

Youth Monitor

A national roundup of recent press reports on youth issues

BY KATE GROSS

The information in Youth Monitor is sourced from the newspapers cited with each item. *Youth Studies Australia* provides details of the location of articles in the newspapers, but cannot provide the original articles.

ATTITUDES & OPINIONS

Drugs, sex and surgery

A survey of 4,000 Australian girls aged 11–18 years published in *Dolly* magazine indicates that most girls surveyed are not happy with their weight and around one in four would have plastic surgery if they could. Approximately 2% of those surveyed had already undergone plastic surgery. Despite this figure appearing small, Dr Jenny O’Dea, associate professor of child and adolescent health at the University of Sydney, believes that it is significant. ‘That’s 80 girls in the 4,000 questioned who had had some kind of procedure, and that’s concerning,’ said Dr O’Dea. The study of drugs, sex and surgery trends among Australian young women also found that 45% of participants knew someone with an eating disorder, 52% have consumed alcohol, 13% have smoked marijuana and tobacco, 5% have taken ecstasy and 3% have taken ice. One in four young women surveyed reported being sexually active (12/08/07: *Sunday Territorian*, p.9; *Sunday Canberra Times*, p.12; *Sunday Tasmanian*, p.10).

Life at 15

On 11, 13 and 14 August, *The Age* published a three-part feature and

accompanying online multimedia report on the attitudes, opinions and experiences of 15-year-olds living in Melbourne. The feature, ‘Life at 15’, examined three topics of significance to 15-year-olds – sex, alcohol and technology – mainly using the voices of young people themselves, but also through input from parents and experts.

- Sex: In this part, young people discussed teenage sexuality and sexual relationships, both their own experiences and those of their peers. Topics included the strata of relationships between members of the opposite sex (including the phenomena of ‘claiming’ and ‘hooking up’), oral sex as a part of teen sexual encounters, the influence of celebrity ‘raunch’ culture on teenage sexuality, and the nature and content of sex education in schools.
- Alcohol: This part looked at alcohol consumption and binge drinking as a part of youth culture (and wider culture) in Australia, the variety of parental attitudes towards underage drinking, and the physical effects of excessive alcohol consumption on young people, particularly those relating to brain development.
- Technology: The final part of this series considered the role of technology in the lives of today’s 15-year-olds. It examined young

people’s use of technology for activities such as social networking and gaming, and as a space for the creation and re-creation of their identities. The issue of parental supervision of young people’s internet use was also discussed, particularly in relation to young people’s exposure to violent and sexually explicit online material and the potential for contact with sexual predators.

CRIME & JUSTICE

More young men involved in murders

The latest statistics released by the Australian Institute of Criminology’s National Homicide Monitoring Program show a significant increase in the number of young males committing homicides. Between 2004/05 and 2005/06, the number of homicides committed by young males aged 15–19 years rose from 22 to 57. In around half of these homicides, the victim was a stranger to the perpetrator. Sydney University forensic psychologist Christopher Lennings said that most homicides involving teenage perpetrators are the result of a ‘robbery gone wrong’ and are not premeditated. The increase in the number of homicides committed by young males coincided with a general increase in the number of murders

committed by strangers, from 19% of all murders in 2004–2005 to 26% in 2005–2006 (*Sunday Telegraph*, 12/08/07, p.36).

CULTURE

Understanding hoon culture

A paper published in the September edition of *Youth Studies Australia* has questioned the criminalisation of hooning and car culture by governments and the media. In the paper, University of Tasmania professor of sociology Rob White and his co-author Hannah Graham argued that a ‘close analysis of “hooning accidents” as such reveals that hooning is not the large road safety problem the media makes it out to be’. While they acknowledged that young people were over-represented in road crash statistics, they said that those implicated were not necessarily drivers of high performance vehicles or involved in car culture. White and Graham contended that hooning activities were not necessarily dangerous if conducted away from public streets, and that involvement in car culture could be a positive social pastime for young people, particularly young men. Professor White advocated giving young car enthusiasts safe places to race their cars (such as race tracks or disused industrial sites) and tips on how to race

their cars safely (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17/09/07, p.3).

DEVELOPMENT

TV viewing linked with attention problems

A study of the television-watching habits of young New Zealanders suggests a link between excessive television viewing in childhood and attention difficulties during adolescence. The University of Otago study examined data from a longitudinal study of 1,037 New Zealanders born in 1972 and 1973, focusing on data gathered when participants were aged between five and 15 years. Participants who had watched over two hours of television per day in early childhood were found to face an increased likelihood of experiencing attention problems in early adolescence. This risk was even greater among participants who had watched more than three hours of television per day. 'The two-hour point is very, very clear with our data, consistent with what the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends,' said University of Otago researcher Dr Carl Erik Landhius. While the study did not prove that excessive television-watching in childhood directly caused later attention problems, Dr Landaus said that the evidence suggests that 'the causal link is in that direction' (*Sunday Herald Sun*, 9/09/07, p.34; *Courier Mail*, 10/09/07, p.12).

Celebrating the pathway into womanhood

This year, the Pathways Foundation, a community-based organisation that has conducted rite-of-passage camps for adolescent boys and their fathers since 1995, has begun to offer similar camps to help adolescent girls mark their transition into womanhood. The five-day 'Pathways into Womanhood' program is designed for girls aged 13–15 years and their mothers or

significant female mentors. The program encourages participants to develop their mother–daughter relationships, with a focus on sharing female intergenerational knowledge and helping girls to understand their bodies as they journey through puberty (*Sydney Morning Herald 'Essential'* supplement, 13/09/07, p.6).

DRUGS

Plans for national binge drinking forum

In September, Queensland Minister for Liquor Licensing and Women Margaret Keech announced plans to hold a meeting of all state and territory ministers responsible for liquor licensing in order to discuss the issue of rising rates of binge drinking among young women. Ms Keech first raised the issue at a meeting of the Ministerial Council on the Status of Women held in Hobart in late August. 'I think it's vital that all liquor licensing ministers share our knowledge and resources to help change a long-standing drinking culture that is killing our young people,' she said (*Courier Mail*, 3/09/07, p.13).

Awareness of illicit drug harm grows

A survey commissioned by the Federal Government indicates that the proportion of young people who perceive illicit drugs such as speed and ice as harmful and addictive has increased in recent years. According to the survey, 91% of young people now recognise that speed is addictive. In a similar survey conducted in 2000, the corresponding figure was 54%. Likewise, the proportion of young people who believe that marijuana makes users lazy and lethargic increased from 65% in 2000 to 91% in the latest survey. However, the proportion of young people who perceive ecstasy as a relaxing drug increased from 24% in 2000 to 33% in 2007. In terms of its perception as a fun social drug, the report found that '[I]n

many ways, ecstasy has adopted the "positioning" that marijuana used to have a few years ago'. The Federal Government plans to use the findings from this survey to inform a campaign to teach young people about the links between illicit drug use and mental illness (26/09/07: *Adelaide Advertiser*, p.11; *Daily Telegraph*, p.2).

Paid employment increases smoking risk

American researchers have recommended the creation of anti-smoking campaigns that target workplaces where young people are employed, following the results of their 10-year study which links paid after-school employment to an increased risk of smoking among teenagers. The study, published in the November 2007 edition of the *American Journal of Public Health*, tracked 799 American students from the age of eight onwards. By the final year of the study, participants who undertook paid work were over three times more likely to smoke than those who did not. In addition, participants who worked more than 10 hours per week were likely to begin smoking at a younger age than their peers (*Weekend Australian*, 6/10/07, p.27).

Drinking just got a little riskier

In October, the National Health and Medical Research Council released a draft version of its revised guidelines for low-risk drinking. In the past, NHMRC guidelines have defined low-, medium- and high-risk drinking levels, but the latest guidelines take a new approach, defining a level of drinking behaviour at which a person has a one in 100 chance of experiencing alcohol-related injury, disease or death over their lifetime. For adults – both men and women – this risk level is now set at two or fewer standard drinks per day. For pregnant women and all young people aged under 15 years, not

drinking at all is recommended as the 'safest option'. While the guidelines do not encourage 15–17-year-olds to drink, the HMRC recommends that any alcohol consumed by this age group should be done under adult supervision and according to the adult guidelines. According to Professor Jon Currie, director of addiction medicine at St Vincent's Health, evidence from over 400 international studies indicates that the risk of alcohol-related harm 'starts to rise very sharply' when people consume more than two standard drinks per day. Although Deakin University health psychology professor John Toumbourou welcomes the draft guidelines, he believes that the guidelines for teenagers should make reference to frequency of alcohol consumption. 'There is actually evidence that the frequency of drinking in adolescence might be the thing that is most important with respect to establishing habits of drinking later in life,' he said (*Age 'Insight'* section, 13/10/07, p.2).

Celebrities reinforce drug use myth

Recent reports of illicit drug use by several high-profile Australian sporting personalities have contributed to the commonly held false perception, particularly among young people, that drug taking is normal and that those who do not use drugs are in the minority, according to drug researcher Paul Dillon.

In the past year, both AFL star Ben Cousins and former rugby league great Andrew Johns have had their battles with illicit drugs made public, while ecstasy and cannabis were allegedly associated with the death of former West Coast Eagles AFL player Chris Mainwaring. Commenting on these incidents, Paul Dillon, a researcher with Drug and Alcohol Research and Training Australia, said: 'I think one of the biggest dangers in these stories that have been coming out ... is

that it reinforces the myth that everybody is involved in this'. Dillon is currently conducting a survey of youth attitudes towards ecstasy and says that, so far, most of the young people he has interviewed have not used the drug. Previous research indicates that 78% of young Australians aged 20–29 years have not used ecstasy (*Canberra Times*, 6/10/07, p.11).

Girls have caught up

An international drug trends researcher says that teenage girls in Australia and America have now equalled – and in some cases surpassed – their male peers in terms of their use of methamphetamine, ecstasy and alcohol. Speaking at a seminar at the University of Queensland in October, University of Texas professor Jane Maxwell said that '[W]e need to quit thinking of girls as not being at as high as risk as boys' in relation to drug- and alcohol-related harm. Professor Maxwell also said that both Australia and America were beginning to experience an emergence of 'people who are very impaired from cannabis use' (*Sunday Mail*, 14/10/07, p.27).

Facing up to the effects of smoking

A team of researchers at Curtin University of Technology is conducting a study to determine whether age progression software can be used to deter young people from taking up smoking and to motivate young smokers to quit. The software modifies photos of young people to show them how smoking will affect their appearance as they age. The study will focus on the use of the technology as a health promotion message for young people aged 17–24 years. Lead researcher Professor Moyez Jiwa is hopeful that the personalised nature of this anti-smoking message will contribute to its effectiveness (*West Australian*, 30/10/07, p.3).

Ice: The dirty drug

The Victorian Government has launched a public awareness campaign to warn young people about the dangers of methamphetamine, referring to ice as 'the dirty drug'. 'The ingredient base of this drug is battery acid and drain cleaner,' said Victorian Mental Health Minister Lisa Neville. The campaign will run over the summer, when most young people come into contact with the drug. It will include posters and outdoor advertisements in city lanes, pubs and clubs and at music festivals, as well as in more unconventional locations such as on rubbish dumpsters, men's urinals and on toilet paper in women's toilets (*Age*, 5/11/07, p.4).

EDUCATION

Eager to learn more

In September, the Australian Government's Financial Literacy Foundation released a report on Australians' attitudes and behaviours relating to their use and management of money. The report *Financial literacy: Australians understanding money* was based on a study of 7,500 Australians, including 553 young people aged 12–17 years. Most of these young people indicated that they were eager to improve aspects of their financial literacy such as budgeting, saving money and managing debt. While 72% of these young participants believed that the most effective savings strategy was to save small amounts of money regularly from a young age, only half were in fact doing this (*Herald Sun*, 25/09/07, p.59; *Adelaide Advertiser*, 26/09/07, p.30).

Australia leads the way in further education

Australia has the highest number of young people entering further education among member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), according to a report released in September. The

OECD report, *Education at a glance 2007*, indicates that 82% of young Australians participate in some form of higher education, followed by Sweden (76%) and Norway (63%). In comparison, approximately 56% of young Americans and 51% of young Britons enter higher education (*Australian*, 26/09/07, p.30).

Virtues may endanger vulnerable students

The promotion of virtues such as high achievement, self-discipline and perfection in schools may unintentionally have a negative effect on students who are vulnerable to anorexia, according to findings from an Australian study. University of Western Sydney researchers carried out in-depth interviews with 24 girls aged 14–20 years who were dealing with various levels of anorexia. The study found that while schools were not to blame for the development of anorexia among these students, regimented school environments and messages of achievement, discipline, perfection and body awareness promoted by schools can be absorbed by vulnerable students and applied to their daily lives 'in ways that have a negative effect on their health and wellbeing' (3/10/07: *Sydney Morning Herald*, p.7; *Adelaide Advertiser*, p.14; *Northern Territory News*, p.12).

Tertiary problems for private school students

A study which examined the results of first-year students at Monash University over a four-year period suggests that students from non-selective government schools perform better than those from private schools or selective-entry government schools. The study found that, among students with an ENTER (tertiary entrance) score of 80 or above, students from government schools generally scored five marks more in their first-year results than students from

private or selective government schools. Meanwhile, a study examining first-year results among students undertaking an agricultural economics degree at the University of Sydney found that students from government schools earned an average of four marks more than their counterparts from private schools. Professor Richard James, director of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at Melbourne University, said that private school students sometimes struggle when they begin studying at university because they no longer have the same level of support that they are used to receiving. 'A lot of private schools support their students too much. They do it in [students'] best interests but the effect is that [the students] may not have developed to the same degree the independent study skills that government school students have ... Kids who got to university from underprivileged schools are survivors – they have already developed independent ways to study,' he said (*Sunday Age*, 7/10/07, p.15).

Concerns over social and emotional health

In October, the Australian Scholarships Group released a report on the social and emotional health of Australian students. The *Student social and emotional health report* found that around 40% of students experience a range of social and emotional problems. For example, 40% of students worried excessively, 30% experienced nervousness and stress, 20% had felt hopeless and depressed for up to a week and around one-third reported losing their temper frequently and bullying their peers. Findings were based on survey data gathered between 2003 and 2007 from over 10,000 students (ranging from kindergarten to Year 12) from 81 schools across Australia. In general, girls experienced higher levels of social and emotional health than boys,

and students from the highest socioeconomic group experienced higher levels of social and emotional health than those from the lowest socioeconomic group. However, common problems such as 'bullying, getting into trouble, stress, feeling down and under-achievement' were present across all levels of social and emotional wellbeing. This research was conducted for the ASG by Professor Michael Bernard from the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Education, who worked in conjunction with researchers from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) (*Canberra Times*, 18/10/07, p.5).

EMPLOYMENT

Teen work culture strong in Australia

Australia has a higher proportion of teenagers participating in the labour market than any other developed country, according to a report released by the United States Department of Labor in August. The report, *A chartbook of international labour comparisons*, indicates that in 2005, 60.6% of 15–19-year-olds in Australia were participating in the labour market, compared with 43.7% in the USA, 30% in Germany and 13% in Italy. At 9.1%, South Korea recorded the lowest teen labour market participation rate among developed countries. While these figures appear positive, Professor Bill Mitchell from the Centre of Full Employment and Equity at the University of Newcastle said that they were deceptive because they included the high proportion of unemployed young Australians who were looking for work and young people employed in low-skilled jobs which provide a living wage but offer few career opportunities. 'We have a severe skills shortage and we would be better off supporting young people getting through formal education in greater numbers,' he

said (25/08/07: *Age*, p.5; *Sydney Morning Herald*, p.4).

ETHNIC/MULTI-CULTURAL YOUTH

Young Muslims' self-perceptions examined

Religion, nationality and ethnic identity all play a part in young Muslims' self-perceptions, according to a study conducted by researchers from Central Queensland University and Griffith University. A group of 117 young Muslims living in Queensland (aged 9–19 years) took part in the study. Close to half of those surveyed for the study were born in Australia. Almost all participants (93%) said that they were proud to be Muslim, while just over half (58%) said that they were proud to be Australian. Many participants reported experiencing discrimination, stereotyping and marginalisation because of their religious identity (*Age*, 13/09/07, p.4).

FAMILIES

Helping teens with family separation

In September, the national Child Support Agency (CSA) launched a guidebook containing information and resources to help teenagers cope with parental separation. The 45-page book *Family separation: A guide for teens* was developed after a number of organisations informed CSA of the particular need for a teen-oriented resource on this topic. According to Kids Help Line clinical supervisor Heath Christie, family relationship issues were the number one reason that young people contacted Kids Help Line in 2006. *Family separation: A guide for teens* is available both in hardcopy and online (*Courier Mail*, 27/09/07, p.9).

GAMBLING

Gambling study investigates teenage Territorians

The University of Adelaide has been awarded around \$80,000

in funding to investigate teenage gambling in the Northern Territory. The research is being conducted as part of a \$2.5 million package, provided by the Northern Territory's Community Benefit Fund, to fund gambling-related research and service provision. This will be the first study of teenage gambling ever conducted in the Northern Territory (*Northern Territory News*, 3/09/07, p.2).

HEALTH

Not just how loud, but how long...

Young people could be endangering their hearing by listening to music through their mobile phones and portable MP3 and CD players for long periods. The HEARing Cooperative Research Centre's study of 200 Victorian young people aged 15–34 years found that around 30% reported listening to music through headphones for more than three hours per day, placing themselves at risk of hearing loss. 'It's not just how loudly someone listens to it, it's more the exposure time,' said HEARing Cooperative Research Centre spokesman Associate Professor Bob Cowan (*Age*, 22/08/07, p.7).

Secondary students missing the mark

Around 86% of young Australians do not meet the recommended daily requirements for physical exercise, according to a Cancer Council Victoria survey released in August. The survey of the dietary and physical activity habits of just over 18,000 12–17-year-old students from 322 schools around Australia also found that only 20% ate the recommended daily intake of vegetables and 39% ate the recommended daily intake of fruit. Students who watched more than three hours of television on weekdays were found to consume more snack foods, fast food and energy drinks than other students (31/08/07: *Age*, p.9; *Adelaide Advertiser*, p.3).

Campaign shows the dark side of tanning

The NSW Government is embarking on a \$2.16 million public awareness campaign to alert residents to the health risks associated with pursuing a tan. The 'Dark side of tanning' campaign was prompted by figures contained in the Cancer Institute NSW's 'Lifestyle and cancer survey' which indicated a positive attitude towards tanning among NSW residents. Young people were particularly keen on tanning, with 68% of 13–17-year-olds and 62% of 18–24-year-olds surveyed saying that they wanted tanned skin. Verity Firth, the NSW Government's Minister Assisting the Minister for Health, said that the new campaign aimed to tackle the 'growing "it can't happen to me" mentality'. Meanwhile, secondary school students in Victoria are to be the targets of a campaign designed to reduce the likelihood of young people developing skin cancer. This campaign follows the widely publicised death of 26-year-old Victorian melanoma victim Clare Oliver in September (*Daily Telegraph*: 17/09/07, p.3; 22/09/07, p.94; *Age*, 23/10/07, p.5).

Not necessarily healthier

Improved mortality rates among young Australians do not necessarily indicate a continuing improvement in their health and wellbeing, according to National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health visiting fellow Richard Eckersley. In a paper published in the *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, Eckersley noted a number of 'adverse trends in young people's health', including overweight and obesity issues, drug and alcohol abuse and mental health problems. He said that social trends such as changes in diet, family breakdown and increasing inequality contributed to these health problems. 'Adolescent health is a good indicator of our future health patterns because young people are at the cutting edge of the impact

of social and cultural changes and how they affect our health ... What the evidence is showing us is that progress, as we pursue it, is not serving us as well as we thought,' he said. Mr Eckersley said that Australia's health system needs to consider the impact of negative social trends on the health and wellbeing of Australians (*Canberra Times*, 12/10/07, p.1).

Family meals help overweight teens

A study published in the November edition of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* shows that destructive eating and weight control behaviours are common among overweight teenagers as well as those who are underweight. Researchers gathered data from 2,500 adolescents over a five-year period, finding that frequent family meals, a positive atmosphere at mealtimes, the promotion of physical activity and self-esteem-building all act as protective factors against destructive weight control behaviours among overweight teens (*Courier Mail*, 16/10/07, p.5; *Sunday Telegraph*, 21/10/07, p.13).

HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS

Survey highlights concerns of homeless youth

To coincide with National Homeless Persons' Week in August, Mission Australia released a report comparing the attitudes, values and concerns of homeless young Australians with those who had stable housing. The report, *Homeless young Australians: Issues and responses* analysed survey data from around 15,000 young people aged 11–24 years. Among the homeless young people surveyed, drug and alcohol use (44%), body image (38%) and suicide (32%) were the top three issues of concern nominated, while those in stable housing nominated family conflict (28%), physical/sexual abuse (27%) and stress (26%). More homeless young

people than those in stable housing nominated the environment as an issue of concern (21% compared with 8%). Mission Australia spokeswoman Anne Hampshire said that she was somewhat surprised at the prominence of body image as a concern for homeless young people. 'This may reflect, in part, the impact homelessness – particularly sleeping rough – can have on personal appearance and self-esteem,' Ms Hampshire said. (*Sunday Mail*, 12/08/07, p.34).

Young people driving up inner-city rents

The author of the Australian Property Monitors rental report for the September 2007 quarter says that Generation Y's preference for inner-city living is largely responsible for a 14% increase in the median weekly asking rental price for houses in the Sydney area in the past 12 months. The median weekly asking rent for houses in Sydney is now \$400 (up from \$350 last year), while the median asking rent for units is \$380 (up from \$340 last year). Similar asking rental price increases were also recorded in other capital cities around Australia. Report author Michael McNamara says that rising interest rates and unaffordable housing prices are forcing young Australians to rethink their plans to buy a home. 'I think for the first time we are going to see a generation where a great many of them will be content to be lifetime renters ... For many of them, even though there's cheaper housing on the outskirts of the city, they would much rather pay exorbitant rents in the urban areas than countenance buying a home in what they consider the cultural wastelands of the suburbs,' he said (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 4/10/07, pp.1-2).

MENTAL HEALTH

Mothers' stable employment improves teens' mental health

An American study which found that mothers who move from

welfare dependence to stable employment experience an improvement in their mental and physical health compared with those who remain on welfare has also found that this transition improves the mental health of these mothers' teenage children. The study 'Welfare, children and families: A three-city study' began tracking 2,400 young Americans and their families in 1999, three years after major welfare system reforms encouraging welfare recipients to enter the workforce were implemented by United States Congress. While results indicated that a mother's welfare or employment status did not affect the wellbeing of young children, the transition of mothers from welfare to stable employment resulted in a decline in psychological distress, particularly anxiety, among teenage children. 'But a movement [of mothers] onto welfare saw adolescent children [experience] increased delinquency and problem behaviours,' said Rebekah Levine Coley, one of the study's investigators. Professor Coley presented her research at a seminar held in Sydney in August (*Australian*, 15/08/07, p.7).

Young Australians aware of substance use risks

Results from a national survey of almost 3,800 young Australians and around 2,000 of their parents indicate that both groups are aware of the mental health risks associated with substance use. The survey was conducted by researchers from the ORYGEN Research Centre at the University of Melbourne to inform their study of the beliefs of young people (aged 12–25 years) and their parents about the effects of substance use on mental health. Participants were presented with a case study vignette about a young person with psychosis, social phobia or depression. Over 85% of participants believed that alcohol, tobacco and marijuana would have been harmful to the young people presented in

the vignettes, while over 80% of young people recognised that refraining from excessive drinking or marijuana use would reduce the chances of developing mental health problems such as those described in the vignettes. Commenting on the study, lead researcher Dr Dan Lubman said that '... such beliefs are in sharp contrast to the high rates of alcohol, tobacco and cannabis use among young people, suggesting this knowledge does not necessarily translate into behaviour'. This study was published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* in September (3/09/07: *Australian*, p.2; *Herald Sun*, p.7; *Adelaide Advertiser*, 4/09/07, p.14).

Increase in bipolar diagnoses prompts questions

A large increase in the number of bipolar disorder diagnoses among young Americans in recent years has prompted researchers to call for studies to determine the accuracy of diagnostic assessments for child and adolescent bipolar disorder. A team of researchers, led by Dr Mark Olfson of Columbia University and the New York State Psychiatric Institute, compared the number of outpatient visits resulting in bipolar diagnoses among young Americans aged 19 years and under with those among adults aged 20 years and over. Between 1994/95 and 2002/03, the number of diagnoses among children and young people increased approximately fortyfold (from 25 per 100,000 to 1,003 per 100,000), while the number of diagnoses among adults increased close to twofold (from 905 per 100,000 to 1,679 per 100,000). Researchers believe that the 'impressive increase' in bipolar diagnoses among children and young people in this period is due to either an under-diagnosis of the disorder in this age group in the past or a current over-diagnosis. The study was published in the *Archives of*

General Psychiatry in September (*Canberra Times*, 8/09/07, p.20).

Room for improvement in youth mental health care

In October, the *Medical Journal of Australia* published a supplement containing papers on the topic of early intervention in youth mental health. An editorial accompanying the supplement called for a range of improvements to mental health services for young Australians, including more and better primary care services, specialised age-appropriate youth services and an increase in the community's capacity to address youth mental health issues. The editorial was written by a number of authors including Professor Patrick McGorry, Professor of Youth Mental Health at the University of Melbourne. The authors noted that current mental health services for young people 'tend to be threadbare and split across multiple levels of government, multiple program areas and myriad cash-strapped service providers'. 'Without access to appropriate treatment, many young people present in repeated crisis to overstretched hospital emergency departments, or their parents and carers are left to pick up the pieces ... for many of these young people, if they survive, their difficulties eventually become chronic and disabling,' they said (*Sun Herald*, 30/09/07, p.15; 1/10/07: *Adelaide Advertiser*, p.4; *West Australian*, p.5).

See the 'Abstracts' section of this edition of YSA for summaries of selected papers from the aforementioned *Medical Journal of Australia youth mental health supplement*.

Online therapy good for youth

A feature article on the growth of online counselling, therapy and other mental health services published in *The Age* in October discusses the benefits of

these online services for young people. Last year, Kids Help Line conducted research into the usefulness of online counselling for young people. University of Queensland clinical psychologist Dr Robert King, who undertook the research, said he found that 'young people felt very safe in the online environment and less likely to be criticised, condemned or embarrassed'. 'A number of kids made it clear in the focus groups that if there was no online counselling available they certainly wouldn't be using the telephone or getting help from other sources,' he said. However, Dr King's study also found that text-only online communication had some limitations as a counselling tool because it is a somewhat inefficient means of communication and has the potential to cause misunderstandings. The International Society for Mental Health Online has developed a series of professional guidelines for online practice in response to the growth in mental health services offered online (*Age*, 4/10/07, p.21).

Reaching out, virtually

The Inspire Foundation has recently launched an online role-playing game to help young people learn about mental health issues and develop resilience and coping skills. In the game, called Reach Out Central, players adopt the role of a young person who has just moved to a new town and must explore his/her new surroundings, make new friends and engage with family members. As decisions made by players begin to affect the mood of their virtual persona, the game suggests strategies for how best to cope with the various issues that arise, and provides links to further information on these issues. Reach Out Central was developed in consultation with a team of 80 youth ambassadors as well as psychologists and gaming experts. The game is aimed at young people aged 16–25 years. According to a paper published in

the *Medical Journal of Australia's* youth mental health supplement in October, just 29% of young people with mental health problems actually seek professional assistance for these problems. Swinburne University is currently conducting an evaluation of the effectiveness of the game as a mental health tool (*Herald Sun*, 18/09/07, p.53; *West Australian*, 17/10/07, p.2; *Weekend Australian*, 20/10/07, p.30).

PARTICIPATION

More information = more donations

Education is the key to encouraging more young people to give blood, according to an online survey of over 200 16–24-year-olds conducted by the Australian Red Cross Blood Service. While 81% of those surveyed had never donated blood, 91% said that they wanted to donate or would consider donating after being informed that one in three people require blood or a blood product at some stage in their lives. The belief that they did not meet the blood donor eligibility criteria (26%), fear of needles (25%), the fear that donating blood would drain them of energy (16%) and a general fear of donating blood (14%) were the main reasons that young people gave for not donating blood. Just under one-quarter of those surveyed said that they had never considered donating, while 11% said that they could not be bothered (*Herald Sun*, 14/09/07, p.30).

RIGHTS

Young workers unsure of their rights

Preliminary findings from research being conducted at the University of South Australia's Centre for Work and Life suggest that young workers have 'a real gap' in their knowledge of their basic workplace rights. This research is being conducted by PhD scholar Catherine Earl (*Adelaide Advertiser*, 23/10/07, p.4).

RISK-TAKING

Fatigue hits young drivers

A comparison of the driving skills of people aged under 25 with the skills those in their 30s indicates that fatigue has a greater effect on younger drivers. University of Queensland psychologist Simon Smith used a driving simulator to test the skills of drivers at different times of the day. According to Dr Smith, the older drivers were 'much less affected by sleepiness' than those aged under 25. 'Young people have very good reaction time but they're very poor at deciding what to react to. That comes with experience', Dr Smith said (*Courier Mail*, 3/09/07, p.18).

Controversial ad just might work

Not only has the NSW Government's latest road safety campaign generated considerable controversy and overseas interest, but initial feedback indicates that it also appears to be achieving its desired effect – to curb the speeding habits of young male drivers. The 'Speeding. No one thinks big of you' campaign features people wiggling their little fingers at speeding male P-plate drivers, a gesture indicating that the drivers' aggressive driving behaviour is compensation for a lack of 'physical manliness'. Over three-quarters of those who took part in a recent survey measuring the impact of the campaign said that they thought it had raised community awareness about speeding. More significantly, 63% of the young men surveyed indicated that the campaign encouraged them to obey speed limits, and over half said that it made them more likely to comment on someone else's speeding. Dr Soames Job from the NSW Centre for Road Safety said that the new \$1.9 million advertising campaign, launched in June, was created as a result of market research indicating that young people were becoming desensitised to campaigns featuring

shocking images of car crashes (*Daily Telegraph*, 15/10/07, p.11).

SEXUALITY

US abstinence campaign heading to Australia

Silver Ring Thing, a popular American campaign which encourages young people to pledge sexual abstinence until marriage, is planning to stage rallies in Australia next year, according to its leader, evangelical youth pastor Denny Pattyn. The controversial campaign uses these high-energy, rock concert-like events to promote its message of sexual purity and warn against the dangers of pre-marital sex. Young people who pledge abstinence at these events buy specially-inscribed silver rings to be worn as a reminder of their pledge. Abstinence campaigns such as Silver Ring Thing have been criticised for undermining safe sex messages. Several American studies suggest that most young people who make these pledges break them within a year and are less likely to use condoms during their first sexual encounter. However, another study indicates that two-thirds of teenagers who do not make abstinence pledges are sexually active before the age of 18, while only 30% of young people who do make such a pledge are sexually active before this age (*Sun Herald*, 16/09/07, p.9; *Sunday Herald Sun*, 23/09/07, p.21).

TECHNOLOGY

Real wired child

Adolescent psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg has written a book to help parents understand and address safety issues children and young people face when using the internet. While the book *Real wired child: What parents need to know about kids online* is aimed at parents, it emphasises the important role schools play in helping young people to 'develop a moral compass as they stroll through the back alleys of Cyberia'.

In the book, Dr Carr-Gregg explains that dissemination is the key to successful school online safety programs. 'An "acceptable use agreement" should be distributed to staff, students and parents, irrespective of whether they make use of the school's computer network and internet facilities,' he says (*Mercury*, 16/10/07, p.28).

Going online for the youth vote

The 2007 federal election campaign was marked by the emergence of a new political platform, with both John Howard and Kevin Rudd (and their respective parties) using online video-sharing site YouTube to communicate their policy messages to young people. Rudd also used social networking site Facebook to generate support. While these platforms offer the potential to engage with a wider youth audience than traditional news media, they have also exposed political leaders to a new form of public criticism and debate, with members of the public able to post critical comments in response to politicians' YouTube videos. 'The relationship now is not just about how-to-vote cards on election day, and this new conversation is very encouraging for the health of our democracy,' said Associate Professor Steve Stockwell, deputy head of the School of Arts at Griffith University (*Courier Mail*, 3/11/07, p.56).

Items recently published on our Youth Facts & Stats website

For further information and references, visit <http://www.youthfacts.com.au>

CRIME & JUSTICE

Most juveniles experience detention before sentenced supervision

While most (90%) of juveniles' sentenced supervision periods are

spent in the community rather than in detention, a report released in August by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) shows that almost half of young people under juvenile justice supervision for the first time spent at least a short time in custody before being sentenced.

The report, *Juvenile justice in Australia 2005–06*, found that 44% of young people, including over 50% of those aged 10–13 years of age, had a period of detention (usually pre-sentence detention) in their first supervision.

During 2005–06, over 40% of young people who began their first ever supervision when aged 12 years had completed at least four supervision periods by the time they were 18, compared with less than 10% for those whose initial supervision began when they were 15 years old.

The total number of young people under juvenile justice supervision in Australia in 2005–06 was 13,254, including 11,265 aged 10–17 years (the remainder were aged 18 years and over). Around four per 1,000 young people aged 10–17 years were under community-based supervision, and around two per 1,000 had detention-based supervision at some time during the year. Almost 65% of young people under supervision were aged 16 years or older with less than 10% aged 13 or younger. Over 60% of young people were at least 15 years old when they had their first ever juvenile justice supervision experience.

There was an average of 5,185 young people in community-based juvenile justice supervision each day (16% were female and 84% were male) and 816 young people in detention-based juvenile justice supervision (8% were female and 92% were male).

Indigenous young people make up 38% of those under juvenile justice supervision.

'About 44 out of 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 10–17 years were under juvenile justice supervi-

sion during 2005–06 compared with about three out of 1,000 non-Indigenous young people,' said report author Ms Ingrid Johnston.

Data in this report were drawn from the Juvenile Justice National Minimum Data Set (NMDS), a joint project between the Australasian Juvenile Justice Administrators (AJJA) and the AIHW.

DRUGS

Alcohol still main drug of concern

The latest report on alcohol and other drug treatment services in Australia, released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) in July, shows that alcohol is still at the top of the list when it comes to the drugs for which people seek treatment.

The report, *Alcohol and other drug treatment services in Australia 2005–06*, profiles over 150,000 treatment episodes from 664 government-funded alcohol and other drug treatment agencies across Australia.

In 2005–06, alcohol was the main drug of concern nominated by clients in 39% of treatment episodes. However, when all drugs of concern were considered (that is, the main drug and any other drug use that concerned the client) the figure rose to around half (54%) of all treatment episodes.

Similar to previous years, cannabis was the most common illicit drug for which people sought treatment (25% of episodes), followed by heroin (14%) and amphetamines (11%). The 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey also shows that cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug in Australia.

The AIHW's Dr Chris Stevenson said that '[A]lcohol was the most common drug of concern for clients aged 30 years and over. However, for younger clients, cannabis was the most common drug nominated, particularly for clients aged under 20 years where cannabis accounted for one out of two episodes'.