

# Insights: youth mental health and wellbeing over time

headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey 2020



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## Methodology

**This paper presents insights from the 2020 headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey.**

### Who conducted the survey?

headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation funded the survey and commissioned Colmar Brunton (now Kantar Public) to undertake the survey, the analysis and reporting.

### Did the survey receive ethics approval?

This study was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) and received ethics approval from Bellberry Limited Human Research Ethics Committee (ref: 2020-04-395).

### How was the survey conducted?

The first survey was conducted between July and September 2018 and involved a national telephone survey of 4,065 Australian youth (aged 12-25 years). The telephone survey was conducted by Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing or CATI.

A quota sampling strategy was used, with quotas set according to age, gender and state/territory that ensured representation as per general population demographic spread.

The current survey was conducted between 25 May and 21 June 2020 and involved a national telephone survey of 1,035 Australian youth (aged 12-25 years). The survey was conducted when much of the country was in a stage of government enforced lockdown, or just emerging from a period of lockdown due to COVID-19.

### How is the data analysed and reported?

Throughout the report, we provide metrics for the total sample and consider differences by gender and by age group.

The data has been weighted to represent the population of young people in Australia in each of the four age groups (12-14 years, 15-17 years, 18-21 years and 22-25 years), by gender and by state/territory of residence.

Tests of statistical significance have been conducted and only differences significant at 95% confidence are presented.

In some instances throughout the report percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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## Executive Summary

**In June 2020, rates of psychological distress remain high among Australian young people, with one in three reporting high or very high levels of distress (34%). This is comparable to the rate seen in 2018 (32%).**

At the community level, young people's mental health (in terms of symptoms of depression and anxiety) does not appear to have been affected in these early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, however their wellbeing does appear to be impacted.

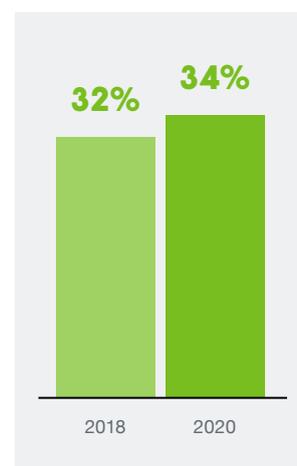
### COVID-19

While rates of distress have not been impacted, young people's wellbeing has been impacted by COVID-19, in particular among 22–25 year olds. Their ability to carry out daily activities and their ability to cope with stress have shown a decline in 2020. Many in this age group are just finishing university and entering the workforce, moving out of the family home and forming new relationships. Many of these milestones are likely to have been disrupted due to the pandemic, and the impact on wellbeing is evident.

12–14 year olds' wellbeing also appears to have been impacted by the pandemic, in particular their ability to carry out their daily activities. Among 12–14 year old young women, their ability to cope with stressors in their daily life has also shown a decline. Many in this age group are beginning secondary school, a significant academic and social milestone that has also been disrupted. Home schooling is likely to have had a great impact on this group, leading to feelings of social isolation and disconnectedness.

### Gender

Rates of psychological distress continue to be higher among young women than young men, particularly among young women aged 15–17 years and 18–21 years. Stress associated with academic pressures, body image expectations and family conflict is known to have a greater impact on young women than young men.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

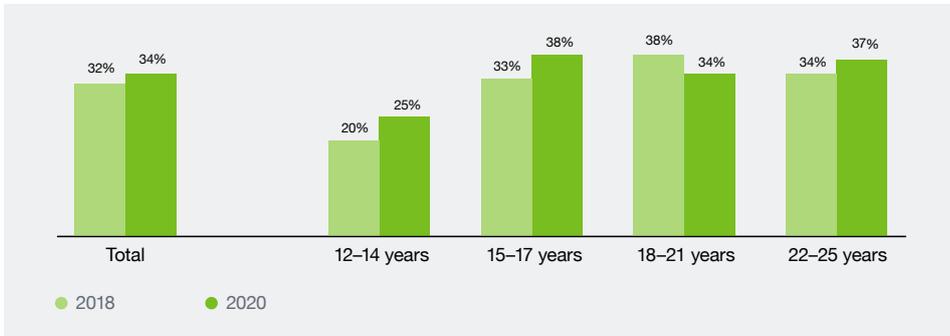


**One in three Australian young people reported high or very high levels of distress (34%), compared to 32% in 2018.**

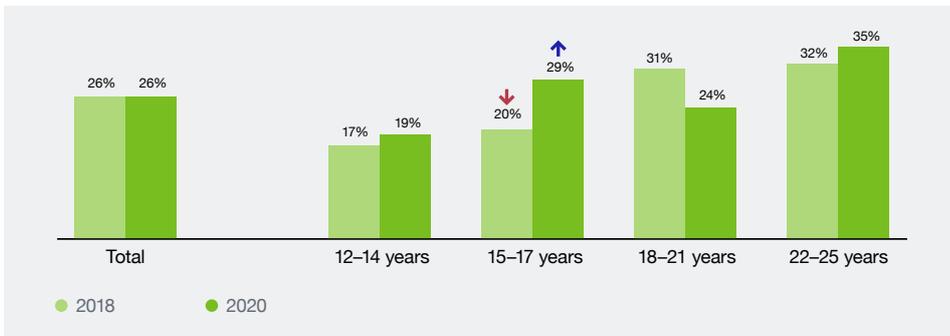
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### Insight 1:

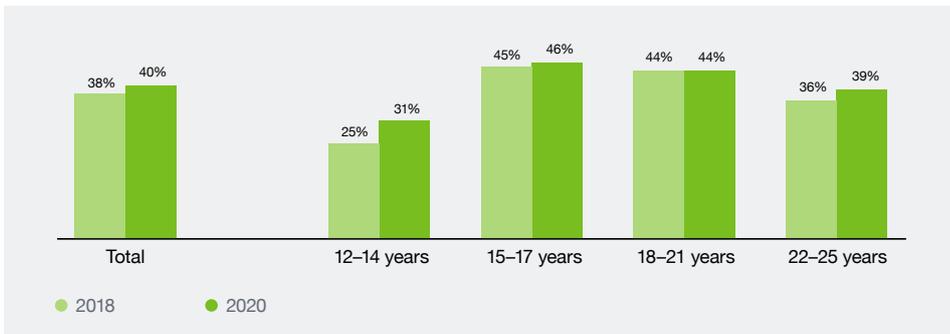
**Rates of high/very high psychological distress have risen among 15–17 year old young men, but remain stable among all other groups.**



**Figure 1.**  
Psychological distress  
% high or very high  
Young people



**Figure 2.**  
Psychological distress  
% high or very high  
Young men



**Figure 3.**  
Psychological distress  
% high or very high  
Young women

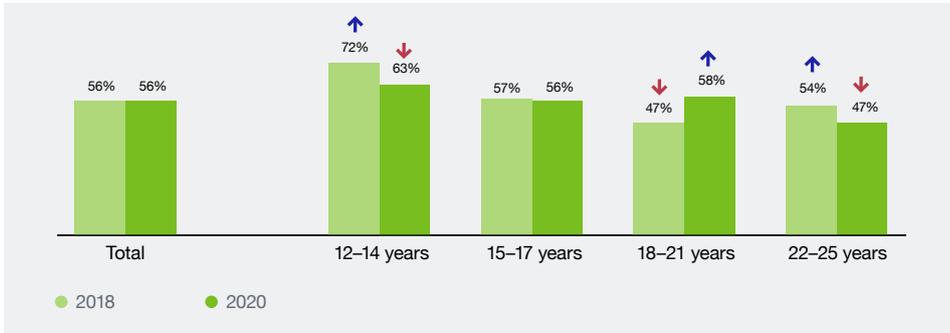
In 2020, one third of Australian young people (34%) report high or very high levels of psychological distress. This is comparable to the rate seen in 2018 (32%). Rates of psychological distress have risen among 15–17 year old young men (from 20% in 2018 to 29% in 2020), but remain stable among all other groups. As was also seen in 2018, young women consistently report higher rates of distress than do young men. This gender disparity is observed across every age group, with the exception of 22–25 year olds.

K10 Psychological Distress Scale

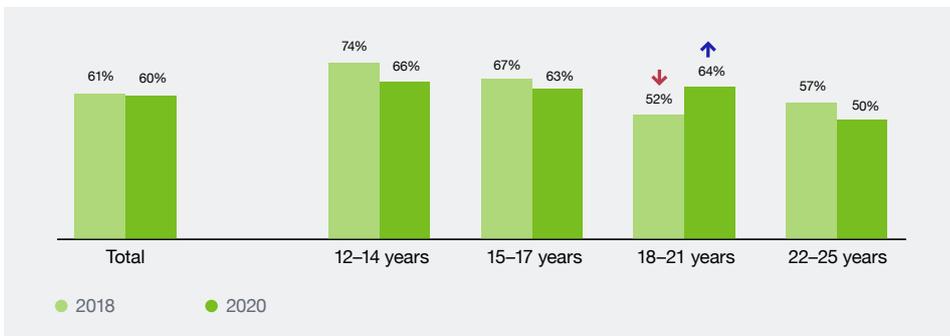
↓ ↑ Indicates results are significantly different from the previous survey at 95% confidence.

**Insight 2:**

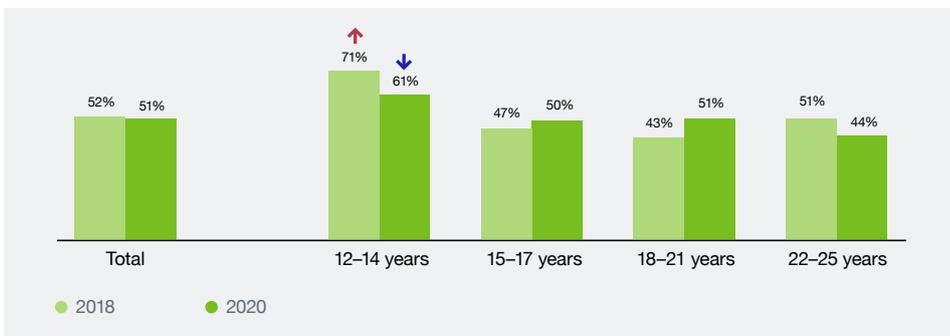
**In 2020, 12–14 year olds and 22–25 year olds are coping or dealing with life less well than they were in 2018.**



**Figure 4.**  
My Life Tracker: Coping – % High (80-100) Young people



**Figure 5.**  
My Life Tracker: Coping – % High (80-100) Young men



**Figure 6.**  
My Life Tracker: Coping – % High (80-100) Young women

In 2020, three in five Australian young people (56%) feel they are coping or dealing with life well. This is the same as the rate seen in 2018 (56%). When considering trends across each age group, rates have dropped among 12–14 year olds (from 72% in 2018 to 63% in 2020), and among 22–25 year olds (from 54% in 2018 to 47% in 2020).

In 2020, the proportion of 12–14 year olds who feel they cope or deal with their life well (63%) is higher than that of 22–25 year olds (47%).

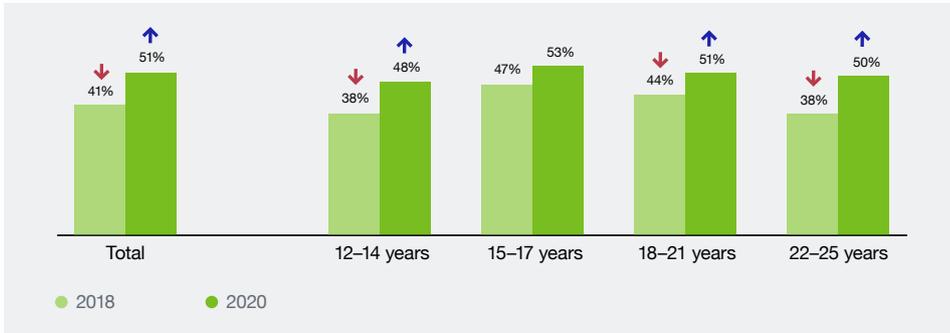
↓↑ Indicates results are significantly different from the previous survey at 95% confidence.

**My Life Tracker (Coping)**

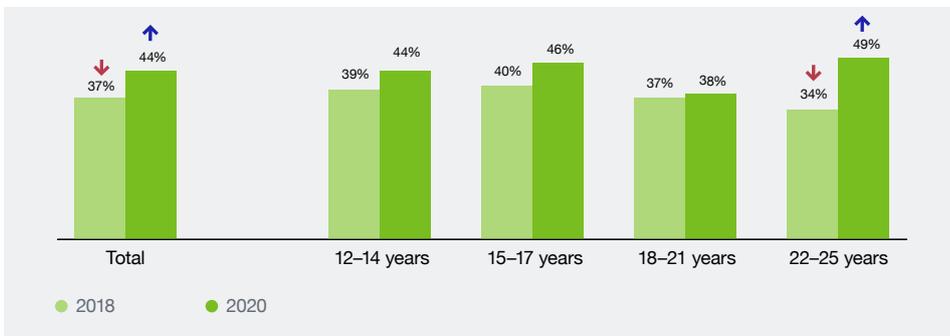
on a scale of zero to 100 where zero is extremely negative and 100 is extremely positive, how have you been feeling over the last week in how you are coping, by coping we mean dealing with life, using your strengths?

### Insight 3:

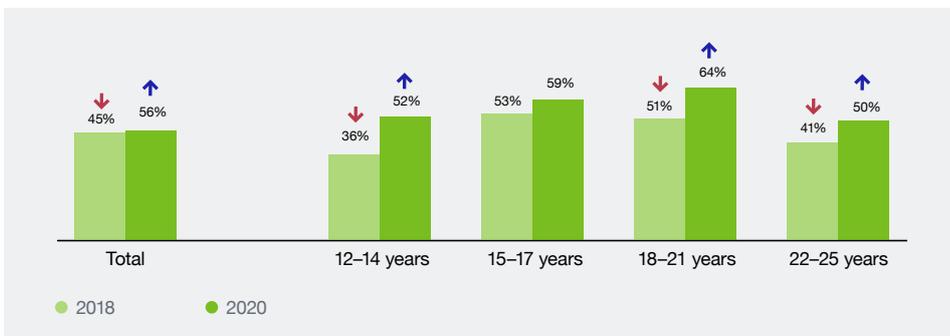
## The proportion of young people who have trouble carrying out their daily activities has increased in 2020.



**Figure 7.**  
Ability to carry out usual activities in past two weeks – % Unable on at least one day  
*Young people*



**Figure 8.**  
Ability to carry out usual activities in past two weeks – % Unable on at least one day  
*Young men*



**Figure 9.**  
Ability to carry out usual activities in past two weeks – % Unable on at least one day  
*Young women*

In 2020, one in two Australian young people (51%) were unable to carry out their daily activities on at least one day in the previous two weeks, this has increased from the rate seen in 2018, where two in five had difficulty carrying out daily activities (41%). This trend is significant for both young men and young women and across all age groups, with the exception of 15-17 year olds (where the trend is evident but not significant).

↓ ↑ Indicates results are significantly different from the previous survey at 95% confidence.  
How many days in the last 2 weeks were you unable to carry out most of your usual activities at school, study, work or home?



## References

1. West, P. W., & Sweeting, H. (2003). Fifteen, female and stressed: changing patterns of psychological distress over time. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 44(3), 399-411.
2. Fink, E., Patalay, R., Sharpe, H., Holley, S., Deighton, J., & Wolpert, M. (2015) Mental health difficulties in early adolescence: a comparison of two cross-sectional studies in England from 2009 to 2014. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 56, 502-507. 41.
3. Sweeting, H., West, P., Young, R., & Der G. (2010) Can we explain increases in young people's psychological distress over time? *Social Science & Medicine* 71, 1819-1830.



headspace would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First People and Traditional Custodians. We value their cultures, identities, and continuing connection to country, waters, kin and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and are committed to making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, by providing services that are welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate and inclusive.



headspace is committed to embracing diversity and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the provision of health services. headspace welcomes all people irrespective of ethnicity, lifestyle choice, faith, sexual orientation and gender identity.



headspace centres and services operate across Australia, in metro, regional and rural areas, supporting young Australians and their families to be mentally healthy and engaged in their communities.

headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health