

# The Research Files Episode 49: Survey data to inform student...

*Jo Earp*

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*Welcome to Episode 49 of The Research Files. My guest today is Dr Joann Fildes, Head of Research and Evaluation at Mission Australia. The charity describes its Youth Survey as the nation's 'largest online annual "temperature check" of teenagers aged between 15 and 19'. In 2018, 28 000 participants across the country shared their views on a range of topics - including school education, their personal wellbeing and who they turn to for help.*

*As you'll hear later in the episode, Mission Australia works closely with schools to get students involved, and data can be used to inform future planning. The latest data show stress, school or study problems, and mental health are the top three personal concerns for young people. When asked who they'd turn to for help, more than one third said a teacher or school counsellor. We'll be discussing the role schools and educators can play in providing support and information. But first, here's Joann with an overview of the survey and its aims.*

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**Jo Earp: Dr Joann Fildes, welcome to The Research Files. Now, this is an annual survey – how long has it been going for and who is involved?**

Joann Fildes: It's been going since 2002. It started as a very small survey in *Dolly* magazine, just to address young people's concerns, and then it's got bigger and bigger. It used to be a survey of 12- to 24-year-olds, but in 2011/2012 we cut the age range down to just cover 15- to 19-year-olds. It's a national survey, so we try and get people from everywhere to participate. We go far and wide with our coverage of getting schools and young people involved.

This year we got 28 000 young people participating, which has been going up and up gradually over the course of the last four or five years. The year before we had 24 000, the year before that we had 21 000. So we're gradually increasing those numbers and obviously the more numbers we have the better we can speak to the voice of young people. So, we're really keen to get people involved in participating. We work really closely with schools to get them to participate and schools are able to get their own data back if they get over 100 responses from their school. So, that's where I think we're seeing those numbers increase – we're working more closely with schools, and quicker with schools, to get them some data back which we hope that they find useful.

**JE: The aim, as you said, is to give a voice to young people, if you like. What kind of topics are covered in the survey?**

JF: We have standard questions which we've been asking year on year and we have some one-off questions as well that we ask. So we've really focused our questions on what concerns young people, their values, their aspirations, and also then we have some select topics. This year we had some questions around internet usage, which were new, barriers to moving out of home, barriers to work after school. We generally tend to focus on – we know that this is a period of time of transition for young people, when many of them are leaving school (you know, that age range), so we're trying to focus on some of the concerns that they have in those sort of post-school years as well.

**JE: Now, I want to focus in particular on school education, general wellbeing and also you ask about issues of personal concern. What are the key findings from 2018 then?**

JF: I think, interestingly, we see that people identify their personal concerns very much around coping with stress, and school and study problems. So we see this in a number of areas across the report that young people are reporting stress around those two things. And this year, for the first time, we saw mental health come up as a personal concern into the top three. It was actually the first time we'd asked it as a question – before we'd had 'depression', so it was the first time we'd asked about mental health as a whole. So they're the top three personal concerns. The fourth concern is body image.

What is concerning for us is all of those relate to their mental health and wellbeing. And we're all very concerned that we see that 43 per cent of young people report either being 'extremely' or 'very concerned' about coping with stress. But they also have an opportunity to write lots of comments as well. In some of those comments we can see that young people are reporting that they feel very responsible about school, they think they've got a lot of activities that they're involved in, a real drive to do well, to participate in sport and all of the other activities that happen in and around school. So we see that a lot of young people are reporting stress around that.

The one thing we did find this year is that mental health is the most important issue identified in Australia today by young people (and that's increased as well), and we also see that in every state and every territory, as well as for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. So that's increased by over 10 per cent in the course of 12 months, it's doubled in two years and it's sort of become just an issue everywhere in Australia. We know that some of that is around the destigmatisation of mental health in Australia, that a lot more young people are willing and able to talk about it. But we also know that young people are recognising that as a concern in Australia, and in those personal concerns as well.

So they're some of the themes that are coming out throughout the survey.

**JE: Just going back to those issues of personal concern then, you mentioned the top four. Are there any differences there between genders, or in terms of location, or cultural background?**

JF: That is a really interesting question. What we see is that females are much more likely to report those concerns than males. For example, coping with stress is a major concern for six in 10 young females, compared to a quarter of young males. So, that's almost double the females reporting that as a concern. School and study problems, again, is a major concern for females compared to males.

So, we can see that body image is really concerning for males and females, but for many more females – 41 per cent of young females were concerned about body image as compared to 15 per cent of young males. So there are some differences, and predominantly we see young females reporting those as major concerns. However, for males we see that physical health is rated their third most important item – so they are reporting more concerns than females on that issue as well.

In terms of regions and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, it's a fairly similar pattern in terms of gender. So, we see consistently, across all our states, those differences – coping with stress, school and study problems, particularly for young females, physical health for males and body image for females. So we do see some of those issues.

We've broken down the data and looked at a lot of regional reports. Again, young females were reporting at much higher rates than young males.

**JE: Some really interesting data in there and I'd recommend anybody look at the full report, because it really does break down into a much finer grain, doesn't it, than we're talking about today?**

JF: Yes, it does.

**JE: Now, we mentioned earlier it's an annual survey. From your analysis of previous data then, how have the responses changed over the years? Have there been any particular trends emerging?**

JF: I think there are some trends, particularly in the Australia question. So, as I said earlier, mental health. When we looked back into 2012 data, 'mental health' there were 12 per cent of young people who rated that as an important issue in Australia today and we see that now [in 2018] at 43 per cent. So, that's a significant

change. It's increased, even from 2016 it's doubled. So we can see that as an important issue.

One of the interesting things again this year was that [concerns about] bullying has also increased considerably. That may be of interest to a lot of your listeners. Again, in 2012 it was 11 per cent and it's now at 17 per cent – although the difference isn't as big we certainly saw that increasing, and that was increasing across the states and particularly in some of our regional areas, that was coming up very high as well.

**JE: So just be clear, that's an issue of national, rather than personal concern – the bullying?**

JF: Yes, that's correct.

**JE: So, back to this year's results then. One of the questions on the survey is about where young people seek help for issues in their life. Looking at this year's data, 85 per cent said friends, 76 per cent said parents and guardians, but about a third said they would turn to a teacher or a school counsellor for help. And in the report you say (I'll just quote from the report) 'Young people need to feel confident in seeking help and know whom they can speak to and trust. At the same time, it is important that those providing support for young people – family, friends, teachers or professionals – are equipped with the tools and resources to address young people's concerns effectively.' So, what are the implications of your research then for teachers? What could schools be doing?**

JF: I think the schools, it is where young people are, and it's where a lot of the young people who are responding to this survey are finding themselves, so I think equipping schools with some of the tools to help young people, having open and frank conversations around mental health – lots of schools have wellbeing counsellors within them and counselling services within them, and making sure that young people feel able to go those, knowing what's there.

I think sometimes it's knowing the difference between what's a 'normal' stress – you know, exams are obviously very stressful, leaving school is very stressful – and what can be more important, what are those important concerns that young people have, what are the signs and symptoms. So, for schools to teach young people around those issues around mental health.

We know that they go to their friends. Making sure their friends know where to go to for help. Lots of schools are teaching Mental Health First Aid within schools and having a Mental Health First Aid Officer within the schools. They're really important for young people to feel that they can go to those sources of support within schools. And I think it is for their friendship groups, to know where to go to for help. Because, as you quite rightly say, over 85 per cent of them are going to their friends first. So, do those friends know where to go to for help and where they can go to within the school environment?

**JE: And actually, just thinking about there, obviously a lot of schools have wellbeing policies – or we'd hope they definitely have a student wellbeing policy. I guess ensuring that student voice is a part of shaping that policy?**

JF: Yes, absolutely. Shaping that policy and any actions that come out of that policy. So, we hear from a lot of young people that they don't want to go to services because they feel ashamed or embarrassed and stigmatised – so, making sure that those services do destigmatise mental health and mental health issues, and making sure that young people can feel confident, that they feel secure, and that they feel that they have a confidential ear as well. So I think some of it is around, young people [in the survey] were certainly expressing, did they feel they could talk to people in confidence? Again, that's something to drive home throughout that 'implications of policy'.

So, one of the other interesting things is we can give data back to schools. As I said, as long as they get around [100 young people] to participate in the survey we give them their data back. And that enables them to understand the mental health status of those young people, their concerns and values, their post-school aspirations. Schools report that they find that information really useful in their planning for the following year. All data is confidential – that's why we have to get a good number of young people participate, so we can give them that data back in a confidential manner.

So, if schools want to get involved contact us on the Youth Survey email, which is [youthsurvey@missionaustralia.com.au](mailto:youthsurvey@missionaustralia.com.au) and we can get you involved.

**JE: Excellent. Well, as I say, there's so much information in that report and there are obviously previous reports as well available on the Mission Australia site, so I'd recommend**

**that people go and have a look at that. But, for now, Dr Joann Fildes, thank you very much for sharing your expertise with *Teacher*.**

Again, those contact details – for help or information, you can call Lifeline on 13 11 14, Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800 or visit [beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au).

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## References

Carlisle, E., Fildes, J., Hall, S., Hicking, V., Perrens, B., and Plummer, J. (2018). *Youth Survey Report 2018*. Mission Australia.

Think about your school wellbeing policies, programs and support networks. What role do students play in developing these? Do you ask students about the issues that are important to them and what they would like help with? How often is the information updated?