
COMMISSION FOR THE FUTURE



Casualties of change

The predicament of youth in Australia

A report on the social
and psychological problems faced by
young people in Australia

By Richard Eckersley

FUTURE CHALLENGES
FOR AUSTRALIA

CASUALTIES OF CHANGE:
THE PREDICAMENT OF YOUTH IN AUSTRALIA

An analysis of the social and psychological problems
faced by young people in Australia.

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"Our country and our world are in this turmoil of change. There are many aspects of that change about which we can do nothing, and many which indeed we should welcome. But much of this change, unless properly understood and sensibly handled, has the capacity to diminish or destroy the environment within which the freedom of the human spirit may flourish. And there are forces which would feed upon these changes to achieve precisely that result.

More and more of our people, especially the young and underprivileged, will be increasingly susceptible to the blandishments of these forces if we do not provide them with employment or security with a sense of fulfilment. If we do not do this we have no right to demand or expect their adherence to the values of a free society."

R. J. L. Hawke
"The resolution of conflict"
1979 Boyer Lectures
ABC.

"If a frog is placed in hot water it will make frantic efforts to escape; it is said, however, that if the animal is put into cold water, which is then slowly heated, it may...be boiled to death without so much as a struggle.

Does this boiling frog principle apply to the human species in civilisation? The evidence shows that it does, on the level both of the individual and of society....

The boiling frog principle may be especially important in the case of behavioural and mental disorders. Suppose, for example, that a slowly introduced environmental change were to produce in most people an increase in irritability, fatigue, aggressiveness, a general deterioration in the quality of personal relationships, and perhaps some interference with the capacity to make rapid and wise decisions. The strong possibility exists that in such a situation these signs of maladjustment would permeate society unrecognised as deviations from the normal or healthy state. In terms of the well-being of people, however, a change of this kind, affecting the mood of the whole population, would be a serious matter."

Stephen Boyden
Professorial Fellow in Human Ecology
Australian National University
"Western Civilization in Biological Perspective"
Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987.

OVERVIEW

Australians are not facing up to the seriousness of the predicament confronting youth today. Because of our failure, more young people each year become casualties of the changes sweeping our society.

Suicide rates for males aged 15 to 24 have doubled over the past 20 years. Australians in this age group are now taking their own lives at a rate of one a day; suicide's toll of young lives is second only to the road toll.

The use of illicit drugs and alcohol abuse by young people have increased to the point where they pose a major social problem. Teenagers are starting to drink earlier, and are drinking more heavily; in the words of one report, their aim is often "to get drunk and get drunk quickly". Heroin is now claiming five times as many lives as it took a decade ago.

More and more youth are being caught up in crime. The incidence of most crimes against people and property, which are committed mainly by young males, has risen dramatically since the mid-1970s: for robbery, burglary and other theft, it has doubled or more; the incidence of rape has risen more than 150%, and that of serious assault has increased four-fold.

All these statistics can be qualified; other factors such as changes to reporting and recording procedures, classifications and legislation can affect the trends. Nevertheless, the figures point unequivocally to an alarming escalation in the social and psychological problems facing young Australians today.

Behind these problems are increases in family conflict and breakdown, increasing poverty, high youth unemployment, soaring youth homelessness and growing educational pressures. Underlying these developments are social, economic and technological changes that may, in themselves, be imposing a growing psychological stress on children and young adults - a stress that finds bleak expression in the fear and pessimism with which many of them regard the future.

These changes and their effects cannot be seen in isolation, but form an intricately linked web, interacting and playing back on each other to perpetuate and compound problems, creating a social and psychological trap from which growing numbers of young people feel there is no escape; they feel powerless and hopeless.

The problems are not restricted to youth. But they are at a vulnerable stage in life - a time when they must learn to fend for themselves, a time when they decide who they are, what they believe and what they want. Because of this, they bear the brunt of the turmoil and confusion created by the rapid changes taking place in Australian society.

Many young Australians appear to be learning to cope with this new situation. At the same time, in the way they are adapting, they could also reinforce the negative impact of the changes on society.

The young have become more resolute and self-reliant; but they have also become more socially conservative, more politically apathetic, and less concerned about the underprivileged.

They rightly perceive that changes in technology and the economy are encouraging a growing demarcation between those who are well-educated and in well-paid, secure and satisfying jobs and those who do poorly-paid, casual, dead-end work, or are permanently dependent on welfare.

Those who think they can, are determined to make it. They are working harder. They may have no more respect for the system than did the youth of the 1960s and 1970s, but they no longer want to change it; they just want to ensure they come out on top.

Those who fail, or feel they never had a chance, are giving up, and resorting to crime, drug-induced oblivion, and suicide. Others seek the certainty society no longer provides by embracing the mysticism and superstition of the

"New Age", or religious fundamentalism. In their vulnerability, more and more young people are falling victim to drug-pushers and charlatans, as well as to the seductive advertising of legitimate commercial interests.

The likely outcome of these changes will be a society increasingly divided into winners and losers, with all that follows from that: two communities that view each other with resentment, suspicion, even fear; a society that has to live with both increasing lawlessness and unrest, and the increasingly authoritarian measures needed to maintain law and order.

This is not to say that life will become intolerable or, for most of us, even particularly unpleasant. Our society may well remain for most people preferable to many that have existed in the past, or found elsewhere in the world today.

From the perspective of 20 to 30 years ago, we already live, in many respects, in a "nightmare" vision of the future (although in others, life has improved). Whereas we once left our houses unlocked, many of us now barricade ourselves behind security doors and fences and fit electronic alarm systems. We were once told to welcome strangers, but are now taught to fear them. Then, police did not wear guns, and airport security checks were unknown. Then, we didn't have to worry about the threat drugs posed to our children.

Once almost everyone who wanted a job could get one; now at least one in five teenagers who wants work can't get it. Youth homelessness, virtually unknown 20 years ago, is increasing at an alarming rate. More than three times as many children live in poverty now as then.

Each new inquiry, it seems, reveals greed and corruption that reach further into high places. Cynicism about our institutions, especially politics, is at an all-time high. "Stress", once a technical term rarely heard outside a few professional circles, has become a by-word of our times.

And yet, most Australians remain happy with their lot in life - or at least say they are. Despite the problems they face, most young people continue to enjoy their lives. But this suggests only that people, especially the young, are resilient and adaptable, and that we tend to become inured to gradual changes that, in the long term, may threaten our way of life.

Evidence of the growing social pressures and tensions is there, however. Beneath our legendary, "she'll be right" nonchalance, research reveals a rankling anxiety about what is happening to Australia, and the direction we are heading. When you look at the plight of youth today, it is clear that things are deteriorating, and will continue to deteriorate as the pace of change grows faster - unless we, as a community, choose to do something about it.

As things stand, public and political debate about the issues discussed in this report - crime, drugs, unemployment, education - remains far too superficial. And as a result, the measures we are adopting to combat the problems we face will, if they make any impact at all, never fully succeed.

Our long-term planning is concentrated on the goal of economic recovery. Yet the evidence presented in this report indicates that the problems of young Australians may not disappear with a return to economic health, and could, in some respects, become even worse because of the structural and technological changes on which increased economic growth depends.

The dominant force behind social change in the modern world is technology. Yet we make almost no attempt to assess the social impact of that technology, or to direct it for other than economic gain. Our efforts in this area are, a Senate committee report noted last year, abysmal.

The outlook may be grim, but it is not hopeless. There is nothing inevitable, or predestined, about what is happening to young people, and to others in the community. We have a choice, and we have, as a society, made similar choices in the past. The last 20 years have seen, for example, fundamental social changes in the way Australians see, and treat, the environment, women, and people of different racial and ethnic groups. While much may remain to be done in these areas, there can be no denying the gains that have been made.

But if we are to remedy the predicament of young people, a predicament that will determine the future shape of Australian society, we must first recognise and accept the seriousness of the situation, and develop the social will to do more about it. It is this recognition and this will that this report hopes to encourage.

INTRODUCTION

Last year, I wrote for the Commission for the Future a report [1] reviewing existing information on Australians' attitudes to science and technology and the future. The report shows that while most people acknowledge the benefits that flow from scientific and technological progress and support a stronger national effort in this area, they are also uneasy about where it is all leading. Amongst their concerns is the perceived development of a society dominated by powerful technologies of which they, as individuals, have little understanding and over which they have even less control.

The surveys covered in the report include several that indicate that many young Australians are very pessimistic about the future, and in particular about specific consequences of industrial and technological development such as the threat of nuclear war, pollution and environmental destruction, and the impact of computers and robots on employment.

These visions of the future, in their bleakness and hopelessness, are, for me, the most disturbing aspect of that report. Some Australian and overseas researchers who have studied youth's perceptions about the future, especially their concerns about nuclear war, have suggested that these attitudes could be having a profound effect on their development, resulting, for example, in apathy, anger, mistrust of adult society, and a lifestyle based on instant gratification rather than long-term goals.

This report began as an attempt to find out if young Australians are as pessimistic about the future as these surveys suggest, and if, as a result, youth today suffer the psychological consequences mentioned above. But the report's scope grew. The final result is an examination of some of the psychological and social problems faced by young Australians today, the causes of these problems, and why, in many instances, they are growing worse.

The report is based on two main sources of information: statistical data on social trends over the past 20 to 30 years; and discussions with psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, criminologists, educators, youth workers, economists, and social welfare policy analysts, as well as research papers written by some of them and by others.

The report is not definitive or conclusive. To cover thoroughly every aspect of such a broad perspective would take years of work; in many areas information is limited because little, if any, research has been undertaken, and is, in any case, notoriously difficult.

The report is, then, an outline of a broad picture, rather than a close examination of one detail. Its intention is to draw attention to the seriousness of the problems that are afflicting growing numbers of young people during this, a period of rapid and profound change in Australian society, and the implications this situation holds for Australia's future.

The first part of the report looks at what evidence there is that psychological and social problems are becoming more prevalent among young Australians. Specifically, it looks at suicide, drug abuse, and crime. It also covers some other aspects of the psychology of modern youth, such as their alleged conservatism and political apathy.

The second part examines the specific factors that experts believe lie behind these growing problems, particularly the family, education and work, and why changes have occurred in these areas in the past two decades. The third part explores the question of whether possible global catastrophes such as nuclear war, and the process of change itself, are contributing to the problems.

Because of the scope and nature of the report, the references are not necessarily to the original source of information, but are, in some instances, to a source which cites the primary reference.

THE PREDICAMENT OF YOUTH

Youth

Youth, for all that it has going for it, can be difficult, even at the best of times.

Youth marks the awkward and often confusing metamorphosis from child into adult: a time when we mature physically and mentally, a time when we determine our identity, values, beliefs and goals. After the dependence of childhood, we encounter a rapid succession of adult rights that entitle us, at least legally, to take charge of our own lives: the right to leave school, to work, to leave home, to have sex, to drive, to buy alcohol, to vote, to enter into contracts. We also reach the age when our parents are no longer liable for our welfare, when we can be forced out into the world.

The young may have health, beauty and freedom, but they are also vulnerable. They are susceptible to harm from family conflict and parental failings. They can be confused by a society that offers shifting and apparently conflicting guidance on values and beliefs. They often agonise over the problems of the world, to which their parents have become inured and blinkered by the responsibilities of work and families.

They are disadvantaged in the workforce because they must first enter it, and until they do, lack the support and protection of the organised labour movement. They also lack the maturity, the skills, the experience, and the vocational qualifications of older workers.

For all these reasons, young people tend to bear the brunt of rapid social change. And in doing that, they provide the most sensitive measure of the pressures and tensions building up in our society.

They are, fortunately, very resilient, with a wonderful capacity to cope. Despite the hardships, most survive the transition to become

reasonably well-adjusted and happy adults. But it now seems clear that for a growing number of them, the burdens imposed by the changes Australia is passing through have become too great.

Sydney clinical psychologist, John Howard [2], says:

"It seems that an increasing number of the young feel so empty and powerless that they are seeking some form of oblivion, escape, tension release, recognition or validation of their existence through acts which are anti-social, violent, or self-destructive. If there is a feeling of no future, and therefore nothing left to lose, then it does not matter much what one does. Risk-taking behaviour becomes common place."

We know something is wrong. There is a widespread public perception that illegal drug use, alcohol abuse and crime are increasing among Australian youth. According to social researcher, Hugh Mackay [3], no social issues are more real to Australians than those that relate to their children's welfare, development and future prospects.

Yet as a society, we appear not to recognise the seriousness of the problems being experienced by young people. To the extent that we do recognise the problems, we are applying remedies that will not work because they do not address the causes of the problems, causes that are deeply rooted in the fundamental changes occurring in Australian society.

Even more disconcerting is the tendency, which appears to be increasing as we become a more conservative society, to blame the victims for their plight: to see the suicidal and drug-addicted as weak - society's "unfit" - and the unemployed as "bludgers".

Suicide

Young Australians are now committing suicide at a rate of about one a day. This year, more than 350 young Australians under the age of 25 will take their own lives. Suicide will be the second biggest killer of young people after traffic accidents (and many of these may also essentially be suicides). Thousands more teenagers and young men and women will attempt to kill themselves with varying degrees of seriousness. Many of these would succeed but for modern medical technology [4].

There has been some media publicity given over the past year to the rise in suicides among teenage boys since the 1960s. But the coverage has been sporadic, and the issue has not yet become one of national concern. The even greater rise, numerically, among men aged 20 to 24 appears to have gone largely unnoticed.

The suicide rate among males aged 15 to 19 has more than doubled from 6 per 100,000 of that age group to 13 over the past two decades (1966-1986). Among men aged 20 to 24, it has jumped from 13 to 29 per 100,000 population. Total male rates have not increased over this period, nor have the rates for teenage girls, young women or women overall [5].

The observed increases in male suicide rates may, in part, be due changes in classifications of

deaths: for example, a greater readiness of coroners to record the death of young people as suicide. Nevertheless, experts believe there has been a real increase [4,6,7].

Women attempt suicide more often than men, but succeed less often [4]. Men are more likely to use violent and more certain methods such as shooting and hanging; women are more likely to poison themselves, often by "overdosing" on prescription drugs. Thus one reason suicide rates for young women have not increased is that more are now surviving suicide attempts because of advances in medical technology. Also, it may still be possible for families to hide female suicide more often than male suicide [7].

Attempted suicide among teenage girls appears to have increased in the past decade. According to Professor Robert Kosky [4,6], formerly director of psychiatry at the Princess Margaret Hospital for Children in Perth and now professor of child psychiatry at the University of Adelaide, the rate of hospital admissions for attempted suicide in Western Australia for boys 14 and under has trebled in the past decade, and doubled for girls 14 and under. About three times more girls than boys are admitted after attempting suicide.

Kosky points out that increased hospital admissions for attempted suicide may be due to increased awareness among the public, better

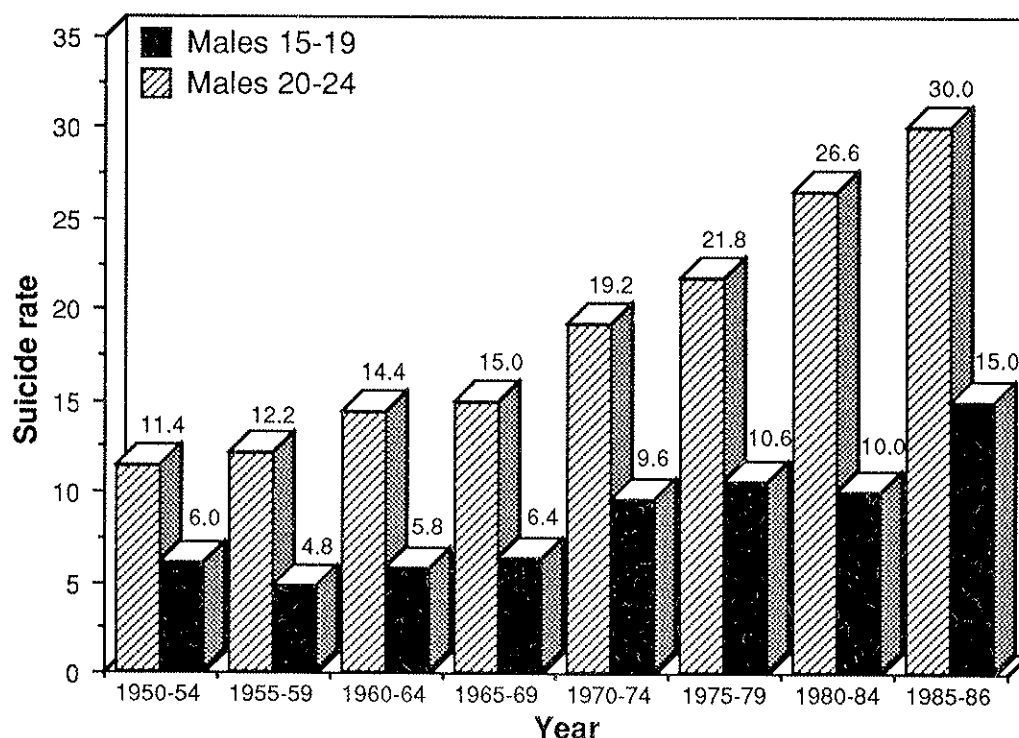


Figure 1: Suicide rates among young males in Australia, expressed as the number of suicides per 100 000 of population in each age group. Yearly figures are given in Table 1 [source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (5)].

Table 1: Suicide rates among young people in Australia expressed as the number of suicides per 100 000 of population in each age group [source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (5)].

Year	15-19		20-24		Total	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
1950	5	2	9	3	14	5
1951	8	1	12	5	14	5
1952	7	3	10	2	16	5
1953	4	2	13	2	16	6
1954	6	2	13	1	16	6
1955	6	1	14	1	15	5
1956	3	2	9	4	16	6
1957	5	2	11	4	17	7
1958	5	3	17	5	18	6
1959	5	2	10	2	16	6
1960	4	1	10	3	15	6
1961	6	2	13	5	17	7
1962	5	3	14	5	19	9
1963	8	2	19	6	21	11
1964	6	3	16	8	19	10
1965	6	4	17	9	19	11
1966	6	4	13	9	17	11
1967	6	3	16	7	19	11
1968	9	2	12	7	17	8
1969	5	3	17	5	17	8
1970	8	3	17	7	17	8
1971	13	5	18	7	18	9
1972	8	4	20	7	16	8
1973	8	5	21	8	15	7
1974	11	4	20	4	16	7
1975	9	3	19	5	15	7
1976	10	3	20	6	16	6
1977	11	3	21	5	16	6
1978	10	4	25	6	16	7
1979	13	4	24	8	17	7
1980	10	2	26	7	16	6
1981	11	2	25	6	17	6
1982	10	2	28	5	17	6
1983	9	2	27	5	18	6
1984	10	2	27	6	17	5
1985	17	4	31	6	18	5
1986	13	3	29	8	19	6

Table 2: Major causes of death among people aged 15-24, 1981-86 [source: Lee and Smith (5a)].

Cause	Mortality rate per 100 000			
	Male		Female	
	1981	1986	1981	1986
Motor vehicle accidents	75.6	59.1	18.9	18.9
Suicide	18.0	21.1	4.3	5.4
Accidents	15.9	16.2	3.4	2.9
Drug dependence	2.8	3.8	0.9	2.3
Homicide	2.6	2.4	1.4	2.1
Asthma	1.1	2.4	1.7	2.0
Skin & breast cancer	2.1	2.1	1.0	1.1
Other	20.4	21.9	14.3	12.7

services, or a greater willingness to refer suicide attempts to hospitals, and may not reflect actual increases in suicide attempts. However, he also notes that the rate of attempted suicide is many times that of suicide, and that "attempted suicide is a very serious public health problem".

A 1987 study [8] on adolescent views, needs and problems by a team headed by Dr Paul Finlayson, a Sydney community physician, and based on a survey of 1,270 Year 7, 10 and 11 students attending State high schools in the largely middle-class Hornsby and Ku-ring-gai areas of Sydney, found 8% of the girls and 5% of the boys had had suicidal thoughts.

The survey found that 11% of girls and 7% of boys had often or very often felt so "down or low" that life had lost its meaning; 54% of girls and 39% of boys had felt this way occasionally. About 12% of these students said they had felt like taking their own lives (representing 8% of all the girls and 5% of all the boys).

Dr Riaz Hassan [7], reader in sociology at the Flinders University of South Australia, sums up the problem of adolescent suicide in this way:

"Suicide among young Australians has been gradually increasing over the past 20

Table 3: Frequency among Sydney high-school students, aged 12-16, of feeling so "down or low" that life had lost its meaning [source: Finlayson (8)].

Frequency	Girls (%) (n=681)	Boys (%) (n=585)
Very often	2.6	2.4
Often	8.4	4.8
Occasionally	53.7	38.6
Never	35.3	54.2

Table 4: What students feel like doing when they feel that life has lost its meaning [source: Finlayson (8)].

Behaviour	Girls (%) (n=441)	Boys (%) (n=266)
Running away	26.1	24.8
Giving up	19.9	10.9
Hating myself and others	13.8	10.5
Being like someone else	13.2	11.7
Taking my own life	12.5	11.3
Hurling other people	2.5	16.5
Other	12.0	14.3

Behind the statistics: confusion, hopelessness, loneliness

"A lot of love and care, that's all I want. That's asking hardly anything at all."

17-year-old homeless girl found dead with a needle in her arm - The Age, 2.1.88.

"A few nights back, a 14-year-old girl injected battery acid into her veins. She died horribly...alone...in sheer agony...without hope...a body racked by terrible pain on the verge of death...for what? Battery acid straight into her veins...at 14!"

Social worker - The Bulletin, 12.1.88

"I wish I'd die soon this world's fucked - it shits me - I just want to die and be forgotten - I wish I had the button for the atomic bomb - I'd push it."

Boy, 15, - quoted in paper [2] presented to conference on youth suicide, Sydney, 12.11.87

"I truthfully want to DIE

P.S. Because I am mixed up and confused and alone and can't take it anymore - I've fuckin had this world.

P.P.S. Except I don't want Suzie to fuck up her life because of me so I'm sorry if I put all that on Suzie - she is free to do what she wants because I'm going to do what I truthfully want to do and that is DIE."

Note left by girl, 15 - quoted in above paper

"Why am I here - life isn't worth living - I am getting into trouble - I am bored - I try hard to do something and I get knocked down for doing it - I try to live a happy life but it seems people are against me because I've been in trouble - I feel like nothing - when I have fun it's great then something happens to ruin it - it's not my fault for what I am - so I just don't understand life and why I was put here on earth - if I can't accomplish anything or do anything for other people or myself - maybe all should just die - then I wouldn't have any problems."

Boy, 16 - quoted in above paper

years. One in seven deaths of males aged 15 to 19 years is now caused by suicide. In 1966 the corresponding figure was only one in twenty. In 1986 there was one adolescent suicide every 70 hours. An estimated 7,000 years of life are lost every year due to adolescent suicide. This is about 10% of the total years of life lost every year in Australia due to suicide. In economic terms adolescent suicides cost over \$100 million a year to the Australian economy. The loss, pain and grief suffered by the family and the community is even far greater and more profound than the economic loss."

Drug abuse

Drugs - illicit drugs and especially hard drugs such as heroin - loom in the public consciousness as one of the greatest menaces to society.

According to some recent surveys [9,10], Australians regard the use of illegal drugs as one of the two most important problems facing young people and the community generally, the other being unemployment. The problem has now been made even more dramatic by the spread of AIDS among those who inject drugs intravenously.

Social researcher, Hugh Mackay [3], says Australians fear the danger of (hard) drugs to their children more than any other single threat. Indeed, he says, "for parents who regard their children as being vulnerable to the risk of exposure to drugs, no other social issue really counts".

Mackay found in a 1986 study that parents were so anxious about hard drugs that they were often more lenient than they might otherwise have been towards their children's use of alcohol and tobacco. It is, however, alcohol and tobacco that are doing the most harm to young people because

their use is much more widespread than that of hard drugs.

Trends and patterns of drug use

A 1986 report [9] to Federal Department of Health on attitudes towards drugs and drug use in Australia found that for the ten main drugs, the popular belief was that use was increasing in every case but one - tobacco. Heroin topped the list with more than eight out of ten believing that its use was rising, followed by marijuana, alcohol and cocaine.

While it is difficult, if not impossible, to measure the extent to which the drug problem has grown over the past two decades or so, statistical evidence does suggest a problem that, like suicide, is continuing to escalate.

Recent surveys of weekly drug use by students aged 15 to 17 in NSW, Victoria and South Australia, indicate a third to a half use alcohol every week, about a third smoke and take analgesics, and about one in ten uses marijuana [11].

In the Finlayson study [8], three-quarters of the students (aged 12 to 16) had drunk alcohol during their lifetime. About 30% had consumed alcohol during the previous week, while 6% of the girls and 7% of boys had drunk on six or more occasions during the week.

Over a quarter of the girls (28%) and a fifth of the boys smoked cigarettes, with 30% of the female smokers and almost half of the male smokers (46%) saying that they had smoked more than 20 cigarettes in the previous week. Seventeen percent of the girls and 21% of the

Table 5: Popular perceptions of trends in drug use [source: Commonwealth Department of Health (9)].

		Percent believing use is:		Increase minus decrease
		Increasing	Decreasing	
1.	Heroin	83	3	+80
2.	Marijuana	71	3	+68
3.	Alcohol	67	9	+58
4.	Cocaine	60	3	+57
5.	Tranquillisers	49	5	+44
6.	Barbiturates	42	5	+37
7.	Inhalants	47	12	+35
8.	Hallucinogens	42	8	+34
9.	Amphetamines	38	6	+32
10.	Tobacco	34	41	-7

Table 6: Drug use by Year 10 students, NSW, 1971-86: percentage using drug at least weekly [source: Commonwealth Department of Health (11)].

	1971	1973	1977	1980	1983	1986
Alcohol	22.4	31.3	37.6	32.7	50.4	36.9
Tobacco	28.6	30.0	40.4	35.1	34.8	28.2
Analgesics	15.8	15.0	11.4	20.8	29.9	28.9
Sedatives	3.6	3.6	3.0	3.3	2.4	1.7
Marijuana	1.6	3.6	8.3	6.3	12.0	9.0
Hallucinogens	0.6	1.1	0.6	1.0	2.0	1.2
Narcotics	0.4	0.8	0.6	0.3	0.4	0.9
Stimulants	3.9	2.6	1.6	0.3	1.5	2.0

boys had smoked marijuana, with more than half of the users saying they had smoked marijuana during the previous week.

Surveys of weekly drug use by Year 10 students in NSW, carried out since 1971, suggest a fall between 1983 and 1986 in the use of alcohol and marijuana [11]. But the decline follows a period of overall increase in use, and use remains well above the levels of the early 1970s.

The proportion of students using analgesics on a weekly basis remains at about the same level as in 1983, and is about double that recorded in surveys during the 1970s. The number of students smoking cigarettes appears to have dropped steadily over the past 10 years.

Whatever the trend in recent years, underage drinking and smoking remain a major problem, given what is known about the health effects of both drugs and that it is usually at this age that life-long patterns of drug abuse often begin [9].

Furthermore, most of the above surveys covered only a narrow cross-section of youth, and may not reflect the overall pattern of teenage drug use. For example, a recent Time Australia cover story [12] on youth reported several Year 10 students as claiming that it was now trendy to say that you did not smoke or drink. One student commented that while his age group no longer drank themselves into a stupor at parties, it was still "a thrill thing" for Year 9 students.

Also, a comprehensive study [10,13] undertaken by Elliott and Shanahan Research for the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse, suggests that adolescent alcohol abuse may be more common than past quantitative studies have indicated. It also indicates that what was once mainly a problem for teenage boys is now considered to be as big a problem for girls.

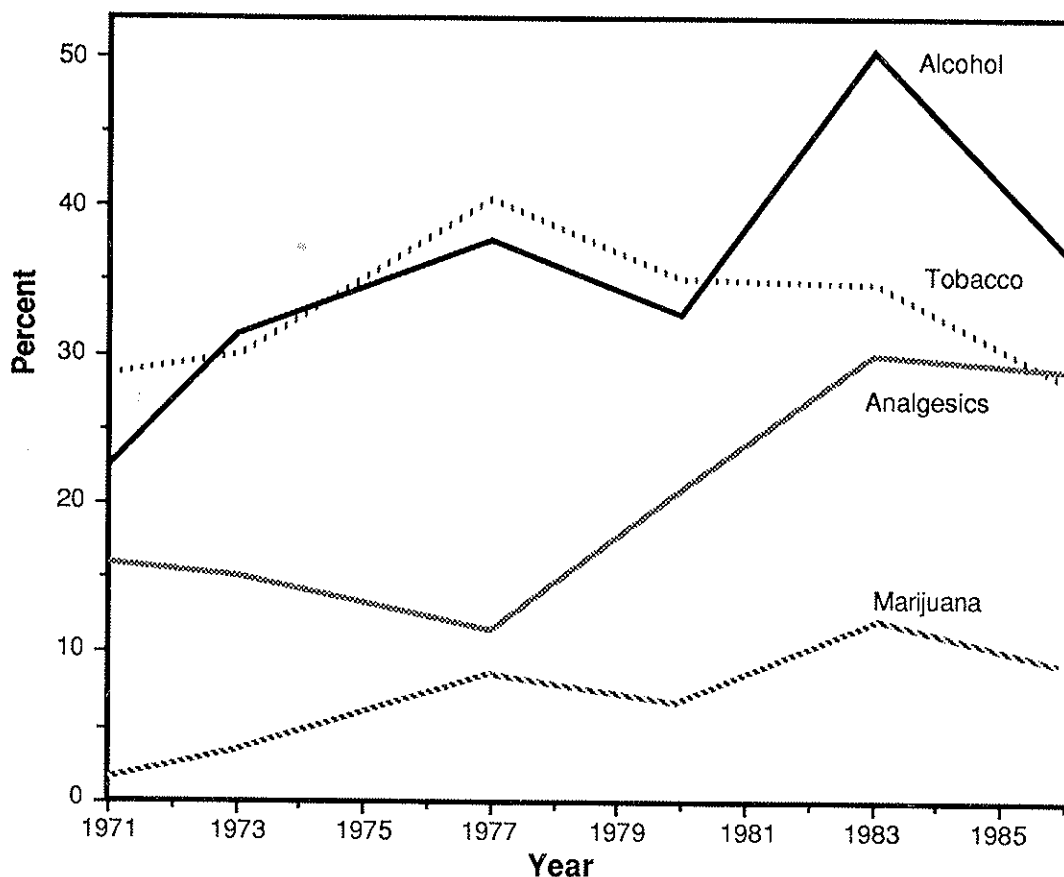


Figure 2: Weekly drug use by Year 10 students in NSW, 1971-86. See also Table 6 [source: Commonwealth Department of Health (11)].

The study - which included interviews with health authorities, teachers, police, youth workers, and researchers; group discussions with parents and adolescents; and a national quantitative survey - found that about 80% of Australians saw underage drinking as more common and a greater problem today than it had been when they were teenagers. Twelve per cent nominated alcohol as one of the three most important social problems facing teenagers under 18, ranking it third after drugs (31%) and unemployment (25%).

A feature of adolescent drinking today is the extent to which it involves not just use, but abuse, of alcohol. The Elliott and Shanahan study suggests that young people are not only starting to drink at an earlier age than previously, but also that "binge drinking" is becoming more common:

"...while adolescents share to some extent (and give lip service to) the adult reasons for drinking (socialising, social lubricant, relaxant etc) their frequent aim is to get drunk and to get drunk quickly."

In the Finlayson study [8], 28% of the girls and

33% of the boys said they had been drunk. Almost 20% of the students said they had "felt sick" from drinking once during the previous six months, and 7% of girls and 9% of boys had felt this way more than once a month. Six per cent of the girls and 5% of the boys admitted drinking until they "passed out" once in the six-month period, while 2% of both boys and girls had done this more than once a month.

The regular use of hard drugs is restricted to a small proportion of youth. Surveys [8,11] indicate that between 1% and 5% of high school students have tried heroin or cocaine, with the number using hard drugs regularly being less than 1%. These figures probably under-estimate the use of hard drugs among young people. One study [9], for example, found that those "open" to hard drugs (those who have tried or are likely to try the drugs) were more likely to be unemployed, and less likely to be students.

Drug-related deaths

While the direct health effects of alcohol and tobacco may take much longer to show up, alcohol still kills about five times more people in the 15-34 age group than heroin and other

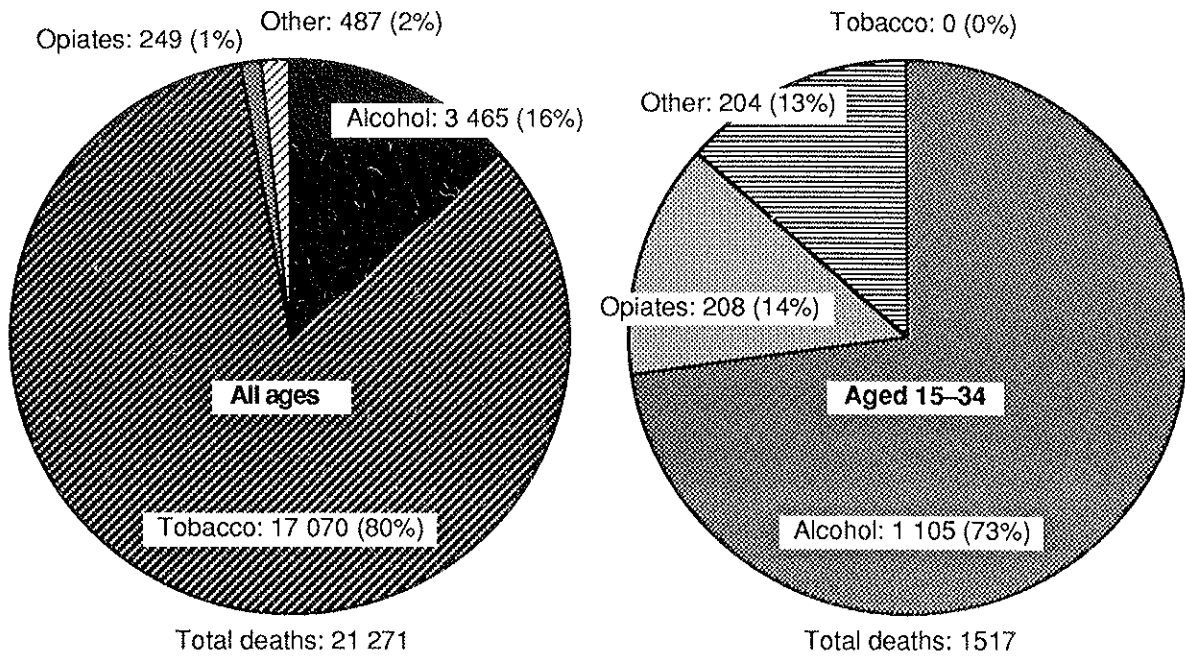


Figure 3: Drug-related deaths, 1986. The 'Other' category includes drugs such as barbiturates, sedatives, and tranquillisers [source: Commonwealth Department of Health (14)].

opiates, mainly through its contribution to the road toll [14]. Furthermore, there is some evidence to support the view that young people who use alcohol, tobacco and marijuana are more likely to take up hard drugs [9].

One in every three deaths among those aged 15 to 34 is drug-related, and alcohol is responsible for about three-quarters of these (mostly through road accidents), making it the most significant cause of death among people in this

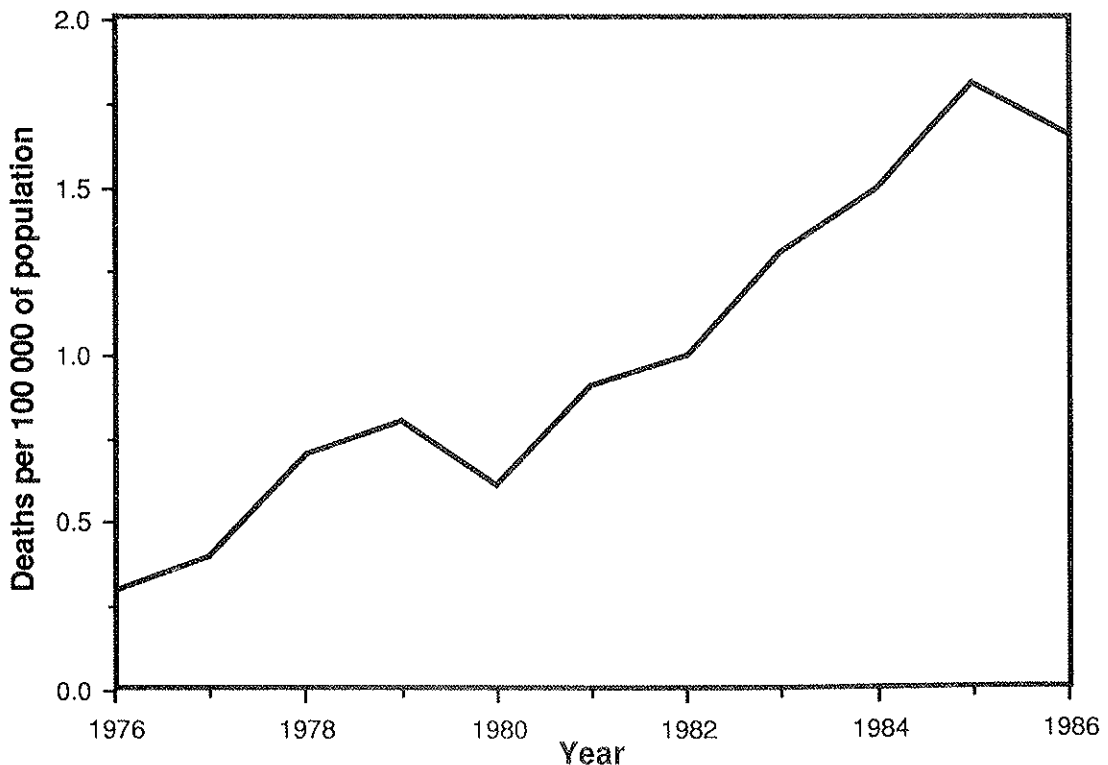


Figure 4: Deaths due to opiates, 1976-86. Note: Rates in 1984 and 1985 have been affected by late registrations in NSW in 1984, and the inclusion of these in 1985. Prior to 1979 some deaths due to opiates were included in another category [source: Commonwealth Department of Health (11,14)].

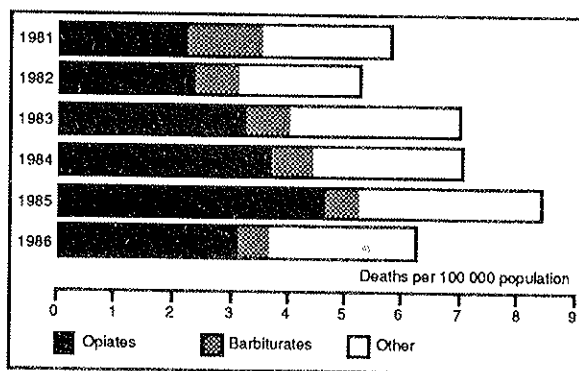


Figure 5: Drug-related deaths for people aged 15-34, 1981-86. This excludes alcohol and tobacco. See note, figure 4 [source: Commonwealth Department of Health (11,14)].

age group [14]. Deaths due to opiates account for 14% of all drug-related deaths in this age group.

The total rate of deaths involving opiates (which occur most commonly among young people) has risen five-fold over the past decade [11]. While part of this rise could be a statistical artefact, it appears there has been at least a two- to three-fold increase in these deaths.

Changes in drug-related death rates among the 15-34 age group between 1981 and 1986 indicate a rise in deaths due to opiates up to 1985, with a decline in 1986. The overall rate of deaths due to drugs other than alcohol and tobacco does not show any clear trend over this period.

However, other statistics on deaths due to "drug dependence" indicate a marked increase in deaths this decade among the 15-24 age group, particularly among females. For males, the rate rose 36% between 1981 and 1986; for females it rose 156% (table 2 page 6)[5a].

Deaths represent only the most easily measurable social cost of drug abuse. Other costs include their contribution to crime, sickness, and family conflict and breakdown (especially in the case of alcohol). With the illicit drugs there are also the consequences of their illegality. In a recent article in "The Age" [15], a former deputy commissioner of the Victoria Police, Paul Delianis, says that the drug problem is getting worse and has been "the prime catalyst for a great deal of society's dysfunction":

"Drugs, like heroin, amphetamines, hashish and cocaine, not only produce numerous users, but bring about: organised crime, a large amount of general crime, high-level corruption, gang rivalry and

assassination, prostitution, serious health problems, congestion of the judicial and penal systems, and large expenditure of government revenue."

Explanations for drug usage

There are usually three different, although not mutually exclusive, perspectives on understanding and dealing with drug abuse [9]:

- An approach based on the availability and control of drugs, which suggests that the ease with which people can get drugs determines their use. The stricter the controls, the less drug abuse there will be.
- The socio-cultural model that holds that the main factors leading to drug-taking are the values, beliefs and attitudes that society holds towards such activities. In other words, the more socially acceptable or tolerated drugs are, the more they will be used.
- The socio-psychological approach that argues that feelings of alienation and low self-esteem are the main reasons behind drug taking, and that these feelings can result from the pressures and tensions of industrial society, leading to drug abuse.

Public discussion about drugs in Australia focuses on the first two perspectives. The Elliott and Shanahan study [10] on adolescent drinking, for example, stresses the importance of the high profile alcohol has in Australian society, and the need to address factors such as: peer group influence; the example set by parents; laws and law enforcement in relation to the sale of alcohol; advertising; and availability.

However, the study also identifies factors behind teenage drinking that do relate to the third, socio-psychological perspective. It links excessive drinking by adolescents to a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence; having little purpose in life and poor values; and the absence of involvement and communication with parents. Non-drinkers and light drinkers, on the other hand, are more motivated and goal-oriented; have good relationships with parents; and are more active and more aware of "where they are at and where they want to go".

This report is concerned primarily with these socio-psychological factors behind drug abuse, although the sorts of social changes discussed could also influence cultural attitudes to drug use.

Crime

Crime statistics support the public perception that crime has increased in Australia. The figures also support the view that problems associated with youth are on the rise because the majority of most crimes are committed by the young. The peak arrest age for crimes against property, for example, is 16; for violent crimes it is between 19 and 23 [16].

Statistics compiled by the Australian Institute of Criminology [17] and based on crimes reported to police, show that since 1974, the incidence of serious assault has risen four-fold, and those of rape, fraud, robbery, break, enter and steal, vehicle theft, and larceny have doubled or more, with rape rising more than 150%. Only murder rates have remained basically unchanged. (Robbery is theft with violence or the threat of violence; break, enter and steal is theft involving illegal entry to premises; larceny is theft without any violation of property or person.)

Like other statistics, these figures have to be interpreted cautiously. Over this period procedures for reporting and recording crimes have improved significantly. It is now likely, for example, that many more rapes are reported than used to be the case. Changes in legislation, such as changes to rape and domestic violence laws, have also clearly affected rates of reported crime in some States [16].

Nevertheless, it is highly likely that the trends do reflect a real increase in crime rates (except for murder). The trends in robbery and break, enter and steal crimes in recent years probably reflect the impact of Neighbourhood Watch programs and increased home security.

Criminal activity among young people is linked with other problems such as depression, illegal drugs and alcohol abuse. In a recent paper [2] on depression, delinquency and suicide, Sydney clinical psychologist, John Howard, concludes that:

- Delinquent adolescents are often more depressed than "normal" adolescents, and are often as depressed as those diagnosed as clinically depressed.
- Depression in delinquent adolescents can be associated with the abuse of a variety of substances including alcohol, cough mixture and marijuana, heroin and other illicit drugs.
- Depressed delinquent adolescents actively seek exciting, dangerous, daring or illegal

activities in an attempt to relieve their restlessness and boredom.

- Adolescent offenders have a far higher rate of suicide and violent death than "normal" adolescents.

In the Finlayson study [8], feelings of aggression towards others were a common outcome of depression, especially for boys. Seventeen per cent of boys who had experienced severe depression (feeling so "down or low" that life had lost its meaning) said they felt like "hurting other people" when they were very depressed, making it the second most common response after "running away" (25%) and more common than "taking my own life" (11%). Only 3% of the girls who had felt very depressed said they had felt like hurting other people, and it ranked as the least common response (table 4 page 6).

As with drugs, public discussion about crime tends to exclude socio-psychological factors, and to focus, in the case of crime, on "law and order" issues. And yet, according to Dr Paul Wilson [18], of the Institute of Criminology, crime is largely the product of social conditions and social relations. If politicians are sincere in wanting to reduce crime, he says:

"...they should turn their attention and their vocal chords to prevention and, most importantly, to unemployment, homelessness and the widening gap between the rich and poor. Then, and only then, will we have rhetoric on 'law and order' worth listening to."

Apathy and other attitudes of youth

Suicide, drug addiction and crime are the more extreme ways in which some young people are responding to the changes in the world around them. Characteristics often attributed to the youth of the 1980s such as political apathy, conservatism and materialism could also reflect the way they are adapting to the changes confronting them.

The Finlayson study [8] found youth were clearly disenchanted with politics. Only 8% of the students felt that government understood the problems of young people today. The study says this gulf between young people and the "elected representatives of the people" deserves more research and a realistic solution:

"If this level of disenchantment of youth

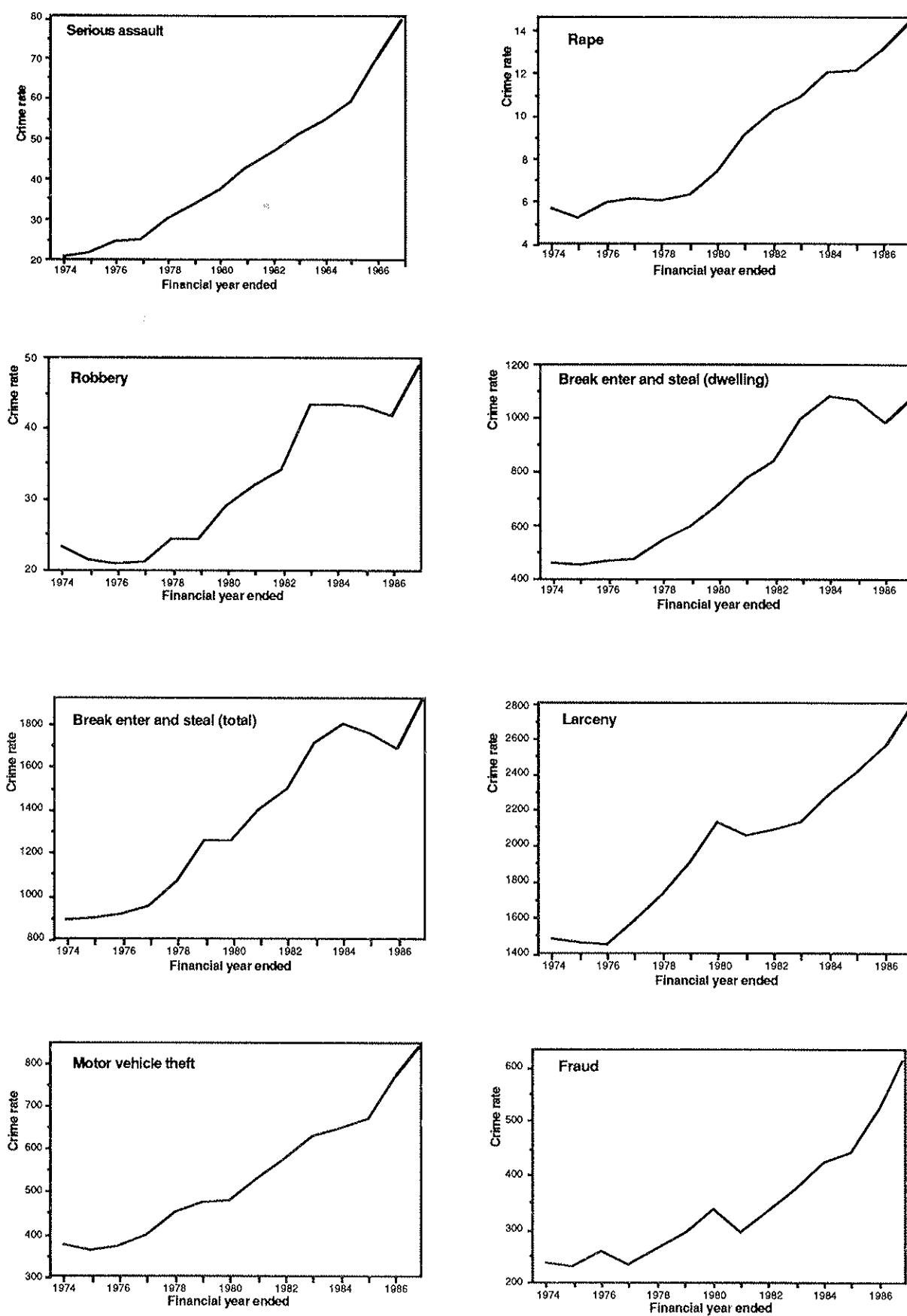


Figure 6: Crime trends in Australia, 1974–87. Number of crimes reported to police per 100 000 population [source: Australian Institute of Criminology (16,17)].

Table 7: Trends in Australian crime 1974-87. Number of crimes reported to police, and rate per 100 000 population [source: Australian Institute of Criminology (16, 17)].

Crime	number (N) or rate (R)	Year														
		1973-74	1974-75	1975-76	1976-77	1977-78	1978-79	1979-80	1980-81	1981-82	1982-83	1983-84	1984-85	1985-86	1986-87	
Murder	N	249	224	247	259	260	247	292	233	269	270	294	262	307	282	
	R	1.88	1.67	1.77	1.82	1.81	1.70	2.04	1.56	1.77	1.76	1.91	1.68	1.94	1.76	
Serious assault	N	2 822	2 995	3 374	3 513	4 258	4 796	5 424	6 250	6 925	7 782	8 335	9 144	11 101	12 642*	
	R	20.76	21.75	24.25	24.75	30.00	33.40	37.37	41.88	46.40	51.27	54.20	58.77	70.31	81.18	
Robbery	N	3 175	2 921	2 855	2 970	3 472	3 509	4 264	4 601	5 126	6 606	6 624	6 670	6 586	7 969	
	R	23.34	21.21	20.52	20.93	24.17	24.18	29.02	30.83	33.76	42.95	43.07	42.88	41.71	49.75	
Rape	N	765	723	828	864	867	911	1 083	1 318	1 552	1 674	1 844	1 886	2 101	2 259*	
	R	5.62	5.25	5.95	6.08	6.04	6.27	7.37	8.83	10.23	10.89	12.00	12.12	13.31	14.51	
Break enter & steal (dwelling)	N	55 090	55 312	57 950	59 884	69 626	84 616	97 226	112 667	123 924	148 908	163 655	163 939	153 078	169 952	
	R	452.95	447.40	462.89	473.24	539.48	589.28	669.80	754.97	837.29	989.49	1 073.52	1 063.36	969.56	1 060.98	
Break enter & steal (total)	N	119 726	122 682	126 199	134 390	152 415	163 081	183 271	203 083	226 088	261 231	276 282	271 710	267 645	305 509	
	R	880.98	890.93	907.25	947.07	1 062.12	1 248.41	1 247.59	1 360.85	1 490.36	1 699.60	1 796.53	1 746.67	1 695.20	1 907.20	
Fraud	N	31 790	30 622	35 349	31 767	37 419	42 461	48 959	42 732	50 182	57 289	64 106	68 024	81 287	97 661	
	R	233.92	225.18	254.12	228.28	260.75	292.63	337.28	286.34	330.79	372.73	416.85	437.29	514.86	609.68	
Motor vehicle theft	N	50 943	49 673	51 358	56 772	64 266	68 726	70 096	76 455	86 955	95 796	99 146	103 164	120 575	134 407	
	R	374.85	360.73	369.21	400.10	447.84	473.45	477.16	512.32	573.20	623.26	644.70	663.18	763.70	839.08	
Larceny	N	182 994	182 013	182 904	220 342	244 870	273 404	305 343	305 436	316 497	296 980	355 718	377 522	403 091	447 308	
	R	1 478.46	1 452.00	1 446.54	1 577.42	1 717.30	1 895.75	2 122.01	2 046.71	2 085.18	2 119.14	2 286.71	2 395.69	2 553.10	2 792.47	

* Excludes Tasmania

remains, particularly as they grow older, this would lead to disregard for society and its laws and values; the implications of this are enormous."

The Australian Electoral Office commissioned in 1983 a study [19] of young people's attitudes towards enrolment and voting as part of a campaign to encourage more of them to vote. The survey found a high level of apathy and disillusionment:

"The single most important reason why young people fail to register to vote is because they do not see any direct link between the Government or Government institutions and their own lives. They become apathetic and will not take the steps necessary to become enrolled.

The same apathy is responsible for their failure to acquire any real political knowledge, leading many young people to feel incapable of recording a meaningful vote. They feel that if they can't vote wisely there is little point in bothering to enrol."

There is also other evidence of this apparent tendency among the young to become more socially detached. For example, a survey [20] of consumers by the Trade Practices Commission found that young people aged 16 to 24 were consistently less likely than other age groups to take action when they encountered problems as consumers. The reason was that they did not expect to succeed in any action and so felt it was not worth trying.

According to Professor Jacqueline Goodnow [21], professor of psychology at Sydney's Macquarie University, the biggest change she has noticed amongst students at the university over the past five years is that they have become more conservative:

"They are working harder; they are less interested in politics. They are not alienated from the system at all. Ten years ago, they didn't want to have anything to do with the system. Now they are buckling down; they're extraordinarily conservative."

Social researcher, Hugh Mackay, found in a 1980 study that young people were becoming pre-occupied with money and getting a good job, a trend he believes has intensified since then [12]:

"They are talking about superannuation

and retirement when they're only 19 or 20. It's really quite scary to me, because it's a stage when they should be being socialist and writing poetry....The economic pressure is such that they feel if they are going to make it they have to do it fast and young. It's making them into middle-aged people."

Journalist, Robert Haupt [22], encountered this same concern about getting a good job and making money when he spoke to 16-year-olds around the world:

"...while these young people could happily declare selfish goals for themselves in material things, it occurred to none of them to do so intellectually or culturally. The most frequent second-guess answer, when I brushed aside the 'get-rich-quick' ambition, was to do good works."

Haupt also picked up the uncertainty underlying the students' optimism, and their conservatism:

"The young people I spoke to are already ahead of the odds - they're bright kids from good schools - but I couldn't say they were carefree, let alone affected (as I recall being affected at 16) by euphoria. With only one exception, their optimism - for they were, on the whole, optimists - was hedged, as if it were naive to acknowledge it.

So what will the world be like in their care? Insofar as people like these prevail, we who are then old will be in the hands of some pretty gritty realists. The instinctive belief of my generation was that the future was ours; for them, it's that no-one is owed a living. I shan't expect a generous pension when I retire."

Jan Owen [23], a former president of the Youth Affairs Council of Australia, says the so-called conservatism of youth today is only a reflection of our present society and what they are being told by teachers, parents and politicians, and of the pressures being placed on them:

"Kids are facing up to realities. They have to work harder to get a good job. They are literally told when they enter high school that only a few are going to make it."

Nevertheless, opinion polls suggest that the young are, at least in some respects, more conservative than their elders, and becoming

increasingly conservative. A 1985 Morgan Gallup Poll found that the young were more likely to regard "people not wanting to work" as a main cause of unemployment than were older age groups; 47% of 14 to 17-year-olds felt this way, compared to 28% of those 65 and over, and 35% overall [24].

Two surveys [25] carried out for the Office of Youth Affairs by ANOP in 1984 and 1986 show a marked shift in opinions among young people about youth unemployment. In 1986, more than half those under 25 believed youth unemployment would increase, compared to about a third in 1984. Despite this, young people in 1986 were inclined to attribute high youth unemployment more to lack of motivation and skills, and less to a shortage of jobs and economic conditions. Those over 25 in the 1986 survey tended to place more emphasis on the economy and technological change.

Research does not support the view that many unemployed people choose not to work. According to a recent study [24], "while there is some evidence of work-shyness, it contributes only a trivial amount to unemployment figures and the costs of benefits".

In line with the shift in perceived causes of youth unemployment, the ANOP surveys found

that there had been a change in attitudes among the young towards unemployment benefits paid to young people. Between 1984 and 1986, the proportion believing the amount given to those under 18 was too much doubled from 7% to 15% while the percentage believing it was too little was almost halved from 42% to 24%. The proportion saying the amount paid to young people aged 18 and over was too little fell by half from 53% to 27%, and the percentage saying it was too much grew from 4% to 14%.

Responses to other questions suggest a decline in the level of personal concern among young people about unemployment and the threat of nuclear war (although they remain among the most serious concerns), and an increase in concern about education and career decisions and prospects.

While there are other explanations for some of these findings, they could also be seen to support the view that young people are becoming inured to broader, social or global issues, and more concerned with issues of more direct personal relevance.

In today's world this more conservative and self-reliant outlook has an understandable appeal, from both a social and personal perspective. It does, presumably, reduce the psychological burden imposed by the global

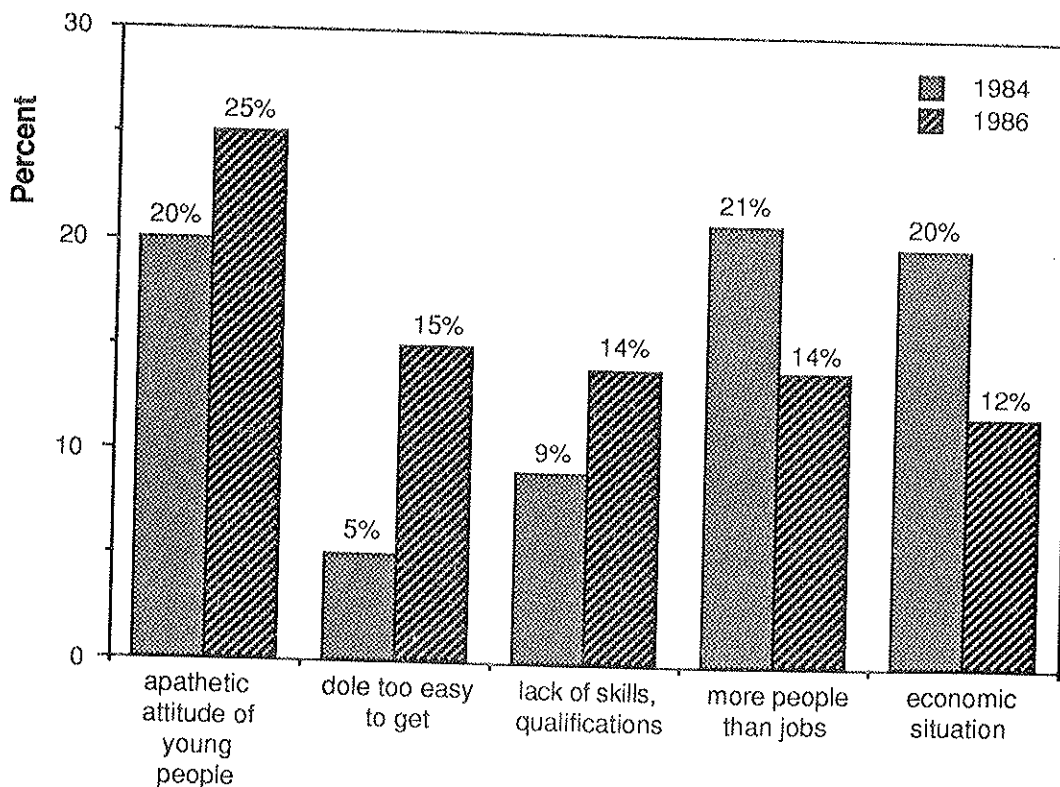


Figure 7: Perceived causes of unemployment among young people — a comparison of the views of those aged 15–24 in 1984 and 1986 [source: ANOP (25)].

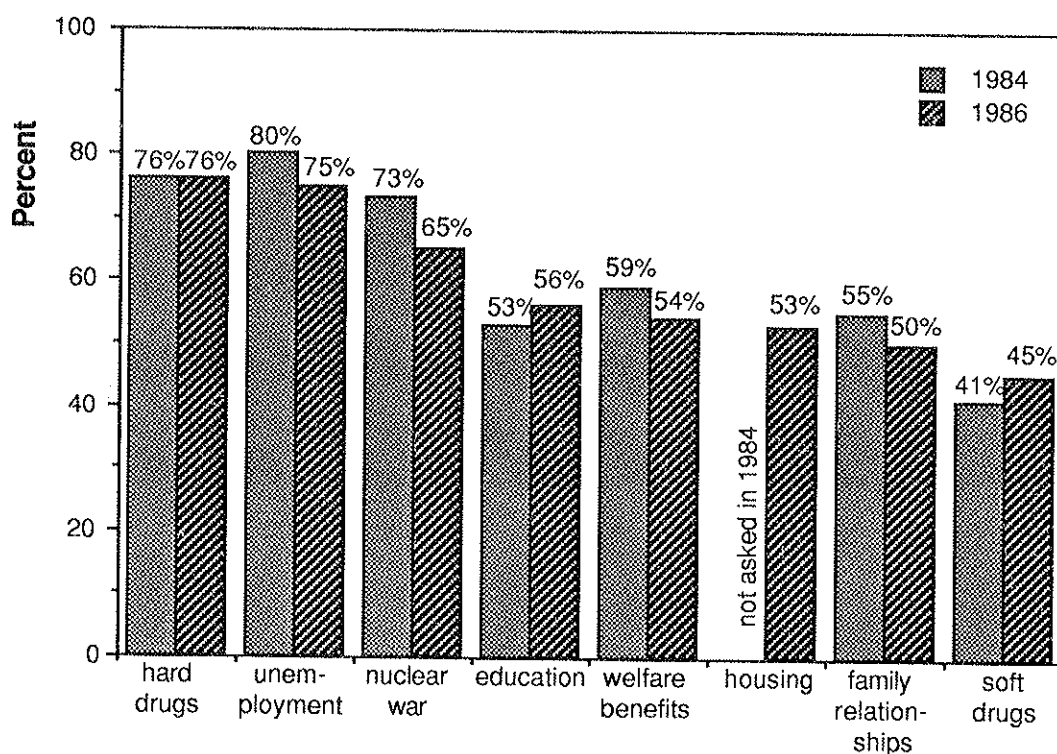


Figure 8: Changes in young people's concern about specific issues. Values indicate the proportion of 15–24-year-olds saying they were 'personally worried very much or quite a lot' about the issue [source: ANOP (25)].

problems we must now live with, and enhance the prospects of individual survival and success. It suggests young people are taking more personal responsibility for their own lives and behaviour. It might, for example, be associated with the recently recorded drop in alcohol, tobacco and marijuana use among at least some students.

Yet if this attitude means that more young people are also less interested in taking part in the political processes of a democratic society, and becoming less concerned about social injustices and more hostile towards the poor and underprivileged, then it has potentially grave implications for the future of Australian society.

CHANGING AUSTRALIA: SPECIFIC ISSUES

Changing Australia

Many factors - developmental, psychological and sociological - lie behind problems such as suicide, drug abuse and delinquency, and the reasons why these problems are increasing among young people are not clearly understood. The consensus among people working in the area is that the most important factors are the changes that are occurring in family life, in education, and in work.

These issues are considered in this part of the report. While they are dealt with separately, this separation is artificial. In reality, these aspects of life form a web of interacting influences that can compound the pressures on children and adolescents. Unemployment or difficulties at school can be a cause of problems at home; unhappy relationships with parents can lead to poor performance at school and affect job prospects; the growing pressures at school are in part related to the changing job situation.

Thus it has been suggested that the increasing alienation among young people today stems from their sense of not belonging in any of the "four worlds of childhood": family, school, work and friends [26]. In the past, alienation from one of these worlds - not getting on with friends, for example - was usually offset by a sense of belonging and security in others - say, at home or school. Now, it is increasingly likely that young people may feel estranged from several of these worlds at the same time, leading to sustained social alienation.

Underlying these changes in the personal world of young people are the social, economic and technological changes sweeping Australia and much of the rest of the world.

Australia has become more pluralistic and heterogeneous. The 1960s and 70s saw a growing questioning of authority, traditional social conventions and political beliefs: attitudes towards divorce, sex and pornography became more relaxed; the role of women changed and the social importance of religion and the Church

declined. While young people may no longer be under the same pressure to conform as they were before, they now face a bewildering array of values and beliefs to choose from.

After enjoying a long period of sustained growth, Australia's economy has faltered during the past decade and more, hit by two international recessions, drought, and declining prices and markets for our agricultural and mineral products, the backbone of our export trade. We now face a long and difficult period of structural change if we are to become, once again, an internationally competitive nation.

Technological developments are an important factor behind our changed economic circumstances. More than anything else, they are responsible for the quickening pace of change in our lives. In fact, technology is transforming almost every facet of life: birth and death, work, leisure, family life, government, business, industry, education.

All these changes are inevitably unsettling. It means we no longer have a stable frame of reference in which to think about things. The social problems facing Australia also afflict most other industrial nations. But the situation may be worse for Australians than for other people because we lack a shared cultural tradition and a strong national identity - a point that has been much discussed in this, our bicentennial year. Thus, the historian, Manning Clark [27], writes that:

"...We now say with Henry Lawson that we are Australians, that we know no other country. But, if anyone asks us who we are and what we want to be, we lapse into the great Australian silence.

...Now, we have to decide what we want to be. We have to find our own solutions to our problems. That is the consequence of saying we are Australians. The difficulty is how to put forward answers when we do not know what to believe....We live in an age of doubt about everything."

The family

The quality of care

For children, the family is the most important resource in making the transition to adulthood. And within families, it is the quality of the care that children receive that matters most [28].

According to Adelaide sociologist, Dr Riaz Hassan [7], there is now reliable evidence of a close link between suicidal behaviour in children and parental relationships - in particular, parents who are frustrating, rejecting and unkind:

"The parents seem to want the child's presence, but without emotional involvement. They want him or her to fulfill parental expectations, though as parents they have given the child little support and incentive to do so. The young person may accept parental expectations in a mechanical manner without deriving much pleasure or satisfaction from fulfilling them. At the same time, they do not feel free to act in ways that would separate them from their parents. Adolescents in such circumstances may make few emotional demands but become instead withdrawn, depressed, quietly occupied with death and suicide."

Adolescent suicide can also be linked to family conflict and breakdown. Adelaide child psychiatrist, Professor Robert Kosky, found in a study [29] of attempted suicide among children 14 and under that suicidal behaviour was most clearly associated with: depression, family violence, divorce or separation of parents, and recent loss of parents or grandparents through death. Kosky says his own work has convinced him that families with suicidal children contain individuals under "great psychosocial stress":

"Early unhappy experiences, combined with unhappy marriages, difficulties due to financial pressures, sickness, disappointments, unmet expectations, ...push the family members to the extremes of their ability to cope; violence towards each other emerges and suicide becomes a real alternative."

Sydney clinical psychologist, John Howard [2], says the development of delinquency can be associated with the quality of parental care, specifically with a father who is uninvolved or brutal, or absent, which then places more pressure on an already over-burdened mother.

Research undertaken for the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse [10] suggests a lack of involvement or communication with parents can be an important factor in adolescent alcohol abuse.

The Finlayson study's [8] main conclusion is that:

"...the quality of the family relationship is of great importance and has an important bearing on the students' school performance, their emotional well-being and their indulgence in problem behaviour. A home situation characterised by a relative lack of love or closeness was closely linked to poorer school achievement, the experience of depression and such undesirable behaviours as smoking cigarettes and marihuana, frequenting hotels and drinking alcohol, and early sexual activity. Although it is probable that distant and unloving family relationships cause these problems and behaviours, it is also possible that these problems and behaviours bring about or aggravate difficulties at home, thereby creating a vicious circle."

The students' greatest need, according to their own assessment, lay in the area of personal relationships, both at home and with friends. Young people's need for more warmth and caring in personal relationships has also come out in other recent studies [30]. Dr Don Edgar [31], director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, says:

"If anything is true in the literature on child-rearing it is that children need close attention from people who care about them as individuals...the most caring teacher cannot provide the loving attention of parents or other family members. Children need quality contact with both parents or with stable substitutes for parents. The quality of those substitutes is what matters."

Thus it is the quality of care given to children, rather than the family structure, that is the most important family influence on their development. A recent major study [28] by the Institute on "children in families" showed that children whose parents were divorced or separated, who had only a single parent, or a step-parent, whose parents were poor, or both worked, were not necessarily disadvantaged. In all these circumstances, children can still get the care and attention they need.

Nevertheless, these factors can and do affect the quality of the relationships within families.

Changes in family life

There have been dramatic changes in Australian society in the past 20 years that have placed growing pressures and strains on family relationships, and which would help to explain the rise in youth problems. These changes include:

- Increased unemployment and, more recently, a decline in real wages, that have increased the financial pressure on many Australian families.
- Changes in social attitudes and values, particularly in relation to the family itself and to the role of women. One important outcome, also linked to economic changes and financial necessity, is the much greater participation of married women in the workforce.
- Smaller families, so that there is now greater financial and emotional investment in each child, and hence a tendency to expect more of that child.
- The decline of many community activities and services, including the deinstitutionalisation of the mentally ill and disabled, making families more socially isolated and forcing them to become more reliant on their own resources.
- High youth unemployment and a tendency for children to remain longer in the education system. As a result children, while maturing earlier than ever before, are now often dependent on their parents for longer than used to be the case, creating another source of potential tension in family relationships.
- The accelerating rate of change, which means that the experiences of parents are becoming increasingly irrelevant to the world of their children, making parenting an even more difficult task.

According to Dr Gay Ochiltree [32], of the Institute of Family Studies, today's parents are ill-prepared for the task of raising children in the harsher social and economic climate of the 1980s. Entering parenthood with expectations shaped by the relative affluence and optimism of earlier years, they now often find they have to care and provide for young adults whose own ambitions and expectations of independence have been frustrated or delayed by shrinking job opportunities and growing educational demands.

As a result, many parents have been left confused and floundering.

The situation for parents has been made worse, Ochiltree says, by the confusion of government on youth issues, resulting in an inconsistent approach to dealing with youth problems, and inadequate support for families.

Divorce

In a world characterised by accelerating change and uncertainty, the family should be, perhaps, a vital source of constancy and security. But it is an expectation that fewer and fewer families can fulfill, and this in itself has become a source of insecurity to children. According to the Institute's "children in families" study, almost half of the children aged 8 or 9, and a third of the older children, aged 15 or 16, feared that their parents might separate [33].

Divorce rates, while lower now than in the mid-1970s, remain three to four times those that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s. If they continue at current levels, more than a third of Australian first marriages will end in divorce. The proportion of remarriages that will end in divorce is higher - about 40% - so that some children will experience more than one marriage breakdown [33].

According to estimates based on 1979 divorce figures, 16.5% of children will see their parents divorce by the time they are 16. This does not include children whose parents have separated, but have not gone through the legal procedure of divorce. About 750,000 children now live in families where one or both parents have remarried [33].

Research into the effects of divorce on children has so far yielded inconclusive and to some extent ambiguous results. Some studies suggest adverse consequences for the children. For example, the Finlayson study [8] found that students whose parents were separated or divorced were significantly more likely to feel that their's was not a close family, not look forward to going home after school, and not help their parents at home.

It also found that "high achievers" among the students - those that performed well academically - were more likely to be living with both their real parents than "average achievers". Other research cited in that study found that children of single-parent families tended to do worse at school and to leave school earlier than those from intact families.

However, other studies have produced different

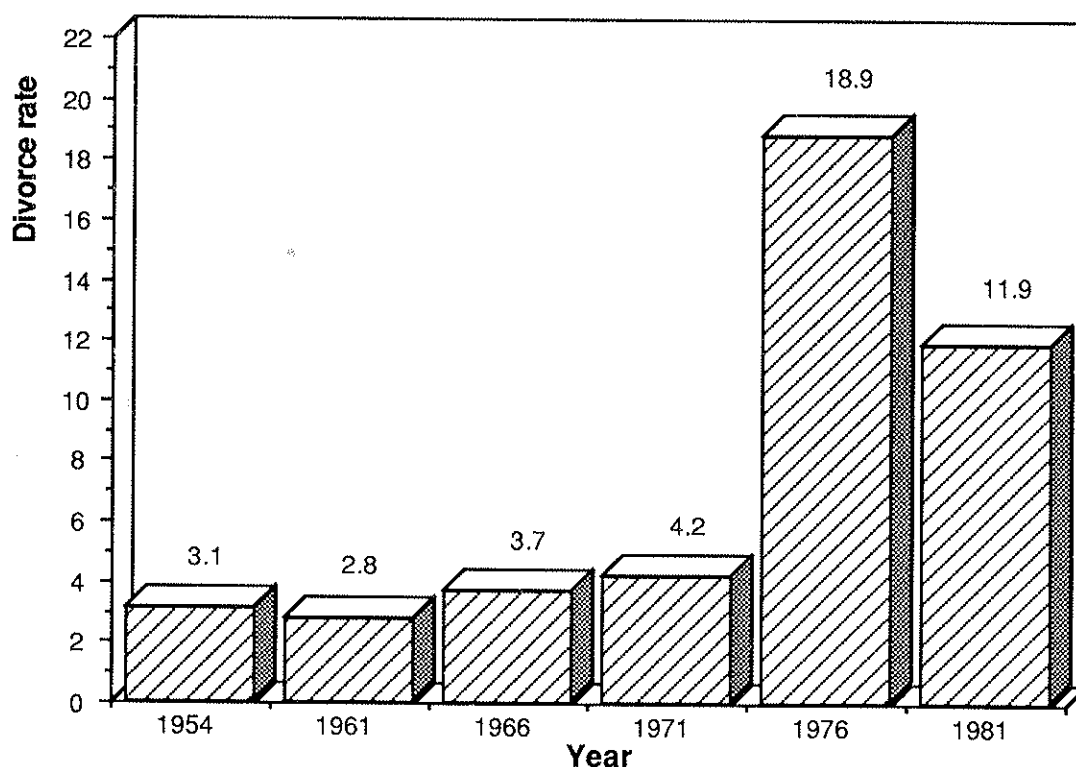


Figure 9: Divorce in Australia, 1954–81, expressed as the number of divorces per 1000 married population [source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (34)].

results. Two recent studies commissioned by the Institute of Family Studies, for example, have found no major differences between children from separated and intact families, when other factors were taken into consideration [32,33].

One of the studies, of children aged 6 to 16 at the time of their parents' separation, found no differences between these children and children from intact families in such areas as social competence, self-esteem, reading ability and everyday skills, if differences in family income were taken into account. The other study, of adolescents aged 13 to 16, also showed no significant differences in the adjustment of children from separated and intact families.

According to Ochiltree [33], it is generally accepted that while the separation of parents is a painful experience for children, they adjust as their parents come to terms with the situation and the turmoil, stress, uncertainty and conflict associated with the breakdown of the marriage are resolved. This process usually takes one or two years.

Factors that affect children's capacity to adapt, she says, include the temperament, age and sex of the child; the overall quality of family relationships before and after separation; the relationship between the child and each of the

parents; and the socio-economic circumstances of the family after separation and divorce.

Where divorce has relieved the tension of a bad family situation, adolescents can adjust rapidly to the new situation, but continued hostility and conflict after divorce is linked to poor adjustment. Some of the adverse effects attributed to divorce are more likely to be due to the poverty of many sole-parent families than to the separation itself.

Ochiltree believes more research is necessary into the long-term consequences of marital disruption before the question of the effects of divorce on children is really answered. In particular, more needs to be known about the effect on children who experience more than one marriage breakdown, or whose custodial parents have a succession of partners.

Poverty

High divorce rates, together with the economic downturn and a decline in social security payments, have resulted in a sharp increase in family poverty in Australia. This is clearly revealed in a recent report [35] by Dr Peter Saunders and Peter Whiteford of the Social Welfare Research Centre at the University of NSW.

The report shows that the number of sole parent families in Australia grew from 180,000 in 1974 to 320,000 in 1986, a rise of 75%. The impact of unemployment on families is seen in the doubling between 1980 and 1986 in the number of children in families where the chief wage earner is unemployed, to more than 220,000.

As a result of these two trends, the number of families dependent on social security has increased. Social security payments to families with dependent children have fallen over the past ten years, both in real terms and relative to the poverty line.

Largely because of these three factors, the number of children living in poverty in Australia has grown dramatically over the past two decades, from an estimated 230,000 in 1966 to over 800,000 in 1985-86. This represents a rise in the incidence of child poverty from 6.2% in 1966 to 20.7% in 1985-86.

(Saunders and Whiteford conclude that the Federal Government's family package, introduced in late 1987, will significantly improve the incomes of poor families, but that more will need to be done, particularly in the area of housing and employment, if child poverty is to be eliminated in Australia.)

Another recent report [24] from the Centre, written by Bruce Bradbury and others, documents evidence of how unemployment, means tests, taxation and other factors can trap families in poverty, affecting the children's prospects as well their parents'. Youth unemployment, for

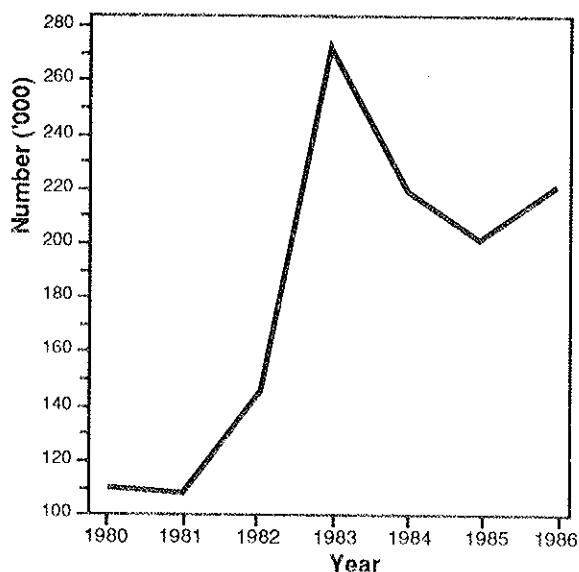


Figure 10: Number of children in families where the chief wage earner is unemployed, 1980-86 [source: Saunders & Whiteford (35)].

example, tends to be concentrated in families where the parents have low incomes or are themselves unemployed. One study cited in the report notes:

"...numerous factors such as unemployment, financial difficulties, impoverished neighbourhoods, physical and mental health problems and so on could combine to lock families into a situation of poverty which made it difficult for adult members to escape and which severely curtailed the life chances of the children."

While single-parent families and the families of the unemployed are the hardest hit, other Australian families are also feeling the pinch. Personal debt has grown steadily over the past decade. While this may also reflect more readily available and serviceable credit, a rise in the number of bankruptcies and the experiences of financial counsellors suggest that an increasing number of families are over-extended and struggling financially [36]. This, too, is placing strains on marriages and families.

Figures from the Inspector General in Bankruptcy [37] show bankruptcies increased 170%, from 1,887 to 5,140, between 1976 and 1981. There has been another rise of 60%, to 7,534, between 1985 and 1987. In other words, bankruptcies have increased four-fold over the past decade in Australia.

A rise in consumer bankruptcies appears to make up most of this increase. A recent survey [38] by the Credit Reference Association of Australia Ltd of bankruptcies in Queensland, NSW, ACT, Victoria and South Australia shows a rise of

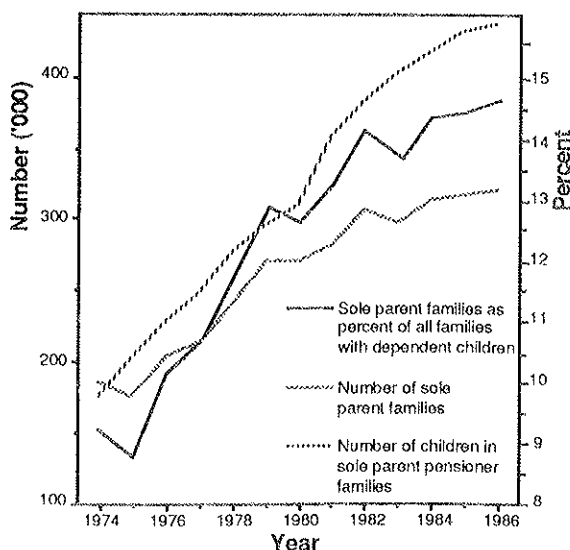


Figure 11: Growth in sole parent families, 1974-86 [source: Saunders & Whiteford (35)].

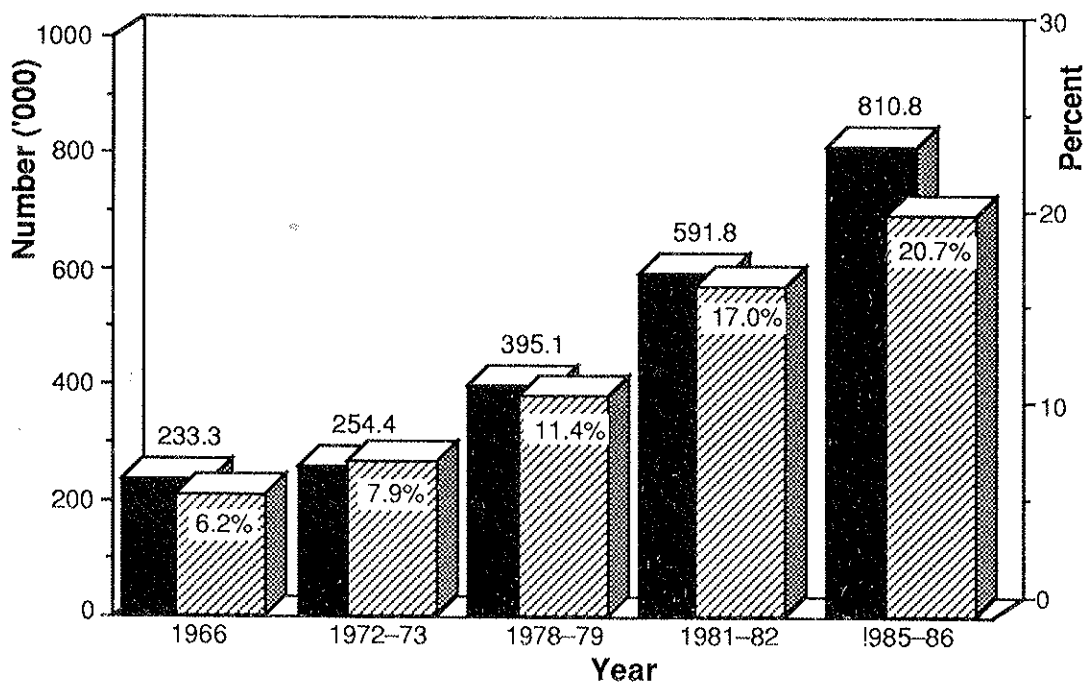


Figure 12: Children in poverty, 1966-86, expressed both as the total number of dependent children (thousands) and as the proportion of all children. Estimates are based on the measurement of poverty developed by the 1975 (Henderson) Commission of Inquiry Into Poverty [source: Saunders & Whiteford (35)].

80% in consumer bankruptcies between 1985 and 1987 - from 2,729 to 4,909. Business bankruptcies rose 39% from 1,135 to 1,577.

The survey found that the unemployed and manual workers made up the largest proportions of consumer bankrupts (36% and 32%

respectively). About 70% of the unemployed had formerly worked in manual occupations.

Family violence

Statistics on domestic violence and child abuse also suggest an alarming deterioration in family

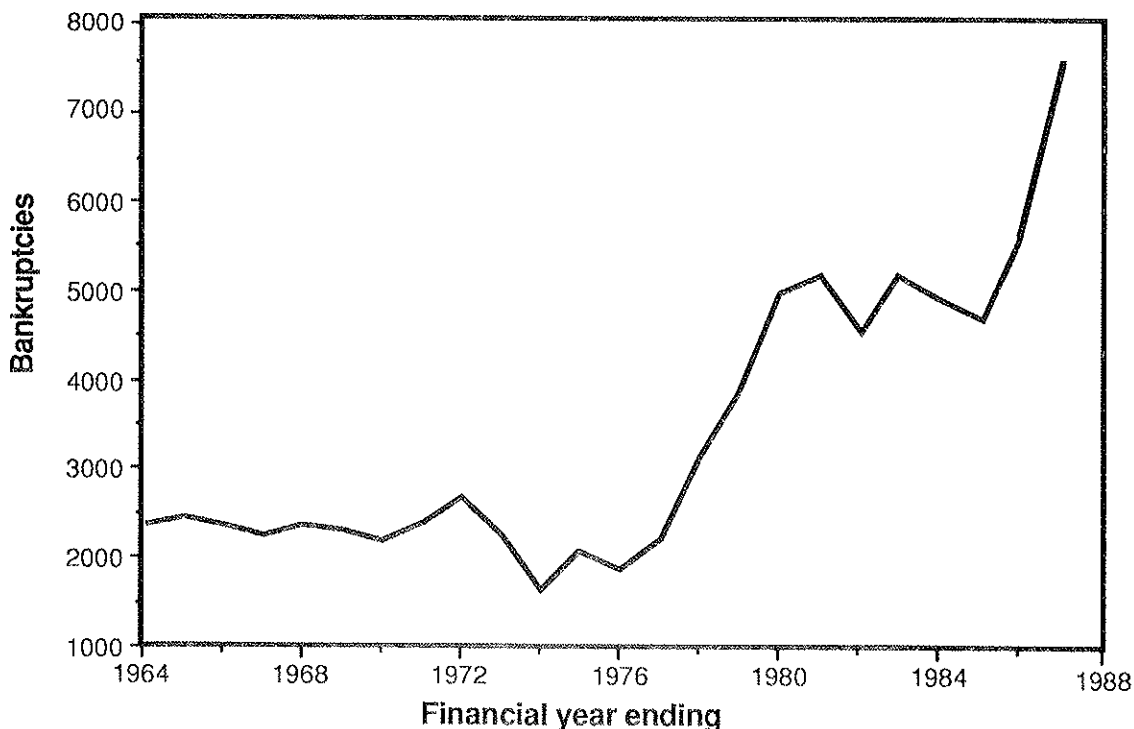


Figure 13: Trends in bankruptcies in Australia, 1964-87 [source: Inspector General in Bankruptcy (37)].

life in Australia in recent years, but in these cases the significance of the figures is less clear. Reliable data do not go back far, and it is impossible to determine to what extent increases are real, or reflect a greater community awareness of the problem, a greater willingness to seek help, and better community services for victims. Certainly, community demands on legal provisions and medical assistance have grown dramatically in these areas.

In NSW, apprehended domestic violence orders, which are sought either by a victim or by police to prevent further violence, have increased fourfold from an average of 4.6 a week in 1983, when the order was introduced through an amendment of the Crimes Act, to an average of 18.6 per week in 1986 [39].

Notifications of suspected child abuse and neglect in NSW have risen from 1,500 in 1981 to almost 23,000 in 1987 (about 15,500 of which are first notifications, the rest being cases where authorities had been notified previously) [40]. About 60% of the notifications are confirmed, with about 60% of these being considered serious enough to require action.

Contrary to earlier beliefs, experts now say abuse and neglect of children (although not sexual assault) is much more common among the poor [41]. If this is the case, and given the rise in family poverty, it seems likely that the increase in notifications represents in part a real rise in child abuse.

The Sexual Assault Referral Centre in Adelaide has seen an enormous increase in the numbers of young children referred to the centre since it was established in 1977. According to Dr Tania Black [43], of the centre, the increases reflect not only an increased public awareness and determination to act, but also a real increase in the amount of sexual abuse "as offenders move from one 'family' to another in our society with its high rate of marriage and relationship break-ups".

Homelessness

Family disputes, violence, conflict, and total breakdown are the most common reasons why young people leave home prematurely [30]. Since the late 1970s there has been a rapid rise in the numbers of homeless youth in Australia, currently the subject of a national inquiry by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

Until the beginning of the 1970s, homelessness was concentrated largely among older men, the "deros" and "hobos". The 1970s and 1980s have

seen the emergence of a new era of homelessness, which now embraces young people, women and families. Behind this development are changed social and economic conditions, but the two groups share common backgrounds: low socio-economic status and family conflict.

According to 1985 estimates cited in a recent report [43] by the Human Rights Commission, there are 40,000 permanently homeless Australians, with another 60,000 on the verge of being homeless. About 700,000 households in Australia lack the means to live above the poverty line and pay rent or mortgage costs. Included among these households are about 400,000 families with children.

The report warns that youth homelessness cannot be dismissed as a short-term phenomenon, and lists two sets of factors behind youth homelessness. One set accounts for why young people have left home and can find it difficult to return. They include: family conflict and breakdown; emotional difficulties; drug or alcohol problems; pregnancy; and sexual or physical abuse.

The other set of factors denies these young people the ability to cope by themselves, and includes: limited job opportunities; the low level of unemployment benefits; increasing private housing costs; little public housing for young people; discrimination by landlords against young people; few hostels and other alternative forms of accommodation within the means of young people.

The report also relates the problem to the policy of deinstitutionalisation – closing large children's institutions – adopted by Australia and many western nations (without always providing adequate alternative support).

Behind this situation lie broader social changes, the reports says:

"Western industrial societies like ours assume that the nuclear family will nurture and assist young people to find a place in the social and economic structure of the community. This assumption, however, is increasingly at odds with reality. For one reason or another, many families do not succeed. Changing economic forces and rapid technological advances are taking their toll on families, particularly on children and young people who no longer have a range of suitable jobs to go to or even the promise of employment after years of education."

Youth homelessness is creating an expanding reservoir of alienated, chronically depressed, prematurely aged, welfare-dependent young people who feel worthless and powerless to change their lives. They are already serious casualties of the changes we are undergoing, and perhaps more vulnerable than any other to the problems discussed in this report.

Children in Australian society

The plight of poor and underprivileged children in Australia is serious. But they are not the only ones that need greater support; all children do. Dr Don Edgar [31], of the Institute of Family Studies, recently called for a more informed and intelligent debate about the place of children in Australian society, saying that children are suffering from the lag between changes in the family and broader institutional responses:

"All our children' must be the catch-cry, not as an alternative to a necessary focus on the poor or 'needy', but in recognition of the requirement for comprehensive treatment of issues that affect us all. Institutional responses are needed on a wider scale if we are not to damage the viability of every family in Australia."

One major factor that Edgar believes lies behind the inadequate support given to families in Australia is our apparent indifference, even hostility, towards children. Without a change in this attitude, he says, we may never get more money for child care, better support systems for families with children, improved children's

television, and recreational and education programs.

Education

Just as changes in the family are imposing greater psychological stresses on children in Australia, so too are the changes in education.

Educational matters made up the most frequently raised issue in the 1985-86 Priority One national phone-in [44] about issues affecting young people. School and education also ranked as one of young people's top concerns in the ANOP surveys [25] undertaken for the Office of Youth Affairs, with emphasis on the issue increasing between 1984 and 1986 (Figure 8 page 17).

In the Finlayson study [8], schoolwork was the most frequently cited reason for feeling "down or low". School and education (including exam pressures and teachers' attitudes) ranked fourth for boys and fifth for girls when they were asked to list up to three Australian or world problems about which they were most concerned. It followed war, violence, unemployment and, for girls, underprivileged people (tables 10,11 page 34).

One of the most significant changes in education in Australia is the growing proportion of young people staying on to complete their secondary schooling. For example, Year 12 retention rates at Australian schools have risen from 34.8% in 1981 to 53.1% in 1987 [45,46]. The proportion of youth aged 15 to 19 studying full-time has

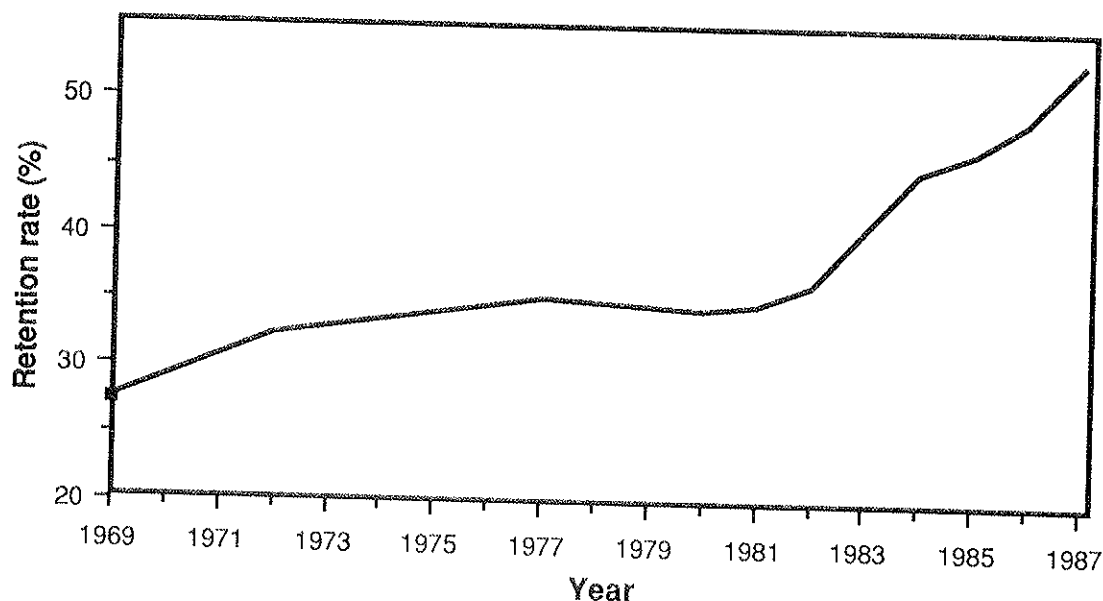


Figure 14: Retention rates in Australian Schools, 1969-87. The rate represents the percentage of students enrolled in first year of secondary school who stay on to year 12 [source: Commonwealth Department of Education (45); Australian Bureau of Statistics (46)].

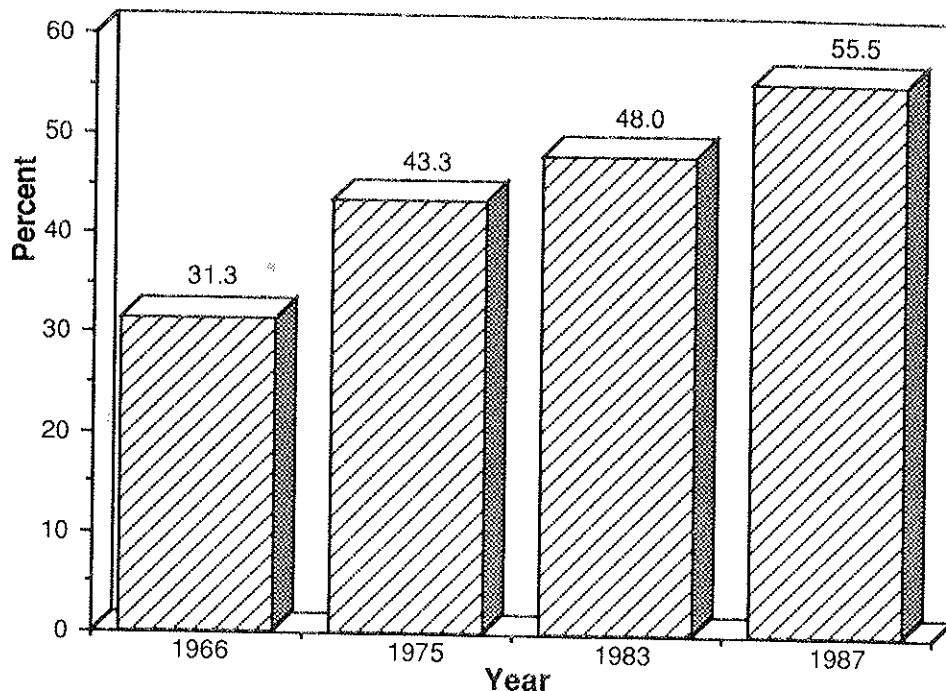


Figure 15: Proportion of teenagers aged 15–19 in full-time education, 1966–87 [source: Sweet (48); Australian Bureau of Statistics (47)].

increased from 31.3% in 1966 to 55.5% in 1987 [47,48].

There are two reasons behind this trend: staying in the school system is seen as an alternative to unemployment; and the perception that a good education is the key to getting a decent job, and even, increasingly, getting any job.

The most obvious pressures of education are those of schoolwork and passing exams. Exams rank amongst children's most stressful experiences [26]. As more students stay on at school and educational qualifications become more important in getting work, then more students become exposed to these pressures, and the pressures themselves will become more intense as education becomes more competitive. The result is that more students are likely to suffer psychologically, and to suffer more.

Higher school retention rates have helped to make competition stiffer for places in the tertiary education system, and contributed to a rise in the number of young people being denied places in universities and colleges of advanced education. Universities and colleges of advanced education have estimated that in 1987 between 13,000 and 20,000 people failed to gain a place despite being eligible and willing to accept an offer — an increase of about 22% over the 11,000 to 16,000 in this category in 1986 [49].

But there is more to the problem than this.

Research provides ample evidence of other tensions in the education system [30]. The research suggests that while students seem to value education and even basically like school, they are also:

- Disenchanted by the mismatch between student and school values.
- Discontented with the curriculum, which they believe is too academic, often uninteresting, and irrelevant. Students want more emphasis on 'the whole person', and a much closer relationship between school and 'the world of work'.
- Dissatisfied with student/teacher relationships. Students resent the level of staff turnover, and feel teachers do not care about individuals.
- Unhappy with the authoritarian nature of school administration, which denies students any influence in decision-making.

Dr James Walker, senior lecturer in the Department of Social and Policy Studies in Education at the University of Sydney, says in a 1987 report [50] that the problematic relation between the curriculum and the post-school needs of young people is heightened by the economic, industrial and technological changes affecting employment:

"If, perhaps, 'the world of work' has changed too rapidly, the curriculum has changed too slowly. Hence we have the problems currently facing secondary students and teachers. For a large proportion of students, the curriculum is perceived, at worst, as largely irrelevant; at best, as relatively ineffective."

Thus social changes are adding to the tensions inherent in the education structure and process: more children are staying on at school when they would rather be working; because more are staying on to get a better education, the competition is fiercer; as the 'outside world' changes with increasing rapidity, the perceived gap between the curriculum and that world is widening, increasing students' frustrations.

It is not surprising, then, that the Finlayson study [8] of Sydney high school students found that:

"Despite their overall feeling that they were doing well at school, the school system appeared counter-productive to this feeling of confidence in their performance. The longer they stayed at school, the more inadequate they felt, presumably due to the increasing competitiveness produced by the system."

Employment

The cost of unemployment

The changed circumstances of young people in Australia are most clearly revealed, statistically, in the increase in youth unemployment over the past two decades.

Unemployment consistently ranks among the top concerns of Australians, and young Australians in particular [1,3,8,9,10,25]. Even the apprehension of unemployment has been associated with feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, emotional problems and delinquency among young people [30].

The most widely supported view of youth to come out of recent surveys on unemployment is that of its negative psychological impact [30]. Attitudes frequently associated with unemployment include anger, depression, anxiety, alienation, helplessness, guilt, loss of self-esteem and boredom [51]. For adolescents, becoming unemployed after leaving school can significantly retard maturation[51].

Research in Australia and overseas has linked unemployment to mental and physical ill-health, suicide, drugs and crime. One study in Victoria found the attempted suicide rate among the unemployed over a two-year period was 12 times the average rate [8]. An ACT study found that half of a group of 16 to 24-year-olds seeking full-time work had severe psychiatric disorders, most commonly depression; in 70% of the cases, the problem followed the onset of unemployment [52].

Unemployment, particularly long-term or frequent unemployment, can also result in a poorer diet, heavier smoking, heavier drinking, reduced participation in sport, and increased use of hard drugs [9,51]. A South Australian study found that the number of juvenile unemployed offenders increased by 238% in a given period, compared to an average increase in numbers of juvenile offenders of only 58% [52].

One possible explanation of why suicide rates for young women have not increased like those of young men is that, because of their socialisation or upbringing, women may not be as hard hit by being unemployed as men [7]. Women can lead a fulfilling life in the home, so reducing the loss of status, self-esteem and social contacts experienced by unemployed men.

The plight of unemployed youth cannot be helped by the finding of several studies that people, including young people themselves, tend to blame the unemployed for their situation [30,25]. What is more, this attitude appears to be becoming more prevalent.

Polls conducted since 1975 show that the proportion of Australians who consider "people not wanting to work" as a main cause of unemployment had fallen from almost a half to a quarter by 1982, as the unemployment rate rose, but has returned to the 1975 level since then, even though the unemployment rate remains high [24].

Other research suggests that the public considers unemployed youth to be far more responsible for their predicament than are unemployed workers generally [24].

Added to this greater burden of social opprobrium, unemployment benefits for 16 to 17-year-olds (now replaced by a job search allowance) have fallen since 1975 - in real terms, relative to benefits paid to other unemployed, and relative to the poverty line [24].

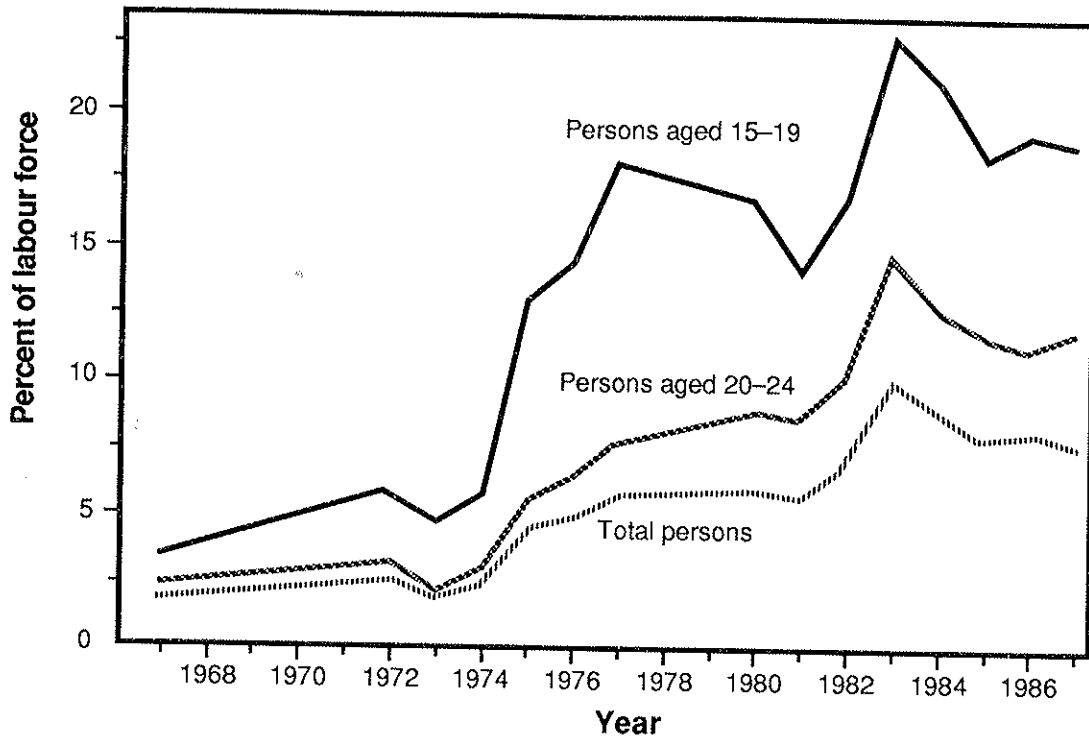


Figure 16: Unemployment rates by age, 1967-87 [source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (46,53)].

Trends in youth employment

The total unemployment rates for people aged 15 to 24 are now more than five times those 20 years ago [46,53]. For people between 15 and 19, it is now 18.7%, more than twice the overall rate of 7.8%, while for those aged 20 to 24, the rate is 11.7% (August 1987 figures).

The unemployment rate for those wanting full-time work, a more significant factor for the purposes of this report, is higher, standing at 21.3% in 1987 compared to 3.3% in 1971. Although the proportion of 15 to 19-year-olds who are working or want to work full-time has fallen from 52.2% in 1971 to 36.4% in 1987 as more teenagers opt to remain at school, there are

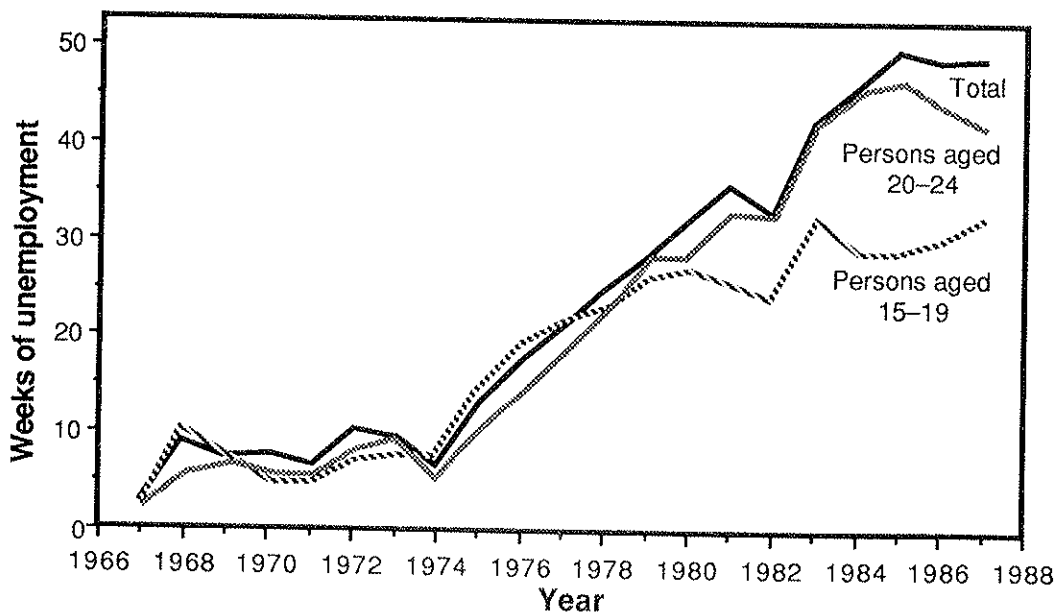


Figure 17: Average duration of unemployment by age, 1967-87 [source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (46,53)].

still 106,600 teenagers seeking full-time work, compared to only 19,400 in 1971.

The time that young people remain jobless - an important factor in terms of the psychological impact of unemployment - has increased in the 20 years since 1967 from an average of 2.9 weeks to 32.5 weeks for those between 15 and 19, and from 2.8 weeks to 41.9 weeks for those aged 20 to 24. The longer people are without jobs, the harder it becomes for them to find work [8,52]. In other words, a growing number of young Australians risk becoming permanently unemployable.

Table 8: Percent unemployment by age [source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (46, 53)].

August	Age group (years)		Total
	15-19	20-24	
MALES			
1967	3.1	1.7	1.2
1972	5.6	2.6	2.0
1977	15.8	7.2	4.7
1980	14.8	8.5	5.0
1981	11.2	8.4	4.7
1982	16.4	11.3	6.3
1983	23.0	17.2	9.9
1984	22.1	14.3	8.8
1985	19.3	12.5	7.8
1986	18.7	12.3	7.7
1987	18.1	12.6	7.5
FEMALES			
1967	3.6	3.0	2.8
1972	5.9	3.8	3.6
1977	20.3	8.0	7.4
1980	18.9	9.1	7.5
1981	17.1	8.7	7.1
1982	17.1	8.8	7.4
1983	22.2	11.5	9.9
1984	19.7	10.3	8.4
1985	17.1	10.5	8.0
1986	19.5	9.9	8.4
1987	19.4	10.6	8.3
TOTAL			
1967	3.3	2.3	1.7
1972	5.8	3.1	2.5
1977	18.0	7.6	5.7
1980	16.7	8.8	5.9
1981	13.9	8.5	5.6
1982	16.7	10.2	6.7
1983	22.6	14.7	9.9
1984	21.0	12.5	8.6
1985	18.2	11.6	7.9
1986	19.1	11.2	8.0
1987	18.7	11.7	7.8

In order to understand the seriousness of the social problem posed by youth unemployment, we need to look at its causes. The situation with the youth labour market is fundamentally different from the adult market. In the adult labour market, both the number of jobs and the size of the workforce is growing, with the gap between the two narrowing in recent years.

With the teenage labour market, full-time unemployment rose higher and has remained high, despite a decline in the number of teenagers entering the full-time labour force, because there has been a fall of about 30% in the number of full-time jobs since the early 1970s.

An analysis [48] of the youth labour market over the past 20 years by Richard Sweet, an education and training consultant and a member of Macquarie University's centre for research in education and work, reveals the extent to which this situation is a result, not just of economic recession or the relative level of youth wages, but of structural and technological changes occurring in Australia.

Sweet identifies factors such as: an increased sophistication of employers in matching labour supply to labour demand; the growth in subcontracting; technological innovation; a finer division of labour; higher entry qualifications in such areas as nursing; unregulated competition from more experienced and better-educated labour-force entrants; and the dynamics of a

Table 9: Average duration (weeks) of unemployment by age [source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (46, 53)].

	Age group (years)		Total
	15-19	20-24	
1967	2.9	2.8	3.0
1968	10.2	5.3	8.9
1969	7.2	6.7	7.4
1970	5.3	5.6	7.3
1971	5.4	5.1	6.6
1972	7.3	7.9	9.7
1973	7.8	9.6	9.3
1974	7.8	5.6	6.5
1975	13.2	9.8	12.7
1976	18.5	14.1	17.5
1977	21.1	17.8	20.9
1979	25.9	27.9	28.4
1980	26.7	28.2	32.1
1981	25.4	32.4	35.1
1982	24.0	32.5	32.8
1983	32.0	42.1	41.5
1984	28.9	45.9	45.5
1985	29.0	46.2	49.5
1986	29.8	43.4	48.8
1987	32.5	41.9	48.6

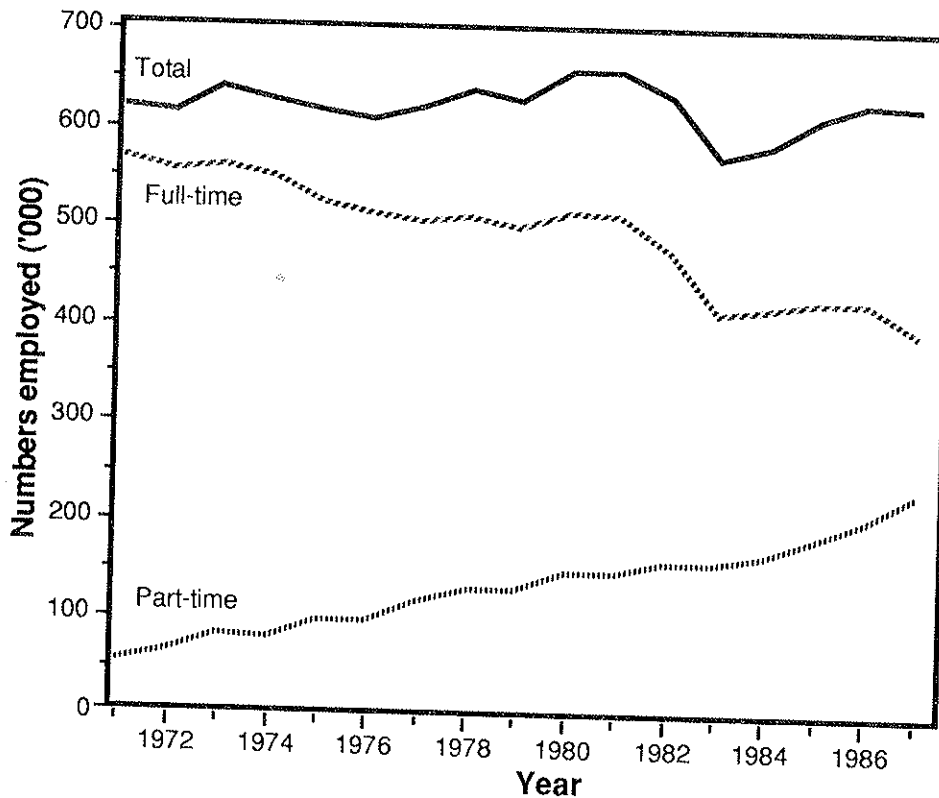


Figure 18: Changes in the teenage labour market, 1971-87 [source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (53)].

labour market which gives preference to skill and experience in both hiring and firing decisions.

"In a very real sense these are factors which increase the productivity of the economy by raising its efficiency and its skills base. Rather than the long-term decline in full-time employment among teenagers having resulted from economic recession, it seems more reasonable to argue that it has been the result of changes in employment patterns which have accompanied rising productivity."

Because of this, he says, any solutions to youth's labour market problems are unlikely to be found in economic growth:

"Over a twenty-year period, decline in full-time teenage employment has occurred both in times of respectable economic growth and in periods of recession. Future economic growth which stems from increased productivity and efficiency (as opposed to factors such as expanded export markets or rising commodity prices) offers little prospect of creating additional full-time jobs for teenagers. Much of the job loss for youth that occurred during the 1970s stemmed from improvements in productivity and

efficiency. Thus youth carried a disproportionate burden of the human cost of these improvements."

But the problem does not end there. Apart from the fall in full-time jobs, there have also been qualitative changes in the jobs available to teenagers. Sweet shows that the highest rates of employment decline have generally occurred in jobs that are skilled and require extensive post-school training, or in white collar and clerical jobs, which young people like. On the other hand, there are now more jobs for junior labourers and storemen, and there has been very rapid growth in the numbers of marginal, deskilled, dead-end, casual, part-time jobs that are not linked to training or to career paths:

"There is thus a clear contrast between an increasingly educated and qualified group of young people entering the labour force and decreasing opportunities for these young people to exercise their talents and skills."

The Senate Standing Committee on Science, Technology and the Environment (now the Senate Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology), in its 1987 report [54] on technology assessment in Australia, similarly warns that young people will be the most disadvantaged by any jobless growth - growth in

the economy that is accompanied by little or no growth in employment - brought about by technological change.

The committee also expresses concern over the possibility that new technology will result in "the division of the Australian workforce into two sectors: a relatively securely employed, moderately well paid sector and a low-paid, insecurely employed sector".

The committee describes the assessment of such impacts of technology in Australia as "abysmal" and, in relation to employment, concludes that:

"...modernisation of Australian industry is essential and that the Government should continue programs to encourage such modernisation. The Committee cautions, however, against approaching the coming period of rapid modernisation with the attitude that this modernisation is guaranteed to help improve Australia's unemployment situation. It calls for vigilance in monitoring developments in relation to technological unemployment."

The media

For many people, the media, especially television, are an important influence behind the growing problems of youth. The most common response from my colleagues, when they learnt of this project, was to blame television. Several of the experts I spoke to also mentioned the harm being done by television.

Television represents one of the most remarkable changes in our society in the past 25 years - a development that has revolutionised what goes on in the family. There are many charges made against television, both the medium itself and the messages it delivers: it is turning us into passive observers of life, living vicariously through the lives of soap opera characters; it is making us more violent, or at least more tolerant of violence; it impairs our children's ability to concentrate and learn; it inhibits the development of social skills necessary to make friends and get on with people; it stops families talking to each other and doing things together; it is making us fearful and anxious about the world; it tempts and frustrates us with images of a good life beyond our means.

How valid are these charges? According to Dr Patricia Edgar [55], Director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation, research into the impact of television has yet to provide clear

answers, and the debate about it remains confused. Because of its important place in our lives, there is perhaps a tendency to place more blame on television than it deserves, she says.

For most children, watching up to about 20 hours of television a week probably does not do much harm, or much good. The situation is different for those children - about a fifth of all children - who are heavy viewers, watching 30 to 40 hours a week.

These children are watching so much television that they are not developing social and physical skills. In their case, however, sitting in front of the TV for so long is a symptom of other problems. They have low self-esteem, do not have friends, are not doing well at school and often have family problems.

Edgar remains unconvinced that violence on television by itself triggers violent acts by individuals or is increasing the level of violence in society - the issue that dominates public discussion about the effects of television. However, the argument that so much anti-social behaviour is shown on TV that it is conditioning people to regard such behaviour as acceptable, is one that is extremely hard to test scientifically.

Similarly, she questions television's alleged impact on learning ability, saying that all it might be doing is showing how dull, in comparison, school is, and how boring many teachers are.

Edgar is more concerned about other aspects of television. One is that through both programs and advertising we are constantly being sold a lifestyle that is beyond our means - a pitch particularly tough for those, such as the unemployed, who feel the system has already beaten them. This aspect of television is probably a far more significant instigator of violence and crime than violent programs, she believes.

But what concerns her most, because of the anxiety and alienation it is creating, is the changing nature of TV news and current affairs. The increasing competitiveness between channels, which is increasing emphasis on dramatic pictures, and the almost instant coverage available of overseas events, mean we are being subjected to an ever increasing barrage of horror, she says:

"Television news and current affairs give the impression that the world is growing into a terrible place of turmoil and threat, and this contributes to the alienation of

people far, far more than fictional, entertainment programs."

Recent research indicates that many Australians are concerned about the power and role of the news media in modern society. Hugh Mackay [3], the author of the Mackay Reports on community attitudes, found in 1986 that many people felt anxious about the power of the media to influence public opinion, to create news, and to reinforce negative and unattractive values.

A 1988 report [56] on middle-class Australian attitudes, prepared by Melbourne psychologist, Vicki Arbes, for the Clemenger group of companies, says that while people have been sceptical of the media for many years, public criticism is now focusing more on the media's emphasis on "bad news". Australians consider the media must take a major share of the blame for the pessimism many feel about life:

"People believe the news they see, hear or read is slanted in such a way as to deliberately present the grimmest and most depressing aspect. It seems as if the media offer a convenient scapegoat for creating the current mood of pessimism. In their hearts, people want to feel that things are not really as bad as they seem so they accuse the media of deliberately slanting the news."

This negative effect of the media is sometimes quite specific, and so can exacerbate the impact of social problems. For example, one recent study suggests that media coverage of youth unemployment has not made young people feel more determined and motivated to study to get a job, but instead has tended to produce a sense of hopelessness, apathy and bitterness [30].

CHANGE AND THE FUTURE

Youth's concerns about the future

This study began as an exploration of what effect the concerns of youth about the future might be having on their attitudes and behaviour. Experts vary in their opinions on this question, ranging from those who believe that it could be significantly affecting child and adolescent development, to those who are sceptical of the research findings that youth are pessimistic and tend to dismiss the significance of global concerns to their development.

However, discussions did reveal common ground amongst most of those I spoke to, with the former being cautious about claiming any direct links between global pessimism and specific problems such as suicide and drug abuse, and the latter conceding that general concerns about the world could become psychologically significant where young people also face personal difficulties.

Many studies [1,57,58,59,60,61], both in Australia and overseas, suggest that a large proportion of young people regard the future of the world with fear and trepidation. They see a world devastated by nuclear war and ravaged by pollution and environmental degradation, a dehumanised society in which technology is out of control (or even in control) and unemployment rampant.

Most of the research has tended to focus on the threat of nuclear war. Thus, according to one of these studies [61]:

"...the threat of nuclear annihilation is uppermost in the minds of an overwhelming majority of young people, even though there are many other pressing issues which they have to deal with, such as the prospect of unemployment, the problem of drug taking, and family disharmony."

Overseas researchers have suggested that the nuclear arms race might be casting a psychological shadow over our youth, producing feelings of apathy or anger, mistrust of adult

society, and an approach to life based on instant gratification rather than long-term goals. The New Zealand branch of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists [62], for example, declared in 1984 that:

"...we share the growing concern of physicians around the world at the escalating international preparations for nuclear war...and as psychiatrists, we believe this situation constitutes the greatest mental health crisis in all history."

Australian researchers have expressed similar concerns. Dr Margot Prior [63], reader in psychology at La Trobe University in Melbourne, who has undertaken research in the area, says:

"We fear that the effects of living in the nuclear shadow could make our children despairing, cynical, filled with anger and outrage, unwilling to make long-term commitments - either to enduring close relationships, to school achievement, or to career and employment. Since life may well be temporary, it seems to make sense that one should live for the moment, to pursue temporary pleasures, to focus on instant gratification. Indeed this may well be an adaptive reaction in our present times. But it does not augur well for a happy adult adjustment."

But Prior [64], like other researchers in Australia interested in the issue of young people's concerns about nuclear war, or the future in general, is cautious about making any direct link between their pessimism and such problems as youth suicide, drug abuse and delinquency:

"Family factors and intrinsic personality factors are much more powerful than their general view of the world....What we know about the kinds of conditions that produce these problems is that they have been around for a long time. It has to do with dysfunctional development and breakdowns very early in development."

The seeds of the problems are sown very early, before an awareness of the world develops."

The possibility that these attitudes are having a serious effect on youth ought to be taken seriously, these researchers feel, but there is very little, if any, research being undertaken in this area; many factors contribute to adolescent development, and any links between world views and personal problems remain speculative. Perth consultant psychiatrist, Dr Suzanne Dobson [62], who has studied the research literature on the fear of nuclear war, says she feels intuitively that there is a link between youth problems and pessimism about the future, but that there is no evidence to back up that belief:

"...no study has yet demonstrated actual diagnosable psychopathology as a direct result of the (nuclear) threat, nor has even attempted to demonstrate it."

Other experts I spoke to had more serious misgivings about the issue, pointing to

Table 10: Issues of concern among Sydney high school students, aged 12-16. Students were asked to list up to three Australian or world problems about which they were most concerned [source: Finlayson (8)].

Issue	Girls(%) (n=681)	Boys(%) (n=585)
Violence (rape, murder, domestic violence, terrorism)	53.0	32.8
War (nuclear bombs, the end of the world, arms race)	49.9	54.0
Unemployment	26.3	30.2
Underprivileged people	24.2	14.0
School and education (exam pressures, teachers' attitudes)	22.5	26.8
Health	20.1	17.8
Racism	15.6	16.7
Conservation	12.0	13.3
Family (divorce etc)	11.9	7.7
Religion	10.9	8.5
Politics	9.2	14.3
Leisure (facilities)	9.1	9.4
Relationships	8.1	9.0
Morals (sex issues etc)	7.6	6.1
Youth (future etc)	5.9	5.3
Law (corruption etc)	4.0	7.3
Advanced technology (space, computers, nuclear science)	1.0	9.0
Other	0.9	2.7

methodological flaws in the studies, which are acknowledged by those engaged in the research. I was told to be wary of the findings of the studies; that they reflected what the researchers were looking for; that they were just stereotypes of the future that children had picked up; and that the perceptions could not necessarily be taken at face value, and might not reflect what children actually expected the future to be like.

Even if young people did have these concerns they did not weigh heavily on them, some said. The more personal worries were what mattered.

Some research findings support this view. A 1983 study, for example, found that teenagers were only interested in their personal future, and showed little concern with the future of society [30]. The Finlayson study [8] found that while war, violence and unemployment topped the list of issues about which the students were most concerned, the most common reasons for feeling depressed were schoolwork, "things going wrong", and family trouble. World problems such as war ranked near the bottom of the list:

"The conclusion appears to be that many of youth's so-called 'concerns' are at an intellectual or abstract level and not at a directly emotional or personal level."

Certainly, a psychological safety mechanism does seem to operate. There is plenty of evidence that people tend to make a sharp distinction

Table 11: Main reasons given by Sydney high school students, aged 12-16, for feeling depressed ("down or low")* [source: Finlayson (8)].

Issue	Girls(%) (n=674)	Boys(%) (n=562)
Schoolwork	48.7	51.9
Things going wrong	46.1	39.0
Family trouble	37.5	30.6
Don't feel good	36.0	18.7
Friend's behaviour	26.8	28.1
Can't do what I want	20.3	21.7
The future	14.1	17.6
Being in trouble	12.5	16.5
World problems (eg war)	8.9	8.4
Lack of Christianity	6.4	5.1
Money	5.6	12.1
Other	11.4	9.6

(*Total exceeds 100% as more than one response was allowed)

between their personal future and the future of society or the world: a happy belief that the misfortunes that they believe are increasingly likely to befall others, won't affect them [1].

For example, a recent United States survey of more than 600,000 school students found that most believed their personal future was promising, but they delivered a grim prognosis for the future of the US and the world [65]. The overwhelming majority expected to be as rich as or richer than their parents, and to be as happy as or happier than they were now.

However, half or more of the students believed that in the US drug abuse and crime would get worse, and over 40% believed unemployment, the national debt and poverty would become more serious. Half or more of the students believed the danger of nuclear war would become more severe, depletion of natural resources and energy sources and pollution of air, water and soil would get worse, and there would be a greater imbalance between population and food supply. The only world problem where a significant proportion of students saw things getting better was the relations between different races.

Australian research also suggests that young people are generally confident that they will get the things they want out of life, despite their concerns about the future in general. The Finlayson study [8], the ANOP surveys [25] conducted for the Office of Youth Affairs and other research [30] indicate that most young people are optimistic about their future prospects, with conventional aspirations to travel, get a job they like, own their own home, marry and raise a family.

It appears, then, that the worst damage is done when this personal optimism breaks down and, because of personal circumstances, pessimism about the future of the world is translated into a more personal despair and sense of hopelessness. As Adelaide child psychiatrist, Professor Robert Kosky [66], put it:

"In relation to suicides, the big factor is family violence, hostility, discord. But anything that lowers the degree of hope outside the family will increase the harm done by problems within the family."

Nevertheless, I believe that the emphasis on the personal factors behind the worsening problems of young people may be, for several reasons, leading us to under-estimate the significance of their broad global concerns.

Fear of the future, or of the present?

There are several reasons why we may be under-estimating the importance of findings about young people's pessimism about the future:

- The professional interests of those who treat or help young people with problems. Psychiatrists, psychologists and others are most interested in those factors that distinguish the disturbed or anti-social individual from the normal - factors that they may be able to change - than the possible effect of global concerns that are shared by everyone.
- The limitations of the research process. Scientific research is much more adept at identifying those characteristics and influences that separate a particular group of people - in this case, problem youth - from the rest of the community, than it is at identifying the specific effects of factors that apply to the entire community.
- The difficulty of interpreting young people's views about the future, and the need for more research into this issue to improve our understanding of its significance.

It is this last point I want to explore in this section.

Most of the research carried out in this area suggests that, on the face of it, a large proportion of young people appear to be seriously concerned about broad social or global issues. In the 1985-86 Priority One national phone-in [44], which prompted almost 26,000 calls about the issues that affect young people, international issues such as peace and conservation were the third most frequently mentioned topic, after education and jobs, for those aged 25 and under. For those under 15, international issues ranked first.

The ANOP surveys [25] (figure 8 page 17), the Finlayson study [8] and others [1,9,60,61] have also recorded these broad concerns, with the main ones usually being unemployment, drugs and war or nuclear war (drugs did not emerge as a major concern of students in the Finlayson study).

However, there is some doubt, as we have seen, about how personally important these concerns are. It is hard to get a measure, or feel, of the depth of feeling or distress that young people might experience about these issues from questions that ask them what their main concerns are, or if they are worried about such issues as the threat of nuclear war.

More revealing, I believe, are those studies in which children and teenagers have simply been asked, sometimes as a prelude to specific questions about nuclear war, to describe or imagine what the world will be like in the future (say, in 20 years time, or when they grow up). The bleakness and sense of hopelessness that pervade the imagery of many of the children is frightening.

Two such studies are described in my earlier report [1] for the Commission for the Future, "Australian attitudes to science and technology and the future", which includes examples of the children's descriptions. I only summarise the findings here.

In one of the studies [57], a 1983 survey by Sydney sociologist, Petah Digby, of 320 children aged 10 to 12, 55% of the children spontaneously mentioned nuclear weapons or war, 31% pollution or environmental destruction, and 29% job shortages that were often linked to the growing use of computers and robots. These were the three most frequently mentioned concerns.

Digby's analysis indicated that almost half (46%) were generally pessimistic about the future, 40% saw the future of the world as "threatened" (with pessimism and the perception of threat increasing with age), and 38% felt helpless about the situation (compared with 30% who did not).

Digby found that while television and radio were by far the most important sources of information about nuclear weapons and nuclear war (56% nominated them, compared with less than 10% for all other sources), information about the future of the world came from a wide range of sources: TV and radio (23%), newspapers and magazines (13%), library and books (16%), children's own imagination and opinion (20%), parents and relations (16%), other people (10%), and teachers and school (3%).

The second study [58] was carried out over a period of several years by Noel Wilson, a former teacher and former principal research officer in

the South Australian Department of Education. Wilson asked 600 students aged 14 to 17 to draw, paint, write and talk about how they saw the future. He sums up the results in this way:

"Over half the scenarios were dominated by computers and robots housed in block houses, skyscrapers, and the ubiquitous domes. Over half contained landscapes of bleak devastation. Nearly all were negative and dehumanised. Most were devoid of humans. Most of the young people believed there would be a nuclear war within their lifetime and that most people on earth would die as a result of that war."

Wilson says most of the students felt powerless to change their own destinies, or the future of the world. Where they expressed their feelings about the future, these were usually of fear or alienation.

A similar study [59] of 700 NSW children aged 10 to 13, carried out by a group of students and one staff member in the faculty of medicine at the University of Newcastle, was published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* in 1987. The area of change mentioned most frequently by the children, when they were asked in what way they expected the world to be different when they grew up, was technology, which was mentioned by 75%. Some of the changes were seen as exciting (for example, space travel), and others as threatening (for example, the impact of computers and robots on jobs).

War, the proliferation of weapons or planetary destruction was mentioned by 33%. Other areas of change frequently mentioned were buildings and shelter (32%), employment (27%), and environment and population (27%).

The authors initially tried to assess children's attitudes from these responses, but abandoned the attempt because while attitudes were sometimes clearly positive or negative, in the majority of cases their responses were expressed in neutral language. Nevertheless, the same concerns that have been found in the other studies emerge: almost half of those who mentioned the issue of jobs wrote of computers taking over jobs; half of those who mentioned the environment said there would be less bush, and almost 30% that there would be more pollution.

In response to another question about how they would like the future to be different, 35% mentioned improvements in technology, 33% the absence of war or less weapons, and

Table 12: How Sydney primary school children view the future of the world [source: Digby (57)].

Attitude	Boys (%)		Girls (%)	
	Year 5	Year 6	Year 5	Year 6
Pessimistic about future	44	60	36	54
See world as threatened	40	49	31	57
Feel helpless about stopping any bad things from happening	39	40	37	29

Table 13: Children's expectations, hopes and wishes for the future [source: Boughton (59)].

Areas in which change expected(%)	Hoped for changes (%)	Wishes (%)
75 Technology	35 Improvements in technology	60 Have money/possessions
33 Arms race/war	33 No war/weapons	31 No war/weapons
32 Buildings/shelter	18 More jobs	20 Do good to others
27 Employment	17 Better environment	16 Have job/career
27 Environment/populn	17 Less crime	16 Live on farm
24 Food/clothing/health	16 Changes in education	12 Eliminate poverty
24 Space travel	16 Better food, shelter, clothes	10 Improve environment
21 Education	15 Lower prices	9 Have self-worth
19 Financial matters	12 Changes in govt	8 Have good health
13 Leisure	12 More leisure	8 Marry
8 Government	10 Less poverty	7 Have more leisure
6 Drugs/crime	9 Better health	6 Have power
5 Poverty	8 Improved morality	5 Eliminate crime
2 Family	7 Space travel	5 Helpful technology
	6 Stay the same	4 Leave school

18% no unemployment. A third question that asked the children to make three wishes about the future elicited a more personal response, with 60% wanting money or possessions. Global concerns such as peace did rank, however, ahead of some personal wishes.

What do these perceptions about the future of the world mean? Obviously one explanation is that they reflect real concerns about real problems that face humanity. But the answer may not be that simple. Professor Ross Kalucy [67], professor of psychiatry at the Flinders University of South Australia, argues, for example, that while nuclear catastrophe is a real threat, it also has mythological qualities. It symbolises the end of the world as we know it, with all the elements of destruction, judgement, punishment, and rebirth that have always been part of human mythology and are part of most major religions including Christianity.

It also offers a degree of hope, Kalucy says, in that it is amenable to political resolution, unlike other threats to human survival, such as overpopulation and environmental catastrophes, that are in comparison:

"...less definable, more painful, slower in their evolution, morale sapping in much more subtle ways, much more difficult in terms of political decisions, and where the problems are much more awe-inspiring and difficult and overwhelming than nuclear war."

Noel Gough [68], a senior lecturer in curriculum and teaching at Melbourne's Victoria College, also argues that we have to be cautious about

taking these survey results at face value. He believes children may not necessarily be making predictions about what the future will be, but may be telling themselves - and researchers - stories about alternative futures, including futures they want to avoid:

"We haven't done anything like the amount of research needed to know what the results mean. We need alternative research designs to get out the deeper, underlying attitudes. The results so far are only scratching the surface."

I believe that one possible interpretation of the findings is that, apart from being legitimate concerns about the future, the young people's perceptions about the future are a means of expressing their anxiety about the present - about the pressures they feel they are under, and the uncertainties caused by the rapid rate of social and technological change taking place in the world around them.

These anxieties can be hard to define, especially when by most objective measures - health and wealth, security and safety, justice and freedom - we are, historically speaking, better off than ever before, despite some of the recent developments. But if we are allowed to express these fears by projecting them into the future, they can be described in more concrete terms. Thus a vague sense of unease about the direction the world is going and our apparent impotence to change that course becomes translated into visions of a world in which the arms race has resulted in a nuclear holocaust, ever-expanding industrialisation has produced a ravaged, polluted planet, or where the development of technologies with powers

beyond our comprehension ends up in human obsolescence.

There is a wealth of data that suggest many Australians, not just Australian youth, harbour these concerns about the rate and direction of social change. Both quantitative surveys and qualitative studies (based on group discussions) have found that many people feel that life has become too complicated and that things are changing too fast. People believe they are losing the power to control their own lives, and yearn for a return to a simpler, more natural lifestyle, and clearer, more certain values and beliefs.

Social researcher, Hugh Mackay, found in a 1986 study [3] that middle-class Australians seemed reluctant to think about the future, but when they did, they were generally pessimistic and fatalistic. Australians were not so much worried about what would happen, as "destabilised" by what had already happened:

"One inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the evidence of this study is that Australians believe they are losing control over their own destiny. Particularly in the large metropolitan areas of Sydney and Melbourne, people feel as though there is so much change going on around them that they are able to exert less influence than ever over the shape and structure of their own lives."

Mackay's and other findings are summarised in my earlier report [1] for the Commission. They are borne out by three studies published in 1988.

A quantitative study by Sydney advertising agency, Campaign Palace, and market researchers, Yann Campbell Hoare Wheeler, found a clear majority of Australians agreed that they often felt frustrated at the way Australia was heading, that they were worried about Australia's economic future, and that Australia was not facing up to the difficulties of the future [69].

A major study of 24,000 Australians conducted over the past three years by the Reark Research company indicates that we are so worried about job security, violence, crime, drugs, AIDS, and generally losing control of our lives that we are returning to traditional conservative values. These concerns appear to be increasing: in 1987, 21% said their lives were "coming apart at the seams", compared to 18% in 1985 [70].

A study [56] on community attitudes, carried out by psychologist, Vicki Arbes, for the Clemenger group of companies and based on group

discussions with middle-class Australians in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, strongly reinforces other findings about Australians' unease over the changes taking place in Australian society. The report reveals a picture of middle-class Australia as insecure, pessimistic, fearful of change, increasingly intolerant, cynical, bewildered and deeply conservative:

"...ordinary Australians are deeply concerned about the pace of change in their society. They feel changes are random and uncontrollable. And this perceived lack of control over change produces anxiety and a sense of apprehension. They point to what they see as ample evidence around them that the supportive social structures that nurtured past generations of Australians are crumbling."

The Clemenger Report notes that concerns about rapid change are not new, but have become more fearful:

"A range of research has shown that for well over a decade people have felt society was changing too quickly. However, the pervading sense of optimism that characterised the 70s in Australia has now evaporated. The present climate of pessimism leads people to feel less able, and less willing, to cope with change. Now, Australians believe that change brings with it a lack of control over events and a feeling of powerlessness that they find frightening."

The report says people rarely mentioned global issues such as conservation, nuclear war or over-population. While noting that the "conservation vote", peace rallies and several research studies all indicate there is community concern about global issues, it says:

"...the current study suggests that it is only when these issues are raised in the public arena that they tap a responsive chord. Left to themselves to nominate areas of concern, people talk of matters that they feel directly affect them."

Mackay [3] also found that some issues, such as those related to economics and international affairs, tended to be dealt with "almost out of a sense of duty", while more personal concerns generated much more intensity and involvement. The threat of nuclear war was mentioned in passing, eliciting a very fatalistic response and very little discussion.

The Clemenger study found that people's concern about social change was a very personal thing:

"Turning inward to find security in the home does not diminish anxiety. Australians today find that the uncertainties of the wider community have followed them in the front door. They are apprehensive about their personal lives, the lives of their children, their finances, their jobs and pessimistic about their ability to act to improve their own domestic world."

Further evidence that people's personal concerns centre on change and the present, rather than future global catastrophes, and of a possible link between these concerns and psychological disturbance, is provided by Kalucy's account [67] of his clinical experiences in treating adolescent psychiatric illnesses, particularly anorexia nervosa. His patients, he says, never talk about the threat of nuclear war, but they do talk about life being difficult, and about the whole process of change:

"I have never seen a patient where I could legitimately say that I thought the concerns about the future were a major or important cause of why they had become ill....It is also true that I have never yet seen a set of parents where the principle dynamic of running the family related to this event.

"Instead, they tend to be families who are weighed down by the burden of attempting to find their own identity, of achieving their own goals within our society, of defining their place in the complexities of a pluralistic and rapidly changing society, and who are preoccupied with quite small events which take on great significance to them as important reasons why they, as parents, are responsible for their child's illness, or in the case of the adolescent girl, why she has let others down."

This sense of unease is undoubtedly heightened by the advances in communication technology that have made us so much more aware of, and responsive to, events in distant parts of the world, and the conflict that results between the "global village" we now live in and our tribal origins. And as discussed in the section on the

media, this situation would not be helped by the media's apocalyptic emphasis on war, famine, disease and other tragedies.

In summary then, many young people appear to be seriously concerned about major global problems such as the threat of nuclear war, environmental catastrophes, and uncontrolled technological development. However, other research and expert opinion suggest that these concerns do not weigh heavily on the minds of young people; the things that distress them are personal, such as problems with friends, family, school or work.

Other studies indicate that all Australians, not just the young, are feeling increasingly confused and troubled by the rate and direction of social change. It is possible then, that the fears young people express about the future of the world - besides being legitimate, rational concerns - are expressions of the anxiety they feel about life in general, an anxiety that may be ill-defined, but is nonetheless personal and deeply felt. Nuclear war, rampant technology, and a depleted, exhausted planet, may be symbols of their sense of impotence and confusion in the face of a maelstrom of change.

If this is the case, these specific global problems would not be actually causing the increasing social and psychological problems among young people, except to the extent that they are contributing to this more general sense of pessimism and anxiety about life today.

Nevertheless, the findings of studies into how children and adolescents perceive the future may be highly significant in revealing how pervasive and profound this unease is. Their sense of being powerless, rather than their pessimism, is particularly important.

Feelings of powerlessness are a major determinant of mental illness, and are often associated with problem behaviour among young people. Adelaide psychiatrist, Professor Robert Kosky [66], says:

"People have said for a long time - over 100 years - that if people become alienated from the body of politics, and what's going on in the world - that is they become powerless - they tend to become more suicidal, depressed and addicted to drugs."

CONCLUSION

If, as I have suggested, the results of studies of young people's perceptions of the future do provide a measure of their fear and impotence in the face of overwhelming change, it raises important implications for the way we perceive, and cope with, the worsening problems of youth in Australia.

This is not to deny the primacy of direct personal influences in problems such as suicide, drug abuse and crime. However, focusing on personal factors encourages, however unintentionally, a view that is already all too prevalent: that we are dealing with what are essentially personal problems. That is, the sufferers are those who, through misfortune or their own failings and weaknesses, face difficulties related to home, school or work, and are having trouble coping with life, or living within the law.

To the extent that social dimensions of the problems are recognised, the resolution of the problems is seen in tackling the specific issues such as unemployment and family conflict.

The broader perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes the fundamental social, economic and technological changes that both underlie the strains and tensions occurring in families, education and employment, and also contribute directly to people's unease about life today.

It suggests that a large, and growing proportion of us are feeling the psychological pressures imposed by today's lifestyle, and that these stresses are pushing an increasing number of young people, especially those made more vulnerable by their personal situation, to the point where they feel they can no longer cope.

Just what aspects of change are creating the most problems remains contentious. Some economists see the root cause of many of the problems as inadequate economic growth. Thus Professor Peter Drake and Dr John Nieuwenhuysen, in their recent book, "Economic growth for Australia" [71], warn that the scale of poverty in "a high-unemployment, low-growth economy" such as Australia's poses a very serious social

problem, raising questions of equity, social alienation and political instability:

"Australia's unemployment and poverty legacy, and the social and economic deterioration that it implies, are direct results of the decline in economic performance experienced during the 1970s and early 1980s....The output losses, welfare costs, personal suffering and deprivation of unemployment are a blight on the economy and society. The sooner output and economic growth are revived under a regime of relative price stability, the sooner the scourge of high unemployment will be removed."

The opposing view, summarised in a Treasury document cited by Drake and Nieuwenhuysen, blames growth for many of the ills of modern industrial society, holding it responsible:

"...for the increasing pace and pressure of urban living and for the co-existence of 'private affluence and public squalor'; for the creation of 'imagined' wants rather than the satisfaction of 'real' needs; for the relentless exploitation of the earth's non-renewable resources; for poisoning of the air and waters; for despoliation of the environment and threats to the biosphere; for crime, violence and drug addiction; and for a variety of other problems and failings."

The evidence presented in this report suggests there is truth in both perspectives. This is, increasingly, the dilemma of growth.

Clearly, greater economic growth could ease problems due to poverty, assuming the poor get a share of the extra wealth generated. However economic growth is also inextricably and increasingly linked to an accelerating rate of social and technological change, and it is equally clear that there are limits to our social capacity to cope with and absorb these changes and their consequences, quite apart from any environmental constraints.

The speed of change, the scale and power of the technologies we are developing and employing, and the complexities of our social systems demand that the key components of society - family, school, workplace, government etc - function at a level of proficiency far greater than was required in the past. Yet in many respects the performance of these institutions is not only not getting better, it is getting worse.

Computers are said to have greatly magnified the stockmarket crash of 19 October 1987 [72]. An American analyst claims that blame for the market's mounting volatility, which climaxed on that day, can be ascribed to "the emotions that drive a trader, magnified a million-fold by the technology at his disposal" [73].

Similarly, the mounting pressures of change on our social institutions are exposing and

magnifying their every failing and weakness. The cost of this social failure is evident in the plight of many young Australians today.

In examining the problems faced by young people, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that we are seeing among a small, but growing section of the community, evidence of the sort of cultural disintegration experienced by indigenous peoples such as the Aborigines, Maoris, American Indians and Eskimos, when they come into sustained contact with western industrial society. The shock of change and the destruction of their traditional way of life and world view, lead to high levels of apathy, suicide, drug abuse and crime.

We are seeing all these things increase among young Australians.

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The Commission's main purpose is to demonstrate that Australians can influence their future through informed choice.



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