

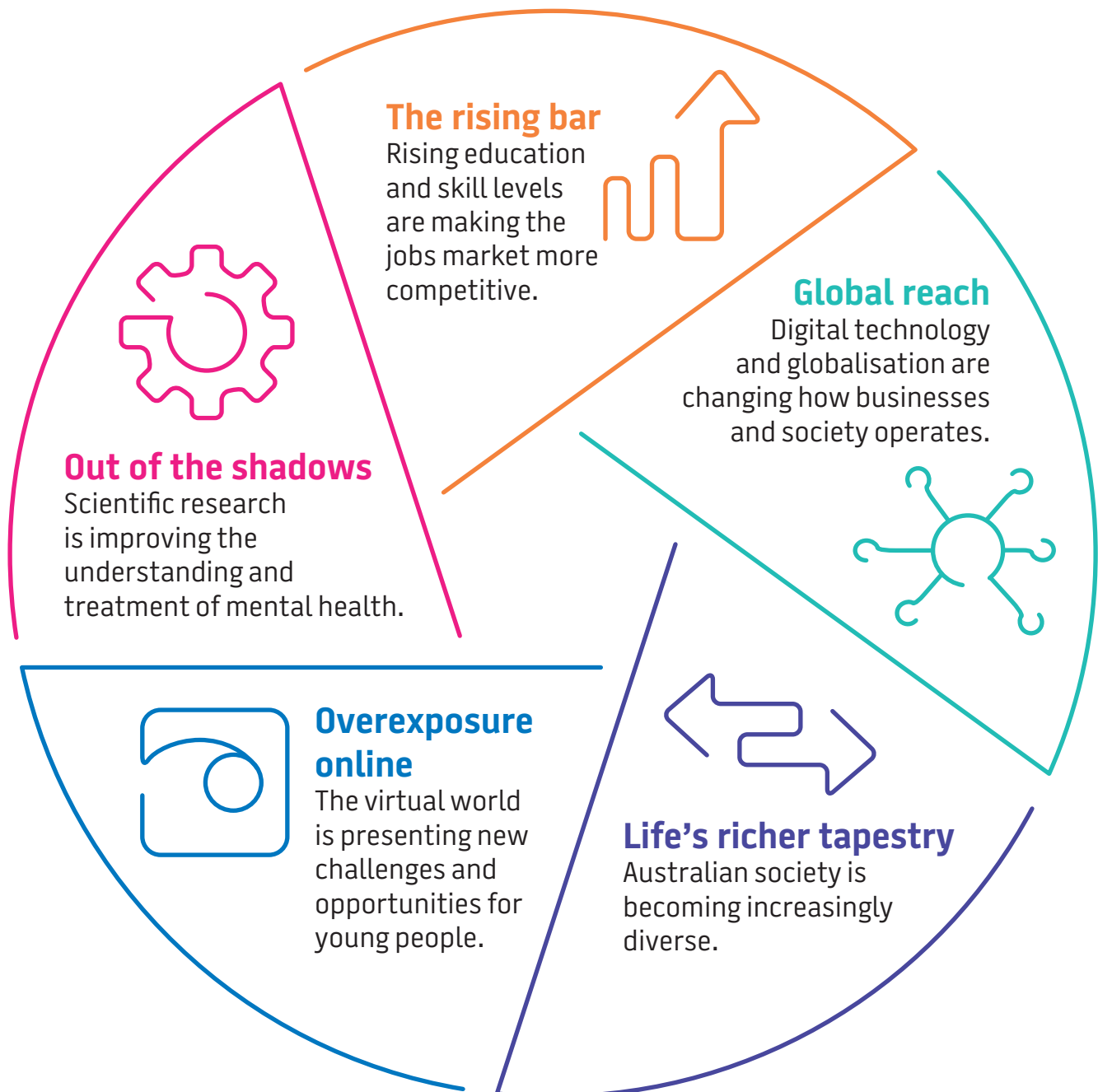
Bright Futures

Spotlight on the wellbeing of young people living in rural and regional Victoria



Bright Futures: Megatrends impacting the wellbeing of young Victorians

In 2015, VicHealth and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) published the *Bright Futures* report, which identified five megatrends* that would impact the wellbeing of young Victorians over the next 20 years. These five megatrends are:



In 2018 the five megatrends were updated with new data and the findings have been published in a separate [document](#).

* A megatrend is a long-term change that affects societies, governments or economies permanently over a long period of time. Multiple smaller trends were clustered to form the megatrends, which were reviewed and refined through consultation. The trends include geopolitical, economic, environmental, social and technological changes likely to take place over the coming decades.

In 2018, VicHealth partnered with the National Centre for Farmer Health, Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) and CSIRO's Data61 to explore what the megatrends mean for young people living in rural and regional Victoria. We held workshops with young people to find out firsthand about the issues that are important to them. The results are summarised briefly here.



The rising bar

The range of education and employment options available to rural and regional Victorians is narrower than their city counterparts, which means young people seeking employment or higher education are under pressure to move away from home. See pages 6–7 for more information.

Let's consider

What actions can we take to improve access to quality education and employment opportunities for young people in rural and regional areas?

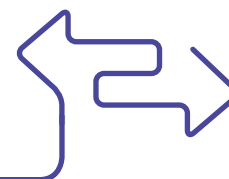


Global reach

Young people in rural and regional Victoria have embraced some benefits of the internet, such as online shopping, but not others, such as freelance work. This is driven by lack of access to the internet and the prevalence of traditional views on work in rural and regional communities. See pages 8–9 for more information.

Let's consider

How can we close the digital gap between rural/regional and urban areas in Victoria, and provide equitable participation for young people in the online world, regardless of where they live?

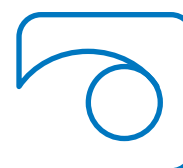


Life's richer tapestry

While rural and regional communities are not as diverse as metropolitan communities, there are many community activities – such as sporting clubs – that offer avenues for social and professional development. See pages 10–11 for more information.

Let's consider

How can rural and regional communities in Victoria provide a range of opportunities to support social connection and opportunities to engage with young people and help them express themselves?



Overexposure online

Social media enables young people living in rural and regional areas to stay connected. However, the online world is only one aspect of life in rural and regional areas. Young people in these areas are also involved in community and outdoor activities. See pages 12–13 for more information.

Let's consider

What can we learn from young people in rural and regional communities to help address unhelpful social media use and encourage greater physical activity across the population?



Out of the shadows

Limited access to mental health services, plus social, financial and logistical barriers to accessing help, means that youth mental health outcomes in rural and regional areas are generally poorer than metropolitan areas. See pages 14–15 for more information.

Let's consider

How can we reduce barriers to accessing informal support networks and online or face-to-face mental health services for young people in rural and regional areas, and improve their mental health outcomes?

Foreword



It is my pleasure to introduce *Bright Futures: Spotlight on the wellbeing of young people living in rural and regional Victoria*.

This is the second in VicHealth's Youth in Focus series, working with Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic), the National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH) and Data 61-CSIRO to shine the spotlight on how megatrends impact young people in rural and regional areas. As with the original *Bright Futures* report, this report identifies that resilience and social connections are important assets that all young people need to thrive into the future.

Talking to young people from rural and regional areas across Victoria was a critical lens through which to understand megatrends.

We discovered that many young people in regional areas enjoy strong support from their communities, clubs and natural environments, and these help them to spend less time using online

networks and more time in physical activity with flow-on benefits to mental and physical health.

But there are also strong forces pushing young people to move away from their communities, like insufficient local higher education or affordable transport options. These are issues that trouble rural and regional communities, and require new thinking to solve them.

The emerging questions are aimed at supporting the wellbeing of young people in a changing environment.

I hope you find this *Spotlight* report of use in your work with young people across rural and regional Victoria.

Jerril Rechter
CEO
VicHealth



For over a decade, the National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH) has worked alongside farming and rural communities to improve health, wellbeing and safety. Furthering this collaborative work, it has been a pleasure to partner with VicHealth, YACVic and Data 61-CSIRO to explore how predicted megatrends will affect young people in rural and regional areas.

Young people's voices—particularly in rural communities—must have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion and conversations about the issues that affect them. Through *Bright Futures: Spotlight on the wellbeing of young people*

living in rural and regional Victoria, our young people's voices have been heard.

The *Bright Futures* megatrends pose challenges for our rural communities, but also highlight opportunities for improving health and wellbeing. Importantly, this report now provides a road map for how our rural and regional communities can work with and support young people, improve social and emotional wellbeing, and help create healthier communities.

Susan Brumby
Director
National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH)



As Victoria's peak body and leading policy advocate for young people and the sector that supports them, Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) has proudly worked with and for young Victorians across our state for almost 60 years.

While there's much to celebrate about living in rural and regional Victoria, we know that young people there often have different opportunities and face additional challenges to those of their peers in metropolitan areas. In particular, distance from and lack of access to support services, restricted employment or study options, and a sense of isolation can impact upon young people's health and wellbeing.

With this in mind, we were pleased to partner with VicHealth, NCFH and Data61-CSIRO to explore the vital megatrends research through a rural lens. We're especially grateful to the young people who participated in this research. Your contributions will help our sector better understand how to effectively support young Victorians' wellbeing and help build even stronger rural and regional communities throughout our state.

Leo Fieldgrass
CEO
Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic)



Introduction

VicHealth and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) published the *Bright Futures* report in 2015, which has attracted strong interest since its release (VicHealth & CSIRO 2015). The report highlighted five megatrends that are predicted to impact the health and wellbeing of young Victorians over the next 20 years.

As an extension of this work, VicHealth partnered with CSIRO's Data61, Youth Affairs Council Victoria and the National Centre for Farmer Health to explore what the *Bright Futures* megatrends mean for young people living in rural and regional Victoria.

Informed by consultations with young people and representatives from key government and youth organisations, this report brings to life the voices of young people living in rural and regional Victoria.

In a series of in-depth workshops, young people living in rural and regional Victoria came together to discuss their experiences of education, employment, digital connectivity, transport and mental health.

This report demonstrates the contrasting experiences of young people living in cities and

those living in rural and regional communities, especially related to their quality of education, breadth of employment and social opportunities, and access to mental health services. These contrasts caution against simple analyses of global trends, to consider the impact of remoteness on them, and alert us to the valuable resources in rural and regional communities.

The report shows how supportive rural and regional communities can be: for example, how sporting clubs can form the social glue of small towns; and how young people in rural and regional areas are resourceful users of social media.

It also highlights challenges facing young people in rural and regional communities, including misuse of alcohol and other drugs, and increasing mental health concerns, as well as the need for urgent action to address them.

Finally, we pose questions that can guide future policy and research towards improving the mental and physical health and wellbeing of rural and regional youth in Victoria.



The rising bar

Rising education and skill levels are making the jobs market more competitive.

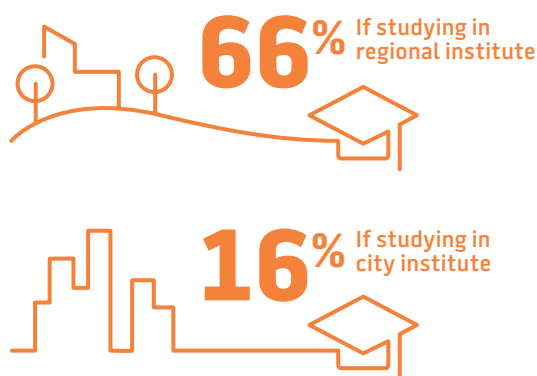
The rising bar megatrend describes how competition for employment is increasing globally, while the educational level required for entry level jobs is rising. The young people we spoke to in rural and regional areas say that the range of local tertiary education options in these areas is limited, reducing the breadth of educational opportunities available to them. This is reflected in research showing that young people living in rural or regional Victoria are less likely to hold a bachelor degree or higher (almost 11%) compared to those living in a major city (over 27%) (ABS 2016a).

Young people in rural and regional Victoria also discussed the pressure they feel to move away from their hometown after finishing high school to pursue tertiary education, sport or employment opportunities.

Research has shown that young people are more likely to stay in a regional community if they study at a regional higher education institute (66%) than if they study at an urban higher education institute (16%) (Richardson 2011).

Finally, young rural and regional Victorians in the study talked at length about the challenges of getting a job locally. On the upside, young people are known to local employers, so they're given preference over others from different towns. However, online competition and decreasing populations in rural and regional areas are forcing the closure of some local businesses, and young people are finding it harder to get entry-level jobs.

Likelihood of staying in rural or regional Victoria



Young people are more likely to stay in a regional community if they study at a regional higher education institute (66%) than if they study at an urban higher education institute (16%) (Richardson 2011).

Youth unemployment in Victoria



Youth unemployment is a key issue across Victoria: as of March 2018, youth unemployment in the Greater Melbourne area stood at almost 12%, while it was nearly 16% across the rest of Victoria (ABS 2018a). Both figures are well above the average unemployment rate for the state as a whole (just over 5%) (ABS 2018b).

OPPORTUNITIES

“
Employment (is) by word of mouth. So, if you know someone better, you're more likely to get the job, instead of someone who's come in from somewhere else.”

“
In small schools, you can get one-on-one learning and all that different kind of stuff.”

RISKS

“
It's getting more difficult to actually find jobs in places like small towns....more places are closing, and it's just making it more difficult to find employment, or at least employment that sort of fits your style.”

“
Because they're smaller schools, the range of subjects is limited, and if you want to do certain subjects you might have to do them by correspondence, which can be really difficult.”

Emerging questions

- What actions can we take to improve access to quality education and employment opportunities for young people in rural and regional areas?
- How might we ease the financial pressures on young people living in rural and regional Victoria, and support them in realising their aspirations for education and careers?
- How can we better support young people from rural and regional Victoria to successfully transition from school to further education, or from education to work?



Global reach

Digital technology and globalisation are changing how businesses and society operates.

While digital technologies have given rise to the 'gig economy' in metropolitan areas, where people earn an income via an app such as Uber or through freelance work, young people in rural and regional areas say that these opportunities are not so widely available in their communities. This is likely due to the traditional views they hold around what is considered 'real work' or the reduced marketplace for some types of online businesses in these areas.

Young people living in rural and regional Victoria described how online shopping has made it easier to access things previously unavailable. This is also demonstrated by the increasing number of parcels Australia Post delivers across Australia, up by 12% from 2016 to 2017 (Australia Post Startrack 2017). However, this has also caused local businesses, unable to compete with online retailers, to close. This in turn means there are fewer of the more traditional jobs available to young people.

In addition, lack of connectivity and slow internet speeds in the home means using computers and many other aspects of modern life are more difficult, and young people rely heavily on mobile phones. Research has shown that around 1 in 4 rural households and

1 in 5 regional households in Victoria have no access to the internet, compared to 1 in 10 urban households (ABS 2016a). This means young Victorians living in rural and regional areas have limited access to education, government and community services, and participation in online communities (Thomas et al. 2017).

The young people also talked about the challenges they face with lack of transport options. They described how difficult it is to meet with friends, attend activities and get to part-time jobs if they don't have access to a car. Current public transport options are limited, less reliable and less frequent, and alternatives such as Uber are either not available or too expensive. While global trends point to increasing use of public transport and ride-sharing (VicHealth et al. 2018), young people in regional and rural areas must currently depend on private cars to get around. Victoria is the only Australian state where the legal age for obtaining a driver's licence is 18 years, meaning that young Victorians have to wait a year longer than other young Australians to get their licence. Meanwhile, young people across Victoria have reported they want to live in walkable neighbourhoods that are close to shops, work and public transport (Garrard 2017).

Access to the internet: rural and regional households

Rural:



Regional:



Around 1 in 4 rural households and roughly 1 in 5 regional households do not have access to the internet, compared with 1 in 10 households in a major city in Victoria (ABS 2016a).

Use of public transport in Victoria



In 2016, around 13% of young people living in regional Victoria reported using public transport to travel to work, compared with over 81% of young people in a major city in Victoria (ABS 2016a).

OPPORTUNITIES

“
Technology can be a good thing, too....I had to start walking to school, and if something were to happen, I'd be able to contact someone.”

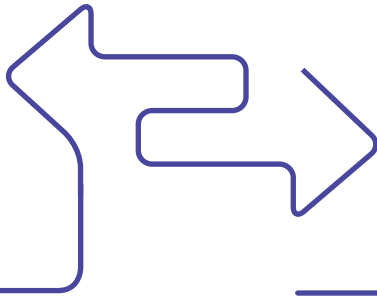
RISKS

“
You have to find a way to get there yourself....or you have to wait for the trains....and then you can't really get there.”

“
Reception and being able to access wifi and all that can be very limited, or really poor. I'm like hanging out of my window if I want to send a message to someone.”

Emerging questions

- How can the digital opportunities of the peer-to-peer labour market provide a greater breadth of employment opportunities for young people in rural and regional Victoria?
- How can we close the digital gap between rural/regional and urban areas in Victoria, and provide equitable participation for young people in the online world, regardless of where they live?
- What new and innovative transport models could be used to better connect young people in rural and regional Victoria with each other, their places of work and education, and with their communities?



Life's richer tapestry

Australian society is becoming increasingly diverse.

In 2016, almost a third of Australian residents were born overseas (ABS 2016a), but rural and regional areas tend to be less culturally diverse because most new migrants to Australia move to cities to be near services (ABS 2016a). Non-traditional family structures are on the rise, including same-sex couples. While same-sex couples are slightly more likely to live in cities than rural and regional areas, their level of representation has been growing at a similar rate across Victoria (Qu et al. 2017), reflecting increasing acceptance of same-sex relationships.

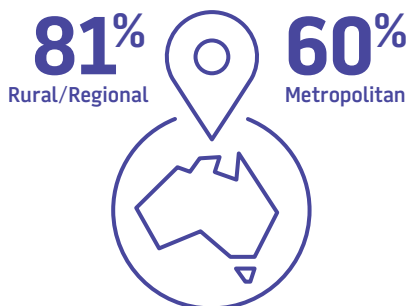
Young rural and regional Victorians in this study talked about the nature of small towns, where everyone knows everyone, and people can get a reputation based on their family or behaviour. They feel that the anonymity associated with city living would make life easier for those who don't fit the traditional cultural and social norms.

The upside of regional living is being part of community clubs, which largely form the social glue of rural

and regional communities. Participation in sport is significantly higher among young people in rural and regional areas (20%) than those living in metropolitan areas (13%) (Eime et al. 2016). Sports participation can provide both physical and mental health benefits. However, young people in the study who had interests and talents outside of sport, and were not members of their local football or netball clubs, spoke about feelings of social exclusion. Some young people prefer being involved in local service clubs, or theatre, music or youth groups.

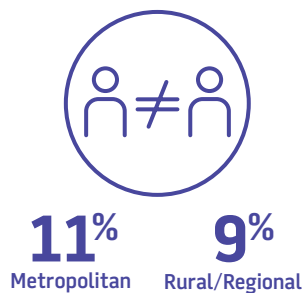
The young people we spoke to who have lived through the impact of climate change and extreme weather events, such as bushfires, were also impressed by the way communities pull together to support each other. This is supported by research which suggests that psychological support, child care, financial assistance and information provided by local communities can help foster resilience in dealing with disasters (Aldrich et al. 2014).

Born in Australia



In 2016, 81% of those living in rural and regional Victoria were born in Australia, compared to 60% living in metropolitan areas (ABS 2016a)

Rates of racism



Rates of racism are higher in metropolitan regions than rural/regional areas (11% versus 9% respectively) (DHHS 2017).

Number of same-sex attracted people



People who are attracted to members of the same-sex are still a minority in rural and regional Victoria—making up 0.6% of all couples (ABS 2016a).

“

As it's been shown through the bushfires and stuff, everyone is there for everyone, even if they don't even get along personally or anything. Everyone really is there for everyone, no matter what.”

OPPORTUNITIES

RISKS

“

Being in a small town you get a name for yourself depending on who your family is.....when in the city you probably wouldn't get that as much.”

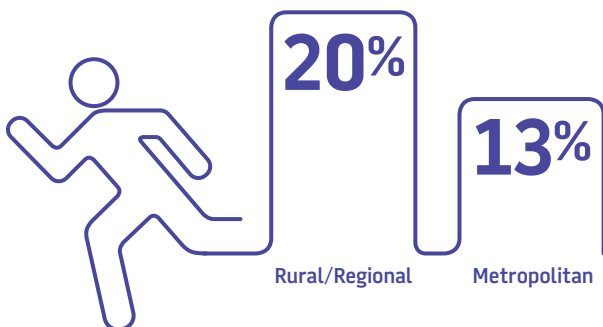
“

If you're not in the footy club or netball club, then you don't find out as much as all the other people in them.”

Emerging questions

- How can rural and regional communities in Victoria provide a range of opportunities to support social connection and opportunities to engage with young people and help them express themselves?
- How can diverse and marginalised young people in rural and regional Victoria be more actively involved in their local communities?
- How can young people in rural and regional communities be involved in and lead new ways of taking action against climate change and responding to extreme weather events?

Rates of sports participation



In 2015, sports registrations in Victoria among young people showed higher rates of participation for those living in rural and regional areas (20%) compared to those living in metropolitan areas (13%) (Eime et al. 2016).



Overexposure online

The virtual world is presenting new challenges and opportunities for young people.

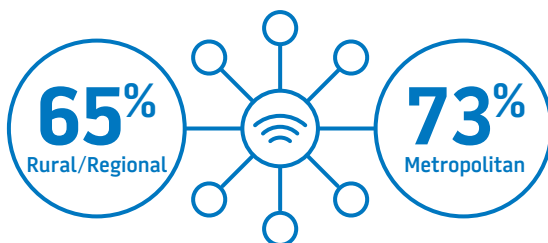
There are some incredibly positive aspects to social media in regional and rural areas: young people in the study described how it enables them to stay in contact with friends and family members who live in other towns, and also make contact in an emergency situation. Research shows that social media also keeps young people connected to news and current affairs (Pew Research Centre 2015); and can be a particularly valuable source of information both during and in the aftermath of natural disasters (Taylor et al. 2012).

In contrast, compared to those living in metropolitan areas, young people living in regional areas are more likely to experience and witness online bullying and harassment (AIHW 2017). Some participants in the study also discussed 'people who hide behind technology'. While dealing with cyberbullying could be a challenge for young people due to limited access to support services in rural and regional Victoria, research has shown that people in regional areas are 10% more likely to delete social media contacts than

those in metropolitan areas, suggesting they may be more proactive in dealing with negative online encounters (Sensis 2017).

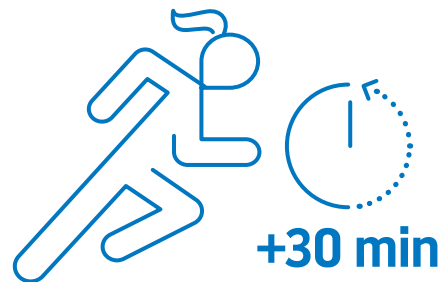
Young people in rural and regional Victoria also recognise that it's important to get away from the internet. Some study participants commented on how lucky they are to have areas of natural beauty on their doorstep. Research has shown that young people living in rural and regional areas spend less time online than those living in urban areas (ABS 2018c). This may be due to poor internet accessibility, but research also shows that, on average, young people aged 9–16 years who live in rural and regional areas engage in up to 30 minutes more of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day than their urban counterparts (Dollman et al. 2012). They are also more likely to socialise with people outside of their family, and show stronger levels of social cohesion and participation in civic activities (Ziersch et al. 2009).

Likelihood of internet use to socialise



People living in rural communities are less likely to use the internet for social networking (almost 65%) than those in urban areas (73%) (ABS 2016c).

Young Australians outside cities are more active



On average, young people aged 9–16 years who live in rural and regional areas engage in up to 30 minutes more of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day than their urban counterparts (Dollman et al. 2012).

“

If you live far away from your friends, because, like, we might not live in the same towns, then you can communicate more easily with them, without necessarily being together.”

OPPORTUNITIES

“

Rural Victoria especially has really rich natural resources. We have mountains and lakes and beaches really close by.....we're really lucky to have that on tap.”

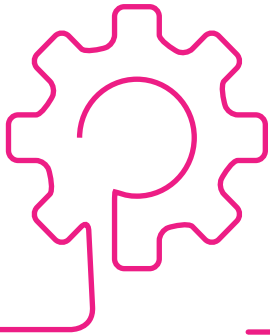
RISKS

“

People hide behind technology ... they text a simple message somewhere and it's there forever....but they don't actually physically say it to the person they want to say it to.”

Emerging questions

- How can we improve access to digital technologies for people in rural and regional areas?
- What high-quality programs exist – or need to be created – to help young people in rural and regional areas develop the skills they need to assess the validity of news sources, identify and respond to online threats, and manage feelings of mistrust, confusion and distress?
- What can we learn from young people in rural and regional communities to help address unhelpful social media use and encourage greater physical activity across the population?



Out of the shadows

Scientific research is improving the understanding and treatment of mental health.

Young people, regardless of where they live, face significant mental health challenges. In rural and regional Victoria, the rate of deaths caused by intentional self-harm and suicide has continued to rise, up from over 11 per 100,000 in 2012 to 13 per 100,000 people in 2016. This is higher than for young people in Greater Melbourne (10 per 100,000 in 2016) (ABS 2017a).

The young people who participated in this study said that alcohol is an issue due to peer pressure. Studies show that alcohol use is more prevalent in rural and regional areas than urban areas (AIHW 2016a). Drug use shows a similar trend, with people from rural and regional areas more likely to consume cannabis and methamphetamine (around 17% and 4% of all people in these areas, respectively) compared to those from major cities (10% and 1%, respectively) (AIHW 2016b). Research shows that greater substance use among people from rural and regional areas is largely driven by a lack of alternative activities (National Drug Strategy 2001), and is linked to higher rates of mental health disorders (Jan-Llopis E & Matytsina 2006). However, youth, community and sporting groups can be effective in providing alternative forms of engagement and support for young people in rural and regional areas.

The young people who participated in the study talked about the importance of accessing help for mental health issues over the phone and internet when face-to-face mental health services are too far away. This is necessitated by statistics showing that most mental health professionals in Australia work in urban areas: in 2005, 88% of psychiatrists, 75% of mental health nurses and 75% of registered psychologists were employed in major cities, leaving the remaining workforce to serve all other rural and regional areas (AIHW 2016c). While this distribution of services in part reflects the small populations in rural and regional areas, the limited number of mental health professionals can make it difficult for young people – especially those living in rural areas – to access these services face-to-face.

Travelling long distances, which is expensive and time-consuming, is a significant barrier for young people accessing mental health services. Young people in rural and regional communities are also reluctant to seek help because their communities tend to rely on informal support networks; services fail to reflect an understanding of rural and regional conditions; there is a lack of anonymity and perceived confidentiality in small rural communities; or they may feel stigmatised when seeking help for mental health issues (Brown et al. 2016).

Most mental health professionals work in urban areas



In 2015, 88% of psychiatrists, 75% of mental health nurses and 75% of registered psychologists were employed in major cities, leaving the remaining workforce to serve all other rural and regional areas (AIHW 2016c).

“

If you have a mental health issue or something, access to support over the internet and over phones can be beneficial if you live far away from services and things like that.”

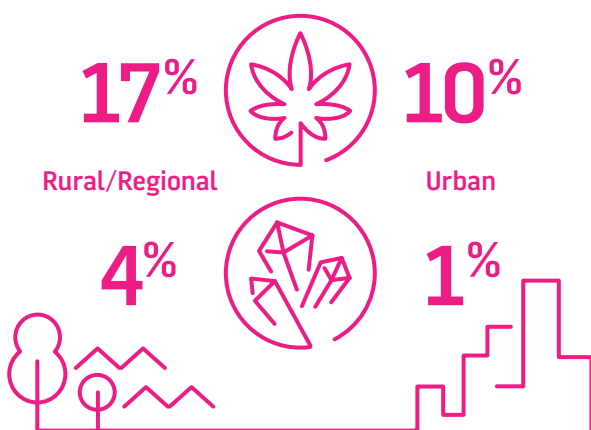
OPPORTUNITIES

“

Alcohol can be an issue, because there's lots of peer pressure to get drunk – like to drink to get drunk. And you can kind of get a reputation for that.”

RISKS

Likelihood of drug use



Studies show that alcohol use is more prevalent in rural and regional areas than urban areas (AIHW 2016a) and people from rural and regional areas more likely to consume cannabis and methamphetamine (around 17% and 4% of all people in these areas, respectively) compared to people living in major cities (10% and 1%, respectively) (AIHW 2016b).

Emerging questions

- How can we reduce barriers to accessing informal support networks and online or face-to-face mental health services for young people in rural and regional areas, and improve their mental health outcomes?
- How can we use digital technologies and innovative service models (for example, peer support models) to better cater for the mental health needs of young people living in rural and regional Victoria?
- How can we support schools, youth groups, sporting clubs and other rural and regional community groups to break down the deep-rooted connection between social activity and alcohol in rural communities, and provide alternative forms of engagement for young people to help reduce their alcohol and drug use?

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