

Bridging the Digital Divide: Young people's perspectives on taking action

Research conducted by the Inspire Foundation
and ORYGEN Youth Health Research Centre

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About this Report

This report presents the findings of research conducted with young people experiencing marginalisation, exploring their attitudes and perceptions towards political and social action.

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The quotes from young people in this report have not been changed and have been used with their permission.

Cover photo:
Inspire Youth Ambassadors Lachlan Larmour,
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Executive Summary

Project Summary

This report is the second in a series of four that explores the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and its role in improving the mental health of young people who experience or who are at risk of experiencing social, cultural or economic marginalisation.

Two areas are explored:

1. Literature examining civic engagement and its impact on mental health with a focus on young people experiencing marginalisation and the potential of ICT as a setting and a tool for civic engagement; and
2. Research conducted with young people and service providers examining attitudes and perceptions towards civic engagement, defined as political and social action, for young people experiencing marginalisation.

Background

Marginalisation affects a young person's ability to exercise autonomy and citizenship. Young people experiencing marginalisation have limited access to material and psychosocial resources, have fewer opportunities to participate in community activities, are more likely to experience disparities in access to health care, education and employment, and, as a result experience higher rates of social and subsequent mental health problems.

The rapid growth of ICT has generated heated debate about its influence on civic engagement. Some argue that given young people are amongst the greatest adopters of these technologies ICT based civic engagement programs may represent a significant opportunity to increase civic engagement and improve the mental health of young people. Others suggest that the technology revolution has broadened the gap between the engaged and disengaged and created a further divide for young people already experiencing significant marginalisation.

Methodology

This report examines the literature relating to civic engagement - the conceptualisation of young people as citizens, their participation in community life, and their interest in political and social activities. The review also examines the role of ICT and its potential to promote civic engagement and its impact on mental health. Research is then presented from focus

groups conducted with 96 young people aged 13-25 experiencing or at risk of marginalisation and in depth interviews with 22 service providers from a broad range of metropolitan, regional and rural Victorian organisations.

Findings

This report suggests that the active participation of young people in the social and civic life of a community is important for a number of reasons:

1. Increasing levels of civic engagement and meaningful participation reduces isolation and social exclusion, and may therefore lead to increased levels of wellbeing and quality of life for young people;
2. Young people have a valuable and unique contribution to make as active citizens in the shaping of society; and
3. Engagement, belonging and connectedness are protective factors in the prevention of long term mental and physical health and social problems.

The literature review identified several gaps:

1. Little research has specifically focused on understanding the role of civic engagement in the lives of young people experiencing marginalisation. This is further complicated by debate surrounding what is meant by 'civic engagement', thereby making it difficult to assess the impact it might have on mental health and wellbeing; and
2. For young people at risk of marginalisation only limited work has been done examining ICT and its potential role in promoting civic engagement.

The research presented in this report is by no means exhaustive but provides some insight from young people and service providers about young people's concept of civic engagement including barriers and enablers to participation:

- When young people were asked to describe 'What does it mean to take action?' the majority cited examples of individual and socially oriented behaviours and activities. These ranged from violence on the grounds of retribution to

addressing personal issues such as mental health problems or alcohol and/or other drug issues;

- Key enablers to action identified by young people included having assistance from supportive people (such as friends, family or service providers), recognition of achievements, personal motivation, having a clear plan and access to knowledge, skills and resources; and
- Barriers to taking action included: not knowing how to take action; the attitudes of others; personal circumstances and characteristics. For example being labelled 'disengaged' or stigmatised as a result of being homeless, from a low socio-economic background or cultural background often meant young people felt unable to contribute or that their contributions would not be taken seriously. For many young people, complex needs such as problems with their mental health, drug and/or alcohol problems or their experience of homelessness often meant that taking action or participating in civic activities was often not a priority.

ICT did not explicitly feature in either young people's or service provider's conceptualisation of 'taking action'.

Conclusions

Young people who participated in this research, and the service providers interviewed represent a diverse range of cultural groups and exhibit a wide range of life experiences. Consequently, their perspectives on and experiences of 'taking action' are similarly diverse, ranging from traditional and less conventional individual or personally oriented behaviours through to societal level action.

This research occurred in metropolitan and regional Victoria and resources and time dictated the number of focus groups and interviews conducted. While the results provide some interesting insights from young people and service providers the findings are not definitive nor are they representative of all populations of young people experiencing marginalisation. Rather the research contributes towards a growing evidence base exploring the opportunities to promote mental health and wellbeing for young people experiencing marginalisation.

Data from the literature review, focus groups with young people and interviews with service providers was triangulated to provide a unique picture of the challenges and opportunities for young people to take action. The research has been used to make recommendations regarding the delivery of civic engagement programs designed to promote mental health and wellbeing of young people experiencing marginalisation.

In sum, when developing programs designed to promote civic engagement the meaning of 'civic engagement' for diverse populations needs to be taken into consideration as well as the organisation and young people's 'readiness', ability and capacity to participate. This cautions against programs designed as a 'one size fits all' and emphasises the importance of developing strategies that are tailored to meet the needs and preferences of the target group. Program planners and facilitators should integrate strategies that reduce the stigma associated with participation as well as promoting positive social attitudes towards civic engagement.

A link must be established between the 'personal' and 'political'. Many young people expressed a strong (perceived) disinterest in politics and government, despite articulating considerable interest about issues that are inherently political. Respondents felt young people needed to know more about how they could take action and effect change, with several young people explaining that having practical frameworks for planning and taking action would be helpful. Both of these findings highlight the importance of focusing programs on personally relevant issues as defined by the participants themselves, whilst integrating targeted strategies to increase young people's civic literacy (knowledge and skills to take action).

Civic engagement programs must offer scope for participants to develop practical skills and learn experientially. While many young people felt that sharing stories about action and issues were important, many also highlighted the importance of 'doing' over 'talking'. Physical and creative activities that assist young people to identify areas of importance may offer more engaging approaches to didactic methods. Participants explained that being

able to see the outcomes of their actions was very important, suggesting that programs guide young people to set realistic and achievable goals for action, as taking action that is unlikely to result in any impact may risk decreasing their sense of efficacy and prove more disempowering than empowering.

Providing opportunities to focus on the process of taking action as well as the outcome itself is important. Helping young people to identify what they stand to gain from the experience as well as highlighting what the impact will be for the wider community has been identified as an effective strategy. Wherever possible, examples given need to be relevant to the individual young person and have meaning for their day to day experiences.

Despite growing evidence within the literature that ICT can facilitate and support civic engagement it did not feature in study participant's conceptualisation of 'taking action'. There appears a need to increase service providers' and young peoples' awareness of how ICT can be leveraged in this area, Based on the barriers and enablers cited by participants and the literature review findings, there are a variety of ways that ICT could be applied in civic engagement programs, both as a tool for engaging young people and as a resource to assist and support action more generally.

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About the Inspire Foundation

The Inspire Foundation is an Australian non-profit organisation established in 1996 in response to the then escalating rates of youth suicide.

Inspire's vision is to make a global contribution to young people's mental health and wellbeing.

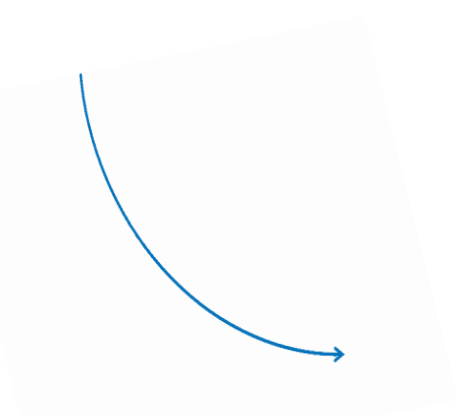
With the mission to help millions of young people lead happier lives, Inspire works directly with young people aged 14-25 years to deliver innovative, technology and evidence-based programs which prevent youth suicide and promote young people's mental health and wellbeing:

Reach Out provides information, support and resources to improve young people's understanding of mental health issues, develop resilience, increase coping skills and facilitate help-seeking behaviour.

www.reachout.com.au

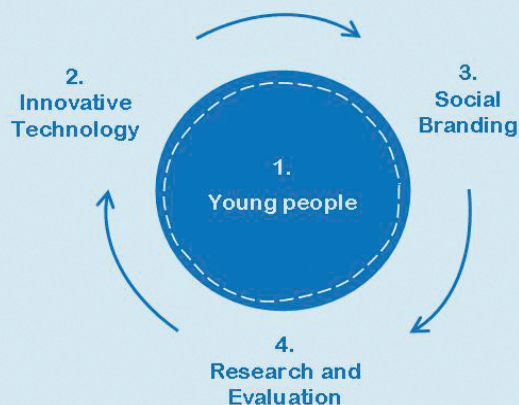
ActNow provides young people with opportunities to find out more about their world and take action on the issues they care about. www.actnow.com.au

Beanbag provides creative technology initiatives for young people to improve their technical skills, self-confidence and social connectedness.



Our program model

1. Young people are at the centre of all we do — as partners in the development and delivery of all Inspire initiatives. 2. We use innovative technology to reach young people and 3. we build trusted social brands that are a part of their landscape. 4. Everything we do is evidence-based and underpinned by research and evaluation.



“Bridging the Digital Divide” explained

“Bridging the Digital Divide” is a three year initiative funded by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) and the Westpac Foundation that brings together the work of Inspire’s Beanbag and ActNow programs. The project aims to positively impact marginalised young people’s mental health and wellbeing by increasing their levels of social connectedness and civic engagement. The project’s key objectives are to:

- Increase marginalised young people’s access to Information Communication Technologies (ICT) by launching four new Beanbag Centres in Victoria;
- Provide opportunities for young people to connect, share their stories and viewpoints with the wider community and to take action that is meaningful to them through the implementation of Youth Action Workshops;
- Develop strong partnerships with youth serving and community organisations in order to build capacity among professionals who work with marginalised young people;
- Produce an audit tool to identify agencies that have the capacity to utilise ICT to promote social inclusion and civic engagement;
- Produce a best practice model for engaging marginalised young people in technology based social inclusion and civic engagement programs, that will also serve as a framework for increasing the number of young people benefiting from technology nationally; and
- Explore the feasibility of working with marginalised young people as participant researchers.

Community consultation was conducted in late 2006, and both a Project Advisory Group and Youth Reference Group were established to guide the project’s development, implementation and evaluation. These groups also facilitate ongoing dialogue between a range of stakeholders, researchers and young people.

Project Advisory Group

This group includes representatives from both the youth and academic sectors. In addition to providing ongoing guidance around accessibility and participation of marginalised young people, the group also played an active role in the development of the research strategy and workshop design, ensuring both were methodologically sound and applicable to everyday practice.

Youth Reference Group

Youth Reference Group members were recruited via ActNow, Victorian based Beanbag Centres and through organisations represented on the Project Advisory Group.

The purpose of this group is consistent with Inspire’s principles of promoting meaningful youth participation that values young people’s knowledge and capabilities. Similarly, to the Project Advisory Group, this group has been actively involved in contributing to the design of the research tools and methodology; guiding workshop development and implementation; and participated in the community consultation.

This report presents:

1. The literature examining the role of civic engagement, defined as political and social action, and it’s impact on the mental health of young people experiencing marginalisation; and
2. Research findings examining marginalised young people’s attitudes and perceptions towards political and social action.

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We would also like to thank:

Project Advisory Group Members 2007

- Dr Jane Burns, Director of Research and Policy, Inspire Foundation and VicHealth Senior Research Fellow, ORYGEN Youth Health Research Centre, University of Melbourne
- Dr Shanton Chang, Lecturer, Department of Information Systems, University of Melbourne
- Ms Jade Colgan, State Co-ordinator, Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council
- Professor Helen Herrman, Professor in Psychiatry, ORYGEN Youth Health Research Centre, University of Melbourne
- Ms Felicity Marlowe, former Rainbow Network Project Officer, Gay & Lesbian Health Victoria
- Mr Trent McCarthy, Speaker, Coach and Consultant, Trent McCarthy & Associates
- Dr George Taleporos, Co-ordinator, Youth Disability Advocacy Service
- Ms Irene Verins, Senior Program Advisor, VicHealth

Youth Advisory Group Members 2007

- Calvin Tsang
- Helen Dang
- Keira Martin
- Thea Saliba

Youth Reference Group Members 2008

- Vassie Dandanis
- Sakshi Shail
- Eric Brown

Host Organisations for Focus Groups

- Barwon Youth Accommodation Service
- Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues
- City of Ballarat Youth Services
- City of Whitehorse Youth Services
- Fusion Youth Housing
- Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services, St Albans
- Homeground Broadmeadows
- Koori Employment Enterprise
- Mission Australia
- Open Family Footscray
- Whitelion
- Worawa Aboriginal College
- YAK, Action Centre, Family Planning Victoria
- Youth Disability Advocacy Service

Organisations and individuals who were consulted in the development and implementation of this project:

- Though there are too many to name, your contribution to this research is invaluable.

Introduction

Background to project

Information Communication Technologies (ICT) play an increasingly significant role in the lives of young people, yet the current evidence base supporting their utilisation in mental health promotion activities is not well established. Wyn and colleagues, in a report commissioned by VicHealth, outline four gaps in the current literature:

Wellbeing: There is little comprehensive and systematic research on the nature and meaning of relationships and social connections online, or the role they play in enhancing (or harming) young people's health and wellbeing.

Meaning and social context: embracing a holistic approach to the complexity of internet use.

Diversity: gaps exist in research on the experiences of young people from a variety of backgrounds.

Participant research: the opportunity exists to involve young people in the design and implementation of research (Wyn et al., 2005).

Since 1996, the Inspire Foundation has worked directly with young people from a range of backgrounds to develop and implement ICT-based programs to promote help seeking, resilience and community participation (Burns et al., 2007, Nicholas et al., 2004, Oliver et al., 2006, Sullivan and Burns, 2006, Swanton et al., 2007). Inspire's Beanbag program works specifically with young people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, social cultural and economic marginalisation.

"Bridging the Digital Divide" aims to build on the experience of Inspire as well as address the gaps identified by Wyn and colleagues, furthering our understanding of the role ICT can play in promoting social inclusion and civic engagement amongst young people experiencing marginalisation. These young people include Indigenous young people, young people from newly arrived, refugee or migrant backgrounds, young people with a disability, same-sex attracted young people, young people who are gender diverse and young people from low socio-economic backgrounds.

In particular, the research aims to explore:

1. The role of ICT in young people's identity formation;
2. The impact of ICT on young people's social relationships;
3. The role of ICT in skill development as well as information provision and communications;
4. The use of ICT by young people to exercise citizenship and civic engagement;
5. The digital divide created by lack of access to ICT; and
6. Organisational capacity of youth and related services to utilise ICT to promote social inclusion and civic engagement.

This report is the second in a series of four and specifically addresses aims four and six (as outlined above). The first report (Blanchard et al., 2007) explored marginalised young people's use of ICT. This second report commences by examining the literature regarding the role of social inclusion and civic engagement in promoting mental health and wellbeing. Findings of qualitative research conducted with young people experiencing marginalisation and the professionals who work with them are presented, examining young people's attitudes towards political and social action. This research has been used to develop workshops designed to improve the mental health of young people experiencing marginalisation through the promotion of social participation and civic engagement. The workshops are currently being piloted and will form the basis of a third report.

Literature Review

Young people who experience social, cultural and/or economic marginalisation are more likely to experience disparities in access to health care, education and employment, and experience higher rates of social and mental health problems (Herrman et al., 2005, AIHW, 2007, Burns et. al., 2008). Groups of young people at risk of marginalisation include those who are Indigenous (AIHW, 2007), same sex attracted (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care 2000; Dyson et al., 2003; Hillier et al., 2005), gender diverse (Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health (MACGLH), 2002), Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) (Gorman et al., 2003, Gorst-Unsworth and Goldenberg, 1998, Dyregrov et al., 2002), carers (see for example Banks et al., 2001; Dearden & Becker, 1998; Dearden & Becker, 2000; Shah & Hatton, 1999) those living with an intellectual disability (McIntyre, Blacher & Baker 2002) and those from low socio-economic backgrounds (WHO, 2003). Poor health outcomes are up to 2.5 times higher amongst individuals experiencing the greatest social disadvantage (Astbury, 2001). As well as limiting access to material and psychosocial resources, experiencing marginalisation affects an individual's ability to exercise autonomy and decision-making (Astbury, 2001). Social inclusion, access to economic resources, freedom from discrimination and violence (Walker et al. 2005) and demographics including age, gender and ethnicity (Herrman et al., 2005; Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000) are key determinants of mental health.

Civic engagement has been defined as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern”. Civic engagement may include volunteering, activism, political or cultural acts (Collin and Blanchard, 2008). For the purposes of this report, and to reflect the notion that young people often refer to their civic engagement as ‘action’ the term ‘political and social action’ has been used interchangeably.

The benefits of civic engagement for young people

Participation can be defined as “the process of sharing decisions which affect one’s life and the life of the community in which one lives” (Hart, 1992). Providing opportunities for young people to participate by engaging in dialogue and exchange allows them to develop constructive ways of influencing the world around them. It provides young people with the opportunity to assume increasing responsibilities as active citizens. UNICEF highlights communities’ responsibility to take the view of young people seriously and aid them in developing competencies for authentic and meaningful participation (Bellamy, 2003).

Evidence suggests participation has numerous health benefits that result from feeling valued by the community. Civic participation is associated with the prevention of physical and mental disorders (Berry, 2007). The Alma Ata Health for All by the Year 2000 Declaration, the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion and the Jakarta Declaration all emphasise the importance of social participation in health promotion (Baum, 2000). A recent Australian study found that, with the exception of expressing opinions publicly and political protest, higher levels of community participation correlated with lower levels of psychological distress (Berry, 2007). Longitudinal research in France has also identified that participation can protect against death, including suicide (Berkman et al., 2004, Kawachi, 1997). Evans (2007) found that young people feel a stronger self-described sense of community in contexts where they experience voice and resonance, some power and influence, and adequate adult support.

Young people experiencing marginalisation and civic engagement

Young people, as a population group, are marginalised in relation to their involvement in political and social decision making processes (Matthews, 2003). Studies suggest that levels of participation in social and civic community life in an urban setting are significantly influenced by individual socio-economic status, health and other demographic characteristics (Baum, 2000, Kawachi, 1997).

For young people who are Indigenous, CaLD, same sex attracted, gender diverse, in care, carers, living with a disability or from a low socio-economic background there are additional barriers to participation in political and social action (Boylan, 2005, Merkle, 2003, Evans, 2007).

Howard et al, 2002, explores some of the challenges for marginalised young people regarding their participation.

“...opportunities for disadvantaged youth to participate meaningfully in various activities and programs in society are often limited by the society’s implicit or explicit power structures and systems (Hart, 1992; Smyth, 1999; Angwin, 2000; Prout, 2001, 2002). The struggle around whose views are represented is ongoing with the outcome usually being that smaller, quieter voices get “drowned out by the other’s louder, more dominant, and putatively more epistemologically legitimate.” (Howard et al., 2002)

In conceptualising marginalisation it is important to recognise the impact of gender differences, of culture and religion and of language, as well as taking into account experiences of marginalisation (McNeish et al., 2002). For example, young people experiencing marginalisation might have personal circumstances which take precedence over their social and political participation. A young carer might be focused on the needs of the person they are caring for, which may restrict the time they have available for civic activities and/or their capacity to engage in education, training and employment limiting their economic participation. Furthermore, while young people experiencing marginalisation may participate in advocacy related activities, the issues around which they are advocating may be ones which affect their immediate experience. For instance, in the given example of a young carer, this may include advocating on behalf of their family member.

Conceptualising young people as citizens

One of the reasons why young people are marginalised in relation to their involvement in political and social decision making processes, is due to

the way in which young people are conceptualised as (non) citizens, and how ‘citizenship’ and ‘civic engagement’ are conceptualised more broadly.

Evans presents a model in which citizenship is conceptualised as either ‘minimal’ or ‘maximal’ (Evans, 1995). A minimal view of citizenship places an emphasis on civil and legal status, rights and responsibilities. The good citizen is one who is law-abiding, public-spirited and exercises political involvement through voting for representatives. Using this interpretation, citizenship is gained when civil and legal status is granted. For young Australians this occurs at age 18. A maximal interpretation of citizenship implies a consciousness of one’s self as a member of a shared democratic culture (Evans, 1995). Using this interpretation of citizenship, young people can therefore gain a sense of being part of a democracy by participating in a range of civic activities before they are permitted to vote.

Another way young people are conceptualised in terms of citizenship, is where young people are positioned as ‘citizens of the future’ (Wyn, 1995). Young people are spoken of as if they are less significant because they are not yet adults. They are seen as ‘non-adults, a group who are in deficit’ (Wyn, 1995). This view affects how young people regard the impact of their contributions, both individually and collectively within society (Holdsworth, 2001). Similarly, if citizens are regarded as only those with the right to vote, stand for office or serve on a jury, it becomes difficult to move away from a view that citizenship can only be enjoyed when young people transition to adulthood (Owen, 1996).

A longitudinal qualitative study in the UK investigated young people’s transitions to citizenship (Lister et al., 2003). Implied in this topic of ‘transitions to citizenship’ is the concept of young people as citizens in training. This study considered young people’s perceptions of this transition and found five models of citizenship through which young people made sense of their place in society. These are:

- Universal status: Everyone is understood to be a citizen by virtue of being a member of the community or nation.
- Respectable economic independence: Being a citizen is associated with fulfilling the economic and social status quo. For example, by paying taxes.

- Constructive social participation: Citizens are constructive members of the community. They participate in a number of ways ranging from abiding by the law to helping people through volunteering.
- Social contractual: Reflects an understanding of citizenship based on rights and responsibilities.
- Right to a voice: At the heart of citizenship is the right to have a say and be heard (Lister et al., 2003).

Holdsworth (2001) integrates aspects of the above views into an alternative model for conceptualising young people's citizenship, whereby their citizenship status is related to their participation in decision making. He argues that the way in which citizenship is conceptualised impacts on the nature of young peoples participation (Holdsworth, 2001). Inherent in this model is the role of institutions in either enabling or preventing young people's participation. The levels of participation Holdsworth proposes are:

- Young people as clients (non-citizen participation): Occurs in situations defined by adults or workers. Suggests most young people lack the skills and motivation to make decisions and make reactive arbitrary decisions, not understood by either party.
- Young people as consumers (token or consultative participation): Young people consume goods or services and exercise their decision-making power through the marketplace.
- Young people as minimal citizens (deferred or apprentice participation): Focuses on the formal aspects of citizenship (for example, voting), which for young people are often tasks deferred to adulthood.
- Young people as maximal citizens (full or deep participation): Young people are recognised as citizens in the present, with skills, knowledge and ideas to share. Young people's citizenship is supported as an inherent right (Holdsworth, 2001).

This model places responsibility on the community and organisations to acknowledge and act on the fact that young people have differing capacities and face very real challenges due to social, cultural and economic marginalisation. For example, a young person with a mental illness may experience debilitating anxiety and therefore lack the confidence to engage in a formal participatory structure, while a young person with an intellectual disability or learning difficulty may find it impossible to read lengthy explanations or fill in complicated paper work.

Conceptualising political and social action

There is some debate regarding the nature and extent of young people's civic engagement in Australia. This is in part related to how political and social action are conceptualised, which in recent years, has theoretically shifted (Norris, 2002; Vromen; 2004).

In the late 70's Milbrath provided the following definitions: He used 'apathetic' to describe non-participants, for example those who do not vote. 'Spectators' or people exhibiting a 'passive supportive' role are those who vote regularly and contribute to the economic life of the country as tax-payers. 'Gladiatorial' or 'active' participants include those who participate in both conventional and unconventional ways. Milbrath categorises 'gladiatorial' participants as protestors, community activists, party and campaign workers. Communicators or contact specialists. Communicators express their political viewpoints through letter writing, either to the media or directly to politicians, while contact specialists only mobilise when a particular issue of concern arises, often by contacting the relevant politicians or department to ensure the problem is addressed (Milbrath, 1977).

Putnam (2003) applies the concept of 'social capital' to examine what he describes as the 'ups and downs' of civic engagement in the US in recent decades. Social capital refers to "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." (Putnam, 2000). This theory suggests that social networks are of value to both the individual and the collective. Individuals form connections that benefit their own interests, for example to help find a job, but both the wider community and the individual can feel the effects of this social capital. Putnam muses, 'perhaps the younger generation today is no less engaged than their predecessors, but engaged in new ways?'

There is growing evidence that young people are motivated to connect and engage with others on the basis of issues or causes such as the environment (Norris, 2003; Bang, 2005; Collin, 2007). Young people's preferred mechanisms for political and social action have moved beyond traditional activities (e.g. voting) and institutions (e.g. governments and political parties) (Norris, 2003). For instance, Bang (2005) argues that an increase in governance networks has

created increased participation in non-government organisations by bringing together authorities and lay-people. He purports that civic engagement is now mobilised more around these types of networks, rather than against the state.

This sense of 'action' or engagement around projects or issues has created new political identities. Bang calls these new political identities 'Expert Citizens' and 'Everyday Makers' (Bang, 2004). Expert Citizens are those who access existing governance processes and structures, assuming professional roles in non-government and community organisations. They are strategic in their participation as they seek political influence. Everyday Makers are also politically involved, but their cause-oriented activities often take the form of individualised action. They see 'potential for political action in everyday activities, such as writing for a local youth magazine, ethical purchasing or the arts. They seek to effect small, profound change through their daily interactions' (Collin, 2007). Utilising Bang's theory, Collin argues that young people are conceptualising themselves as social and political actors in new and distinct ways, looking beyond the state and forging networks for action across traditional divides between the public, private and voluntary sectors (Collin, 2007).

Young people's interest and participation in political and social action

Young people's interest and participation in political and social action is inextricably linked to the social and cultural changes of late modernity (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, Castells, 2001). Young people's lives are characterised by higher levels of risk and uncertainty than previous generations (Cartmel & Furlong, 1997; White & Wyn, 2004). Additionally, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and disability impact on young people's identity production and the way in which they relate to and participate in traditional social structures (such as the family, school and work) (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007).

Numerous studies (predominantly surveys) have sought to gauge young people's knowledge of civics, and their interest and participation in social and political issues. The 2003 State of the World's Children report based on a survey of nearly 40,000 children aged 9 to 18 in 72 countries across East Asia, the Pacific, Europe, Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean indicated that children and young people are deeply concerned about a range of economic, social and environmental issues, however they were disenchanted with traditional politics

and politicians. In Europe, only 40% of children see voting as an effective mechanism for enacting change, while almost a third distrusted their government. Trust of politicians and other public figures diminished with age (Bellamy, 2003).

Data on Australian young people reveals similar trends. An international study of civic knowledge found that Australian students considered the following factors to be essential to democracy: public free speech by individuals, a free press, and equity to ensure that power, family and wealth do not influence the selection of those who hold positions in government (Mellor, 1998).

Another study, by Beresford and Phillips (1997), found 60% of young people in Australia aged 18 to 24 had relatively high levels of interest in politics, with only 11% indicating they were completely disinterested. However very few young people reported that they actually 'participated' in politics through activities such as attending rallies or joining a political party (Beresford and Phillips, 1997). Of the young people surveyed 18% were trade union members, 17% had supported a protest movement, 11% had joined a community protest, 4% were members of community pressure groups and just 2% were members of political parties. An overwhelming 65% indicated that they had not participated in any of these activities. Results such as these raise the question of why, when 60% of the sample indicated high levels of interest in politics, this does not translate into participation? (Beresford and Phillips, 1997).

Vromen suggests that 'rather than Generation X having homogenous (or even negligible participatory experiences)' there are four distinct participatory typologies which emerged from a sample of 237 18-34-year olds surveyed. These are activist, communitarian, party and individualistic (Vromen, 2003). Activist participation included being involved in human rights, women's or environmental organisations or attending rallies and marches. Communitarian participation tends to be focused on local community activities such as belonging to a church group, volunteering or contacting a Member of Parliament. Participation that falls under the party classification refers to activities such as being part of an election campaign, being a member of a party or union or participating in a sport or recreation group. Finally, individualistic participation includes such activities as volunteering, making donations, boycotting products and belonging to sporting and recreation groups. Many of these activities can be considered in more than one group.

The role of ICT in Civic Engagement

A major change which has impacted on young people's civic engagement and the experience of youth more broadly, is the evolution of ICT, including the internet. Its rapid growth since the mid 1990s has generated much debate about its influence on civic engagement and political activism. While the theoretical potential of the internet for promoting and facilitating civic engagement and political activism is acknowledged, there is polarised debate regarding the extent to which such potential is being realised, and the resulting impact of such technology for different groups.

While some theorists argue that the internet facilitates increased levels of civic and political engagement others are much more sceptical, citing that it reinforces existing disparities in civic engagement, and may even contribute to an overall decline in social capital (Bimber, 1998; Bimber, 2001; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Lombardo et al., 2002; Jennings and Zeitner, 2003).

Norris (2005) identifies four theoretical perspectives on the relationship between internet based civic engagement and formal political participation. They include:

1. The Internet as a Virtual Agora

This perspective posits that the internet is a virtual public forum and offers possibilities to involve "ordinary citizens in direct, deliberative, or 'strong' democracy" (Norris, 2005). It suggests that ICT facilitates alternative channels of civic engagement (such as political chat rooms, remote electronic voting in elections and mobilisation of virtual communities) thereby 'revitalising levels of mass participation in public affairs' (Norris, 2005). A number of authors (Boulos and Wheelert, 2007; Lefebvre, 2007; Kahn and Kellner, 2004) affirm this perspective, arguing that ICT facilitates networking between diverse political groups and provides 'the structural elements for the existence of fresh kinds of highly-informed, autonomous communities that coalesce around local lifestyle choices, global political demands, and everything in between' (Reingold, 2002 in Kahn and Kellner, 2004). Furthermore, it is suggested that ICT offers potential for greater levels of flexibility, agency and democracy, facilitating new forms of social organisation (Boulos and Wheelert, 2007, Lefebvre, 2007). Various case studies illustrating this

perspective can be found, including the recent mass demonstrations organised by the anti-war movement in the US (Kahn and Kellner, 2004).

Critics of this perspective however, argue that those who engage in digital politics tend to be individuals who were already most predisposed to participation via traditional channels (Wilhelm 2001 in Norris, 2005). Additionally, critics hypothesise that the 'disengaged, apathetic, or uninterested' are unlikely to be reached by political websites as they are more likely to spend time on entertainment or social focused websites (Norris, 2005).

2. The Knowledge Elite Social Inequalities

Described as the 'cyber-pessimist view' this perspective cautions that the internet reinforces existing inequalities, and may also further divisions between the information rich and poor (Golding 1996 in Norris 2005). This view acknowledges that ICT offers significant potential for facilitating political change, however it argues that within established democracies, traditional interest groups and governments will continue to dominate and assert their control in the virtual political sphere. Proponents of this view also cite the strict surveillance practices towards online publishing and information dissemination by governments in Cuba, Saudi Arabia and China as examples.

3. Politics as Usual

This view stresses the difficulties of achieving radical change in political systems through technological mechanisms. It suggests that the internet has failed to have a dramatic impact on the practical reality of 'politics as usual' arguing that political parties are yet to employ ICT to facilitate little more than information dissemination (Margolis & Resnick 2000). It speculates that the internet merely serves as an aid to good governance by increasing transparency, efficiency and customer-oriented service delivery rather than facilitating meaningful citizen engagement.

4. The Political Market Model

This final view suggests that the impact of the internet on civic engagement is largely dependent on the interaction between the 'top-down' supply of political information available and the 'demand' from the online public (Norris, 2005). Norris hypothesises that the preponderance of younger, well-educated citizens among internet users, and their prior political interests and propensities, will impact on civic engagement.

Certain 'types' of democratic practices may be strengthened, particularly cause-oriented and civic-oriented activities, while more traditional channels of participation such as voting and political party membership are less likely to be affected.

Numerous empirical studies have sought to further assess the relationship between levels of civic engagement and internet use (including Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Moy et al., 2005; Norris, 2005; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Overall these studies produced mixed findings, though most tend to support the hypothesis that internet use is positively associated with higher levels of civic engagement. For example, Tolbert and McNeal (2003) investigated the impact of the internet on voter turnout by analysing data from the large-scale, randomly sampled 1996, 1998 and 2000 American National Election Studies (NES). They found that those with internet access and online election news were significantly more likely to report voting in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, even after controlling for 'socio-economic status, partisanship, attitudes, traditional media use, and state environmental factors'

In historical comparisons, Jennings and Zeitner (2003) used data from 1982 and 1997 in order to compare levels of civic engagement before and after the internet's introduction. They found that internet access had a positive effect on many types of civic engagement (including media attentiveness, interest in public and external affairs political involvement, volunteerism and trust), and they reported a positive relationship between internet use and organisational involvement. However, this relationship weakened after controlling for pre-existing levels of civic engagement. The study also found that younger generations use the internet more for political purposes than older generations (19% vs 13% respectively). However, it appeared that the relationship between indicators of civic engagement and the internet was weaker among younger generations.

Norris (2005) found regular internet users were significantly more politically active across 21 indicators though the size of the activism gap varied according to type of engagement. The most important factors predicting activism include: personal efficacy, age, education, region and civic duty. Further analysis confirmed that claims about the effect of the internet on activism need to distinguish among types of participation in political activities.

Similarly, Moy et al (2005) found that the relationship between internet use and civic engagement differs according to the purpose for which individuals use the internet. In particular, using the internet to search for information, email, political activity (such as visiting a political advocacy web site), and community-based activity was positively related to civic engagement. The results also suggest that 'time spent online may complement traditional forms of civic engagement rather than displace it' (Moy et al. 2005 p. 580)

Evidently further work is required to fully understand the relationship between ICT and civic engagement. It is however apparent that ICT's interactive nature and capacity to facilitate interpersonal communication significantly influences social and civic life, with many social researchers citing how such technology cultivates social networks and strengthens social ties (Bernhardt, 2000; Boase et al., 2006; Kraut et al., 2002; Maibach et al., 2007; Peattie, 2007). As Wyn et al., (2005) highlight, the internet is therefore continuously increasing the possibilities of who we connect with, and how we 'belong' both online and offline, and these possibilities may also extend to political engagement that translates into offline, individual and collective actions (Lombardo et al., 2002, Wyn et al., 2005b). The recent advent of 'Web 2.0' has also blurred the boundaries of consumer and producer, enabling individuals to create and publish content themselves through applications such as wikis, blogs, social tagging and networking, aggregative content management, and pod/vod-casting (Boulos and Wheelert, 2007). Through such participatory content generation, Web 2.0 technology offers further opportunities for increased collaboration, ownership, and empowerment (Christensen et al., 2002; Crespo, 2007; Wyn et al., 2005).

Methodology

This is the second publication in a series based on a mixed method study which utilised both quantitative and qualitative methods. Further information regarding the focus group sites can be found in the first report (Blanchard et al., 2007).

The Project Advisory Group and Youth Reference Group were both involved in developing and refining the study design and research tools. Both groups contributed input into and feedback on the survey, focus group and interview questions, as well as focus group structure, survey design, and recruitment strategies. This process identified strategies to minimise potential barriers for marginalised young people's participation.

Focus groups

Sixteen focus groups were conducted across 12 host organisations in Victoria. These organisations were selected through a snowballing methodology which commenced by meeting with peak organisations who work with marginalised young people, including: Council to Homeless Persons, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Rainbow Network, Youth Disability Advocacy Service and the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council. These organisations helped identify appropriate local sites to conduct focus groups.

A selection of host organisations for the focus groups aimed to ensure balance in terms of:

- Service type (e.g. state/local government, non-profit/community organisation, education provider);
- Gender of participants;
- Geographic spread (sites were based in the 25 most disadvantaged electorates according to the Socio-economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) index and included a mix of locations across Victoria including metropolitan, rural and regional areas as well as urban fringe local governments);
- Organisations which do and do not have an existing relationship with Inspire; and
- Organisations that do and do not currently use the internet and related technologies in their work with young people.

Staff at host organisations recruited participants for each of the focus groups. Flyers promoting the focus groups and information sheets were provided for participants and (if the participants were aged under 18) their parents and guardians.

Focus group questions explored what it meant to young people to 'take action' on issues that affect them. They were also asked to consider the barriers and enablers to civic engagement (questions available on request).

Focus groups were of one hour and fifteen minutes in duration and were held at venues familiar to participants, including youth and community centres, accommodation services and restaurants. Focus groups were designed to accommodate difficulties in understanding English or maintaining concentration. Frequent breaks were offered to accommodate participant needs, and in one service, one-on-one and small group interviews were conducted instead of following a more traditional focus group format, as young people were more comfortable participating in smaller groups.

Refreshments and a \$20 gift voucher were provided to participants to cover out of pocket expenses. Information and contact details for key support services were also provided to participants at each focus group.

Interviews with service providers

In-depth interviews with individuals who work with young people were conducted to explore the same key concepts covered in the focus groups with young people, as well as the capacity of youth and related services to utilise ICT to promote social inclusion and civic engagement. Service providers were asked to consider their clients' readiness to engage in civic activities. That is, whether they had the interest, skills and knowledge to engage as well as whether they had other needs that would take priority. Examples of some of these needs included finding safe, secure accommodation, ongoing employment or completion of a pharmacotherapy program for drug problems. These interviews were conducted face-to-face with staff at almost all of the host organisations. A snowballing methodology was also employed to identify other organisations that work with young people from diverse backgrounds.

Written surveys

Before focus groups with young people and interviews with host organisations, participants completed a written survey providing demographic information (available on request).

Service providers, researchers and in some instances, peer participants, assisted young people with lower literacy skills or other special needs to complete the survey.

Data analysis

Focus group and interview tapes were reviewed and notes were made from the recorded material. The data collected was then analysed in two stages: (1) a thematic analysis of responses to four key focus group and interview questions was conducted with members of the Youth Reference Group and Project Advisory Group. Individual responses were printed on pieces of paper and the two groups arranged them thematically; this process allowed for discussion between the participants as they made sense of the data. (2) Further thematic analysis was then conducted by the researchers drawing on literature from the fields of sociology, health promotion and psychology. The final results were checked with the Youth Reference Group and Project Advisory Group to ensure that interpretations were accurate and meaningful. This methodology reflects the concepts described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in their book *Naturalistic Inquiry* where they contend that the process of data analysis is one where the constructions that have emerged through the interaction between the researcher and the participant are reconstructed into meaningful wholes. By involving both young people and service providers in this process there is less risk that the interpretation applied to the data privileges the views of the individual researchers.

Results

Focus groups with young people

Demographics

97 young people participated in the study with 96 providing demographic information. The characteristics of this group are summarised below:

- Age ranged from 13 to 25, 58% were aged between 16 and 19.
- 56.3% were male.
- 61.5% identified as being from a CaLD background.
- 25% identified as Indigenous.
- 42.7% spoke a language other than English at home.
- Just over half were at secondary school (16 doing year 9 or less, 27 doing year 10 or 11 and 6 doing year 12); 17 were completing a trade certificate, professional diploma or TAFE course (including alternative education programs) and two participants were completing undergraduate University study. 13 were looking for work, three indicated working or looking for work and studying and one completing an adult migrant education program.
- 54.2% lived with parents or close family, while 11.5% lived in temporary or supported accommodation. A further 7.3% lived with other family members; while 6.3%, each lived alone, with a partner or with friends.
- 14.6% identified as having a disability or learning difficulty, including anxiety, depression, psychosis, aspergers syndrome, intellectual disability and spina bifida.
- 29.1% of participants identified as same-sex attracted.

What does it mean to ‘take action’?

Focus group participants were asked, ‘What does it mean to take action?’

The concept of ‘taking action’ was interpreted widely, with few participants likening the phrase to political or social participation. The majority cited examples of individual, socially oriented, and in a significant number of cases, destructive behaviours. These ranged from violence on the grounds of retribution to addressing personal issues such as mental health problems or alcohol and/or other drug issues. Same sex attracted young people were the main exception to the above, with many participants citing examples of political or civic participation when asked about the concept of ‘taking action.’

Young people’s broad range of responses regarding their perception of what it means to take action can be loosely themed as:

Doing something to address an issue

By far the most common response to this question was to ‘do something.’ For some this referred to ‘actually physically doing something’ or ‘getting off the couch.’

This definition lends itself to action on two different types of issues: issues affecting the individual, such as unemployment, and issues affecting the community.

“For me, I have an issue. I haven't had a job for a while. I'm jobless. It pisses me off because I don't have any money and I know no-one's going to help me, so I have to do my own actions and stuff. I had to do everything myself. Taking on responsibilities and stuff. Helps you move on.”

“Do something about it. I went to camp yesterday for TAFE and there's this guy, he's 19 now, but he was adopted from the Philippines, because his parents weren't able to look after him because of the poverty there. He was adopted by an Australian family. He thought he wasn't wanted. He was nearly in jail 3 times. His

parents said to him, he should go back to the Philippines and see where he's from, so he understands it more. He didn't realise it was so horrific over there. He thought he was sent here because he wasn't loved. He didn't realise. We sit here in Australia, but we don't realise how bad it is over there. This lady on this slide show was making 4000 boxes, but getting paid \$1.50 for it. He turned around and said we can all sit here and feel sorry about it and cry and talk about it, or we can do something. So we've decided we're all going to go to the Philippines and raise as much money as we can and take it over there and give it to them personally."

Being proactive

There was a sense from participants that talking about action was quite common, but many felt that few people are able to turn these thoughts and ideas into action.

"A lot of people tend to just talk about the issue. They're really passionate, but when it comes time to actually do something about it, they're all talk. I'm like that. I talk about it and don't do stuff."

Protesting

A number of participants defined 'action' as participating in a public rally, gathering or protest march.

Fighting

Some participants defined taking action as 'fighting' or 'fighting back' both figuratively and literally. While some were referring to fighting in the sense of challenging ideas or behaviours they disagreed with, others were referring to physical retaliation. An example from the same-sex attracted groups was 'fighting' homophobia, by taking a stand on the issue.

Working together

There was a theme from participants of working together to create change. For example:

"Take something into consideration and let other people know and if they all tend to agree it's the right sort of topic or issue to be dealing with actually deal with it, rather than leaving it."

Others provided examples of taking action in their response such as taking out a restraining order, writing a letter to a newspaper or blogging online. Interestingly, it was only the groups of same-sex attracted young people who made reference to ICT-based forms of action.

Barriers and enablers to taking action

Participants discussed at length the barriers that stopped them from taking action on a wide range of issues. While some focused on barriers which prevented them from creating change in their own lives, others discussed barriers that stopped them from taking action in their communities. Table One describes the barriers and enablers to taking action identified by young people.

Table 1 – Key Themes: Barriers and enablers to action

Barriers	Enablers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Challenging life circumstances (e.g. being homeless, experiencing a mental illness) – Low self-esteem, personal motivation, self-efficacy and self-worth – Not being able to see outcomes of action or knowing that the action taken may not make a difference – Unsupportive peers – Legal issues and public space concerns – Lack of financial resources – Not enough time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Financial or material resources – Personal motivation, supportive peers or significant adults being able to imagine the outcome or action (or non-action) – Being praised or recognised for action taken – Access to information and knowledge (including information on how to take appropriate action)

Barriers to taking action

Participants saw personal issues such as experiencing homelessness or being unemployed as significant barriers to being able to contribute to community change. Issues such as finding housing, gaining employment and remaining healthy often took precedence to being involved in the community.

“Not having your own life sorted out. If I was set and I had a house and a job, I'd be like hey, I want to take action now. This is my chance.”

Not having the financial resources to take the action they desired, was seen by some as a barrier.

For many, psychosocial variables impacted on their capacity to take action. For those who wanted to take action to address a personal issue such as substance abuse or participation in crime, friends as well as personal characteristics were seen as important influences and could act as both barriers and enablers to action.

“Peer Group. You can't blame it all on your mates, it's yourself as well. If you say, oh I'm going to my JJ appointment and they say 'fuck your JJ appointment, come and get stoned.' Your mates are having a ball and you think JJ - you're going to be sitting there talking shit for an hour and your mates are getting blind you'll go with your mates.”

Low self-esteem, lack of motivation, low self-efficacy and feeling a lack of worth were all seen as significant barriers to taking action.

“Not thinking that you can do it, or that you're not worthy.”

Some felt it took a 'certain kind of person' to take action.

“I don't really do anything to take action. I just sit in my room and watch movies.”

Interviewer: So what stops you?

Myself. It's just myself. I'm that sort of person.”

Not having enough time amongst other commitments to invest in taking action were barriers.

Not being able to see immediate outcomes of their action, or knowing that the action they take may ultimately be fruitless was seen as disconcerting for many.

“If you know it's going to be a long process and nothing could come out of it, [‘that's what stops you].”

Not having the skills or knowledge to take action was another identified barrier, in particular not knowing where to start.

A number of young people made reference to the perceived or actual negative attitudes or behaviours of those around them acting to deter them from taking action. In identifying these attitudes and behaviours young people cited people who tend to work against you rather than with you, people who are “set in their ways” and an inability to allow others to express themselves as barriers.

It was also suggested that community attitudes towards the issue the individual felt strongly about could also be a deterrent.

“I think also the area you live in. Like the gay marriage issue is not something that's going to be lightly taken in Broadmeadows. So it wouldn't be more openly discussed. There's no pride march in Broady!”

Young people seeing others around them not taking action or hearing people talk about action, but not acting often resulted in disillusionment and a reluctance to take action.

Those who saw 'taking action' as physical or violent action acknowledged that fighting or punching someone would be seen as against the law.

It was also suggested that legal issues may prevent traditional forms of action such as protests in some public spaces.

Enablers to taking action

Having the financial or material resources to take action was important for a number of focus group participants.

“I think the availability of paper and pen. You can make images of the issues you're dealing with or taking actions. You can write about it. Photocopiers you can use to mass produce posters or flyers.”

Access to information and knowledge about both the issue the action is directed at as well as the process of taking action was considered an enabler.

“Having access to television and newspapers. They can make you aware of things like protests. Or internet.”

It was suggested that often people don't know where to start when taking action, so “knowing how to start or somewhere you can go to get advice on how to take action” was a significant step.

Possessing the motivation to take action was also considered important. For some this involved a negative event or behaviour motivating them such as not wanting to let themselves or others down.

“Just think about the downside. If I'm sitting at home. I'm thinking everyone else around me has money and I don't want to be so poor. I didn't have any help from friends. I did it without all my friends. I got a job in Bridge Rd. It's a really long way, but I realised I really needed a job. It's a hassle but I knew I had to do it. I found out the job was really ridiculous, but about a week after that I knew I couldn't give up. I had to find myself another job. My family sometimes helped me. I come home and they asked me how I was doing, but I don't want to let them down. There was, but it's hard to put it into words. You don't want to be left out by your friends when they're getting somewhere and you're not.”

Often family and friends motivated young people to take action, as well as being able to imagine the future with or without change.

“My daughter's my biggest inspiration and everything I do is for her. When it comes to getting on the methadone and stuff like that, I can picture myself at 60 years old still trying to find a vein and shit and I don't want that to be happening.”

Being surrounded by others who are motivated was also useful. The cynicism in this quote below from a young man suggested that this was often a barrier as well.

“One thing that makes it easy is when people are already motivated about it. In Australia one of the hardest things to do is to get people motivated to do everything. I

mean Jesus Christ the kids are already so fat they can't get them to exercise let alone do anything other than that.”

Having someone to help young people to take action, preferably a significant adult was considered important by many participants.

“My teacher at school who is an activist, completely huge on everything that she finds unfair or discriminatory, she'll organise a lot of things and then if we want to protest against something, she's already organised something.”

This support person could assist by providing not only information about how to go about taking action, but more importantly the moral support required to motivate and encourage action.

“Someone who believes in you, they have some faith in you.”

Someone who will listen was also considered important.

“Having someone who listens to you. If you want to talk about something, you can tell your friends and family, but sometimes they won't support you.”

Being praised or recognised for taking action was important to some, but not all young people. Many felt it was important to be told they were “doing a good job.”

Issues that concern young people

Focus group participants were asked two different questions to get a sense of what issues concerned them and what they may be interested in ‘taking action’ on. These were: “What's important to you?” and “What pisses you off or makes you angry?”

The issues identified were broad, although there were two categories identified: those issues affecting the individual and those affecting others in the community.

Examples of issues affecting the individual include interpersonal relationships and the challenge of getting through a difficult time.

“People that constantly talk about jail, crime, drugs. It's taken me so long to try and get away from that stuff and it shits me when people keep bringing it up”.

Interviewer: “So you want to leave that stuff behind?”

“Yeah....A lot of the stuff I've talked about today I rarely bring up in conversation anymore. I'm different now.”

Police

Young people's relationships with local police and public transport ticket inspectors was a recurring theme throughout the focus groups and, amongst newly arrived and refugee young people was the issue of most concern. Young people reported being asked for identification without cause and feeling like they were being harassed. At the same time, this was an issue young people felt almost powerless to address. When questioned about whether they'd ever challenged the police or tried to raise their concerns, many responded that they either had, to no avail, or hadn't because they felt it was pointless.

“The cops in Footscray. Now they don't ever come up to me. But when I was younger they were always coming up to me. I think they reckoned I was a junkie or something. They randomly choose anyone off the street, waste your time, and ask for ID. I never challenged them. What for? It's meaningless. There's no point. You argue with them and they're going to argue back, so what's the point.”

Discrimination and being treated differently

Being discriminated against or treated differently because of gender, sexual orientation, race, religion or ability was a concern for many young people.

“I'm a Youth Ambassador through Yooralla (Disability Support Service) and something I've always made a priority is disability discrimination and try to make the mainstream public aware that there are some horrible discrimination issues and let the general public know that.”

Homophobia was of particular concern for young people who were same-sex attracted, although this issue, and that of gay marriage, was also raised by some participants who identified themselves as straight.

Interpersonal relationships

A number of young people spoke about the importance of interpersonal relationships and that

problems with family and friends were issues they'd like to change.

In the majority of focus groups family and friends were identified as the most important things in the lives of the young people who attended.

“What matters to me most is my family. Sometimes my friends. If they are well or not. If they're sick it really matters to me. It makes me worried. Same with friends. If they have a problem or they get injured or something then I worry.”

People in positions of power

In some of the focus groups participants expressed a dislike for people in positions of power. What appeared clear from their responses was that they felt they weren't being heard by decision-makers, nor do the decision-makers understand their experiences.

“Politics.”

Interviewer: “What do you hate about it?”

“All the shit that comes with it. They get to make all the decisions they make. Why do they get to make all the decisions?”

“The only thing I can think of is John Howard for some reason.”

Interviewer: “What is it about John Howard that annoys you?”

“Everything! Just the things he says. Just the way he thinks everything's all sweet and goes through as if there's nothing wrong and life's a piece of cake. He doesn't have a clue, he doesn't know what he's talking about.”

What is important to highlight here is that for this young person former Prime Minister John Howard represented people in power, highlighting this individuals concern that they felt that they weren't being heard.

Finances

Having enough money to have basic needs met and live comfortably was important to a number of participants.

Education and Employment

To many of the older participants their educational and career choices were important.

“Study. You have knowledge and you need it to find a job. If you don't find a job you're stuffed.”

Role models for action

When asked to describe anyone they know who has taken action, most of the participants identified people who had taken action by overcoming personal challenges such as drug and alcohol issues and domestic violence.

For example, the following discussion took place amongst a group of young women who had experienced care and/or the juvenile justice system.

“I’ve got one. Am I allowed to say it? [my friend] –because she’s taken control of her life.”

“All of us. We we’re all, well not all of us, we were on the drugs and stuff like that. And now we’re kicking ass!”

“That’s all you can really take action on – you have power over yourself and nothing else.”

A similar discussion took place in Frankston amongst a group of young people who had been in trouble with the law and had past drug and alcohol issues.

Interviewer: Can you think of anyone who has taken action?

All: Myself! Me

Young Person One: As I said before from committing crimes, doing drugs, drinking alcohol, to taking myself away from it. I moved up to the country for six months, totally changed who I was and admittedly I’ve come back to the same area, I’ve grown up here, I’ve been in Frankston my whole life, I no longer see people I don’t want to speak to anymore because of what happened and what I got into. I’ve got a kid on the way. Even though it’s probably going to happen, they’re going to do drugs, try all different shit, I don’t want them to know about my history. I don’t want to flaunt it in their face. I want to acknowledge it and move on.

Young Person Two: Look at my mates right. They’re all out of school, haven’t been to school since year 8. It’s the exact same with me. I haven’t been to school since year 8 but I decided for myself, I wanted to get an education. Fuck, I’ve got no chance of

getting a job with a year 7 pass, and then I got my year 7 pass and got expelled by year 8. I’m doing year 10 now though and look at them. What are they doing now?

Interviewer: But you’re actually out there trying to get an education?

Young Person Two: Yeah. All of us are

Worker: and finding a job too.

Young person Three: I’ve only got a year 7 pass and I’m doing it too.

Interviewer: Do you see that as taking action?

Young person Three: Yeah maybe. I’ve taken action so many times, but I’ve just fucked up. I got kicked out of Mornington at the end of year 7, then I’ve down Operation Newstart, it’s like Ropes Course, but different, and that got me back on track. I moved up to Carrum and got back into Chuff, and speed and just amphetamines and that. They I went to Patterson River Secondary and I was going alright ‘til about a full year and I ended up getting kicked out with a drug related problem. So have a think about the times when things got back on track.

Young Person Three: My JJ (Juvenile Justice) workers. They are paying for me to do a music theory course and a hair styling course and they’re paying for this. So they helped me out and I don’t want to fuck them over.

Young Person Two: I reckon the thing that fucked me up most with school, with drugs, with everything was that I was on the drugs. I’d rather get on than go out. At one stage before I went on a holiday I went pretty bad and everything.

A small number of participants talked about celebrities they had seen raising awareness of issues such as poverty and racism. In particular they referred to Oprah Winfrey and Sir Bob Geldof.

One participant cited Pamela Anderson as an example of someone who had taken action on an animal rights issue.

“You know how she used to wear those Ugg Boots or something. She wore them for about 10 years and then someone told her they were made out of sheep skin and

she said that's cruelty. So she took action on something she'd been doing for 10 years. It's kinda ridiculous, but she's doing something about it now!"

Another used the example of Tupac Shakur who supported young gang members in the US to express themselves, resulting in them feeling like they were not alone.

"Tupac. In America he took care of the youth, the gang members. He cared for them. He wanted to send messages to the people so he wrote songs about things that were actually happening. Like me man".

Amongst a group of Indigenous participants, local community volunteers were top of mind.

"There's lots of people in the community in Shepparton. Like the Aunties and Uncles who drive around in the buses as volunteers."

Interviews with service providers

Demographics

Twenty-two service providers participated in the study. Their demographic profile is summarised below.

- A relatively even number of males and females participated (46% male, 54% female).
- The age of participants ranged from 21 to 53 years, with the average age being 33.
- Three spoke a language other than English at home (Vietnamese, Greek and Arabic).
- A majority had completed undergraduate or postgraduate tertiary study. One worker had completed a trade certificate or diploma, while 54.5% had completed undergraduate study and a further 40.9% had completed postgraduate study.
- Participants represented a range of experienced practitioners and those new to the field. Of those who indicated how long they had worked in the field, 52.2% had been in the profession more than 6 years.

Demographics ... cont.

- Almost half (45.5%) identified themselves as youth workers, while others worked in the fields of social work (22.7%), psychology (9.1%), community development and family therapy (4.5%), nursing and health promotion (4.5%).
- Almost all participants reported that 75% or more of their work was focused on young people aged 16 to 24.

Young people's perceived needs

Professionals who work with young people were asked to identify the greatest needs of their clients.

Overall, the need to feel connected to something was considered important for almost all groups of young people. This included feeling connected to others, as well as being connected to services so that they could access the support required.

"What people are really looking for is a connection to the services they need at the time they need them. Because we're an information and referral service it's about connecting the person to the services they need that are out there. Can be anything from legal, to health to accommodation, to employment."

For young people who are newly arrived to Australia or from migrant or refugee backgrounds, their greatest needs are directly related to their settlement experience. Workers report that these young people experience difficulties accessing income support, gaining employment and completing homework. They often experience intergenerational conflict resulting from their ability to adapt more readily to their new environment than their older family members.

"From my observation, the young people I work with face economic disadvantage because they come as refugees here. It puts them as late starters. Economic disadvantage affects almost every other aspect of their lives. Their parents are not likely to be working. They have big extended families. This makes accessing other things hard. A lot of the young

people I work with can't afford to pay the enrolment fees for school for example or even the TAFE. These are real problems."

For young people who are experiencing homelessness there are a range of concerns, usually in relation to their health and wellbeing. They include not having their most basic needs met such as hygiene, fresh food and a safe place to sleep. Dental and mental health issues, as well as more entrenched issues such as drugs and alcohol are also prevalent. Workers also reported that sexual health is of great concern with a number of young people engaging in high risk behaviour such as street sex work and survival sex.

For young carers, there was a need to acknowledge the significance of their caring role as well as provide respite support and educational assistance. It was also acknowledged that young people who have caring responsibilities often do not have the same opportunities to develop social skills as other young people. Therefore, opportunities for them to make new friends and learn how to interact with these friends in age appropriate ways are important.

Workers reported that same-sex attracted young people experience high levels of abuse, including bullying. One worker referred to the "Writing Themselves In" report (Hillier et al., 1998) which indicated that 74% of that abuse occurs in school. Workers explained that same-sex attracted young people often experience bullying and harassment or find a lack of support, at home, in the community, in their friendship groups, at school and at work, so they can become isolated in all aspects of their lives.

Sexual health information which is relevant to same-sex relationships is also considered crucial. Often young people are reluctant to use the local sexual health clinic for fear of being identified.

One worker explained that for younger same-sex attracted young people issues relating to sexual identity and coming out were more prevalent, whereas for older same-sex attracted young people the issues experienced often related to finding an appropriate partner or housing.

When asked to identify the top three social issues affecting their clients, interviewees again cited a wide range of issues.

"Being judged by the community. I do believe they are a very disengaged client group already, and they are further disengaged by the attitudes of the community as a whole who place judgment on them."

For young people one of the most important challenges is:

"Lack of connection. On all levels. Lack of personal connection and access, but then also lack of overall connection and understanding. Sometimes there's no connection to an understanding of workforce, let alone no concept of being friendly to someone or a mentor. Feeling like a valued member of the community."

The issues commonly identified included:

- Lack of safe and secure housing
- Balancing work and study
- Isolation
- Identity
- Education system not understanding young people's life circumstances (particularly relevant for young carers and refugees)
- Drug and/or alcohol use
- Poor mental health
- Family breakdown
- Bullying
- Sexual health

Discussion

There is growing acknowledgement that civic engagement plays an influential role in improving mental health and wellbeing, particularly through strengthening social connectedness. The literature review identified several gaps. Firstly, there is limited understanding of the role of civic engagement in the lives of young people experiencing marginalisation and the impact it might have on mental health and wellbeing. Second, limited work has been done examining ICT and its potential role in promoting civic engagement for young people's experiencing marginalisation or young people more broadly. Dedicated research in both areas is fundamental to developing effective civic engagement programs both offline and online. The insights gained about young people's perspectives on 'taking action', the barriers and enablers and the key themes summarised in this report therefore constitute an important step forward in furthering the evidence base in this area, with various implications for practice.

On the whole, participants in this study tended to conceptualise 'taking action' in terms of individual or personally oriented behaviours, with few relating 'taking action' to participation in community and societal level actions. The exception to this individualised conceptualisation of action was amongst same-sex attracted young people, who also displayed a much more conventional understanding of political and social action. This may reflect the social context of the Queer protest movement which has long been a site for political and social activism.

A key implication arising from this study is the importance of establishing the link between the 'personal' and 'political' in civic engagement programs. Many young people in this study expressed a strong (perceived) disinterest in politics and government, despite articulating considerable interest about issues that are inherently political in nature. This is relatively consistent with the literature, as it may in part be due to a broader sense of disenfranchisement and distrust of authority and government institutions and systems, rather than 'apathy'. A significant number of respondents also said that they felt they needed to know more about how they could take action and effect change, with several young people explaining that having practical frameworks for planning and taking action would be helpful. Both of these findings highlight the importance of focusing programs on personally relevant issues as defined by the

participants themselves, whilst integrating targeted strategies to increase young people's civic literacy (in terms of knowledge and skills to take action). Providing opportunities and forums for young people to share their stories and perspectives about what matters to them personally is also fundamental. This provides a strong case for the role of ICT in civic engagement programs (particularly web based initiatives such as ActNow) as such technology can facilitate such dialogue between young people while also linking participants into practical tools and resources to further support social and political participation.

The results of this study offer important insights into marginalised young people's perspectives on, and experiences of political and social action, that in turn, have implications for the development and implementation of civic engagement programs for these populations. It should be acknowledged foremost, that the young people who participated in this research represent a diverse range of cultural groups and exhibit a wide range of life experiences. Consequently, their perspectives on and experiences of 'taking action' are similarly diverse ranging from traditional forms of civic participation through to less conventional ways of taking action.

Key enablers to action identified by young people included having assistance from supportive people (such as friends, family or service providers), recognition, motivation, having a clear plan and access to knowledge, skills and resources. The barriers to taking action were similar to those identified in the literature. For example, not knowing how to take action is a commonly reported barrier amongst many groups in the community. For young people experiencing marginalisation, the attitudes of others and their own personal circumstances and characteristics were also significant barriers. For many young people, being labelled 'disengaged' or stigmatised as a result of being homeless, from a low socio-economic background or due to their cultural background often meant that they felt unable to contribute or that their contributions would not be taken seriously.

For many young people, their complex needs such as problems with their mental health, drug and/or alcohol problems or their experience of homelessness often meant that taking action or participating in civic activities was often not a priority for them. Young people also suggested that their own personal characteristics such as feeling unmotivated could deter them from action. As Maslow's hierarchy of needs postulates, lower order 'safety and survival' needs must be met before individuals are able to engage in activities beyond coping with day-to-day stresses of unstable housing, employment and food (Maslow 1968 in Egger et al. 2002). Conversely, amongst those young people who had overcome these challenges and had, for example, re-established themselves with a safe home, taking action to raise awareness of issues such as homelessness had personal significance.

Service providers felt that for many of the young people they worked with, their personal circumstances were such that civic activities were simply not relevant. However, almost all suggested that a significant need of their clients was to feel a connection to others. Any activities need to be flexible and recognise the other competing priorities young people have.

Service providers also highlighted the importance of personalising issues when conceptualising taking action and that developing connections with others, whether peer to peer, positive role models or services was crucial to meeting young people's needs. It was cautioned that any activities needed to be relevant to the young people involved and that for those young people with the most complex needs, participating in civic engagement activities may not always be appropriate.

These findings are consistent with literature which postulates that increasingly, civic and political participation is driven by issues. For example, Vromen (2007) and Collin (2007) have identified that while young Australians' participation in collective action is decreasing, many young people find meaning in individualised, cause-based action. Understanding this interest in cause-based or individualised action is particularly important in designing programs that foster engagement.

Furthermore, it was suggested that the needs of young people varied depending on the issues they were experiencing or their circumstances. For example, it was reported that same-sex attracted young people needed assistance in negotiating issues surrounding bullying and discrimination and sexual health, while young carers required recognition of the significance of their caring roles. It is important when developing resources to support young people that they are tailored accordingly for different population groups.

An important practical implication of this is the need to consider the meaning of 'civic engagement' as relative to the perspectives of the groups with which program planners and practitioners are working, as well as young people's 'readiness' to participate. This cautions against 'one size fits all' programs and emphasizes the importance of developing strategies that are tailored to meet the needs and preferences of the target group.

In addition to tailoring civic engagement programs to address participation barriers, program planners and facilitators must also integrate strategies that reduce the 'stigma' associated with participating in such projects, as well as promoting positive social attitudes towards civic engagement. The research revealed that some young people perceived participation in social and political action or civic engagement programs was for 'other people', citing such initiatives as irrelevant and better suited to 'non-lazy', 'smart' people. Thus, there is a need to debunk stereotypes and common perceptions about the 'types' of individuals who take action and/or participate in civic engagement programs. Peer education, positive role modelling and meaningful youth participation in the design and delivery of programs may be effective in addressing these issues.

Civic engagement programs must also offer scope for participants to develop practical skills and learn experientially. There is a body of work within the civic education literature which argues against simply teaching young people about civic processes, but rather suggests the benefits of providing opportunities for young people to exercise citizenship through activities such as volunteering, individualised action and contributing to public debates rather than waiting until they can vote in elections. Recognising young people as citizens in the present enhances their sense

of agency. While many young people expressed that sharing stories and discussion about action and issues were important, many also highlighted the importance of 'doing' over 'talking'. Physical and creative activities that assist young people to identify areas of importance may offer more engaging approaches to didactic methods. Participants also explained that being able to see the outcomes of their actions was very important, suggesting that programs guide young people to set realistic and achievable goals for action, as taking action that is unlikely to result in any impact may risk decreasing their sense of efficacy and prove more disempowering than empowering.

Providing opportunities to focus on the process of taking action as well as the outcome itself also important. Helping young people to identify what they stand to gain from the experience as well as highlighting what the impact will be for the wider community has been identified as an effective strategy. It is crucial that when designing programs aiming to increase civic literacy and engagement amongst young people experiencing marginalisation that this is taken into account. Wherever possible, examples given need to be relevant to the individual young person and have meaning for their day-to-day experiences.

Interestingly, ICT did not explicitly feature in service providers' or young people's conceptualisations of 'taking action' in this study. This is surprising given the increasing amount of literature on the potential role of ICT in mediating civic engagement, and young people's use of such technology more broadly. The exception to this was among same-sex attracted young people, who identified numerous ICT-based action examples (such as using online petitions and blogs) to address issues of importance and effect change.

It could be hypothesised that the absence of ICT in service provider's conceptualisation of young people's civic engagement may be indicative of low awareness of ICT's potential to promote and support civic engagement. Additionally, this may relate to broader issues surrounding service providers' capacity to integrate ICT into practice more broadly (such as limited ICT related knowledge and skills, and organisational constraints such as infrastructure, costs and staff time) (Blanchard et al., 2007).

Given that ICT did not explicitly feature in research participant's conceptualisation of 'taking action' there is a need to increase service providers' and young people's awareness of how ICT can be leveraged in this area. Based on the barriers and enablers cited by participants and the literature review findings, there are a variety of ways that ICT could be applied in civic engagement programs, both as a tool for engaging young people and as a resource to assist and support action more generally. Broadly, these include:

- Using creative media techniques such as digital storytelling, photography and music to share stories, provide a 'voice' and explore issues of importance.
- Using web-based applications such as blogs, email lists, forums, and social networking sites to mobilise, organise and connect young people with peers who share similar interests to support, instigate and showcase action.
- Developing online resources to raise awareness and knowledge of issues, ways to take action and connect young people to local community supports and resources.

ICT clearly offers scope to promote and support young people's civic engagement, however further evaluation of ICT-based methods is required to establish best practice principles to guide program development in this area.

Next steps for this project

Based on these findings, guiding principles for civic engagement programs include:

1. Involve young people in the development, implementation and evaluation of initiatives;
2. Consider the readiness of the target group in terms of current personal circumstances that may inhibit participation or create additional barriers to program engagement;
3. Identify barriers that might be commonly experienced by different groups particularly in relation to access and participation;
4. Address social attitudes, beliefs and values around 'taking action' and focus on promoting and encouraging civic engagement through initiatives such as peer-led and supported projects;
5. Identify practical ways that young people can take action and exercise their voices on issues of personal importance and relevance;
6. Offer practical opportunities for young people to take action, and in particular, enable young people to see the impact of their actions. Acknowledge the efforts of young people by establishing realistic expectations about what is achievable, as well as integrating processes for reflection and evaluation of individual and project outcomes;
7. Provide resources and tools that can assist young people in overcoming logistical barriers to taking action; and
8. Explore the possibility of integrating ICT-based methods as a tool for engaging young people (e.g. digital storytelling) and as a setting for action (online communities and forums) and resource for information and taking action (e.g. online petitions).

The findings of this study have been used to inform the development of 'youth action workshops' designed to provide young people with the motivation, skills and resources to take action on issues that affect them. The workshops have been piloted in 2007 and will be evaluated in 2008 and 2009. It is anticipated that these workshops will contribute to an improvement in young people's mental health and wellbeing by increasing their social inclusion and civic engagement.

The workshops provide an opportunity for young people to meet new people, share stories and experiences about taking action, and exchange their visions for the future. These stories will be published on ActNow (www.actnow.com.au) which serves as a platform for taking young people's voices to the wider community. This also has the added benefit of increasing and diversifying the content on ActNow.

An evaluation framework will identify barriers and enabling factors that contributed to young people's participation in the workshops and their levels of civic engagement following the workshops. The evaluation results and the workshop model will be published in 2009. If successful, the workshop model will be made available for implementation.

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