

Politics, policy and pessimism: **What Australians think**



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Detailed report: Part A

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Child health and wellbeing: Australians say children today are no better off than when they were growing up

Report highlights:

- **Over half of Australians think the physical and mental health of children and teenagers today is no better than it was when they were growing up**
- **The majority of Australians think that neighbourhood and community safety is worse for children and teenagers today than when they were growing up**
- **More than 75% of Australians say life for kids today is no better in terms of bullying and family violence than when they were growing up**
- **Despite a strong perception of better education, almost half of Australians think employment opportunities for today's young people are worse than when they were growing up**

In a survey fielded in April 2016, more than 2,100 Australian adults were asked about their perceptions on a range of aspects of the quality of life of children and teenagers today compared to when the adults themselves were growing up.

Among adults nationwide, the dominant perception is that quality of life is no better for children today than it was when respondents themselves were growing up. One fifth (21%) indicated life in general for children today is 'no different' and 30% indicated it is worse than it was when they were children (see Figure 1). Respondents were least optimistic about bullying, family violence and neighbourhood safety, with less than a quarter indicating these aspects of life were better for children and teenagers today than when they were growing up. Pessimism extended into the areas of environment and climate, as well as employment opportunities and mental and physical health. Australians were most optimistic about dental health, schooling and further education opportunities, with well over half indicating these aspects of life are better for today's children than when they were growing up (see Figure 1).

Australian children today no better off in terms of physical and mental health

Over half of adults surveyed think that the health of children and teenagers today is no better than when respondents themselves were growing up, with 57% saying physical health and 63% saying mental health is either no different or worse (see *Figure 1*). These findings were consistent across household income, state and parental status. Older respondents (>60 years) were less likely to indicate that the mental health of children today is better than when they were children (29%) than younger respondents (40%). There was no difference in perceived change in physical health based on age of respondent.

Over half of Australians perceive kids today to be no better off in terms of healthy diet (59%) and play and recreation (54%). Just on 50% of respondents indicated today's children are better off when it comes to friendships, relationships and social networks (see *Figure 1*).

Communities more unsafe, environment worse, and bullying and family violence persisting problems today

The majority of adults indicated that neighbourhoods and communities today are less safe than when they were children (see *Figure 1*). There was no difference across household income bracket or age of respondent. Those respondents living in regional areas were less likely to perceive communities as being safer for children today (14%) than those from urban areas (25%).

Over three quarters of Australians perceive bullying to be no better for children and teenagers today than it was when they were children, with a notable 40% indicating it is worse (see *Figure 1*). Almost half of all adults (47%) indicated no difference in family violence for children of today compared to when they were growing up and almost a third (31%) think it is worse (see *Figure 1*). Those of lower household income (\$1,000/week) were slightly less optimistic in their perceptions of family violence than those reporting higher household income.

Only 27% of adults indicated the environment and climate to be better today than when they were children, with 40% saying it is worse (see *Figure 1*). Perceptions of negative environmental change were consistent across demographic subgroups, including age, gender, state, and parental status.

Australians most optimistic about schooling, further education and dental health

The majority of adults nationwide were optimistic about education for children and teenagers today, with 59% saying school education is better and 72% saying opportunities for further education are better than when they were growing up.

Dental health was also viewed positively, with 61% of Australians indicating it is better for kids today than when they were children. That said, a notable 13% indicated it was worse, and 26% said there was no difference (see *Figure 1*).

Pessimism about employment opportunities despite better education

Despite a strong perception of better school and further education opportunities, 57% of adults indicated opportunities for employment were either no different or worse for children and teenagers today compared to when they were growing up. This was particularly so for those with a household income less than \$1,000 per week where only 28% indicated opportunities for employment were better for today's kids than when they were growing up.

Migrants more optimistic

A more positive response pattern was seen in the migrant population, with 54% of all respondents born outside of Australia and 64% of those who had recently migrated (within the last five years) indicating life in general was better today for Australian children and teenagers than when they themselves were growing up. The majority of respondents who had migrated within the last ten years indicated life was better today in terms of schooling, opportunities for further education, physical health, and play and recreation compared with their own experiences as children (likely outside of Australia). Of those respondents recently migrated, 49% indicated opportunities for employment are better for Australian children and teenagers today than when they themselves were children, compared to 31% of Australia-born respondents.

Implications

Despite great advances in medicine, public health, communication and technology, this poll suggests most adults perceive life for Australian children and teenagers today to be no better, and in many aspects worse, than when they were growing up. Even though most adults report improved schooling and further education opportunities for today's kids, the overwhelming majority perceive employment

opportunities for young people to be no better today, and many indicate they are worse. Concerns for future employment opportunities for children were noted across all demographic groups, including recently arrived migrants.

Australians are particularly pessimistic about the mental health and safety of today's children and teenagers with many indicating they think life is worse in terms of community and neighbourhood safety, bullying, and family violence. Whilst some Australians are optimistic about progress in dental and physical health of children, a concerning number still indicate little or no perceived improvement in these areas.

Findings from this poll support a call for a stronger focus and investment in programs and policies aimed at optimising the health and wellbeing of our nation's children and young people, with mental health and employment being the areas of greatest perceived need.

Data source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from April 5 to April 19, 2016, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=2,113). The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. More than half of the sample were parents or caregivers of children aged less than 18 years (n=1,050). The completion rate was 65% among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate.

Adults' views on life for children today compared to when they were growing up

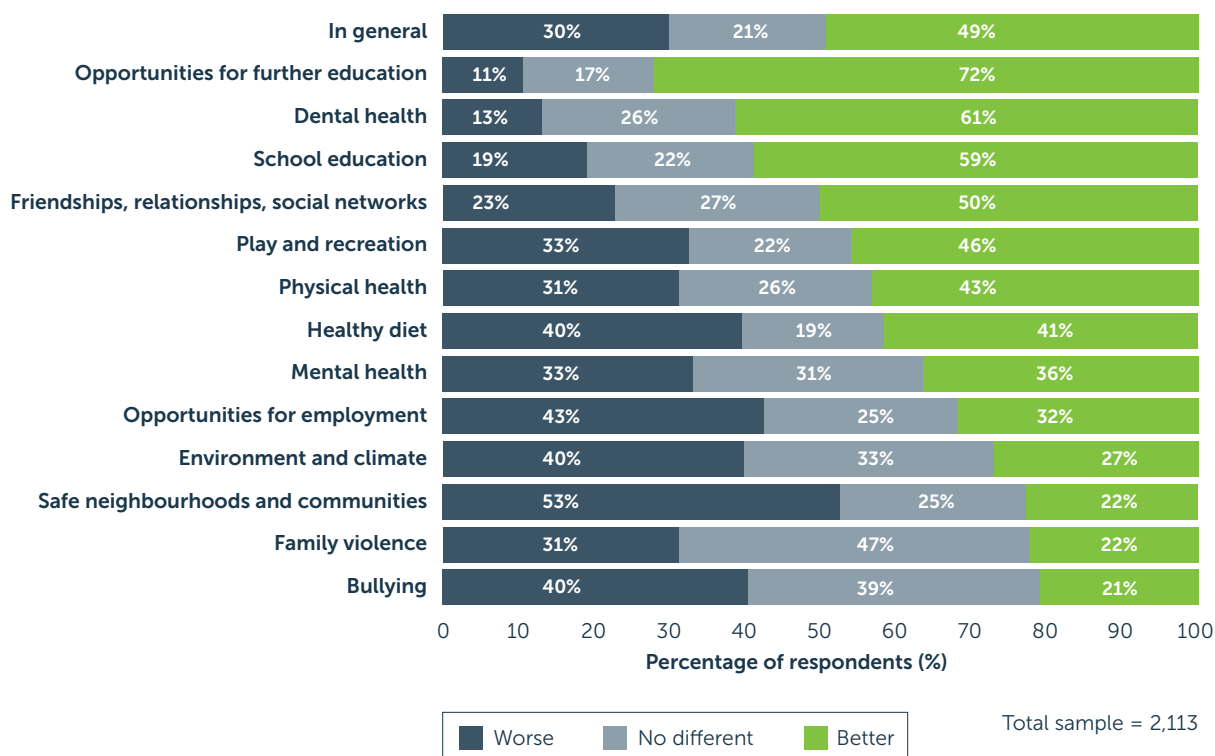


Figure 1.

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