



RESEARCH REPORT SNAPSHOT



THE CENTRE FOR
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Generation Trapped: Housing, handouts, and the collapse of young Australians' life satisfaction

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Key findings

- Young Australians want the same things as previous generations — financial security, home ownership, meaningful work, relationships, and children — but these goals now feel out of reach.
- Life satisfaction among 18–34-year-olds is lower than for older Australians, driven by higher anxiety and a lack of perceived control over the barriers to achieving their aspirations.
- A loss of personal agency is central to youth malaise: fewer than four in ten young Australians believe they can influence the barriers blocking their aspirations.
- Housing affordability is the single most important perceived barrier across all groups and a powerful symbol of lost control over life outcomes.
- Government handouts that narrow choice or reinforce dependency may fail to improve — and may even worsen — overall life satisfaction.
- Policies that substitute government support for personal choice risk worsening wellbeing. Expanding real choice and agency is more effective than increasing handouts.

Introduction

Life satisfaction is trending down for young people in Australia and the West. Those born after 1997 are reporting the highest levels of misery of any age group. They are unhappier than previous generations

become during the 'hump' of dissatisfaction which, in previous generations, has typically accompanied middle age.¹

As the plight of young people has become increasingly electorally-salient, policymakers have attempted to respond to its symptoms and presumed cause. Home ownership — or at least access to cheaper rentals — has become a key focus, as most young people now consider buying a home an almost unattainable goal. Mental health services have proliferated. To help with the cost of living, governments have offered young people free TAFE and one-time rebates on already-discounted higher education loans.

Instead of making young people's aspirations more accessible, these policies offer a pacifier: a substitute vision for the future that governments believe is more within their power to deliver than the one young people imagine for themselves. These short-term fixes and attempted redirections represent a failure to address underlying issues.

This paper creates a foundation for evaluating existing policy and developing new policy to support the priorities and goals of young Australians, aged 18–34. Based on their answers to qualitative and quantitative research, it reveals the different aspirations, challenges, and values of a group which is often treated in policy making as a homogenous whole. To do this, it identifies six 'tribes', categorised according to their core beliefs, attitudes, and life circumstances. This segmentation allows a deeper understanding of each tribe, while comparisons between the tribes reveal insights into the drivers of low life-satisfaction across the age group.

Policies that narrow choice or reinforce dependency lower life-satisfaction

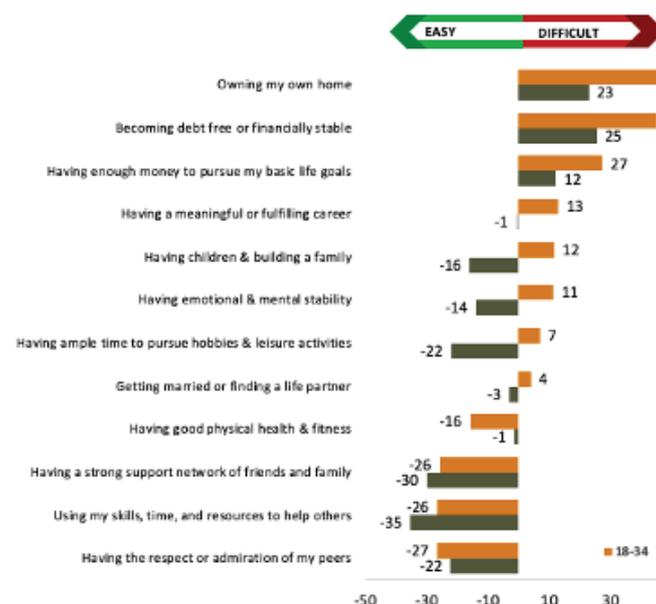
A central finding of the research is that a sense of personal agency — ability to influence the world around you — is directly linked to life satisfaction.^{2,3,4} People who believe they have the ability to shape their life course are more satisfied than those who do not. While wealth can create choice, government transfers often narrow choice or reinforce dependency. Consequently, they may fail to improve — and may even worsen — overall life satisfaction.

Young Australians feel they can't achieve traditional aspirations

Young Australians do not aspire to radically different lives than previous generations. Financial security, home ownership, meaningful work, family, and children remain core goals. What has changed is the degree to which these goals feel attainable.

They are anxious about the future at much higher rates than those over 35. Nearly half worry about the future almost all the time (20%) or most of the time (28%). Only 10% of over-35s worry almost all the time and 17% some of the time.

While over-35s are more likely to consider emotional and mental health, achieving a meaningful or fulfilling career, and having children and building a family as achievable, to under-35s, achieving these goals seem hard.



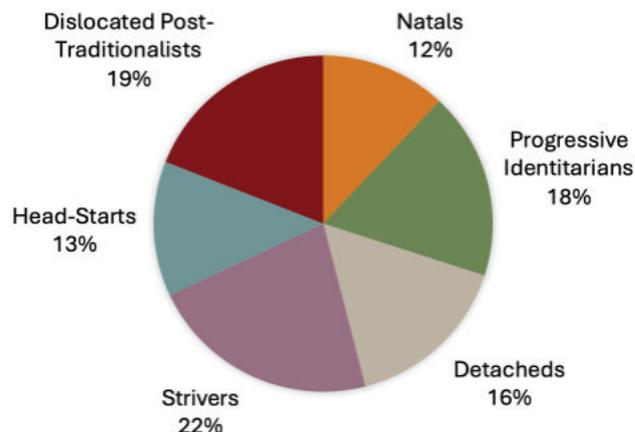
*Scores shown as NET

Q: For each of the following, can you say in your experience whether they have generally felt difficult to achieve for you?

Source for graphs: Quantitative research by Spectre Strategy on behalf of the Centre for Independent Studies

THE SIX TRIBES

While young Australians share many aspirations, their circumstances and beliefs differ significantly. Yet common patterns emerge that offer insight into how policy design could improve life satisfaction for young people with different experiences and values.



Progressive Identitarians are often students, still living at home with parents or in rental accommodation. They overwhelmingly identify as left or far left and a disproportionately large number identify as LGBTQ+. They have shifted their focus away from traditional milestones, and prioritise immediate pleasures. They are highly anxious and have a very low sense of personal control and life satisfaction.

Dislocated Post-Traditionalists are predominantly female, with low educational attainment. Politically they are uncommitted. They are likely to have children but have never been married. They are financially precarious and are mistrustful of government and institutions. They are highly anxious, have the lowest sense of personal control of all the tribes, and the lowest sense of life satisfaction.

Nats, like most other tribes, aspire to traditional milestones of financial security, home ownership, and having children and building a family. However they feel all these goals are very hard to achieve. They are the group that most identifies as right or far-right. They are fiercely protective of their Australian identity and worry that immigration is taking Australia in the wrong direction. They have a deep mistrust of government and institutions. They are anxious, and have a low sense of personal control and life satisfaction.

Strivers identify as politically centrist. They are largely disengaged from public and current affairs. Strivers are neutral to mildly positive about the effect that government has in most areas of their lives, but are concerned about wasteful government spending, taxation, and believe Australia should prioritise its own economic interests over international climate commitments. They aspire to traditional milestones and, on balance, feel like they have personal control over achieving their goals. They are less anxious than

other tribes and have slightly higher levels of life-satisfaction.

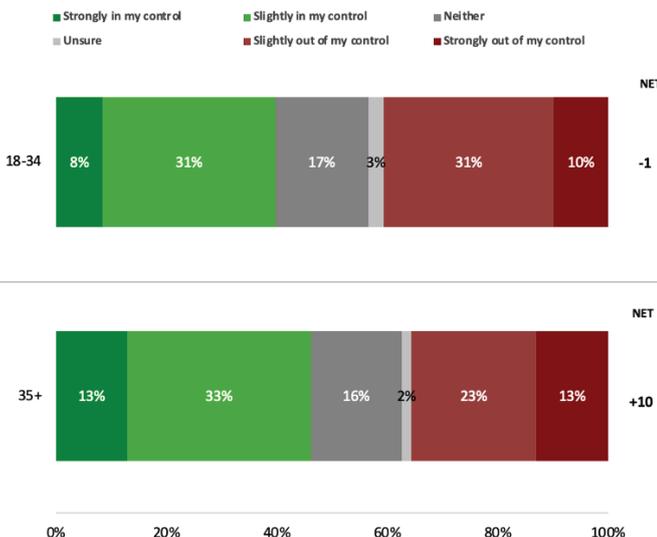
Detacheds are politically disengaged. Their opinions on most issues are neutral or uncertain, but one aspiration stands out: while they are overwhelmingly not married or in a relationship, they would like to have a family and children. They tend not to think much about the future and incline to an optimistic ‘she’ll be right’ attitude. They have a weak but positive sense that the barriers to their aspirations are within their control, but their life satisfaction is moderate to low.

Head-Starts expect to benefit from, or have already received, an inheritance or family wealth transfer and possess a high degree of financial security. They experience barriers far less than other tribes and their experience of government policy is that it has overwhelmingly had a positive impact on their lives. This tribe is very comfortable with redistributive policies and, while a portion identify as right-leaning, the tribe tends to be progressive in its life outlook. They feel in control of life and have the highest life satisfaction of all the tribes.

Young people have lower perceived control over their lives than older Australians

Compared with older Australians, under-35s feel less able to influence the barriers they encounter to achieving their aspirations. Only 39% feel the barriers are strongly or slightly within their control. In contrast, 46% of over-35s feel barriers are strongly or slightly within their control, with more selecting “strongly in my control” than their younger counterparts. But this is an inversion of how in control older and younger people feel around the world.⁵

Given the connection between a sense of agency and life satisfaction, this emerges as a cause of the worsening wellbeing of young Australians.



Q: Thinking about the main barriers to achieving your aspirations in life, do you feel that they are within your control, or out of your control, to meaningfully impact at this time?

Home ownership is a symbol of control and agency that is now out of reach

Home ownership is a consistently cited aspiration among young people, however for many it seems like an out of reach goal. Young Australians reject cheaper rentals as a substitute for home ownership, which is a symbol of stability, autonomy and self-determination. The sense that home ownership is out of reach is therefore likely a significant contributor to a lower perception of personal agency and life satisfaction.^{6 7 8}

Returning control and life satisfaction to young Australians

This paper argues that many current policy responses focus on treating symptoms — subsidising rent, expanding mental health services, or offering one-off financial relief — rather than addressing underlying structural constraints. These measures often substitute a narrower, government-defined vision of a ‘good life’ for the one young people would choose themselves if given genuine alternatives. But as we have seen, the lack of agency reduces life satisfaction. Consequently, policy meant to help people can end up adversely affecting them.

The central policy implication is clear: improving the life satisfaction of young Australians requires expanding real choice and personal agency, not merely increasing transfers or services. Policies should be assessed not only on whether they provide support, but on whether they empower individuals to shape their own futures.

Without a shift in approach, Australia risks entrenching a generation marked by lowered expectations, disengagement, and political volatility. Addressing youth malaise is not a matter of electoral convenience but of long-term national renewal. The direction of current trends makes this task urgent.

Conclusion and policy proposal summary

Shift the focus of policy from redistribution to agency.

Improve life satisfaction by expanding real choice and personal control rather than increasing transfers or services alone.

Assess policies by whether they expand or restrict autonomy.

Policies should be judged on whether they empower individuals to shape their own futures, not merely whether they provide support.

Move beyond symptom management.

Current approaches such as rent subsidies, mental health expansion, and one-off financial relief treat symptoms rather than structural constraints.

Reverse, replace or adjust policies that reduce life satisfaction.

Existing policies should be evaluated according to whether they contribute to, or detract from, fundamental life satisfaction, and changed where necessary.

Prioritise structural reform over short-term electoral fixes.

The paper argues against 'policy patchwork' and retail political convenience in favour of deeper reform.

Address systemic barriers to home ownership rather than redefining aspirations downward.

Cheaper renting or abandoning home ownership is not an adequate substitute for restoring attainable ownership.

Tackle structural constraints affecting housing, income and time scarcity.

Housing affordability and financial insecurity are dominant barriers requiring structural solutions.

Avoid policies that entrench dependency or narrow choice.

Policies that reinforce dependency or substitute a government-defined "good life" for individual aspirations may reduce life satisfaction.

Reassess redistribution-heavy responses where they undermine agency.

Transfer-focused approaches, without attention to autonomy, risk worsening disengagement.

Rebuild trust by restoring agency, not by expanding control.

Youth disengagement and democratic disenchantment should be treated as the result of a disconnect between the implied promise of a democratic system and the lack of agency young people experience, rather than moral failures of apathy or ignorance.

Prevent political volatility by expanding opportunity.

Without a change in direction, lowered expectations and political instability will become entrenched.

Maximise choice as the organising principle of reform.

New policy should maximise choice and ensure Australians have the freedom to shape their own version of a good life.

Endnotes

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