

What is life like for young Australians today, and how well are they faring?

Many worry about how young people are coping with the complexity and uncertainty of modern life. Is the sky the limit, or are their lives tough and unrewarding? Are young people happy or miserable? This paper reports the progress and perspectives of 1157 young people aged 19-20 years.

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There has been much speculation and concern about how young people are faring in today's world. The lives of the current generation are very different from the lives of their parents and grandparents. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, most young people had settled into lifelong careers, married, and become parents by their mid twenties.

Nowadays, however, the period following secondary schooling is often one of prolonged financial dependence, with young people progressing to further education and training at rates unprecedented in Australia's history. Employment opportunities are changing rapidly and have become more uncertain, and it is expected that individuals will traverse multiple career paths during their working life. Many young people are postponing marriage and family life, and there is growing public debate about an imminent "fertility crisis" (Weston, Qu, Parker and Alexander 2004).

Some have even suggested that we should begin thinking of the years from the late teens through the middle twenties as a new stage in the life-course, calling this the "emerging adult" period of development

(Arnett 2000). As Arnett (2000: 469) notes, this is a time in which a "variety of possible life directions in love, work, and world views" are explored, and a period of self-discovery and trial and error for many.

There is disagreement about whether young people are doing well, or finding life difficult. In a recent discussion of this issue, Richard Eckersley (2004: 36) asks "are young people having the time of their lives, or struggling with life in their times?", and cites evidence supporting both possibilities. However, the evidence base to answer this question of clear public health concern remains slim, with Australian research particularly lacking. Hence, conclusions tend to be based on the accumulation of findings across studies that are designed to examine a single issue (such as substance use) or only a few of the key areas. The methodologies of these studies (for example, the type and age of participants, and the measures and data collection methods used) may differ substantially and not mesh well.

There is an urgent need for Australian research that can provide information about how a large and diverse group of young adults is faring over a broad



range of aspects of life, both positive and problematic. The most recent wave of data collected in the Australian Temperament Project provides such an opportunity. This paper aims to provide a snapshot of what life is like for young Australians on the threshold of adulthood, across a broad range of indicators. A more detailed report examining interconnections between the various indicators, and the progress of particular sub-groups (for example, young women compared with young men, young people living in urban or rural areas), is currently in preparation.

Australian Temperament Project

The Australian Temperament Project (ATP) is a multi-disciplinary collaborative project between the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the University of Melbourne, and the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. To date, this ongoing, longitudinal study has followed the progress of a large, representative group of Victorian children from infancy to 19-20 years of age. A cohort of 2,443 infants aged 4-8 months and their parents were recruited in 1983. Thirteen waves of data have been collected up to the year 2002, via annual or biennial

mail surveys, with the aim of elucidating the pathways to psychosocial wellbeing and maladjustment over the lifespan. Using age-appropriate measures, a wide range of aspects has been assessed, including the child's temperament, behavioural and emotional adjustment, academic progress, health, social skills, peer and family relationships, as well as broader family functioning, parenting practices and the family socio-demographic background. Parents, teachers and the children themselves have provided information about the children's adjustment and development and aspects of family life at various stages of the project.

Approximately two-thirds of the cohort continue to participate in the study after 20 years. Of the families who are no longer participating, a higher proportion come from a lower socio-economic background, or include parents who were not born in Australia. However, there are no significant differences between the retained and no-longer-participating sub-samples on any child characteristics assessed in infancy, and the retained sample closely resembles the original sample on all facets of infant functioning (for further details see Prior, Sanson,

Smart and Oberklaid 2000). Thus, while the attrition over the 20-year time span of the study has led to a slight under-representation of children from families living in socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances, the study continues to include children with a wide range of characteristics and capacities.

The data for the present paper come from the 13th ATP survey wave, collected at 19-20 years of age in the year 2002. A total of 1,157 young adults (56 per

cent female) and 1,100 parents took part in this survey wave. This represents a response rate of 75 per cent of the young people and 71 per cent of the parents who were still participating in the study at this time.

A wide range of aspects was measured in the 13th survey wave, but here only a sub-set of measures, considered to be key aspects of positive and problematic adjustment, is used (listed in Table 1). The paper focuses mainly on young adults' self reports, but also includes parental reports where appropriate.

An overview of the activities and current life circumstances of this group of 19-20-year-old young adults is provided, and followed by an examination of how the sample was faring on aspects of positive adjustment (social competence, life satisfaction, relationships with others, and civic engagement), as well as problematic aspects (depression, anxiety, antisocial behaviour and substance use).

Activities and lifestyle

Figure 1 shows that almost one-third of respondents were working (either full- or part-time), and similar proportions were studying, or doing both. A small number (4 per cent) were neither employed nor taking a course of study; this group includes the 1 per cent who were parents caring for a dependent child. These trends suggest that this sample of young people were generally leading productive, and often busy, lives.

Figure 2 shows the diversity of take-home, weekly incomes received by this sample of 19-20-year-olds (for reader ease, the original ten categories were collapsed into four). Income could be derived from wages earned, as well as government allowances, parents' support and other sources (for instance, savings, shares). The most common take-home, weekly income was between \$150 and \$300, with two-fifths receiving this amount. Almost one-third received more than this, while approximately one-quarter received less, and 2 per cent did not receive any income at all.

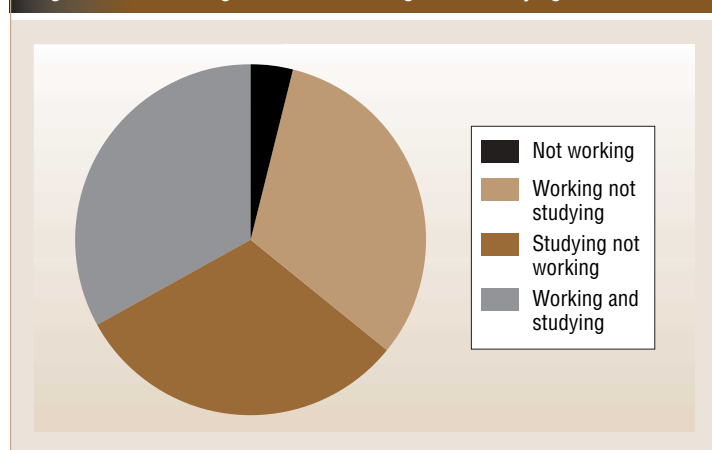
When asked about their current financial situation, almost three-quarters (72 per cent) reported that they were "living comfortably" or "doing alright", with one-fifth feeling that they were "just getting by" (21 per cent). Only 6 per cent said they were "finding it difficult" or "very difficult". Thus, it seemed that while most were receiving a fairly small income, they were getting by with few difficulties.

Almost three-quarters (72 per cent) said they were living in the parental home. Half of those living away from home were sharing a house or flat with others (14 per cent). A small proportion (6 per cent) was living with a partner or spouse; and a similar proportion was in residential accommodation, such as at a university college or in the army (5 per cent). Few were living by themselves (2 per cent) and 1 per cent reported more complicated arrangements (for example, living with other relatives, or living on-the-job during the week and with parents at weekends).

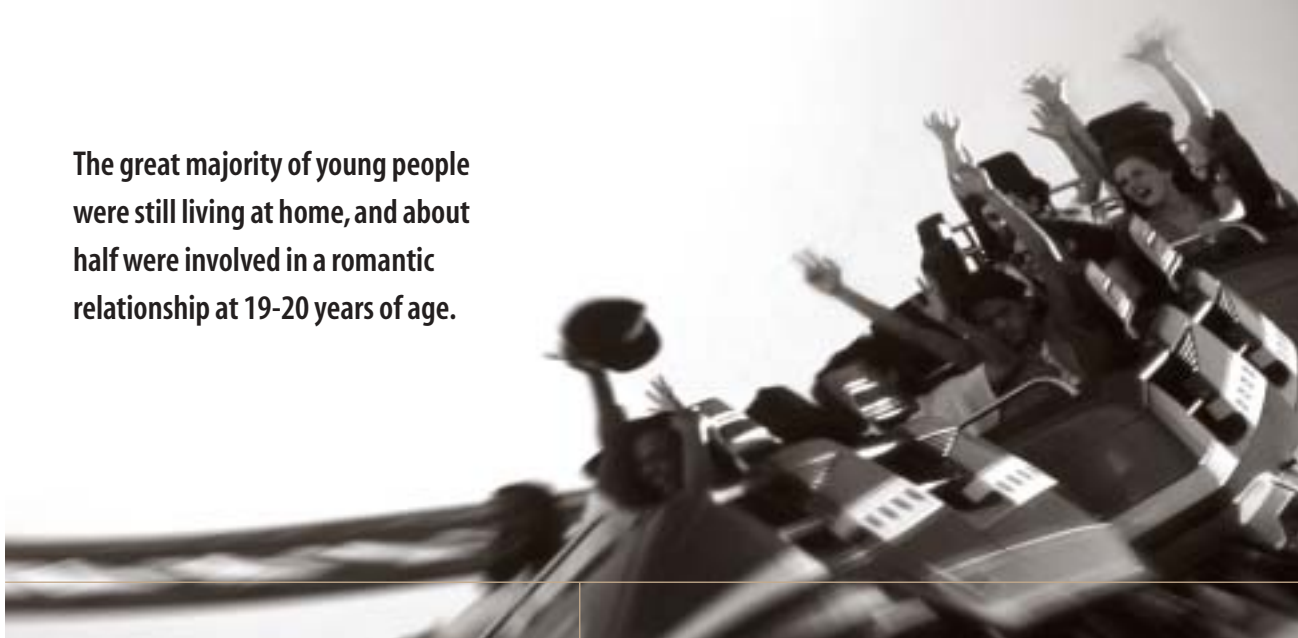
Table 1 Measures of lifestyle, and positive and problematic adjustment

Life circumstances	
■	Current educational / occupational activities (ATP item)
■	Take-home weekly income (ATP item)
■	Financial strain (ATP item)
■	Living arrangements (ATP item)
■	Existence of a romantic relationship (ATP item)
Positive aspects of adjustment	
■	Social competence (ATP items – see Smart and Sanson 2003)
■	Life satisfaction (adapted from Australian Institute of Family Studies Quality of Life scale)
■	Faith (Social and Community Planning Research and Barnado's Policy and Development Unit, Young People's Social Attitudes (YPSA) 1994)
■	Relationships with parents (MacDonald 1998, Perceived Social Support Scale)
■	Conflict with parents (ATP scale)
■	Relationships with friends (MacDonald 1998, Perceived Social Support Scale)
■	Size of friendship network (ATP items)
■	Engagement in civically-oriented activities (ATP items)
Problematic aspects of adjustment	
■	Depression (Lovibond & Lovibond 1995)
■	Anxiety (Lovibond & Lovibond 1995)
■	Health – the presence of a long-term physical or mental health problem/disability (ATP item)
■	Antisocial behaviour (adapted from Elliott & Ageton 1980 Self Report Delinquency Scale)
■	Substance use (ATP items): alcohol and cigarette use during the previous month; binge drinking in the past month (risk = 5+ if male, 3+ if female; high risk = 7+ if male, 5+ if female, NHMRC 2001); marijuana and other illicit drug use during the previous month
■	Total number of these problems

Figure 1 Percentage who were working and/or studying



The great majority of young people were still living at home, and about half were involved in a romantic relationship at 19-20 years of age.



One obvious possibility is that the low rate of financial strain reported by this group of young people is due to the fact that many were still living in the parental home. Investigation of this possibility revealed a complex relationship between living arrangements and financial strain. For young people who were receiving less than \$300 per week in income, rates of financial strain were significantly higher among those who were living away from home than those living at home. However, living circumstances were not related to the experience of financial strain among those receiving more than \$300 per week in income. These findings suggest that young adults in receipt of a relatively low income tend to be buffered from financial strain if they are living in the parental home.

Just over half (54 per cent) were currently in a romantic relationship, most commonly in a stable, “steady” relationship (40 per cent), or engaged or married (2 per cent and 1 per cent respectively). Ten per cent were in a casual relationship, and 1 per cent were in a different type of relationship (for example, de facto, long-distance). The corollary of this is that a substantial minority (46 per cent) were not in a relationship at this age.

In summary, the great majority of young people were still living at home, and about half were involved in a romantic relationship at 19-20 years of age.

Positive adjustment

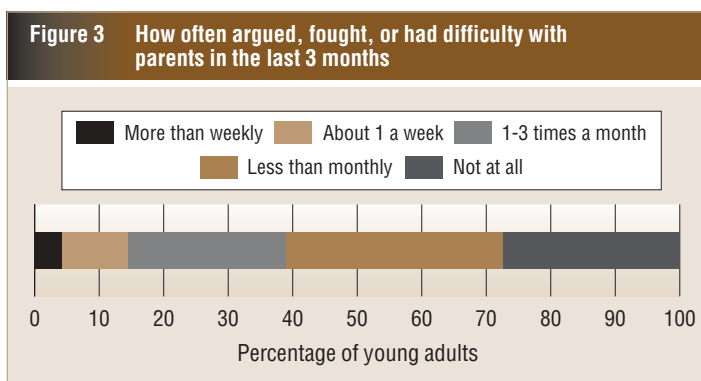
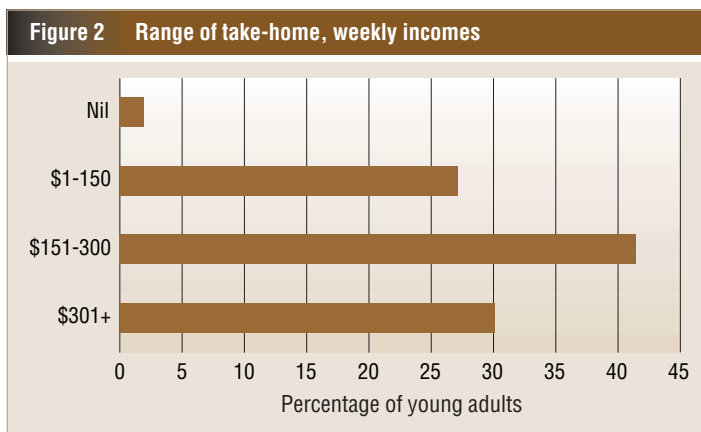
Five indicators of positive adjustment were used. The large number of items measured precludes the reporting of findings for each individual item. Instead, the average of the items selected to measure a particular aspect is reported. For example, several items assessed each aspect of social competence (responsibility, empathy, assertiveness, self-control), but only a single overall score for each aspect (the average of responses across the set of indicator items) is reported.

Personal attributes

With regard to social competence, 80 per cent of young people said they “often” or “always” acted responsibly, or were empathic towards others.

Parental reports were in accord, with 76 per cent of parents assessing the young people as “often” or “always” behaving in this way. More than half the young people (58 per cent) reported being assertive in social situations, or being able to maintain self-control in conflict situations. Parental perceptions were again similar, with 52 per cent of parents rating the young people as “often” or “always” displaying these characteristics. For more details of the findings concerning social competence, see Smart and Sanson (2003).

A set of ten items assessed young people’s life satisfaction. These covered areas such as lifestyle, work/study, relationships with others, perceptions of oneself and one’s accomplishments, and the direction one’s life is taking. On every item, the percentage who were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” was



more than 80 per cent, and the level of satisfaction averaged across all items was 86 per cent.

Young people were also asked if they belonged to a religion, and the importance to them of their faith. Just over one-third reported belonging to a religion (37 per cent), but only one-quarter agreed that their religion was important to them (25 per cent).

Relationships with others

Regarding young adults' relationships with others, relationships with parents are first described. Two aspects were examined: levels of conflict and the quality of the relationship. Figure 3 shows how often young people said they had argued, fought or had difficulty with their parents in the last three

months. As can be seen, 85 per cent said conflict had occurred infrequently (at most one to three times per month) or not at all, while only 10 per cent had experienced conflict on a weekly basis and 4 per cent more often. When they disagreed, the most common disagreements were about helping round the house (49 per cent), followed by money (39 per cent), job (24 per cent), and staying out late (20 per cent).

The quality of the parent–young adult relationship was assessed by a series of questions (for young adults these were about their relationship with “the parent/s or step-parent/s you have most contact with”). Over the set of items assessing whether the relationship was warm and close, 82 per cent of young people and 93 per cent of parents reported that this was so. Similarly, when asked whether parents viewed them negatively, only 18 per cent of youth and 16 per cent of parents reported that this had occurred. The consistency of views across both young people and parents suggests that these are valid trends, although there may be some social desirability and an “eye of the beholder” effect also present in these findings.

The same items were used to assess the quality of relationships with friends, and friends' negative perceptions of the young adult. These aspects were even more positively rated, with 86 per cent of young people feeling that their relationships with their best friends were warm and close, and only 9 per cent feeling that these friends viewed them negatively. Also assessed was the size of the individual's friendship network (see Figures 4 and 5). Figure 4 shows that four-fifths of young people had three or more close friends, with the most common number being between three and five, while Figure 5 shows that 90 per cent had six or more friends with whom they were less close, the most common number being 15 or more.

Overall, it seemed that the relationships between young people and their parents and friends were positive and supportive, suggesting that they had strong connections to those closest to them. Additionally, conflict between young people and their parents and friends occurred infrequently at this stage of life.

Civic engagement

The final area of positive adjustment considered was pro-social attitudes and behaviour. It should be noted that several aspects were measured and will be discussed in a forthcoming report, but this paper reports on only one indicator – engagement in civically-oriented activities. As the items assessing this characteristic are quite disparate, the findings for the individual activities are shown. Table 2 shows the proportion of young people who participated in each activity at least once in the previous 12 months.

Table 2 shows that there were moderate to high levels of participation in some activities, and lower engagement in others that may have been more overtly politically oriented. Over four-fifths reported taking actions to care for the environment, while

Figure 4 Size of close friendship network

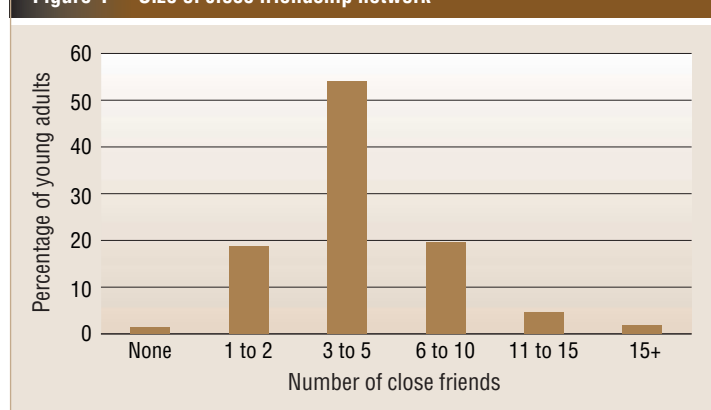


Figure 5 Size of wider friendship network

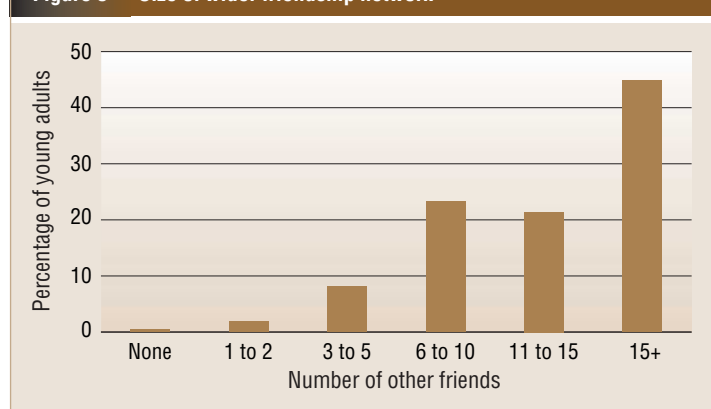


Table 2 Rates of engagement in civically oriented activities

	Per cent
Made a personal effort to care for the environment in one's daily life	84
Voted in an election	81
Signed a petition	51
Undertaken voluntary or charitable work	38
Attended a public meeting	16
Supported an environmental lobby or political group	16
Joined with others to try to resolve a local or neighbourhood problem	7
Taken part in a demonstration or march	6
Contacted a government official regarding a problem	6
Contacted the media regarding a problem	3

almost two-fifths had undertaken voluntary or charitable work. On the other hand, as Table 2 shows, only a small minority had taken part in a number of the activities measured. For example, only 16 per cent had supported an environmental lobby/political group, and 7 per cent had joined with others to try to resolve a local or community problem. Overall, while there was considerable variability in the type of activities undertaken, many young people reported engaging in some type of civically oriented activity.

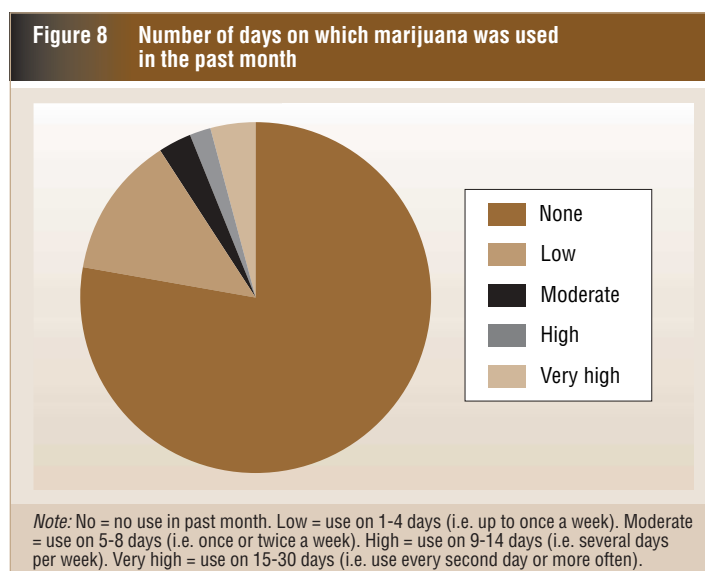
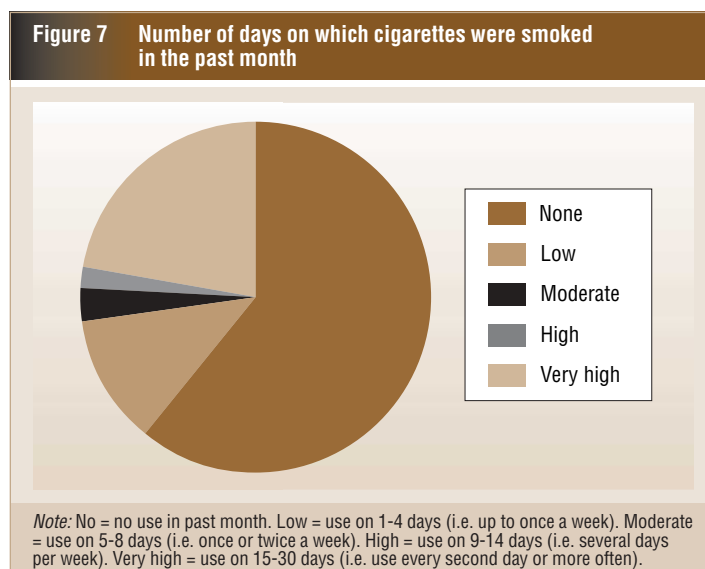
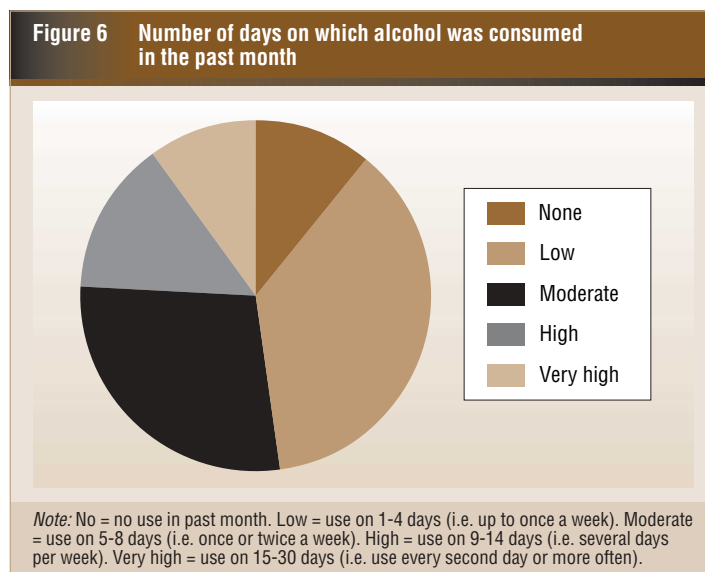
Problematic aspects

Regarding problematic aspects of adjustment, rates of depression and anxiety are first described. The Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale was employed to measure these aspects, with the published norms applied to determine the percentage of young people who were experiencing “moderate” or “severe” difficulties. (A “moderate” level of difficulties meant that an individual was between the 87th and 95th percentile on the norms, while “severe” difficulties placed an individual between the 95th and 98th percentiles, and an individual in the 98th to 100th percentile was classified as experiencing “very severe” difficulties. Hence, the presence of moderate or severe difficulties suggests a serious level of difficulty). Using these norms, 20 per cent of young people were found to have been moderately or severely depressed over the past month, while 19 per cent had been moderately or severely anxious.

Involvement in antisocial behaviour was also assessed. Individuals who had engaged in three or more different types of antisocial acts in the previous 12 months were classified as “highly antisocial”. The behaviours included were criminal acts such as property offences, assault, white collar crimes, and illicit drug use such as marijuana, amphetamines, designer drugs (during the past month), but a small number of socially unacceptable behaviours such as fighting or carrying a weapon were also included (for further details, see Smart, Vassallo, Sanson, Richardson et al. 2003). This is a widely used method (see Elliott and Ageton 1980) and parallels the DSM IV criteria for Conduct Disorder (American Psychiatric Association 1994). Using the criterion of involvement in three or more different types of antisocial acts in the past 12 months, a total of 15 per cent of young adults was identified as “highly antisocial”.

Rates of licit and illicit substance use were investigated separately as well. As recommended by McLellan and colleagues (1992) and consistent with many other studies (for example, Bond et al. 2000), the ATP study sought information about use within the past month, as reports over a longer time frame are considered unreliable. Alcohol use in the past month was very prevalent, with 87 per cent reporting such use. Of concern, almost two-thirds (64 per cent) reported drinking at the NHMRC (2001) defined level of “high risk” (seven or more drinks for males and five or more drinks for females) on at least one day in the past month.

The number of days on which alcohol was consumed in the past month is shown in Figure 6. The Figure shows that approximately one-tenth of young adults (11 per cent) had not consumed alcohol at all; one-third (37 per cent) reported drinking on one to four





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days (equivalent of up to once a week); one-quarter (28 per cent) from five to eight days (equivalent to once or twice a week); and another quarter (24 per cent) on nine to 30 days per month (equivalent to several days per week or more often).

Regular “high risk” (see above definition) and “risky” (five or more drinks for males, three or more drinks for females) binge drinking was relatively common – about one-quarter (25 per cent) of the sample reported binge drinking at “high risk” levels once a week or more often, and a further one-tenth (9 per cent) at “risky” levels weekly or more frequently.

Cigarette use during the past month was reported by about two-fifths (39 per cent) of young people, with 15 per cent reporting that they were daily smokers. The frequency of cigarette use is shown in Figure 7. The categories used are the same as those used for alcohol consumption. Figure 7 reveals two main patterns of use, with much greater numbers of young people reporting either “low” or “very high” use while few reported “moderate” or “high” use, perhaps reflecting the addictive nature of smoking.

Approximately one-fifth (22 per cent) reported marijuana use in the previous month. As Figure 8 shows, more than half of this type of substance use was at low levels, although 6 per cent were using marijuana on several days per week (classified as “high or “very high” use). Other illicit drug use in the past month (hallucinogens, opiates, designer drugs) was reported by about one-tenth of young people (11 per cent). The most frequent types of illicit drugs used were sniffing inhalants (7 per

cent) and LSD/hallucinogens (6 per cent). All other types of drug use were rare, at less than 2 per cent occurrence. Due to the small numbers who had used other illicit drugs, a more detailed breakdown of use was not possible.

The final aspect included as an indicator of problems was the existence of a long-term physical or mental health problem or disability. More than 80 differing conditions were reported ranging from minor ailments such as skin problems to major problems such as cancer. In total, one-fifth of young adults (21 per cent) reported having a long-term health condition.

To gain a view of the overall prevalence of difficulties, the total number of problems present was computed. Table 3 shows the percentage of young Australians who were depressed, anxious, and/or highly antisocial (recalling that the definition of antisocial behaviour included illicit substance use). As the Table shows, more than one-third (37 per cent) were experiencing one or more problems, with the majority experiencing a single problem. Nevertheless, 15 per cent were encountering multiple problems.

Adding problematic alcohol use (defined as “high risk” binge drinking on five or more days in the last month – equivalent to once a week or more often) to the list of difficulties, one-half (50 per cent) of this group of young adults were found to be experiencing one or more problems, with the majority of these individuals (28 per cent) experiencing one type of problem and 22 per cent multiple problems (see Table 3).

Thus, a substantial number (from one-third to one-half) were experiencing one or more serious problems depending on how this was defined, and 15 to 22 per cent were encountering multiple problems.

Discussion and conclusions

What can be concluded about the progress of this group of 19-20-year-old young Australians? It seems to be quite a mixed picture. On the one hand, almost all were holding down a job or taking a course of study, and some were undertaking both.

Table 3 Percentage who were experiencing one or more problems

Percentage who were depressed, anxious, and/or involved in antisocial behaviour		Percentage who were depressed, anxious, involved in antisocial behaviour and/or high alcohol consumption	
None	63	None	50
One	22	One	28
Two	12	Two	16
All three	3	Three	5
		All four	1

They were surviving on not much money but coping (probably because most were living in the parental home); they reported being very satisfied with their lives; they were socially skilled; and they were closely connected to parents and friends. Many had formed a long-term relationship with a partner, and a sizeable number had been involved in civically-oriented activities. If we were simply to look at the positive side of the equation, we would conclude that they were doing very well.

On the other hand, there were clear signs of difficulties. One-quarter were experiencing high levels of depression or anxiety; one-fifth reported having a long-term health condition; there were high rates of substance use; and one-tenth of the young people were involved in illegal, criminal activities outside of substance use. Overall, from one-third to one-half were encountering serious adjustment problems, depending on how this was defined, and a substantial number were experiencing multiple problems.

Thus, if only the problematic side of the equation were to be considered, it is far from a rosy picture, and it could be concluded that the group was struggling. It should also be noted that while the sample has been remarkably loyal over the life of the project, those with difficulties are probably over-represented among the group no longer participating, hence the rate of problems reported here may be conservative.

These findings reinforce the value of gaining a broad view of how this group of young adults is faring over a large and diverse range of aspects. Focusing on only one or other side of the equation, or on a limited number of areas of life, could have led to a simplistic and inaccurate view of the group's wellbeing and adjustment.

Bearing in mind the trends evident across both positive and problematic areas of life, overall, the majority of young people in this study appeared to be progressing well. However, a sizeable minority were experiencing substantial difficulties and may need support to help them flourish in the future. Particularly worrying were the rates of depression and anxiety, and the extent of harmful substance use, especially of alcohol. However, it was encouraging to see that most had close ties to others, and high personal skills, which augur well and promise to provide a sound resource base for a positive future.

The findings also illustrate the multi-faceted nature and complexity of young people's lives, and suggest that their lives are often finely balanced. They reinforce Eckersley's (2004) call for a different kind of summation to be sought. Instead of the "either/or" question of whether young people are doing well or poorly, a more differentiated view focusing on strengths and difficulties may provide the most useful information to guide policy and practice aimed at assisting young people to lead satisfying and productive adult lives.

This paper has provided a relatively simple description of the differing facets of young people's lives.

The next step is to examine in more depth inter-relationships between these positive and problematic aspects. For example, how do social skills relate to antisocial behaviour and substance use? Are they protective? Do positive family and peer relationships help those who were previously experiencing problems to become better adjusted at age 19-20 years? These are some of the issues that will be addressed and reported in a forthcoming report.

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