

Youth attitudes and locus of control



About Youth in Focus

Youth in Focus (YIF) is a study about young Australians – their experiences while growing up and aspirations for the future, their education and work choices, and their diverse transitions to adulthood.

YIF is a project combining administrative data with a longitudinal survey. The first wave of interviews took place in 2006, involving more than 4,000 18-year olds and their parents. The project will follow the young adults as they finish school, leave home, enter employment and form their own families.

The YIF Factsheets are a series of brief reports on the major outcomes and characteristics of Australian youth using the data collected in the course of the YIF survey.

Income-support history stratification

One of the important questions which YIF is designed to address is the relationship between outcomes of young people and the socio-economic experiences of their families while they were growing up. Nearly all YIF participants agreed to having their survey responses matched to government administrative records of family benefits and income support. For the young adults in the study, these records provide information about the timing, intensity, and duration of their families' use of government assistance.

We can categorize families' experiences in three broad groupings which turn out to be very informative about the young adult's current circumstances.

- A** The family of the young adult never received income support while the young adult was growing up (they may have received tax benefits/credits or child care subsidies for families with children).
- B** The family of the young adult received income support for more than 6 years while the young adult was growing up.
- C** The family of the young adult received some income support while the young adult was growing up, but for less than a total of 6 years.

The YIF factsheets report results separately for categories A, B and C.

While these factsheets provide descriptive analysis that can be used as a first step towards understanding the complex relationship between young people's outcomes and their exposure to the income-support system, at this stage it is not possible to draw conclusions about the causal nature of these relationships.

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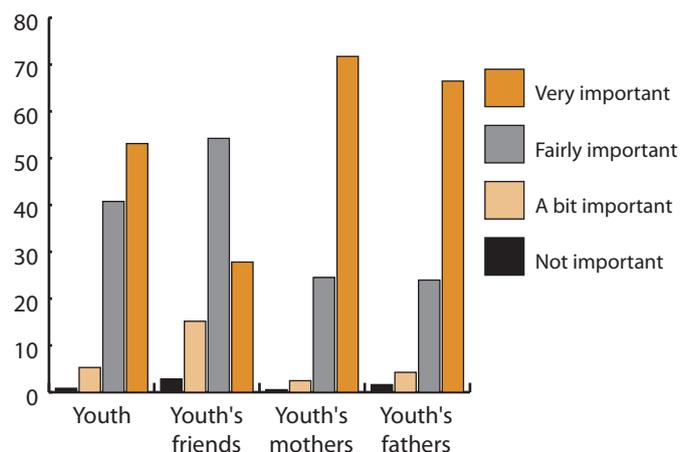
esearch shows that productivity-related skills – ability, education, experience and the like – fail to fully explain significant disparities in labour market outcomes between groups with differing backgrounds. There is

growing interest in understanding the extent to which non-cognitive skills, psychological factors, and attitudes towards work might affect the economic and social outcomes of individuals.

The Youth in Focus (YIF) survey collects information on two specific psycho-social factors – attitudes towards work-welfare and locus of control – thought to be related to a range of important economic and social outcomes. These concepts were measured in parallel for parent and youth respondents of the survey. This Factsheet discusses results for the young people.

The attitudes of young people towards education do not seem to be related to their family's income-support history. Specifically, YIF youth respondents were asked about their own, as well as their friends' and parents' views on the importance of working hard in school, university or TAFE (Figure 1). While just over half of young people report that they themselves see working hard at school as very important, they are much less likely (approximately 28 per cent) to report that their friends agree with them. At the same time, close to three-fourths of youth believe that their mothers and fathers view working hard in school as very important. The differences in views about the importance of hard work at school across economic categories were relatively minor. This similarity in attitudes occurs despite there being significant differences in education experiences and outcomes between the groups, as described in YIF Factsheets No.1 and No.2.

Figure 1 Importance of working hard at school/university/TAFE

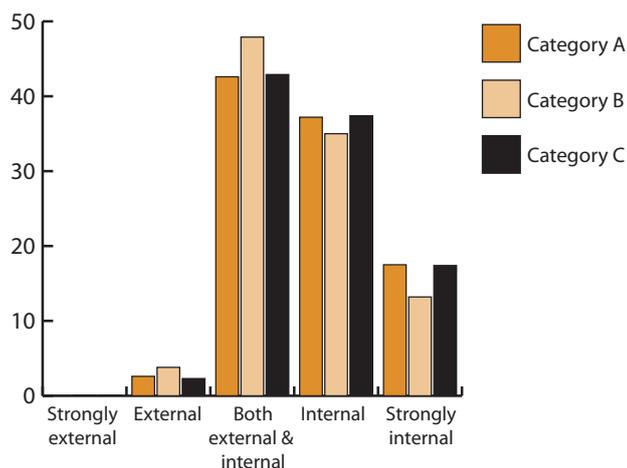


Views about what it takes to get ahead in life also do not appear to be related to an individual's income-support history. In particular, there is widespread support – irrespective of income-support category – for the view that having a good education, ambition, and a job are necessary for getting ahead. More than 95 per cent of young people in all categories view these as either extremely or fairly important to get ahead in life. There are some differences in the extent to which young people believe that family background is linked to future success – 56 per cent of youth in category B

Table 1 Views on getting ahead in life

	A	B	C
Well-educated parents			
Extremely important	14.5	17.8	17.6
Fairly important	48.1	38.4	42.1
Not too important	31.0	31.6	30.1
Does not matter at all	6.2	11.8	10.0
Good education			
Extremely important	51.7	52.7	50.0
Fairly important	42.5	40.6	42.8
Not too important	4.9	5.2	5.8
Does not matter at all	0.9	1.1	1.0
Person's own ambition			
Extremely important	76.9	74.1	73.8
Fairly important	22.5	23.6	24.8
Not too important	0.5	1.2	0.9
Does not matter at all	0.1	0.3	0.0
Having a job			
Extremely important	59.0	61.8	58.9
Fairly important	37.3	34.1	37.4
Not too important	3.2	3.5	3.3
Does not matter at all	0.5	0.3	0.3

Figure 2 Youth's locus of control



believe that it is extremely or fairly important to have well-educated parents, compared with 63 per cent of youth in category A.

Young people from different economic backgrounds all tend to believe that their life is not governed by outside forces and they themselves control the things that happen to them. This is illustrated in Figure 2, which summarises the locus of control results for the youth respondents. Locus of control is a psycho-social measure which reflects a person's belief about what causes the outcomes in their life. A person who believes that they themselves control their decisions and their life is said to have an internal locus of control, and those who believe that environment, some higher power, or other people control their life are said to have an external locus of control.

The YIF survey uses the Pearlin Mastery scale for its locus of control battery. This scale consists of seven items which are answered on a 4-point scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). The results indicate that young people believe that they have a great deal of control over

Figure 3a Opinions on unemployment benefits

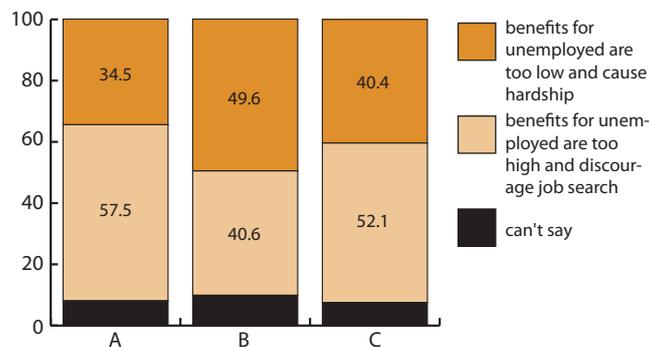
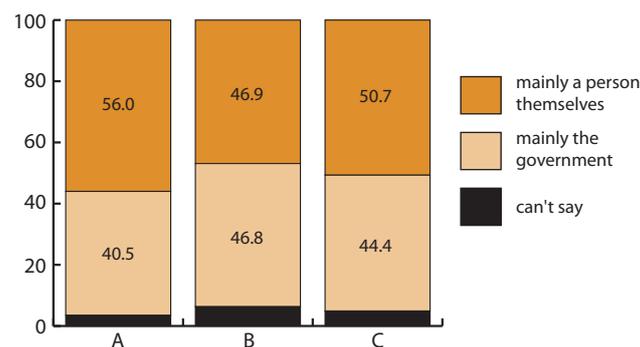


Figure 3b Who should be responsible to ensure that the unemployed have enough to live on?



life events irrespective of their family's income-support history. The disparity across categories, while present, is much weaker than that observed for the parents.

The only pronounced differences in attitudes among YIF young adult respondents were found in their opinions about unemployment benefits and responsibility for providing to the unemployed (see Figures 3a and 3b).

The young people who grew up in families with an intensive history of income-support receipt (category B) were more likely than young people in families which never received income support (category A) to believe that unemployment benefits are too low rather than too high. Young people in category B are evenly split between those who feel it is the government's responsibility to look after the unemployed and those who think it is the responsibility of individuals themselves. However, young people in families with less or no interaction with the income-support system are more likely to believe that unemployed individuals should be responsible for providing for themselves.

Future research questions

Our results show that the attitudes of young people are largely independent from their economic circumstances, as captured in our economic categorisation. However, Factsheets Nos. 1 and 2 point to significant disparities in educational attainment between income-support categories. We intend to look further at why these positive attitudes towards education among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not translate into better educational outcomes.

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