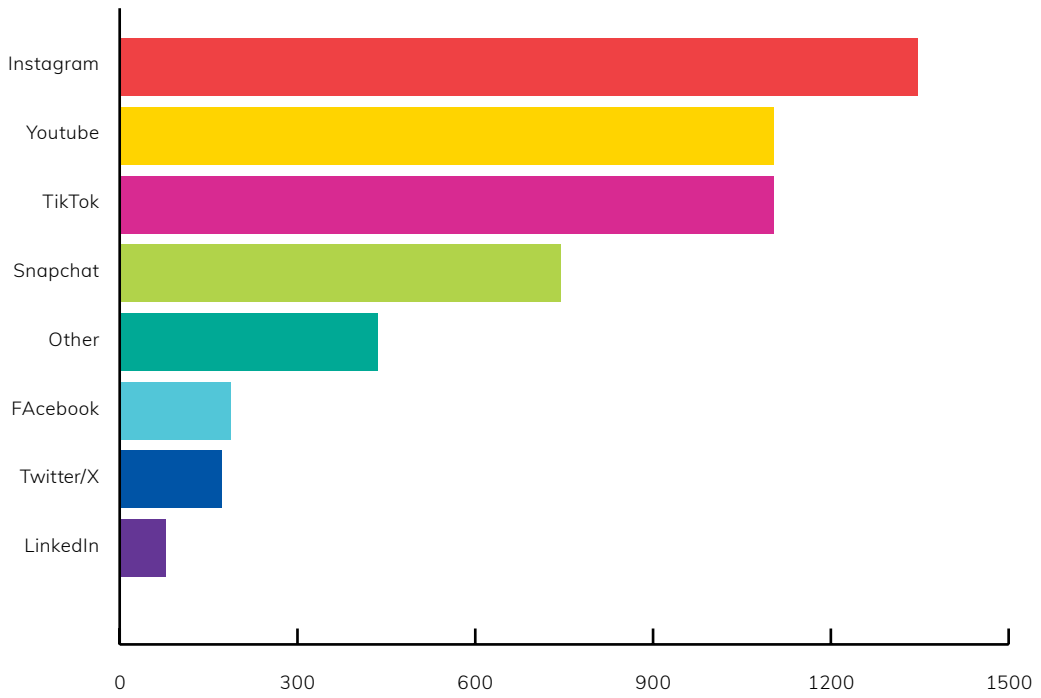
**“Social media just makes you doom scroll and It’s perfectly tailored by psychologists to make you use the app as long as possible.”**

**“It’s hard to stop playing video games and I lose track of time.”**

## Where do young people get their information online?

Based on 2120 responses from young people across the Northern Beaches

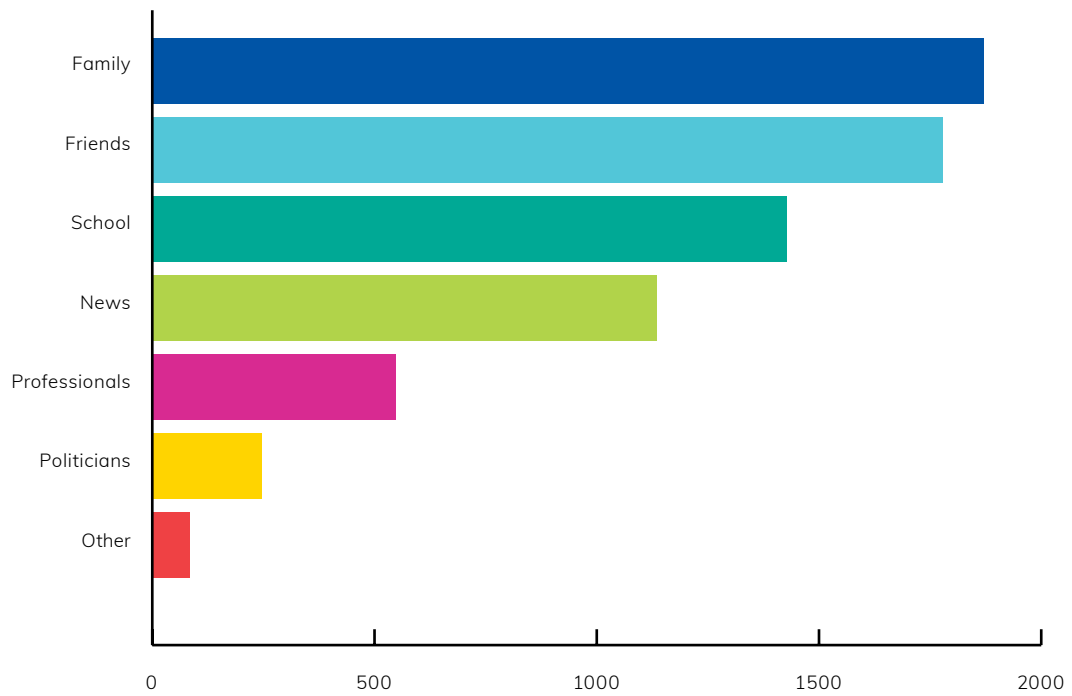
---



## Where else do young people get their information online?

Based on 2120 responses from young people across the Northern Beaches

---



# **Presentation transcripts**



## Harmful Online Content

Seb and Sophie – Northern Beaches Secondary College Freshwater Senior Campus  
Aarohi – Northern Beaches Secondary College Manly Selective Campus

We often speak of childhood as a protected time. It's a time often defined by guidance, nurture and the gradual formation of an identity. For the current and following generations, much of that formation is now outsourced.

Identity, once shaped primarily by family, community and education is increasingly facilitated by our digital environments. These spaces conjure emotional connection as currency and vulnerability is recorded as content. In such a system, the self is not nurtured but rather inflicted with strangers simulating friendship and validation. What emerges is a generation of young people conditioned into comparison, performativity and an addiction to being perceived.

When we give smartphones to children before giving them emotional language, before they can name shame, or regulate power and understand rejection, we aren't empowering them, we are exposing them. And like millions, I've ticked the 'I agree' to the app's terms and conditions without a second thought. But we don't let teenagers sign contracts, consent to surgery, or be held legally accountable for complex decisions because their brains are still developing. So why do we let them consent to an app designed to create a cycle of dopamine dependence?

We don't talk about the specifics, because explicitly addressing them makes them harder to ignore. Harmful online content is not just inappropriate language or excessive use. It is the algorithmic promotion of disordered content under the guise of fitness, or wellness content. It is the romanticisation of self-harm under anonymous forums. It is the violent livestreams, misogynistic influencers, deep fake videos, and conspiracy driven misinformation that will reach impressionable minds faster than verified educational material.

This isn't accidental. It's structural. These platforms are designed to amplify content that provokes, unsettles or outrages, because that's what maximises engagement. All at the expense of young minds susceptible to influence, in the pursuit of their identity, belonging and self-worth.

As one respondent noted, it "makes quite a large impression on what people think and do." And yet, this impression is largely ungoverned. We can't keep framing this as a question of parental control when the architecture of these platforms is deliberately built to override it. If this content is engineered, then so too must be our response. Treat harmful online content for what it is, a public health issue.

Harmful content is not just seen. It is learned. A generation of young girls now equate appearance with self-worth, creating, as many respondents suggested, "unrealistic expectations." It conditions young boys to equate masculinity with dominance. And it teaches all of us that rage, manipulation and humiliation are forms of power.

We regulate who can teach, who can counsel, who can advertise to children. Why not who can influence? In an age where young people get more health advice from influencers than doctors, it's time we treat digital influence as a position of power. Influencer licensing would mean that creators with large youth audiences undergo basic training in media ethics, mental health literacy and misinformation awareness. If influence is a career, then responsibility must be a requirement, not an afterthought.

However, we, as Northern Beaches Youth, are currently facing a space where influencers are not yet held to this standard. So, for now, our solutions will require our own agency to effectively combat our exposure to harmful online content.

One responder said they had found it effective to “restrict phone use more” during school time, as to mitigate the timespan possible where distressing content may be viewed and participate in a healthy classroom environment that invites feelings of safety and security.

Another said that their participation into “football and soccer” was beneficial in personally solving this issue, and with the surplus of physical spaces we have access to like our beaches, sports clubs and numerous leagues, this is an achievable way of limiting our exposure to harmful content and to improve distress if we have already witnessed it.

There were many responders who found that “talking to a parent”, a trusted adult, or anyone possessing the maturity to console and discuss with us our feelings toward content we have seen online was deeply constructive. Such structures are often available in the support systems of our schools, however, as other responders have requested, perhaps having our schools implement support initiatives that specifically try to resolve the distress that comes from witnessing harmful content could bridge the gap between destructive silence and open communication.

The impacts of harmful online content are not imagined; they are persistent and clear. One respondent urged, “social media amplifies problems”. These platforms do not simply reflect the teenage experience but intensify it. It takes confusion, grief, shame and gives it an audience. It takes insecurity and multiplies it. They take what is vulnerable and make it visible. In this context adolescence becomes a stage, not a sanctuary. And yet the platforms profiting from that conditioning remain largely unregulated. We’ve regulated industries that market to children before: tobacco, alcohol,

gambling, because harm demanded action. This is no different. We need enforceable standards. Content moderation that works, age gating that functions and protects rather than exploits. The question can no longer be whether we act, but whether we are willing to accept the cost of inaction.

## From Eco-anxiety to Empowerment

Róisín and Destiny – Stella Maris College

Have you ever watched a movie where you sat tensed up in your seat the entire time? Fists clenched, teeth on edge, seeing the story unfold with almost comically heavy foreshadowing, yet powerless to stop anything?

This is the way that one teenager on the Northern Beaches described how climate change affected her life every day. This is not a singular phenomenon. Across the Northern Beaches, and globally, we are experiencing an epidemic of eco-anxiety.

Eco-anxiety, or climate-anxiety, refers to profound emotional distress caused by the devastating, ongoing impacts of climate change on our environment and future. It is a problem we have found to have a direct and destructive impact on the social, physical and mental wellbeing of young people on the Northern Beaches.

Now of course, we have cause to worry.

Concern for how we treat our environment is vital as a call to action. However, in our hyper connected world, and without any outlet for positive change, worry can all too often become debilitating.

Today's youth are more digitally connected than ever. Through social media and 24/7 news feeds, they face a constant barrage of distressing updates – devastating floods, dying reefs, melting 'doomsday glaciers'. This relentless stream of alarming content fuels a sense of despair, leaving many feeling silenced, powerless and hopeless.

Lacking clear avenues for action, 453 teenagers from the Northern Beaches identified climate change as a primary source of distress in our survey. Many young respondents spoke openly about their emotional distress, describing "hopelessness," "fear," and "anxiety" driven by climate change.

One wrote: "I live under constant stress due to environmental issues. I hate knowing that there is so little I can do to help when this is the future I'm going to grow up in." This is a monumental challenge, but not an insurmountable one. This despair stems from a perceived lack of agency. After all, what is one grain of sand against a tidal wave? The solution is clear; youth-led, community-driven, and above all, action-focused responses.

So, what can we do to help? Recent Yale research led by Prof. Sarah Lowe found that of 300 students, those who participated in collective community actions, such as outreach, advocacy, and peer education, did not experience any depression related symptoms due to climate anxiety, compared with high levels in their peers.

Community-led action groups offer a vital dual benefit; practical, impactful environmental solutions, and safe, inclusive spaces that support youth mental and social health. Many youth respondents expressed feelings of isolation and disconnection in the community, with one proposing "more inclusive, youth-friendly community areas like outdoor hangout spots (and) creative hubs ... allow (us) to feel a sense of belonging." Conversely, isolation only compounds climate anxiety, creating a snowball effect of mental health across the community.

So, what does it look like to make sustainability visible, action-oriented, and woven into youth social life? Let's cast our gaze to the amazing ideas that young people themselves have put forward. Local clean-up groups to protect the natural spaces we turn to for peace - especially Manly and Narrabeen Lagoons. Composting workshops can grow our community gardens into youth-led sustainability hubs, and you'd have to have been living under a rock to miss the 'thrift-flip phenomenon', so what about

mending, upcycling and recycled-textile arts clubs to fight against fast-fashion?

These are not abstract ideas. They are clear, actionable solutions that empower youth to lead change in their communities. Today, we have a vital opportunity. An opportunity to equip young people with the resources, spaces, and support they need to confront both the climate crisis and the growing burden of eco-anxiety. By fostering connection, strengthening mental health, and building community resilience through youth-led, action-driven initiatives, we can shift the climate narrative from one of fear and paralysis to one of collaboration, empowerment, and hope.

## Destigmatisation of Mental Health

Sam and Charlie – St Augustine's College

"Nothing, in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity." (Martin Luther King - 1963)

In the modern landscape, the words of Martin Luther King have never rung truer. The consistent ineptitude of a society towards the mental states of its youth is a path leading to our undoing, prevalently acting as a catalyst in light of serious issues, notably the stigmatisation of mental illness.

Through our 2025 Have Your Say Day youth survey, the dangers of this modern society upon itself have been affirmed. Young people have clearly focalised the Presence of 'stigma' surrounding mental health.

Here are some responses listed in survey answers, italicizing the ignorance present towards psychological struggles:

- 'It's not real'
- 'You're just having a bad day'
- 'Your life is so good, why would you have a problem'

It is through these generic ignorances that we find a younger generation in fear of a complete psychological omission in the contemporary landscape. In effigy, sometimes the topic is overlooked. It is evident, by just scraping the surface of the data collected, the presence of a social stigma.

Out of 560 responses acknowledging the presence of mental health in their lives, 21% were between 12 and 14 years old, and almost 30% between 15 and 17. From these data spreads, it is evident that 50% of children still within primary and secondary education have experienced the stigma of the modern landscape. This is without going into detail about how these stigmas carry into workplace with older generations and become a legitimised part of everyday life.

And the literal response of these children, 'I have to live with it.'

If we are openly accepting the presence of stigma and provoking no demand for a shift in societal demeanour, we may as well openly support these stigmas that are socially denigrating our youth.

I could continue my emphasis to highlight what we have done to our youth, but the purpose of this conference is to instigate positive change. So, where do we go from here?

Education regarding mental health, within recent years has become a mandate in most institutions to attempt to mitigate the presence of stigma, however, as stated in multiple survey responses, "Awareness is not a problem... concerns lie within authority and measures."

If we are capable of enforcing the destigmatisation of these mental health issues by acknowledging the need for change in all generations, we raise the capabilities of our modern society to foster resilience and empathy.

Actioning realistic workshopping of the impacts of stigma on mental illness, for schools and workplace to mandate anti-stigmatisation, would constitute the development of a society where no child feels they must 'live with it'.

## Teacher Inconsistencies and Shortages

Tully and Austen – St Paul's College

Education inconsistencies (teacher's missing numerous lessons and consecutively leaving us to essentially teach ourselves) and teacher shortages leading to substitutes to teach our classes (who do not have the knowledge of content in order to assist us in our learning thereby affecting our education due to lack of consistency and stability of teachers especially in our final year of schooling). Third party spaces, e.g. library and study hubs for youth to gain access to a quieter environment to wider their learning.

Students in the Northern Beaches are being let down by a critical shortage of qualified teachers, leading to disrupted learning and missed opportunities. To fix this, we need immediate support through better study spaces and long-term investment in attracting and retaining passionate educators.

We are facing a crisis – one that's affecting students every single day in the Northern Beaches. Our education system is being stretched to its limits by a severe shortage of qualified teachers, and we, the students, are the ones paying the price. This is not just about missing a lesson here or there, it's about missing opportunities, consistency, and the chance to succeed.

According to a recent NSW Government study, nearly 10,000 lessons each day in public schools are taught without a qualified teacher. That's 10,000 moments where students are left without expert guidance, without proper support, and without the education we deserve. The same study reveals a 42% shortfall in casual teacher availability, and the effects ripple through our classrooms like aftershocks. The result? Scrambled timetables, constant reshuffling, and an unsettling sense of instability.

As year 12 students in the most important year of their schooling, we are being supervised by teachers who often don't even specialise in the subject. As one student put it "I feel that the teachers at school are not specialised in the subjects they teach." This has created a cycle of disconnection, where the shortage of teachers leads to disengaged students, and disengaged students lead to an even greater strain on the system. It's a loop that leaves all of us feeling unseen, unheard, and unsupported.

Another year 12 student shared "I feel like there are not enough teachers. We're constantly having subs every day, despite being told we should have priority over other years." That frustration is not an isolated story. It's echoed in classrooms across the beaches.

In our survey, 177 students named education as their top concern, which speaks volumes. Our generation isn't apathetic. We care. We are desperate to learn, to grow, to succeed. But how can we do that without qualified, passionate educators by our side?

To combat these impacts, we must consider immediate solutions and long-term strategies to create meaningful change. In the short term, one effective approach would be to introduce third-party learning spaces. These could include dedicated senior study areas on school campuses as well as the expansion of school-based sections within public libraries.

This directly responds to student feedback from the recent survey, where one participant stated "At school, there are limited places to study, and when in free periods, there is no room and too much noise in the library, causing students not to study and be distracted."

These 'third spaces' would serve as quiet, purpose-built environments for students who are self-motivated and striving to achieve their academic potential. Not only would this support individual student growth, but it would also help alleviate some of the pressures that arise from overcrowded and under-resourced school environments, a situation made worse by the shortage of available teachers.

However, while such immediate measures offer valuable support, they do not resolve the core issue, the critical shortage and inconsistent presence of qualified teachers, particularly across regions like the Northern Beaches of Sydney. Addressing this long-term challenge requires systemic reform and direct government intervention.

To begin with, there must be a renewed focus on increasing the number of qualified teachers entering and remaining in the profession. This means providing competitive salaries that reflect the importance and difficulty of the role. A more attractive pay structure would not only encourage more university graduates to consider careers in education but also incentivise experienced teachers to remain in the profession rather than seek alternative employment.

Solving the teacher shortage on the Northern Beaches and across the state requires a multifaceted approach. One that combines better learning environments for students with stronger support systems for teachers. Only then can we ensure that every student receives the consistent, high-quality education they deserve.

## Casual Discrimination

Ava and Tanja – Northern Beaches Secondary College Mackellar Girls Campus  
Isaac – Northern Beaches Secondary College Balgowlah Boys Campus

I begin solemnly this evening by asking you to pay attention to our 20 speakers here on stage. 7 of us teenagers have experienced some form of discrimination in the past 12 months. That's one third. Now this is a shocking statistic pulled from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, but as part of Have Your Say Day, our team found that this number was far from the truth. Bullying and discrimination begin as snide comments and evolve into the intentional harming of a person who may be of a certain ethnicity or gender, have a disability or be a part of the LGBTQ community.

Youth on the Northern Beaches have alerted us to the detriment of bullying. Expression through covert racism, blatant homophobia and outdated gender disparities plagues the minds of those of us suffering through this discrimination. Bullying ultimately affects teenagers both physically and mentally, with higher rates of mental ill-health in our youth, academic decline within schools and social isolation that our friends and your families experience.

These issues stem from fitting in with friendship groups, and a social agenda within schools and sporting clubs tend to amplify the matter with many young teenagers becoming bystanders to the conflict feeling that 'it is hard to stand up for the person being bullied if the bully is your friend'.

Trying to fit in the Northern Beaches as youth is hard enough between the casual racism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination. On top of that burden, we find it hard to stand up for our own friends in fear of being left out and bullied ourselves. This is largely due to the fact that many feel that 'The people bullying me have never been held accountable' and "the teachers never really help... no advice, no tips...nothing".

Bullying is endemic in our schools and local clubs here on the Northern Beaches

as made explicit by our survey. Troubled mindsets are not being supported by our institutions. Youth on the Northern Beaches are suffering and it's clear to us that little by little, a little becomes a lot.

These issues stem from a lack of education and understanding. We are lucky that our generation has a heavy online presence and that we are able to connect with people we identify with and relate to online. However, without that online barrier to hide behind, many youths on the Northern Beaches struggle with connecting and finding people they are comfortable sharing their identities in person.

This disconnect often leads to the normalisation of casual, harmful jokes that are often racist, sexist, ableist, or homophobic. The harmful nature of the 'jokes' is often disguised, such as someone being told 'smile more' or that they 'scream like a girl'. While these may sound like jokes, they echo a culture that tells people they're less capable, less rational, or need to act or look a certain way. The more we laugh along or stay silent, we normalise these jokes and messages. Often when someone does speak up, they're told to 'lighten up' cause it's 'just a joke'. This creates fear, especially in young people, of exclusion, thus silencing those who might challenge this discrimination.

So, what do we do? The best way to combat these mindsets is to educate youth through emotionally engaging programs which not only explain how 'simple jokes' are actually a form of discrimination, but also describe the profound and detrimental impact they have on someone's wellbeing and sense of identity. Such as programs like Tomorrow Woman and Tomorrow Man.

Without such intervention, these jokes develop into mindsets and further actions that are even more potentially harmful. Our survey shows it's already beginning

to escalate on the Northern Beaches. A response we found particularly alarming was 'I recognise intimidating behaviours in boys my age which are encouraged by their friends', while another stated 'When I'm out in public I might get yelled at ...by random kids my age'. These aren't isolated incidents. Left unchecked, small harms accumulate. Little by little, a little becomes a lot.

They say that we have come a long way in recent years. I know it seems like homophobia is a thing of the past, and that in today's society it doesn't exist. But that's not entirely true. And just like other forms of discrimination and bullying, direct and casual homophobia can have detrimental impacts on individuals feeling comfortable and accepted in their world.

In our survey, someone shared that they have been 'bullied on various occasions for being a member of the LGBTQ+ community'. Another quote explains how 'Casual homophobia is so extremely common in social situations' and that they 'receive back-handed compliments or just insults about (their) sexuality', this blatantly depicts how their day-to-day life has been affected. This concept of 'casual homophobia' is really the stem of the problem.

There is a subconscious attitude towards the queer community that facilitates a society where people feel alienated and abnormal for something that they can't control. The cause of this is fundamentally a lack of education. Casual homophobia stems, not from direct acts of targeted behaviour, but from a deeper-rooted stigma and cultural attitude towards being queer.

The only way to change this view is to normalise the idea of being queer and increase inclusivity through education. In school, we learn about the civil rights movement and the struggle of Indigenous people in Australia, which is fantastic for understanding and preventing racism, but

the curriculum doesn't cover the struggle of queer people at all. The Stonewall Riots, in 1969, for example. How can we expect young people to empathise with something they haven't been educated about? In my opinion, steering clear of these topics only feeds into the idea that queerness is taboo.

As well as this, we need to teach people how to deal with bullying and actions of discrimination on a personal level by teaching them coping mechanisms in emotionally engaging workshops and programs, as previously mentioned.

The survey also included a quote that I found really poignant, where someone explained, 'I don't want to have to explain myself or be embarrassed about my identity. I just want it to be normal'. I feel this really encapsulates perfectly what it feels like when you're constantly treated differently, or as an 'other', even subconsciously by friends or family. It makes simply existing day to day exhausting.

Essentially, the problem is that the majority of people refer to inclusion as 'include people that are different to you', which only feeds into the idea that queer people, neurodivergent people, people of colour, or people of a different gender are different from them. The idea of inclusivity should be, include everyone. Full stop. We all have similarities and differences. Why should we group people together at all?

They say we've come a long way in recent years, but why are so many young people still feeling suffocated? They say we've come a long way in recent years, but why do queer people still feel alienated? They say we've come a long way in recent years, but that doesn't mean that we can't strive to educate young people to help create a society without casual discrimination and bullying, because little by little, a little becomes a lot.

## Transportation

Emily and Toby – Killarney Heights High School

Let me paint a picture for you. It's 6 o'clock. My alarm goes off. I scramble all my things together and rush out the door to make it to my early morning extension English class. It's a hot summer day, and by the time I get to Starkey Street, ready to walk the hill, I'm already late. When I finally get into class, I'm dripping with sweat, thirsty, and unable to concentrate.

You'd think there'd be an adequate bus line for the several students in my position, but apart from the regular class time bus, there isn't. It goes without saying, but in your senior years of high school, the last thing you want to tank your ATAR is a steep hill.

Toby's story is just one of thousands of other students across the Northern Beaches and all over New South Wales, who have to tell their teacher 'Miss, sorry I'm late.'

As we know, all public transport within the Northern Beaches stems from privately owned organisations, yet several students find bus routes inconsistent, unreliable, and unsafe. Responses to our youth survey showed deeply concerning results. Students claiming there were very limited buses, or any public transport at all.

One student told us she's late to school and work almost every day. She misses the first 20 minutes of her classes regularly, and now, her attendance record is being flagged by NESA, not because she's lazy or skipping school, but because the system meant to support her is failing.

Another student called out the public transport on the Northern Beaches claiming 'it's actually the most awful system. The buses don't come, and when they do, they're either full or completely off-schedule'.

These aren't distant hypotheticals. They're the unfortunate realities of thousands of

students. 186 responders said cancellations and poor timing impacted them significantly and 165 students said a lack of services and bus routes made public transport almost unusable. And almost every single person we spoke to mentioned that this issue is increasing their stress at a time when they already have the pressure of exams, jobs, and their future hanging in the balance.

It goes beyond just inconvenience. For many, it's also dangerous. Various bus stops across the Northern Beaches have little to no lighting, buses themselves have barely any safety measures, and the lack of certain bus routes at nighttime means many young people can't even get home safely.

So how are we going to fix this? For one, bus routes and timetables should be regularly restructured to meet demand. It isn't good enough that there are thousands of students in need that have specific problems with the bus routes affecting them. It's an easy fix to mitigate these issues - we need to formally call out the various flaws within the current bus timetable across the state.

This will mean we need greater emphasis on the use of Opal cards, as many school buses and even public lines often don't regulate whether students are tapping on or off. If we can provide greater support in gaining school Opal cards, enforcing regulations, and providing direct contact between students and bus organisations, bus lines will be greatly improved.

We also propose that bus drivers are given more benefits and higher wages as essential members of the workforce. If we expect increased consistency and high standards from them, their job position needs to be a secure and appealing one. Bring back prioritised school services. Dedicated school buses would directly address timing, overcrowding, and safety issues. And finally,

we think that privatised organisations should introduce further regulations regarding the safety and comfortability of their passengers. No one should feel unsafe or excluded by public transport.

If we expect these changes to occur, the government needs to work closely in conjunction with these organisations, otherwise we ought to end the privatisation of the public transport industry, because the welfare of citizens needs to take priority over profits. When we talk about creating a future-focused education system, we can't ignore how students get to school in the first place.

So, we ask that after tonight, we make a sustained and dedicated effort to improve an industry that affects the entire youth across the Northern Beaches, because if we're always waiting for a bus that's never going to come, then how can we ever expect to move forward?

## The Overuse of Technology

Jayden and Piper – Barrenjoey High School

Before we begin, I have something to admit to you. Ironically, while writing this speech Piper and I couldn't seem to go 8 sentences without scrolling on Instagram or starting another game of block blast. It's safe to say that attention is the new economy of contemporary times.

Currently we are facing an epidemic of overuse of technology and social media amongst our youth. It is clear that this is a catalyst that is damaging the welfare of our youth and how the next generation are developing. Many adolescents are complaining that they want to get off their phones, as they feel like they could spend their time better, but can't seem to put the phone down. Survey responses have shared, "I spend all my time on Instagram and stuff rather than doing activities that are beneficial to me." and "Social Media has taken over how we spend our time and instead of being outside we are on our phones."

One hour of screen time per day adds up to 7 hours per week. Stay with me on this.

Youth are becoming addicted to social media and technology. Our day-to-day lives are becoming consumed by marketing, trends, and highlight reels and it is evident that our youth on the Northern Beaches are feeling concerned about how this impacts their sleep, social life, schooling and ultimately their futures.

The lack of awareness, education, or services about this is one of the main reasons it is a growing problem on the Northern Beaches. Our survey found that 278 adolescents said that technology is the number one problem affecting them and many survey respondents have shared how this affects their mental health, therefore creating larger concerns.

3 hours a day adds up to 21 hours per week.

Youth have screen times varying from 1-3 hours, a healthy screen time to 6-8 hours which is obsessive and unhealthy. 6 hours every day leads to 42 hours per week, which is almost 2 whole days. I don't want to alarm you, but this adds up to 91 days a year. And yet you say you don't have enough time to start that new hobby, pick up an instrument, try a new sport or read a book. It's not about ignoring technology all together, it's about ensuring that our youth are adequately prepared to manage their time wisely and gain self-control in order to prepare a brighter future for us all.

It might be ironic, but I have gone without a phone for 16 years and only just recently bought a phone at the start of year 12. I felt that it was important to stay off social media as much as possible and grow as a person by learning about the world through my personal experience rather than someone else's.

It is important that we are reminded that our teenage years are the prime age for self-discovery and developing our personal identities, as our experiences help shape the world around us. As many survey respondents have stated, we live in what feels like such a fast paced world where we are all racing to stay in the know, see what our friends are up to and keep up with the latest trends, but in the process we can tend to lose our sense of self before we have even found it.

Youth live in a world that is constantly changing and innovating, one that has evolved rapidly, the introduction of the iPhone to the world, global pandemics and much more has changed the dynamic in which youth face every day. One that relies on being connected both in person and online. We need to change the behaviours around technology and realize that it is becoming increasingly important to everyday

life. We need to work collaboratively to create, support and educate youth on how to manage time and how to get out of the screen and into the world when necessary.

For all of you old people in the room, you probably remember when the first iPhone was released to the world on the 29th of June 2007. Ever since that day everyday people have had an instant cure to boredom in their pocket. I was born in December of 2007 and have never known the world without its most prominent piece of technology. But I assure you that when I am old and surrounded by my loved ones and my grandchildren ask me what it was like when I was growing up. I'll tell them that our generation isn't just defined by the minutes we spent browsing or hours wasted gazing at screens; it's by the moments that we share through the ride and our collective contributions to the world. The laughs shared between mates, the road trips taken spur-of-the-moment, the late-night conversations and bonds that are well and truly undeniable. It's these touchable, indestructible moments that we're remembered by, not minutes passed.

So don't let the time scroll on by.

## The Teenage Dream

Brie, Josie and Summer – Brigidine College

There is no worse sentiment ever uttered to a teenager than “These are the best years of your life.” The shudder from that side of the stage was audible. This idealisation of youth haunts us. It’s everywhere. From the reminiscing of arthritic grandparents, to the lyrics of Wheatus’s Teenage Dirtbag, and it forms the backbone of the entire discography of our greatest living astronaut, Katy Perry.

Mentions of this so-called “Teenage Dream” while meant to inspire hope and I guess, empowerment, really only evokes a sense of impending doom that our generation is intimately familiar with. Is this it? Have I peaked at 17 years old - jobless, broke and without Katy’s promised skin-tight jeans?

The teenage experience today is fundamentally different than it was for past generations. Then, adolescence was a time for self-discovery, friendships and freedom. But this ultimately comes at a cost, one that is not resistant to inflation. The Maccas runs are not so spontaneous when you realise the Big Mac Meal you just ordered is over an hour of work, the late-night drives are less life changing when you remember a full tank costs over a hundred bucks.

Every hour not spent behind either a laptop or a cash register is a waste, and when 43% of young people feel they are missing out on their youth, it isn’t surprising that even on the largely affluent Northern Beaches, 300 young people placed economic issues as one of their top three concerns. In the age of social media and comparison by design, we are constantly reminded of all that is out of reach, to such a degree that big dreams for the future always have an asterisk, “How can I get the money?”.

Reducing prices is one thing and capping public transport costs like we do for our elderly bus buddies would make significant steps towards affordability, but it is certainty which young people are demanding. How can they achieve the lifestyle their parents have? Schemes for first home buyers, youth assistance, rental programs, they all exist, but they mean nothing to us when we don’t know about them or how to access them.

A survey from Monash University showed that 50% of the young people taking the survey believed that their education had not prepared them for the future and this same sentiment is echoed through the results of our own survey. Young people felt unprepared

to deal with the pressures of paying rent, paying taxes, paying off their HECS. They were provided no guidance on how to 'adult' properly, which only furthered the influence of the increasing costs of these issues.

Financial literacy must meet us where we are, online, in a Service NSW-style one-stop-shop for youth, or, better implemented in the school curriculum, because otherwise governments and services are launching programs into the void.

Katy Perry is a prophet of our age. But she made one small error. We will not be young forever. But that doesn't mean that we, and our future teens, don't deserve a real, achievable, teenage dream.



northern  
beaches  
council

[northernbeaches.nsw.gov.au](http://northernbeaches.nsw.gov.au)