

Part II Background information

Chapter 1 Introduction

Chapter 2 Population and family characteristics

1 Introduction

Compared with many parts of the world, young people in Australia enjoy relatively high levels of health. However within Australia, some groups of young people are disadvantaged in their health status compared with others. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are one such group.

The health status of young people, as measured by the more widely used health indicators, is also relatively high compared with other age groups in the community. For example, mortality rates are generally lower than for older people (AIHW 1998:256). In terms of morbidity, young people generally have lower rates of disease than older Australians. This is largely a reflection of the fact that many of the most prevalent diseases in Australia today are diseases related to age – the longer people live, the more likely they are to develop these diseases. Obvious examples include cardiovascular disease and most types of cancer. However, there are a number of conditions that are particularly important in young people, including injury, asthma and mental health problems.

This first national statistical report on the health of Australian young people aged 12–24 years presents information on both health status and determinants of health. The inclusion of information on health determinants reflects the importance of factors and behaviours that affect health status, both within this age range and into adulthood (for example, substance use and diet).

This is the second report on young Australians by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The first – *Australia's Children: their Health and Wellbeing 1998* (Moon et al. 1998) on the health of children aged 0–14 years was published late last year. Also, a previous report (Mathers 1996) included detailed information on health differentials of young people from different sub-population groups. The ABS (1997) also published a related report on youth.

In the national monitoring of young people's health, a broad definition of health which also includes concepts of wellbeing is used. This is consistent with the World Health Organization's definition of health (WHO 1946):

a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

This definition identifies health as a positive entity. Departures from 'complete' health, such as disease, are important to measure when examining health status. However, the absence of disease does not necessarily mean that the person is 'healthy'.

Despite the desire to measure health as defined above, the majority of information on the health and wellbeing of young people (at least currently) mainly relates to mortality, morbidity, or determinants of health. This is at least in part due to difficulties in defining and measuring such a broad concept as 'wellbeing' (AIHW 1998).

In general, information presented in this report is about young Australians aged 12–24 years. This provides an overlap with the age range used in *Australia's Children*, recognising that the transition from childhood to young adulthood is a gradual process, beginning and ending at different ages for different individuals. The actual age ranges used in each chapter, however, are constrained by data availability, resulting in a more limited age range than the 12–24 years being presented.

Introduction

This report provides a comprehensive picture of the health status of Australian young people based on available information. There is currently work under way to identify: the most appropriate means for reporting national health information on young people; the availability of corresponding data; and how best to collect the data not currently available (see Chapter 29). It is hoped that data on further aspects of young people's health will be available for subsequent reports.

There have been a number of health policy documents relating to young people published in Australia in recent years. This report concentrates on youth health information, but these documents provide valuable contextual background. The main health policy documents relevant to this report are outlined briefly below.

- *The Health of Young Australians: A National Health Policy for Children and Young People* (DHS 1995) is a joint statement by the Health Ministers of the Commonwealth, States and Territories of Australia. Its stated intention is to set a clear direction for the future development of health and health-related services for children and young people in Australia.
- *The National Health Plan for Young Australians* (DHFS 1997) was prepared by the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council Working Party on Child and Youth Health to cover the seven key action areas identified in *The Health of Young Australians* (outline above). The Australian Health Ministers' Conference endorsed the plan in July 1996. The plan indicates a need to move towards an evidence-based approach to monitoring the health of children and young people.

As mentioned above, work has recently been undertaken to identify an appropriate means of reporting national youth health information. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) convened a workshop in May 1999 to examine a number of issues relating to the national monitoring and reporting of youth health. The workshop was organised under the auspices of the National Public Health Information Working Group (established by the National Public Health Partnership). Workshop participants endorsed a conceptual 'framework' for organisation of national youth health information (included in Appendix 6 of this report). The framework and the discussions at the workshop provided valuable input into the content and structure of this report. However, many of these issues involve data development and/or analysis requiring longer lead times than were available for the production of this first edition of the national report on the health of Australian youth. These, along with other issues relating to youth health information, are being examined by the National Youth Health Information Advisory Committee, formed subsequent to the workshop. The committee is providing advice to the AIHW on the development of national youth health information.

Report structure

As already mentioned, the structure of this report is guided by the National Youth Health Information Framework. However, given the availability of information, it is not currently possible to report on all aspects of the framework. Therefore, this report is based on currently available information that nonetheless covers the majority of areas included in the framework.

The first part of the report provides background information on the youth population. Part II covers the health status of young people, including mortality, morbidity and disability. Part III covers biological and behavioural determinants of health, many of which will have their greatest impact later in life. Part IV – social determinants – also

covers determinants of health, but includes those that affect young people from their wider environment. Part V includes information on health and community services for young people. For easier identification of relevant information, we have chosen to include information on the health status of particular population groups in a separate part – Part VI – rather than to include this information throughout the report. The final part provides some views on the data gaps and deficiencies in youth health and action to address these problems.

The majority of information in this report covers the health of Australian young people at the national level. However, where available, the main measures of youth health status are given at the State and Territory level in the tables in Appendix 1.

References

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