

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT STUDY:

FINDINGS FROM
THE FIRST SURVEY

RESEARCH REPORT

July 2021

'YES'

Youth
Employment
Study

The Youth Employment Study (YES) is funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and aims to better understand the barriers and facilitators to suitable work for young people and the role played by employment support programs. The research is being led by researchers at the Disability and Health Unit within the School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne. YES brings together researchers and experts from Monash University, Deakin University and the University of New South Wales; as well as from the Brotherhood of St Laurence, National Disability Services, VicHealth and Disability Employment Australia. For more information, visit www.yes-study.org.au.

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Youth Employment Study:

FINDINGS FROM THE FIRST SURVEY

About this report

The Youth Employment Study is a study of Australian youth, aged 15 to 25, looking for work during the COVID-19 pandemic. An overview of findings relating to looking for work and previous work, employment programs, wellbeing, housing, and financial stresses is summarised along with recommendations arising from the findings (Recommendations 1-5).

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1:

Focus on underemployment into the COVID-19 economic recovery phase and support for youth jobs via investment in industries that hire youth and graduates.

Recommendation 2:

Ensure focus on post-study and work transition support for young people and ensure young people receive work experience even during times of lockdown.

Recommendation 3:

Increase exposure and understanding of employment support available to Australian youth.

Recommendation 4:

Consider young people in future policy decisions to support job losses (e.g., JobKeeper).

Recommendation 5:

Provide youth with mental health supports.



BACKGROUND

Employment for young people in COVID-19

Young people in Australia are predicted to be the hardest hit by the economic fallout from the COVID-19 crisis (1). Already experiencing high levels of unemployment and under-employment before the COVID-19 crisis, young people are likely to be disproportionately impacted by pandemic-induced job losses because of the industries they often work in, including hospitality and retail, which are typically made up of 45% of 15-25-year-olds (2). Indeed, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has shown that young people are more likely to work casually (54 percent) compared with any other age group (18%) (3).

Youth Employment Supports

As shown in a YES report done in collaboration with the Brotherhood of St Laurence (4), numerous government-funded employment programs exist to help young people find work (such as through writing resumes or applying for jobs). This report found a large number of these programs exist and they are often not evaluated or evidence-based. These programs will play an important role in supporting young people into the COVID-19 economic recovery phase.

Work and health for young people

For young people, we know that the longer they are out of work, the more likely it is that their skills and productivity deteriorate, as does their self-esteem and mental health (5). Furthermore, this research has shown a direct link between positive work experiences and wellbeing, and that a good psychosocial working environment may reduce the likelihood of mental health problems for young people later on.

Rationale

Given the devastating effects of the economic downturn on the availability of jobs and economic security, researchers at the University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales (UNSW), Deakin University, and the Brotherhood of St Laurence conducted an online survey of young people aged 15 to 25 years of age to understand the experiences of young jobseekers during COVID-19 in Australia.

By documenting young people's experiences looking for work and in employment, we aim to provide evidence that supports governments and other stakeholders to develop policies and programs that enable young people to enhance their employment and career opportunities.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Recruitment and sample selection

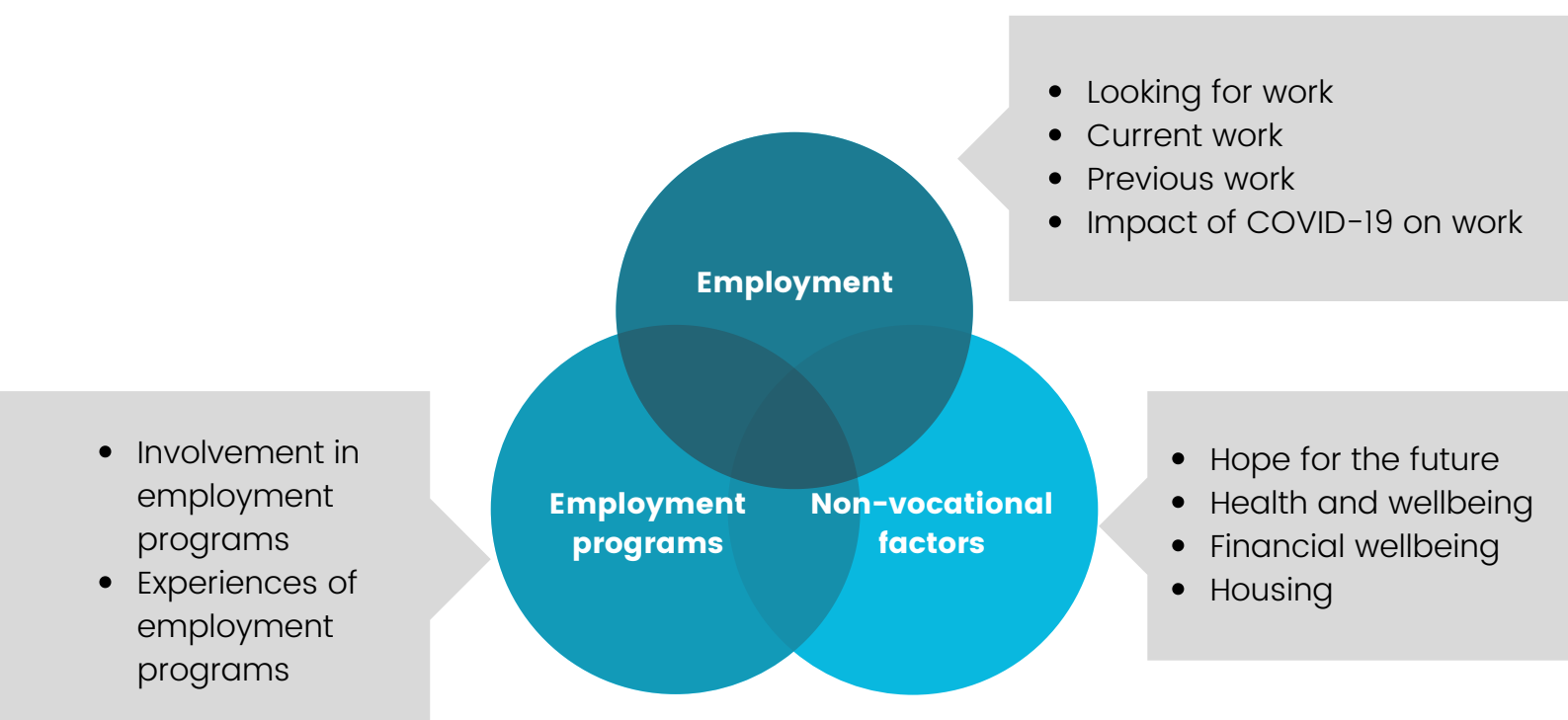
Beginning in June, over 500 young people aged 15–25 years of age across Australia participated in the YES online survey about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted an online survey during the months of June 2020 and January 2021. Participants were recruited via email invitation through employment services across Australia as well as via a targeted social media campaign.

Survey development

We collected information on demographic factors, vocational factors (looking for work, previous work, employment supports) and non-vocational factors (health, wellbeing, housing and financial wellbeing). The YES survey questions (see Figure 1 below) included items from pre-validated scales and existing population-based surveys, as well as questions developed by the researchers who are experts in the field of youth and employment.

Figure 1

YES study survey domains



FINDINGS

WHO PARTICIPATED

Participant characterisation

During the months of June 2020 and January 2021, a total of 493 young people, between the ages of 15 and 25, participated in the YES study. 72% identified as female and 86% were born in Australia. A large proportion of participants (33%) were living in Victoria. 31% were still in high-school and 51% were studying. 34% have a disability or chronic health condition.



Table 1

Demographic details of YES study participants (N= 493)

	N	%
Female	354	72
Born in Australia	424	86
Language other than English	81	17
High school		
Still in high school	149	31
Did not finish high school	69	14
Completed year 12	267	55
Disability or chronic health condition	133	34
State		
VIC	163	33
NSW	121	25
QLD	90	18
SA	50	10
WA	34	7
TAS	20	4
ACT	13	3
NT	2	<1

FINDINGS

WORK & STUDY

Young people in employment

Just over half (52%) of young people were in paid employment at the time of the survey, 83% of these were working in part-time employment. Nearly two-thirds of young people (61%) reported working in casual or temporary jobs. Participants were also asked whether they wanted more hours or not, with 49% indicating that they were underemployed.

Looking for work

73% of young people were looking for work. Most of those looking for work were not currently employed (54% of all young people), however, a small minority of those looking for work were currently employed (19%). Of those not looking for work, most were currently employed at the time of the survey (20%), and a small group were not (7%).

Recommendation 1:

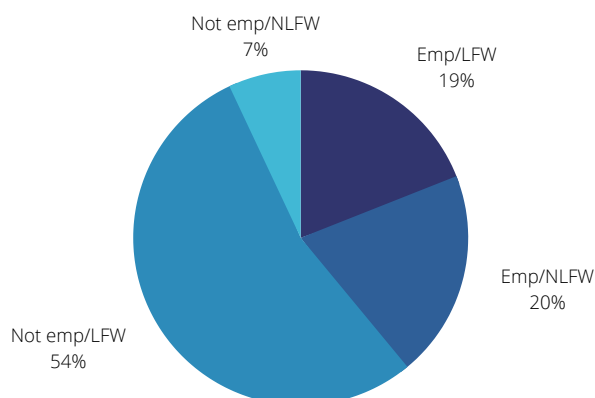
Focus on underemployment into the COVID-19 economic recovery phase and support for youth jobs via investment in industries that hire youth and graduates.

Employment status and looking for work

Figure 2 shows the proportions of young people according to whether or not they were in paid employment at the time of the survey and whether or not they were looking for work at the time of the survey. As shown in Figure 1, 49% of young people employed were looking for work.

Figure 2

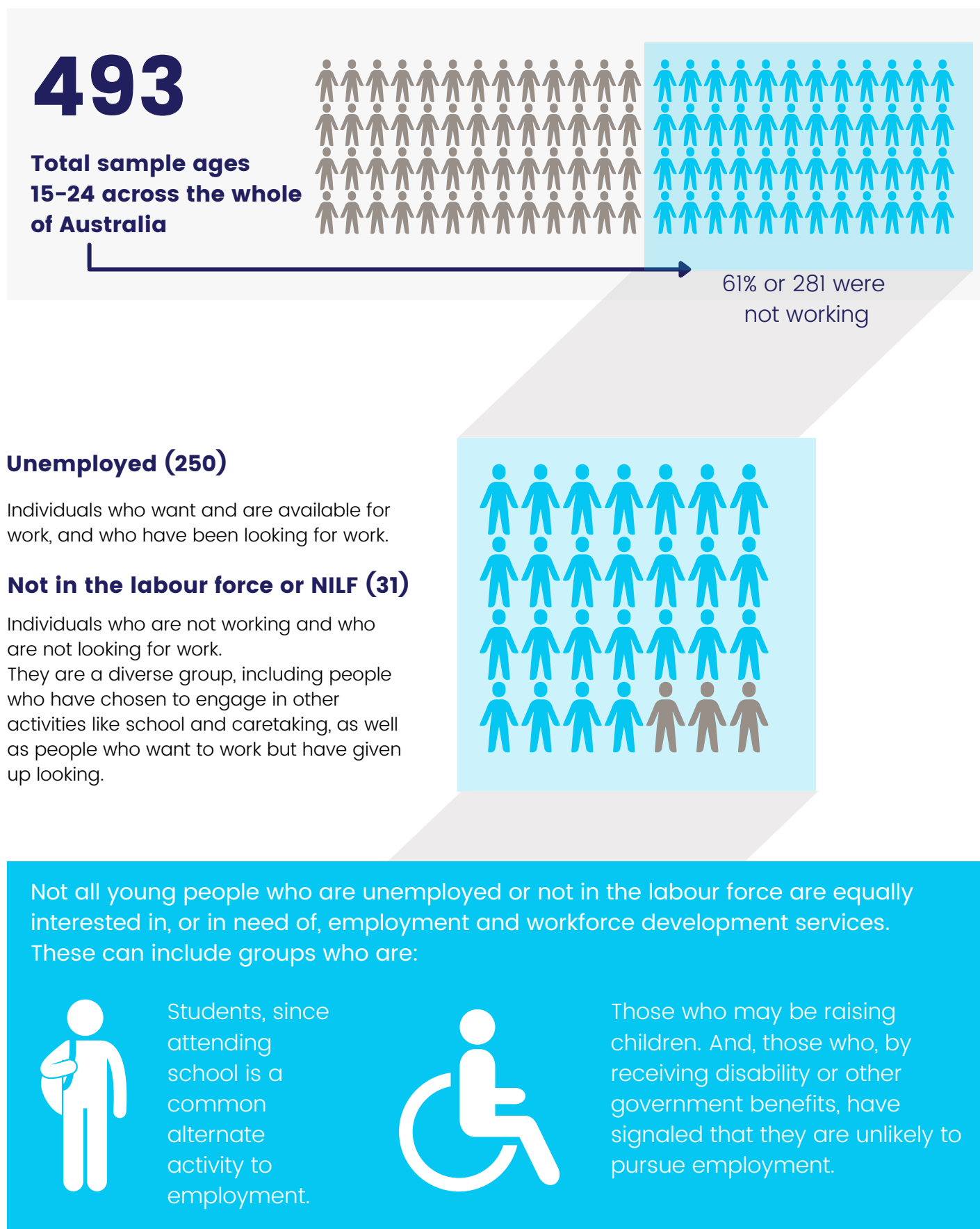
Employment and jobseeking status amongst YES respondents



Note. Emp = employed. LFW = Looking for work. NLFW = Not looking for work.

Figure 3

Defining unemployment amongst the YES study participants



FINDINGS

WORK & STUDY

Studying

- 31% were still in high school at the time of the first survey
- Of those that had finished high school, 12% had not attempted any additional qualifications and 37% had started but not completed additional qualifications. 13% had completed an additional certificate, 7% a diploma and 29% a university degree.
- Of those not in Year 12, 52% were undertaking study at the time of the survey (such as an apprenticeship, university study or tafe)
- Of those participants that were currently studying, young people were asked if COVID-19 had disrupted their learning. The following said yes to the ensuing occurrences of events:
 - 9% - course cancelled or postponed
 - 73% - course had to go online
 - 33% - wanted to see teacher
 - 45% - wanted to be able to interact with peers

Recommendation 2:

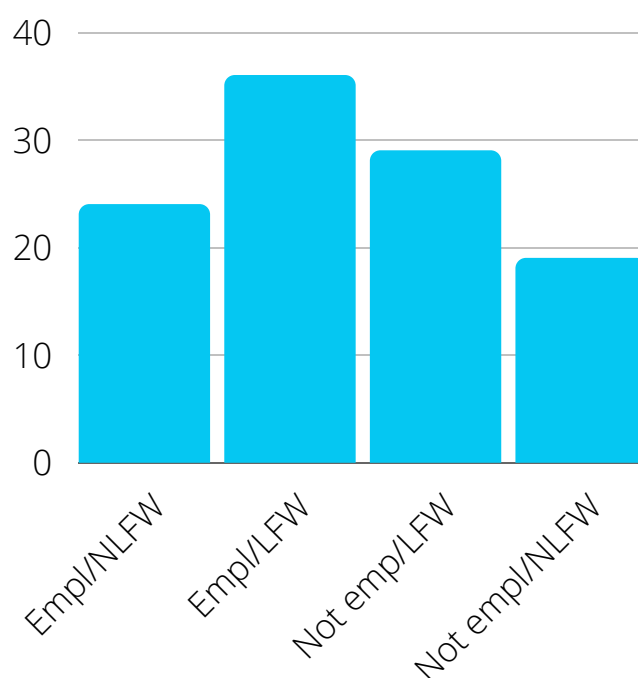
Ensure focus on post-study and work transition support for young people and ensure young people receive work experience even during times of lockdown.

Volunteering

Overall 29% of participants had done voluntary (unpaid) work in the 3 months prior to completing the survey. Of these, over two thirds (69%) reported choosing to do so for community involvement and approximately half (54%) to gain work experience (see Figure 2 below). Figure 2 shows this volunteering by employment status.

Figure 4

Voluntary work (unpaid) done in the last 3-months prior to completing the survey



Note. Statistics reported in percentages. Empl = employed. LFW = Looking for work. NLFW = Not looking for work.

FINDINGS

EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

Program involvement

- A total of 93 (19%) young people were involved in an employment program.
- 36% of young people indicated that they would like to be involved in a program if this was offered to them.
- The most common programs young people were involved in were:
 - 'jobactive' (46%)
 - 'Disability Employment Service (DES)' (21%)
 - 'Headspace Work and Study Service' (21%)
 - 'Your job your way. (yourtown)' (10%)

Recommendation 3:

Increase exposure and understanding of employment support available to Australian youth.

What the programs did

The most common things that employment programs did with young people were assessing their skills and interests (52%), exploring career options (41%) and helping them develop a job plan (46%). 34% of young people indicated that their employment program provided them with one on one mentoring and support, and 37% said their program

provided training in job search skills (such as developing a job application and a resume). Fewer participants said their employment program helped them develop vocational skills (16%), provided job placement assistance (9%) or found work experience placements (4%)

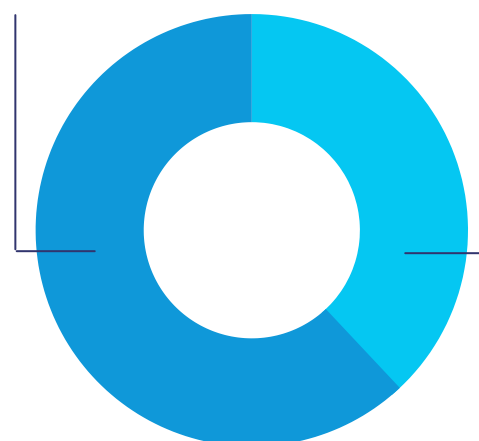
Program satisfaction

Participants were asked to rate how satisfied they were with the employment program they were involved in (ranging from 0 very dissatisfied to 100 very satisfied) with a mean of 57 (SD=29).

Figure 5

Employment program satisfaction

Satisfied n=45 (62%)



Dissatisfied n=28 (38%)

FINDINGS

DISABILITY

Participants with disability

- A total of 133 (34%) young people identified as having a disability or chronic health condition.
- Of the 133 people who said they had a disability or health condition, 124 provided information about the type of disability they had.
- 60% of those young people with disability reported a mental health condition (this may have been in addition to other disabilities/health conditions).

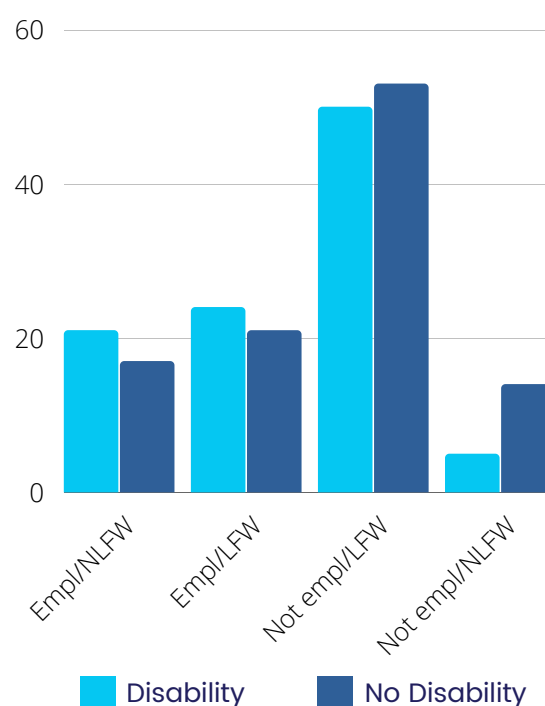
Employment for youth with disability

A slightly higher proportion of youth with disability had been employed at some time in their life (84%) compared with those without disability (76%). However, fewer youth with disability (55%) were in paid employment just prior to COVID-19 (in February 2020) compared with those without disability (71%) and fewer were employed at the time of the survey (46% compared with 59%).

Similar proportions of young people were underemployed amongst those with disability (51%) compared with those without disability (55%). Interestingly, a larger proportion of young people with disability would prefer to work fewer hours (14%) compared with only 2% of young people without disability.

Figure 6

Employment status of young people with disability compared with those without



Note. Statistics reported in percentages. Empl = employed. LFW = Looking for work. NLFW = Not looking for work.

A slightly higher proportion of young people with disability were volunteering at the time of the survey (35%) compared to those young people without disability (28%).

Young people with disability and employment programs

A greater proportion of young people with disability were involved in an employment program (31%) compared with those without (18%).

FINDINGS

NON-VOCATIONAL FACTORS

Financial wellbeing

Government support

Among those not currently in high school (i.e., those who did not finish or have completed year 12), 14% received JobSeeker in February and 10% were receiving JobKeeper at the time of the first survey (see Figure 7).

Shortage of money

Participants were asked about whether they had experienced any shortage of money that meant they were unable

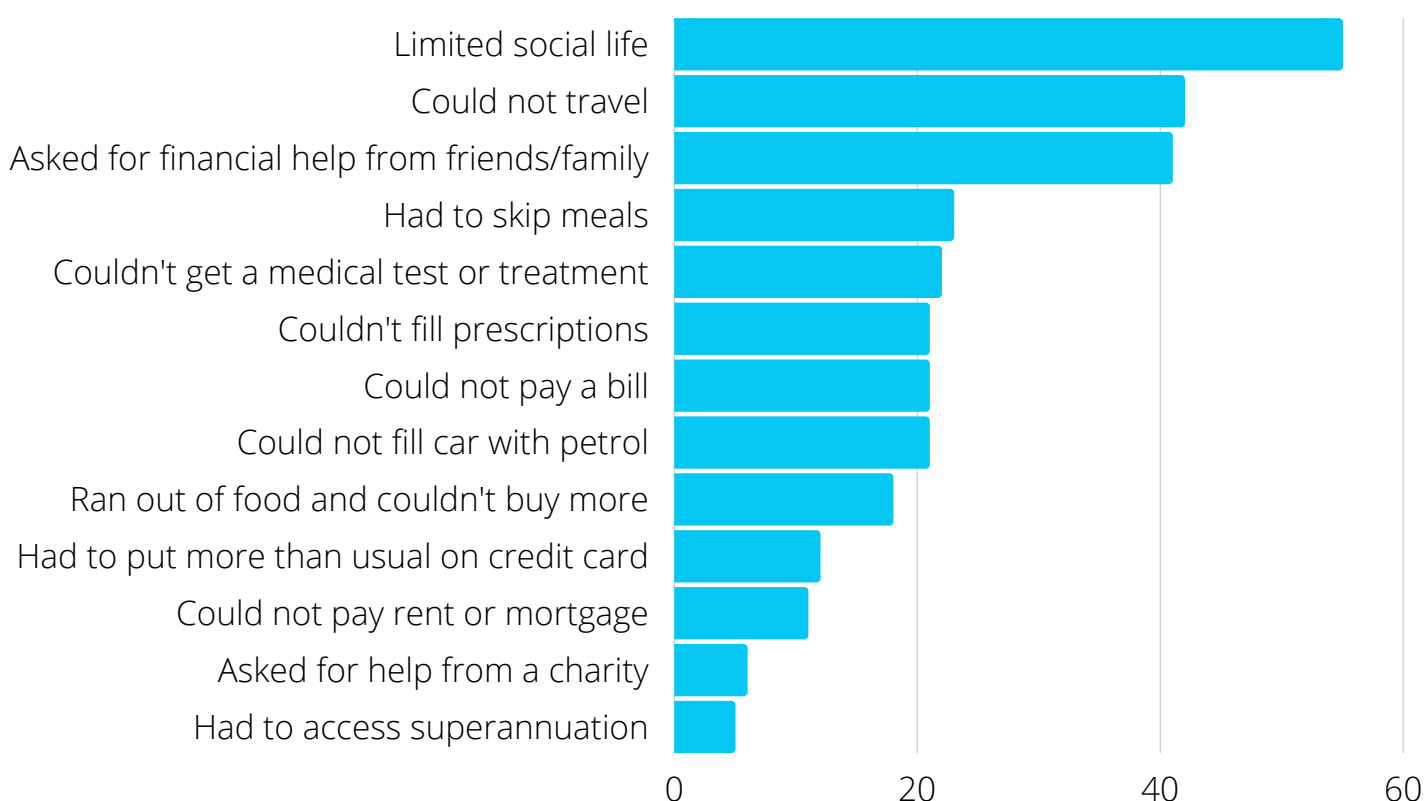
to do things (e.g., fill car with petrol, pay a bill) or needed to ask others for financial assistance. 68% of individuals reported at least one financial stressor, 56% reported at least two financial stressors and 40% reported at least three financial stressors.

Recommendation 4:

Consider young people in future policy decisions to support job losses (e.g., JobKeeper).

Figure 7

Financial distress experienced by YES study participants



Note. Statistics reported in percentages.

FINDINGS

NON-VOCATIONAL FACTORS

Housing

- 41% of participants were currently paying rent, board, or mortgage.
- 7% reported that they had not had a place to live in the past 6 months (e.g. had to couch surf).
- In February 2020, around 90% of respondents were living in a private residence. The remaining 10% were living in other living situations such as with a partner's family or in a dorm.
- 19% reported that they had moved since February. Of those young people who reported moving, 32% moved because of COVID-19.

Mental wellbeing

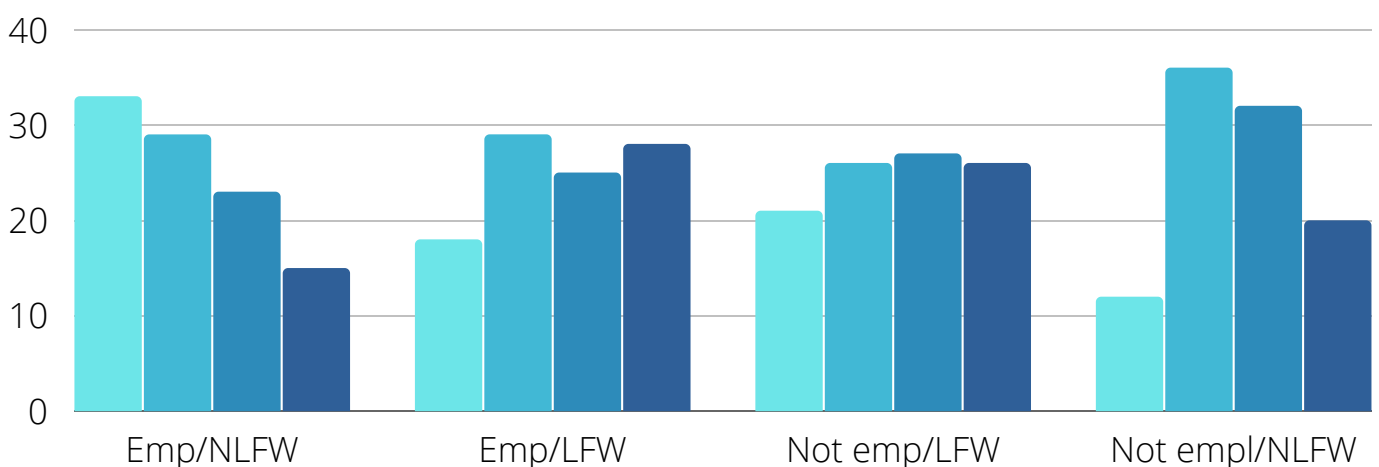
As measured by the PHQ-9, across all individuals, over half were experiencing moderate or severe symptoms of anxiety and about 50% of participants were experiencing moderate/severe symptoms of depression.

Recommendation 5:

Provide youth with mental health supports.

Figure 8

Unemployment and mental health amongst the YES study participants



Note. Statistics reported in percentages. Emp = employed. LFW = Looking for work. NLFW = Not looking for work. The scale ranges from light blue to dark blue indicating severity of depression and anxiety symptoms ranging from normal to mild to moderate to severe.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This report outlines findings from the first survey of the Youth Employment Study (YES) which was conducted during the COVID-19 crisis in Australia in 2020.

Findings from this first survey relate to youth experiences of employment, employment support programs, and non-vocational factors such as financial wellbeing and mental wellbeing.

Young people reported experiences of underemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and over half reported that they were looking for work. As Australia enters the economic recovery phase from COVID-19, it is imperative that the government and local employment services support young people in gaining suitable employment and employment experience.

Those young people that were attending an employment service reported that the tasks those services engaged in with them were varied, as were satisfaction levels. Furthermore, a third of YES respondents reported that they would be interested in being involved in an employment support program if they knew this was available to them. It is important to increase exposure of the supports available to young people.

Finally, findings highlighted the difficult circumstances within which young people are living and looking for work. A large number of young people reported numerous financial stressors such as not being able to afford food. It is important for the government to support young people who may be struggling financially and that young people are considered in future economic policies.

Young people were also struggling with their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a majority of the sample reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression. It is therefore important that the intersection between work and mental health be considered as we move into the COVID-19 economic recovery phase.

The YES study also showed the diversity of youth in Australia. For example, a third of respondents reported having a disability or chronic illness. These findings highlight the need to consider all youth as we move beyond COVID-19 with special consideration for those that will be experiencing additional challenges, such as those with disability or from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The YES study will continue surveying young people into the COVID-19 economic recovery phase to ensure youth aren't forgotten.

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