



Policy Platform: Health

Youth Coalition of the ACT

This Policy Platform focuses on primary health, sexual health and access to health services. Mental health, alcohol and other drugs, comorbidity and disabilities are addressed in separate policy platforms.

The Youth Coalition supports the World Health Organization's definition of health, as not simply the absence of disease or illness, but rather a state of 'complete physical, mental and social wellbeing'.¹ The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Australia has ratified, also states that it is the right of young people to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health.² Further, the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion lists the fundamental prerequisites for good health as peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice and equity.³

From the ages of 12 – 25 years, young people experience many life changes that can affect their health, which include sexual, physical, mental and emotional development; but also key transition points in family, housing, education, employment, peers and other relationships.

A 2011 report found that while most young people in Australia are 'faring well', groups particularly at risk of poorer health included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, young people in regional and remote areas, and young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage.⁴ The Youth Coalition strongly believes that resources and services need to be directed equitably to groups who are at greater risk of poor health.

According to the *Health Status of Young People in the ACT* report, approximately 80% of young people aged 16 – 25 in the ACT rate their health as 'excellent', 'very good' or 'good'.⁵ The *ACT Healthy Young People Feasibility Study* lists the primary health issues affecting young people in the ACT as: high levels of psychological distress; lack of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health; high rates of Chlamydia infection; considerably lower than recommended levels of physical activity and vegetable consumption; alcohol and other drug use; and sun over exposure.⁶ The Youth Coalition also notes that emergency department waiting times for young people aged 12 – 25 have increased from 78% seen in clinically appropriate time frames in 2000 – 01, to 60.2% in 2008 – 09.⁷

Access to Health Services

Access to health services is of vital importance to young people. In the 2012 *Rate Canberra* survey conducted by the Youth Coalition, access to health services was rated by young people aged 12 – 25 as one of the top five issues of most importance, and young people aged 18 – 21 rated it as the second most important issue.⁸

Many individuals in Canberra experience difficulties in accessing health services, including: shortages of general practitioners and health professionals, waiting lists and limited bulk-billing services. Young people, carers and professional stakeholders also identified that young people may experience additional barriers on top of those faced by the general population. These include: cost (including lack of bulk billing), discrimination, lack of transport options, a general lack of awareness that services exist, confidentiality concerns, stigma, opening times, long waiting times and a limited number of 'youth-friendly' general practitioners and other health professionals. 'Youth friendly' practice includes listening to young people, providing appropriate information and advice without judgement in an accessible and understandable format. It is of concern that in the feasibility study survey, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were more likely to report the above mentioned barriers than other young people.

Workers and services in the youth and health community sectors have identified the need for a coordinated approach to health service delivery to young people. This is particularly so for young people experiencing disadvantage. They have highlighted the importance of coordinating and building the capacity of existing health services that work with young people, to remove barriers and improve access and delivery of services for young people.

Youth Health Network

The Youth Coalition has been advocating for the development of a Youth Health Network, encompassing mental health, alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, comorbidity, sexual health and primary health. The Youth Health Network would look at the health needs of young people, examine the coordination of the health system, and find ways to work within the existing system to improve health outcomes for young people. It would build on existing services and would support existing community-based services to access mainstream health services and ensure young people are a key target group in the ACT.

Sexual Health and Wellbeing

A 2008 report on secondary students and sexual health found that there have been some significant changes in knowledge, behaviour and sexual health of young people since 2002.⁹ The research found that students' knowledge of some Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), including Chlamydia and Hepatitis, had improved over this time, with young women demonstrating better knowledge than young men. However, notifications for STIs in Australia have increased fourfold, with much of this increase being notifications for chlamydia.¹⁰

In the ACT, chlamydial infection has been identified as an area of health concern, and notification rates for chlamydia are considerably higher in young women than young men.¹¹ A recent study found that 88% of students had sought information regarding sexual health, most commonly seeking information from their mothers (56%), female friends (55%), the school sexual health program (49%) and pamphlets (44%).¹² This highlights the important role of sexual health education, as part of a continuum of health education.

In relation to sexual behaviour, the ACT Sexual Health Lifestyles and Relationships Programs data from 2004 – 2009 found that 76.3% of secondary college student seen by the program had had sexual intercourse, and 11.9% had never used a condom.¹³

The Youth Coalition is concerned that in an Australia-wide report, there was a

marked increase in the number of young women experiencing unwanted sex, from 28% in 2002, to 38% in 2008.¹⁴

Given that 9% of secondary students report attractions that are not exclusively heterosexual,¹⁵ the Youth Coalition also believes that sexual health promotion and education programs need to be inclusive of diverse cultural backgrounds, genders and sexual orientations, to ensure that young people have access to appropriate, relevant, non-judgmental and evidence based material.

Commitments

1. Advocating for the establishment of a Youth Health Network to:
 - a. 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;
 - b. Provide networking and information sharing opportunities for workers and services in the youth mental health sector; and,
 - c. Facilitate linkages and partnerships between non-government and government mental health agencies.
2. Advocating for the equitable distribution of resources and services to support groups of young people who are at greater risk of poor health outcomes, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, young people in rural and remote areas, and young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage.
3. Supporting sexual health and relationship education in schools that is inclusive of diverse cultural backgrounds, genders and sexual orientations.
4. Advocating for the removal of barriers experienced by young people in accessing health services, such as cost, discrimination, lack of transport options, unawareness of services, confidentiality concerns, stigma, and a limited number of 'youth-friendly' general practitioners and other health professionals.
5. Advocating for the ACT Government to fund the outcomes of the Youth Health Feasibility Study for the ACT.
6. Advocating for the active involvement of young people in designing, planning and evaluating youth policy and service delivery frameworks.
7. Advocating for the active and supported participation of young people in their individual care planning and case management.

¹ World Health Organization (1946) Constitution of the World Health Organization.

² United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 24.

³ World Health Organisation (1986) Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion.

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011) Young Australians: Their Health and Wellbeing 2011, Australian Government, Canberra.

⁵ Epidemiology Branch, ACT Health (2011) Health Status of Young People in the ACT, ACT Government, Canberra ACT.

⁶ ACT Health (2011) ACT Young People Feasibility Study Final Report, prepared by LeeJenn Health Consultatnts for the ACT Government, Canberra ACT

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Youth Coalition of the ACT (2012) Rate Canberra 2012: Findings from the Survey of Young People aged 12-25 in the ACT, Canberra.

⁹ Smith A, Agius P, Mitchell A, Barrett, C, Pitts M. Secondary (2009) 4th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2009: Report of the findings from the 4th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

¹⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011) Young Australians: Their Health and Wellbeing 2011, Australian Government, Canberra.

¹¹ Epidemiology Branch, ACT Health (2011) Health Status of Young People in the ACT, ACT Government, Canberra ACT.

¹² Smith A, Agius P, Mitchell A, Barrett, C, Pitts M. Secondary (2009) 4th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2009: Report of the findings from the 4th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

¹³ Epidemiology Branch, ACT Health (2011) Health Status of Young People in the ACT, ACT Government, Canberra ACT.

¹⁴ Smith A, Agius P, Mitchell A, Barrett, C, Pitts M. Secondary (2009) 4th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2009: Report of the findings from the 4th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

¹⁵ Ibid.