



## **Policy Platform: Mental Health**

### **Youth Coalition of the ACT**

*For more information on mental health, refer also to the Comorbidity Policy Platform.*

The World Health Organization defines mental health as:

*Not just the absence of a mental disorder. It is... a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.<sup>1</sup>*

Youth workers and services in the ACT consistently report that mental health is one of the top three issues for young people in the ACT, alongside housing and homelessness, and alcohol and other drugs.

Mental health issues are likely to be significant in many young people's lives with 25% experiencing a mental health issue in any given year;<sup>2</sup> and the median age of onset being under the age of 24.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the issues associated with 20% of the population experiencing a mental disorder in 2006/07<sup>4</sup>. Anxiety and depression, alcohol abuse and personality disorders account for almost 75% of the burden attributable to mental illness<sup>5</sup>.

Anxiety and depression are the leading causes of the burden of disease and injury in young people.<sup>6</sup> While rates of suicide for young people have declined in the past decade, the Youth Coalition notes that they are still high, with suicide accounting for 20% of all deaths in young people.<sup>7</sup>

A 2009 survey indicated that 'depression' and 'coping with stress' are particular issues of concern for young people in the ACT, more so than nationally.<sup>8</sup> 21% - 22% of young people in the ACT who participated in the survey identified these as issues of concern, compared with 18% nationally. The national results also indicated that depression and stress were more prevalent among young people aged 20 - 25 years of age; while suicide and self-harm concerns were more commonly identified by young people aged 11 - 19 years of age.

Research indicates that young people most frequently access the family doctor or school-based counsellor for mental health support.<sup>9</sup> Only 28.6% of young people experiencing mental health issues access support services. Few young people who self-harm access services with 90% of young people who have self harmed reporting to have not have sought help prior to self-harming.<sup>10</sup> This is the lowest access rate among all age groups.<sup>11</sup>

Mental health issues can also affect young people disproportionately. Youth services report that young people experiencing homelessness, alcohol and other drug issues, multicultural young people, young people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual,

transgender or intersex, young carers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are often affected in higher proportion. It is important to note the cyclic impact these co-occurring issues can have upon young people.

The symptoms, effects and types of mental health issues can also vary between young males and females. For example, almost 90% of eating disorders occur in women<sup>12</sup>, although services report an increase in the number of young men experiencing eating disorders. The burden of anxiety and depression in women is almost twice as high as in men.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, young males are nearly 3 times more likely to complete suicide than young females.<sup>14</sup> Young males are less likely to access informal supports, highlighting the need for specific strategies to engage young men in mental health services.

The effectiveness of promotion, prevention and early intervention has been highlighted through research and evaluation in addition to the cost effective nature of these programs. However, given that only 28.6% of young people experiencing mental health issues access support services,<sup>15</sup> more frequently accessing the family doctor or school-based counsellor,<sup>16</sup> the Youth Coalition highlights the importance of implementing promotion, prevention and early intervention mechanisms within other services, and in particular, schools.

The Youth Coalition strongly supports headspace ACT, an early intervention service for young people experiencing low to moderate mental health issues, and/or alcohol and other drug issues. headspace ACT is a key agency in the ACT youth mental health service system, and currently receives no funding from the ACT Government, despite experiencing increasing demand. The Youth Coalition urgently advocates for the ACT Government to contribute funding to this vital service before it reaches capacity.

The Youth Coalition has been calling for funding for a Youth Health Network, which would seek to support existing health service providers to coordinate health services and support to young people in the ACT. The establishment of this Network, particularly in light of the increase in youth mental health services, would support the youth mental health sector to map treatment and support for young people, and identify opportunities and gaps to provide a comprehensive continuum of care.

## **Commitments**

1. Advocating for the establishment of a Youth Health Network to:
  - Facilitate linkages between mental health services and the youth sector to improve co-ordination, collaboration and advocacy on youth issues and ensure integrated health service provision;
  - Provide networking and information sharing opportunities for workers and services in the youth mental health sector; and,
  - Facilitate linkages and partnerships between NGO and Government mental health agencies.
2. Advocating for the increased capacity of schools, youth services, and other health services, to be able to identify mental health issues, respond in an effective and efficient manner, and make appropriate referrals to specialist services where needed, as well as provide mental health promotion and

prevention activities.

1. Advocating for the active involvement of young people in designing, planning and evaluating youth policy and service delivery frameworks.
2. Advocating for the active and supported participation of young people in their individual care planning and case management.
3. Supporting community-based youth mental health programs and services in the ACT.
4. Advocating for the provision of dedicated and holistic treatment options for young people with eating disorders.
5. Advocating for the ACT Government to contribute funding to early intervention youth mental health services, such as headspace ACT.
6. Advocating for the development and implementation of mechanisms which support young people with mental health issues to meaningfully engage in education, employment and the community.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation (Accessed 2010) What is Mental Health? Switzerland

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (March 2009) Australian Social Trends: Mental Health, Australian Government, Canberra

<sup>3</sup> Kessler et al, cited in: McGorry P, et al (2006) Youth Mental Health Services, Department of Psychiatry, University of Melbourne and ORYGEN Research Centre

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007) National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, Australian Government, Canberra

<sup>5</sup> Begg S, Vos T, Barker B, Stevenson C, Stanley L & Lopez A 2007. The burden of disease and injury in Australia, 2003. AIHW cat. no. PHE 82. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007) Young Australians: Their Health and Wellbeing 2007, Australian Government, Canberra

<sup>7</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (May 2008) Injury among Young Australians, Bulletin 60, Australian Government, Canberra.

<sup>8</sup> Mission Australia (2009) National Survey of Young Australians 2009: Key and Emerging Issues, Sydney

<sup>9</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) National Survey of National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results

<sup>10</sup> ACT Government (2005) Suicide Prevention: Managing the Risk of Suicide in the ACT 2005 - 2008

<sup>11</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (March 2009) Australian Social Trends: Mental Health, Australian Government, Canberra

<sup>12</sup> Mission Australia (2009) National Survey of Young Australians 2009: Key and Emerging Issues, Sydney

<sup>13</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007) The Burden of Disease and Injury in Australia: p59

<sup>14</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009) Causes of Death, Australia, 2007. ABS Catalogue Number 3303.0.

<sup>15</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) National Survey of National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results

<sup>16</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (March 2009) Australian Social Trends: Mental Health, Australian Government, Canberra