

South Australian  
Commissioner  
for Children and  
Young People  
2024

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# Teenagers and Work

Views and experiences  
of teenagers on work  
and workplaces

PROJECT REPORT NO. 38 | JANUARY 2024



Commissioner  
Y for Children &  
Young People

## The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*.

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people.

This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes, services and practices that affect their lives.

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## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the South Australian young people who shared their experiences and insights. Throughout this report we have used unedited quotes from young people to ensure their views are faithfully communicated.

## Suggested Citation

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## Commissioner's Foreword

Young people's experiences of work impact their lives in many ways – not only in terms of their present and future workforce participation, but also in relation to their health, safety, wellbeing and education outcomes.

Laws, policies and practices across schools, industries and all levels of government should provide workplaces and work-readiness programs that uphold children's rights as citizens and workers, and better reflect and respond to their experiences.

While much of our society and schooling system focuses on preparing children and young people for their post school futures – including the 'future of work' – young people's current experiences of work, and workplaces, attracts far less attention.

From a young age, children are asked: 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' As children and young people get older this question often takes the form of 'What are you doing after school?' or 'What are you studying for?' Implicit in these questions is a view that the only decisions young people will make about work are those related to the work they do once they finish school.

However, young people's experiences in workplaces during their teenage years can influence their post-school plans, including what decisions they make about completing their school education, what further education they will consider, and the type of work they will seek and move into once they have completed school.

For teenagers, having a paid job during high school is an extremely common experience. This is clear from the hundreds of conversations I have had with young people over the past five years. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics also reflects this – the number of teenagers aged 15–19 years in employment in 2023 is at the highest level it has been since the ABS started collecting this data 45 years ago.

A strong labour market post pandemic, with cheaper labour costs for young people, and the growth in casual jobs, have all combined to cause this. Also, increasing cost-of-living pressures mean a growing number of teenagers are seeking entry to the workforce from a younger age.

Anecdotal evidence from children and young people with whom I have engaged suggests that they start paid work at a younger age. It is increasingly common for children aged 12 and 13 years to be working in casual jobs. Not only are they babysitting or doing 'odd jobs', they are also working in business and hospitality. As young people get older, their work tends to become more regular and formalised, often in a wider service sector beyond the informal networks of family and friends.

Despite the large numbers of teenagers who are working, very little is known about their experiences of work, including their relationships with supervisors and co-workers, their job satisfaction, and the challenges they face. Given that paid work is a significant part of young people's lives, it is critical that we engage with young people directly to address the gaps in our understanding of how they experience work.

There is debate within families, communities and experts, about whether paid work is good for young people and we need to understand what teenagers themselves say about the positive and negative aspects of work. This includes listening to their perspectives on what work provides them in terms of skills for adulthood and financial independence, as well as their vulnerability to exploitative work practices and injury.

**By better understanding what makes a workplace 'teen-friendly', we can improve the information, training, and support being provided to young people in ways that can minimise the risks and maximise the benefits for younger employees and their employers.**

Adults must provide the frameworks that keep teenagers protected while they're at work, ensuring they have clear information about their rights and responsibilities and are empowered to act when things go wrong. To do this policy makers and employers need to better understand the experiences teenagers have while at work.

This report follows on from other studies I have undertaken on the topic of young people and work:

- Off to Work We Go...preparing South Australian school students for their work futures;
- Spotlight on Parent/Carer Careers Advice;
- The Job Aspirations of 8–12 year olds; and
- Growing Confident, Connected, Creative Regional Kids.

The particular focus of this report is on the workplace experiences of over 900 South Australian young people aged 11–19 years who participated in my Teenagers and Work Survey. By exploring what these young people have told me, I am seeking to build a greater understanding of the workplace challenges teenagers face, while simultaneously identifying key opportunities to improve workplace practices, culture and environments for their benefit.



**Helen Connolly**  
Commissioner for Children  
and Young People

## Context

When it comes to working children and young people, South Australian legal and policy parameters are sparse. Many young people in South Australia do not know their rights in relation to work, nor do they know about the working conditions to which they are entitled.

Children's rights in relation to work are captured in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 32 of the UNCRC states that children should be protected from 'economic exploitation' and from work that is hazardous or which interferes with their education, or which is harmful to their development. This includes the need for a minimum age, or ages, for child employment, as well as regulation of children's hours and conditions, with penalties or sanctions put in place to enforce these rights.

Although Australia ratified the UNCRC on 17 December 1990, there are no federal laws protecting children's rights specifically in relation to their employment. In June 2023, Australia ratified the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Minimum Age Convention, 1973, indicating a commitment to protecting children from exploitation and to ensuring they complete their education. The Convention sets a minimum working age of 15 years with provision for 'light work' that can be undertaken from age 13. This will overwrite current state laws when it comes into force on 13 June 2024.<sup>1</sup> Australia also ratified the ILO Convention on child labour in 2006, and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) committing us to meeting the international standards set.<sup>2</sup>

At a national level, the *Fair Work Act 2009* covers the rights of Australian workers of all ages. It outlines terms and conditions of employment (including the National Employment Standards) as well as the rights and responsibilities of employees, employers, organisations, and others, including independent contractors. Although young workers are specifically mentioned in relation to the need for junior employees to be paid minimum wages, there is no mention of a minimum working age.

All states and territories in Australia have legislation that restricts the conditions and types of work a child can undertake. Some of these are dedicated child employment laws, while others have provisions in relevant child-related legislation. South Australia does not have legislation specific to child employment laws.

South Australia's *Education and Children's Services Act 2019* sets out restrictions relating to children and young people who are of compulsory school age (6–16 years) so that they can't work during school hours, or work hours that may impact on their attendance and engagement at school.<sup>3</sup>



Some companies have their own minimum age while also abiding by different state or territory laws. The minimum age for these companies is often 14 years (eg McDonald's, KFC, Baker's Delight) or 15 years (eg Target, Woolworths Group, Coles Group). There are other companies known to employ a large teenage workforce that don't mention any minimum age, only making reference to the relevant state or territory laws (eg Kmart, Cotton On).

There is more regulation in place with respect to children's wages. Many wage levels are protected under awards and enterprise agreements. The amount that junior workers (those under 21 years) are paid depends on their award. In some of the key industries, wages for junior workers (under 16 years) can be between 40–50% of the adult wage, 50% for those who are 16 years, 60% for those who are 17 years, 70% for those who are 18 years, 80–85% for those who are 19 years, and 90–100% for those who are 20 years of age.<sup>4</sup>

There are junior rates in place for those working in children's services (below Level 3), clerical and office work, hair and beauty, health services, horticulture, and vehicles. Not all awards have junior rates, in which case juniors should be paid at adult rates.

Arguments have been made for abolishing junior rates of pay, noting that they are bad for the economy and discriminatory.<sup>5</sup> Junior pay rates are based on assumptions that the work young people do is worth less, or that all young people have financial support from family, overlooking the fact that many young people need work in order to support themselves.

There have been moves in the past to establish a legislated framework that would specifically cover children and young people's employment in South Australia, but none has passed beyond the development of a Bill.



## The Issue

Existing Australian research indicates that although paid work can be an important part of many teenagers' lives, with many balancing casual or 'gig' jobs alongside secondary school, there is surprisingly little research focusing on teenagers' experiences of work.<sup>6</sup>

There is no clear data around teenage workers in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) collects monthly workforce data in its Labour Force survey, but only provides employment data for workers aged 15 years and older. In June 2006, the ABS undertook a one-off Child Employment survey relating to 5–14-year-olds as a supplement to its Labour Force Survey, but this has not been repeated.

The limited number of Australian studies about teenagers and work rarely mention minimum age, wages, injuries, or other rights-based issues. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) do provide some background to teenagers and work in Australia, often focusing on patterns of work and the impact of work on other areas of their lives, with a particular focus on child development.

There are few studies which explore young people's experiences of work, including work injuries. This is despite reporting from Safe Work Australia that indicates workers in Australia under the age of 20 have a higher-than-average rate of serious claims for work-related injury and disease than older workers.

Workers under 20 years of age have a frequency rate of serious claims per million hours worked that is higher than the national total (7.5 compared to 6.5).<sup>7</sup> In South Australia in 2014–2017, Return to Work SA reported that 8,129 young workers were injured at work and received income or medical support throughout this period. Some of these young people died or had long-term impacts from their injuries.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to recognise that young people are more likely to under-report injuries and workplace incidents than their older counterparts. One South Australian survey found that young workers were less likely to report hazards or injuries or apply for workers' compensation.<sup>9</sup> Approximately three quarters of survey respondents were concerned about stress at work, not being trained to do the job, fatigue from work, lifting heavy things at work, and illnesses caused by work. This survey also found that more workers who are aged 17 years and under, felt 'too scared' to report work health and safety concerns, compared to those aged 18–25 years (63% compared to 27%).

In addition to suggesting teenagers may think only serious injuries can be reported, another Australian study shows that many teenagers do not know their rights in relation to work.<sup>10</sup>



While the Fair Work Ombudsman and relevant unions can provide support for young workers, these organisations are often viewed as not being accessible by teenagers. One South Australian survey found that young workers were unlikely to report issues to a union or to SafeWork SA.<sup>11</sup> Another Australian survey found that 13–16-year-olds had very little knowledge about unions, and in many cases did not know they had a legal right to join a union.<sup>12</sup>

While some states have young worker associations or unions, South Australia does not have a full time dedicated legal advocacy service for young workers. Whilst SA young workers can access Youth Law Australia, Legal Services Commission and the Working Women's Centre SA, these services are not specifically targeted at, or designed for teenagers.

Young worker associations are often focused on workers who are under the ages of 25 or 30 years rather than in their teenage years. Therefore, these sources of support may not account for the specific circumstances relating to having a first and often short-term job as a teenager. They're more likely to focus on older young people in the context of work undertaken post-school or post-graduate jobs or careers.



## Key messages

- Teenagers have varied engagement in paid work. Some have one or more paid jobs, and jobs spanning different roles and industries, most commonly in food and hospitality, fast food, supermarket and/or retail and sales positions.
- Teenagers need more guidance, education and training to understand how to protect their health and well-being at work, including knowing where they can safely raise concerns and increase their confidence for the future.
- Teenagers have a range of aspirations and desires when it comes to their ideal jobs and employers. Some are very focused on particular industries or specific people, or on companies they would like to work for. For others it is the culture, practices and environments of an ‘ideal’ workplace or employer they seek.
- Teenagers often experience challenges in relation to their paid work, including pressure to work after they said they were unavailable, or when they are sick. Other challenges include pay and working conditions, balancing paid work with school, study, and other commitments, as well as navigating relationships with managers, co-workers and customers.
- Teenagers often find themselves in unsafe work environments and experience instances of bullying, discrimination or sexual harassment and disrespect, which are commonly not reported.
- Teenagers want workplaces to be welcoming, encouraging, and physically and emotionally safe. They highlight the importance of friendly co-workers, opportunities to learn, and space to make ‘mistakes’. They also look for supportive and professional management, and fair and flexible work conditions.
- Teenagers want workplaces and employers to understand and value them as young people and to engage them in creating better workplaces that consider their best interests and needs.
- In terms of issues or worries relating to work, teenagers are least comfortable seeking help from their boss, supervisor or manager; a union; or another worker who is an older adult. They are most comfortable seeking help from a friend outside of work, a family member, or another worker of a similar age to them.

## Recommendations

# 1

In implementing the ILO's Minimum Age Convention, 1973, Australian governments must establish mechanisms to collect data and hear directly from teenagers to ensure Australia's future labour market is fair for workers of all ages.

# 2

The South Australian Government must monitor any unintended consequences of the increase in the minimum working age. This includes the vulnerability of children in low-income families who may have no choice but to turn to work that sits outside formal systems, to supplement their household's income.

# 3

In addition to setting a minimum working age, Work Safe SA should consider other changes to law, regulation, or policy with respect to children's workplace rights and conditions. This includes, but is not limited to, children working as independent contractors; differential minimum working ages, or parental consent for specific work; abolition of junior pay rates for those over 17 years; superannuation for all workers; and living wages for trainees and apprentices.

# 4

To empower young workers and reduce risk of exploitation, high school career and work-readiness programs and curriculum must be mandated for all students in Year 9 and above. These programs should focus on workplace health and safety training, broader workplace rights and responsibilities, as well as where and how to access support and advocacy services produced specifically for teenage workers.

# 5

Formal industry and employer bodies should actively engage with teenage workers to co design a charter that supports and inspires businesses to become and be recognised as 'employers of choice for young workers'. This would involve demonstrating a commitment to providing quality workplaces and opportunities for young people that includes seeking their input into shaping what these are.

## The Good

“ I enjoy working and the feeling of being independent.” (14, female, Eastern Adelaide)

“ It’s good. I have good co-workers.” (14, gender-queer, Eyre and Western)

“ I love working where I am. I wouldn’t change this fact ever, because I am well settled and supported in my workspace.” (15, male, Eastern Adelaide)

## The Not-So-Good

“ That it can be stressful at times, and good at times. But often it is just a means to an end.” (16, male, Eastern Adelaide)

“ I have been in work for the past 2 years so I enjoy it, but sometimes it gets really rough.” (15, female, Northern Adelaide)

“ Going to school, then going to work is a very long day.” (16, female, Eyre and Western)

“ Forced to count total and close. I am a minor. That is illegal.” (15, non-binary, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island)

“ Expected to staff the department by myself a lot of the time.” (15, male, Eyre and Western)

## The Bad

“ Fast food is a terrible place for people to have their first jobs. The companies don’t care about the young people enough and neither do the customers. I recommend it to no-one. There also needs to be more options for young people, especially [those of] us with sensory issues and who are LGBTQIA+.” (16, Trans Masculine, Northern Adelaide)

“ Racist comments were made by a co-worker.” (16, female, Western Adelaide)

“ We use chemicals including one that is called Gorilla to clean ovens. Often we breathe it in when we are meant to wear masks, but haven’t been provided one. [It] gets in our eyes too.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)

“ Another time a co-worker who’s known to be a bit creepy came up behind me while I was stacking the shelf (I was having to bend over to do this) and he continued to get very close to me and try to talk to me.” (16, female, Eyre and Western)

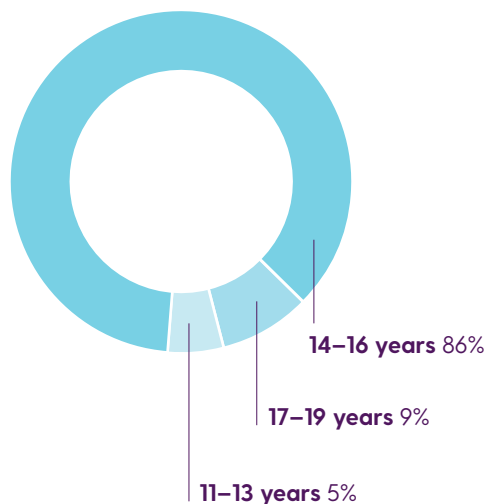
## What we did

Building on many conversations with young people about their experiences of work, teenagers were surveyed to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences of work and workplaces.

A total of 907 South Australians aged 11–19 years participated in the Teenagers and Work Survey that was undertaken between November 2022 and March 2023. Their responses provide insights into the challenges and experiences they face in the workplace and the impact work has on their lives, as well as what they are looking for in a teenage-friendly workplace.

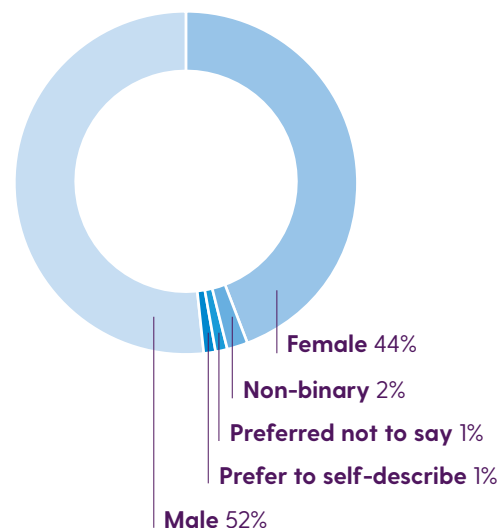
Respondents live across metropolitan, rural, and regional locations throughout South Australia and have diverse experiences of work spanning many roles and industries. The teenagers who responded were also diverse in terms of their age, gender identity and sexuality, ethnicity, and personal circumstances.

### Age



The survey was completed by 11–19 year olds across South Australia. Most were aged 14–16 years (86%).

### Gender

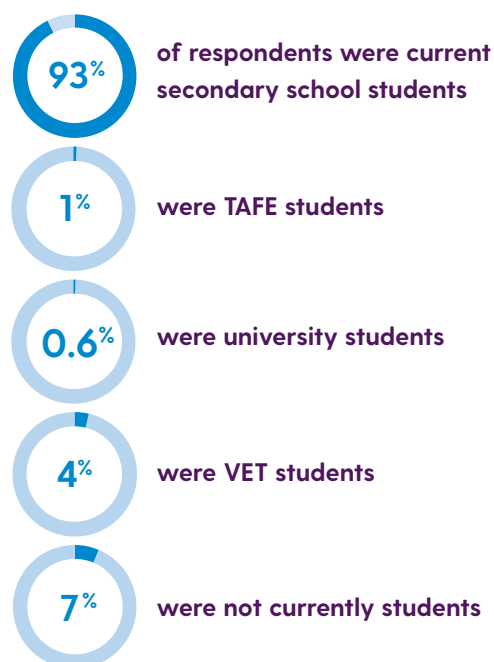


More males completed the survey than females (52% compared to 44%). Other participants were non-binary (2%), preferred not to share their gender (1%), or chose to describe their gender in their own words (1%). Self-described genders included genderfluid, gender-queer, Demigirl, and Trans Masculine.

Of the young people who responded:



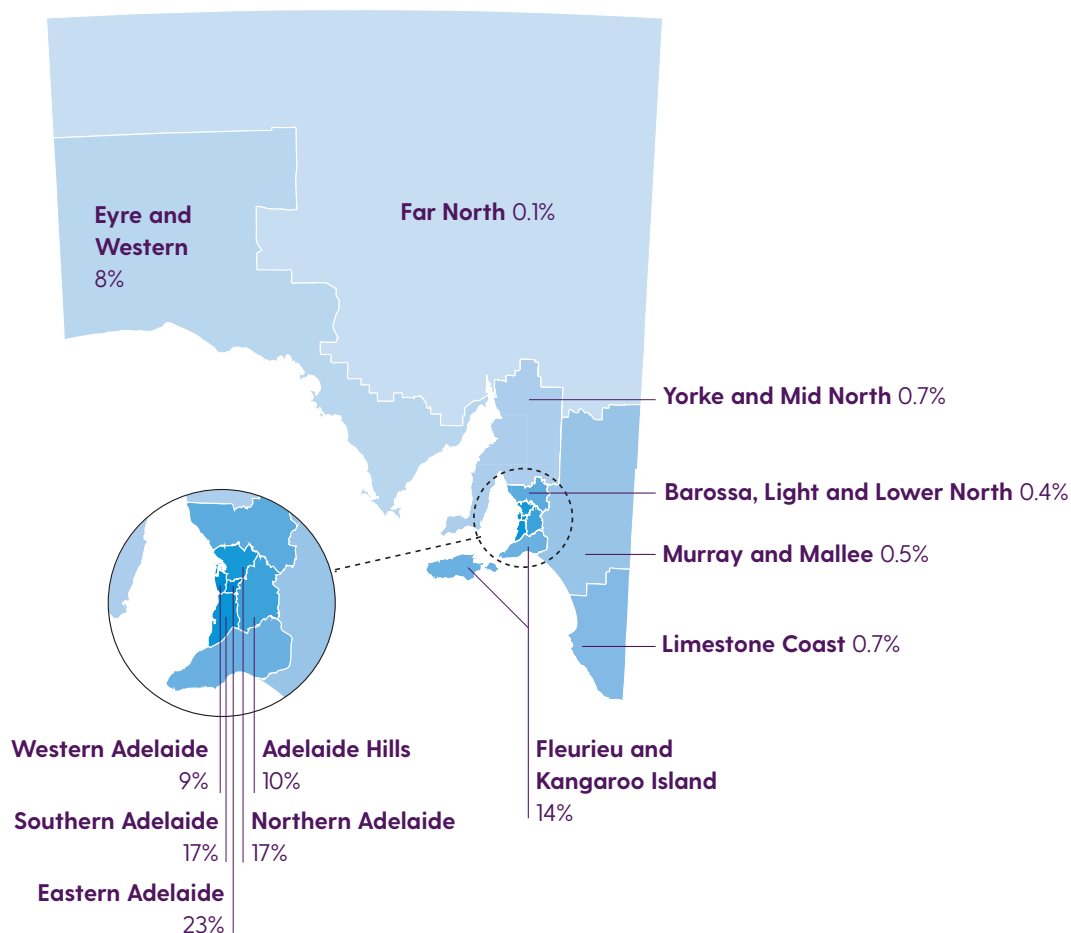
## School and study



A small number reported more than one study type.

## By region

Responses were received from teenagers living within all 12 regions of South Australia.





## Survey results

### Work status of survey respondents

47%

Had a paid job

6%

Had more than one paid job

2%

Worked as part of an apprenticeship or traineeship

11%

Volunteered

37%

Did not have a job but would like to find one

12%

Did not have a job and were not looking for one

### Most common industries of work

31%

Food and hospitality (not fast food)

17%

Fast food

14%

Supermarket

13%

Retail or sales

### Aspects of work which had the biggest impact on young people's lives ('a lot of impact')

36%

How work clashes with other parts of life

34%

How managers treat them

34%

How work clashes with school and study

34%

How other workers treat them

### Influences on experiences of work

34%

Reported that how other workers treat them had 'a lot' of impact

29%

Reported that how other workers treat them had 'a bit' of impact

26%

Reported that how customers treat them has 'a lot' of impact on their experiences of work

## Challenges in the workplace

31%

Felt pressure to work after they said they were unavailable a lot of the time or sometimes

31%

Felt pressure to work while sick a lot of the time or sometimes

18%

Reported being shouted at or sworn at by a customer

17%

Reported being verbally threatened or made fun of or humiliated by a customer/s

13%

Reported being told jokes by a customer that made them feel uncomfortable

12%

Reported having another worker take credit for their work

9%

Reported being shouted at or sworn at by a manager

## If young people were worried about something, they were most comfortable talking to:

71%

A friend outside of work

65%

A family member

46%

Another worker of a similar age

## Young people reported feeling not comfortable talking to:

27%

A boss

22%

A union

20%

A supervisor or manager

19%

Another worker who is an older adult

## What we heard

Teenagers work in a range of settings, including larger chain stores, smaller local businesses, family business, or their own business. The type of work being done by teenagers varies. The day-to-day experiences of teenagers at work can vary as much as the nature, location, and hours of work they undertake.

Many young people say they enjoy their jobs, particularly their relationships with co-workers, earning their own money, and gaining independence and new skills. They describe their workplaces as being well suited to a teenage workforce. Others have mixed views on work; they enjoy some aspects of their work, but also find it stressful and challenging.

For some teenagers, work can be a very negative experience. They may find it difficult to balance their paid work with school, have poor and unsafe work conditions, or experience discrimination, harassment and abuse from employers, co-workers, or customers.

Beyond reflecting on their current workplaces, many young people are looking to the future and thinking about how the work they do now will build their skills, experience, and connections for later employment opportunities. Many of those who like their current job indicated that they would like to continue working where they are. Others are thinking about their 'dream jobs' or about the specific places in their local areas where they might be able to find work.

Some young people surveyed have their sights set on working for national or international companies such as the 'FBI', 'Google', or a 'famous sports team' or 'famous person'.

Others want to be self-employed by either establishing their own business, or by being a writer, author, plumber, speech pathologist, occupational therapist, or game designer.

More than 1 in 3 respondents (37%) did not have a job but would like to find one. A smaller proportion (12%) did not have a job and were not looking for one. Many teenagers are seeking more guidance and resources to feel more confident about preparing for work and applying for jobs, including how to write resumes and respond to interview questions. They saw this as being an important part of 'work readiness' programs alongside learning more about workplace expectations, culture, safety and wellbeing, and what to do if things go wrong at work. Some noted that it can be difficult 'to get experience in order to be hired, if people don't hire because you don't have experience'.

## Pay rates and work conditions

Some respondents shared their concerns about their pay rates, particularly about being underpaid. Some were concerned about the fairness of junior rates, especially for those who had been working for a few years in one role and believed they were as productive as their adult co-workers. Teenagers are often fearful of losing their job if they raise the issue of pay, and do not always know where to go to get the correct information about what their wages and entitlements are at various ages and levels of experience.

Beyond pay rates, some teenagers raised concerns about not receiving all their entitlements, including those in relation to breaks, sick leave, superannuation, and access to a union or other form of information and support. Others highlighted issues with excessive work hours, overtime, safety, and poor workplace practices where young workers were given too much responsibility, or were left alone without either adequate training, appropriate support, or proper supervision.

“ I shouldn’t get paid significantly less than people who I work at a higher level than.” (16, female, Eastern Adelaide)

“ They paid me half the usual pay when I was on trial.” (16, female, Eyre and Western)

“ Why should a teen get paid far less than an adult who does the exact same work with the exact same qualifications. Note this is mainly about the food industry.” (16, non-binary, Southern Adelaide)

“ A good workplace for young people would be a place where we can make money and also not being underpaid.” (15, female, Eyre and Western)

“ For people to understand that we can’t work ridiculous hours and that we are still teenagers.” (14, female, Northern Adelaide)

“ Fair and equal pay, enforce breaks, understand that some workers can’t drive, or always make it to work.” (15, female, Barossa, Light and Lower North)

“ I always get just 15 minutes short of a break on my shifts, even ones that go over usual dinner times.” (16, female, Adelaide Hills)

## Pressure to work

It was relatively common for teenagers to report feeling pressure to work while sick or after saying they were unavailable. Young women were more likely than young men to report these pressures and to be experiencing negative working conditions more broadly.

Many teenagers reported a lack of understanding among employers that young workers have busy lives outside of work and are often balancing paid work with their other commitments, especially school. Of particular concern was how much notice they were given about shifts, and how often they were expected to work, as well as how these late changes impacted on their need to change arrangements for transport to and from work.

Teenagers highlighted the importance of flexibility and that navigating the expectations of workplaces and their employers can be difficult. They said this was particularly so when work commitments clashed with other parts of their lives, or impacted on parents, carers and other on whom they rely for transport.

“ Asked to me work overtime even though I said I couldn’t.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)

“ I find it hard to get all my studies done with work as well.” (14, male, Eastern Adelaide)

“ I would like to be alerted of my work shifts before the week starts, so I can prepare for places I might have to attend, like sport.” (14, male, Southern Adelaide)

“ This year in particular has been harder for me to balance work and school, and I haven’t had support from my manager or area manager in this case.” (16, female, Western Adelaide)

“ The workplace needs to be flexible and understand that we can’t control that we have assignments, tests, and have school at a set time every day.” (14, female, Southern Adelaide)

“ I think that a place that knows that younger people such as high school students do have study and extracurricular activities so they cannot work as much as an adult.” (16, female, Eastern Adelaide)

“ Accept that their busy school lives are inevitable and accept when sick days need to be taken.” (16, female, Eastern Adelaide)

### **Bullying, harassment and negative interactions with managers or bosses, co-workers and customers**

The way managers, supervisors, and bosses treat young people can have significant impact on their experiences of work, as well as on their health and wellbeing. Most negative experiences with managers or bosses relate to being shouted or sworn at, or being unfairly punished for a mistake.

Respondents reported that how their co-workers treat them also has a huge impact on their experiences of work. Some young people wrote positively about their co-workers, highlighting that they had good relationships and trust them. Others reported negative experiences that included other workers taking credit for their work, making them feel uncomfortable, shouting or swearing at them, making fun of them, or humiliating them in front of customers or colleagues.

Many young people have jobs which involve regular interaction with customers. They reported that these interactions have a significant impact on their experience of work. Several young people reported negative experiences that included customers shouting or swearing at them, making jokes that made them feel uncomfortable, being verbally threatening, making fun of them, or humiliating them in front of others. Others said they enjoyed interacting with customers and found this to be a good part of their job.

“ I did get asked by a customer if I wanted to join them for a beer. I said No.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)

“ A customer got right up in my personal space, and I essentially was cornered by him and was then asked if I was in my 20’s because he was interested in me and once, I said “no, I’m 15” he went to my co-worker “why can’t I talk to women?” (16, female, Eyre and Western)

“ I wouldn’t say unfairly punished for a mistake, however, my boss yells and overreacts to some mistakes.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)

“ Where I work [fast food], the managers are very supportive and protective of their crew, and I have never felt uncomfortable talking to them. I know that they will listen to what I have to say and almost always take some sort of action.” (15, female, Northern Adelaide)

## Key findings

### 1

Teenagers have diverse engagement with the paid workforce across a range of roles and industries.

- Almost half of the young people who took part in the survey (47%) had a paid job.
- 6% had more than one paid job.
- 2% were working as part of an apprenticeship or traineeship.
- One in 10 (11%) were volunteers. Half of those who reported volunteering also had a paid job.

### 2

Teenagers reported a range of challenges at work, particularly in relation to:

- pay rates and work conditions
- pressure to work after saying they were unavailable or sick; and
- bullying, harassment and negative interactions with managers, bosses, co-workers or customers.

### 3

Teenagers most commonly reported working in the following industries:

- Food and hospitality (not fast food) (31%)
- Fast food (17%)
- Supermarket (14%)
- Retail or sales (13%)

### 4

Teenagers are least comfortable seeking help from:

- their boss, supervisor, or manager
- a union; or
- another worker who is an older adult.

### 5

Teenagers are most comfortable seeking help from:

- a friend outside of work
- a family member; or
- another worker of a similar age.



## 6

Teenagers want workplaces to understand and value young people and commit to providing them with:

- environments that are welcoming and encouraging, as well as being physically and emotionally safe
- learning opportunities and space to make mistakes
- supportive and professional management; and
- friendly team environments.



## Where teenagers seek support for work issues

Teenagers have mixed views about whether they are comfortable talking to their boss or manager/supervisor if they are worried about something at work. Some expressed that those ‘higher up’ were unapproachable, or felt that they would react negatively if they shared their worries with them.

Some young people said they chose not to talk to their boss because they found them to be ‘intimidating,’ ‘scary,’ ‘mean,’ and ‘rude,’ and ‘you would get yelled at’. Others highlighted that ‘bosses feel so far away and not involved’ and ‘I haven’t met them much’ so they would not be easy to approach. Some felt that people ‘higher up’ would not understand their concerns or not ‘fully, truly care as much as I do about the thing I’m worried about’. They highlighted the power imbalance that exists between young people and their bosses, feeling they would not be listened to or know if ‘the managers and bosses would take criticism well’. They also presumed that ‘bosses are always on the same side as other bosses’.

Others noted that if they were worried about something at work they felt more comfortable talking to their direct manager or supervisor, rather than to someone who was ‘higher up’. They also noted that it depended on the individual person and the relationship they have with them.

Those reporting positive experiences with a boss, said they trusted and felt comfortable raising issues with them. Others saw bosses as being important to talk to ‘since it’s their job to deal with employees and issues’.

Others similarly highlighted the importance of talking to managers because they are in a position to take action in response to any issues raised.

“ Any leader of a company or business should be responsible for helping you learn and achieve. But it’s your responsibility to ask them about your worries. Bosses are typically very experienced and would understand since they probably went through similar experiences before becoming the boss or head of a company.” (15, male, Eastern Adelaide)

“ I feel like because I am younger, I’m not really in the position to talk to my boss about changing things and stuff like that.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)

“ Because I feel that the higher power people have, the more worried I would feel to talk to them.” (15, male, Northern Adelaide)

“ It’s hard to tell as it really depends on the person. There are some bosses that I would feel comfortable to speak with, and some who I don’t.” (16, non-binary, Southern Adelaide)

“ I trust my boss and manager more than someone who doesn't work there.”  
(15, male, Northern Adelaide)

If they had worries, most teenagers reported being more likely to feel comfortable talking to a co-worker of a similar age than to their boss, supervisor/manager, or adult co-worker. Their shared age meant they felt this co-worker might be more approachable and understanding of their situation because they may be 'facing the same things'.

Some young people did not feel comfortable talking to co-workers at all, noting that they would not know what their response would be, and that 'another worker might tell everyone'. Others indicated that they could talk with co-workers, but acknowledged that this was unlikely to lead to any change given their lack of power and influence.

“ I feel more comfortable with people I know I can relate to, eg people my age and people I already have a connection with outside of work.” (16, female, Yorke and Mid North)

“ I work with a lot of people similar to my age, which I am able to talk to. The adults are very kind, but I wouldn't be as comfortable talking to them.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)

“ Because friends or workers my age tend to have the same experience.” (15, female, Western Adelaide)

“ The co-workers are nice, but none of us really know how to do anything about it. Bosses are always on the same side as other bosses.” (15, female, Western Adelaide)

If they were worried about something at work, teenagers reported that they felt most comfortable talking to a friend outside of work, or to a family member. They viewed family and friends as people they could trust with their worries, were easy to talk to, and able to give them help and advice when it was needed. Being personally close to them, while being outside the work situation, was also viewed as beneficial.

“ Family are closest to me, and I feel like I could trust them and open up without judgement. To me, bosses feel so far away and not involved, so I probably wouldn't go to them over others.”  
(16, female, Southern Adelaide)

Teenagers have mixed responses to unions and becoming members of a union. While a small number reported that if they were worried about something at work they would feel comfortable talking to a union member, there were many more who were either not familiar with unions, or did not have access to a member of one.

“ I don't know of any unions, so it would be difficult to talk to them.” (16, female, Northern Adelaide)

Most commonly, young people viewed unions with some apprehension and uncertainty. There were also responses about lack of access and action, and some held views that their town was 'too small to have a union' or that they were 'not paying for a union, so they probably won't do much'. Some were not confident to approach a union, sharing that 'unions scare me' and that they 'would find talking to the union a bit intimidating'. Of those writing positively about unions, they highlighted that they are important to talk to 'because that is what they are concerned about.' For these teenagers, unions were viewed as 'vital to every workplace'.





# What makes a good workplace for teenagers?

Improving work and workplaces for teenagers begins with considering what they believe would make a good workplace for them.

## Welcoming and encouraging

Teenagers most often shared that they want 'supportive workplace environments which are welcoming and inviting', and 'where they feel comfortable'. They value workplaces which are friendly and caring, that are positive places to be, are fair, and which uphold their rights as workers.

Young people want to work in places that are 'openly supportive of younger people' and where 'personal needs are accommodated for' based on encouragement and understanding. Some note the need for workplaces to be inclusive, accepting, and respectful of all people. They also want fun and happy workplaces where young people can laugh and make jokes and be in a 'vibrant atmosphere' that can make work more enjoyable and less stressful.

“ A welcoming workspace where colleagues are happy to help if you require, and just a generally friendly atmosphere, are what I find make a workplace a good workplace.”  
(15, male, Southern Adelaide)

“ A place where everyone is comfortable and a place that has a sense of belonging, respect, compassion and kindness.”  
(15, male, Eastern Adelaide)

“ Safe, welcoming, accepting a.k.a. not homophobic, racist, transphobic, etc. and open to new ideas.” (14, female, Adelaide Hills)

“ A welcoming family like workplace. Walking in and laughter filling the room eases the nerves on a first day!” (16, female, Eyre and Western)

“ More about their morals, how they treat their staff. If it's a nice place to work and the hours I would be expected to work every week – the business itself.”  
(16, female, Southern Adelaide)

## Physically and emotionally safe

Safety at work is a common concern for young workers. Their need for workplace environments where young people are both physically and emotionally safe is considered a key feature of a good workplace. Some respondents described safe workplaces as 'having safety procedures in place' and where 'employees always need to be police checked.'

A safe workplace is one that 'provides the ability to be able to anonymously report workplace incidents without fear that the perpetrator will find out they have been reported'. Creating safe workplaces also includes having managers and co-workers who young people can trust,

and who will listen to them when they have concerns or issues, as well as act on these when needed. Some young workers described creating workplaces which are emotionally safe, and that in particular this includes the need for employers to make workplaces safe for LGBTQIA+ young people and young women.

- “An environment where you feel safe and get treated like humans, not robots.” (17, male, Northern Adelaide)
- “Enforce the environment to be more supportive about mental health and the LGBTQIA+ community.” (14, genderfluid, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island)
- “Ensure that female workers are more safe at work, especially in male dominated industries. Proper punishment for harassment and sexism.” (17, female, Adelaide Hills)

## Learning opportunities and having space to make mistakes

Training provided before or when starting a job is a high priority for teenagers, including having a proper induction program and relevant ongoing training on the job. Teenagers want workplaces to be open to teaching them and to offer them help and explanations for how things are done, as well as ‘how to handle things that come up’. They want to be able to feel comfortable asking questions and seeking help when they need it. This means working with managers and co-workers who are approachable and willing to answer questions and show support for young workers who are learning and therefore more likely to make some mistakes.

In addition to formal training, opportunities for informal learning are also important to young workers. Young workers recognise that while they are learning they may make ‘mistakes’

and therefore need co-workers and managers to be patient and forgiving. Their responses emphasise the need to allow young people room to make ‘mistakes’ and not be criticised or judged when they do. They want employers to be empathetic towards young people, and to provide constructive feedback rather than respond to mistakes with punishment, anger, or yelling. Importantly, as a background to a good learning environment, they want to be given clear roles and instructions, where ‘they know and understand what is happening and what is expected of them’.

In addition to support for those who have a job, young people want more practical guidance and information on how to find work, how to apply for jobs, and how to become ‘ready for work’ too. They highlighted the importance of website resources for this, as well as learning through school lessons and the curriculum, as well as through practical work experience opportunities.

- “A safe environment with adequate preparation for the job (not being thrown into it with no introduction).” (15, female, Eastern Adelaide)
- “Not being too hard on them since they are just getting used to it. Making it a bit fun and helping them out. Or if they have a question to not get mad at them.” (15, female, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island)
- “Somewhere you can feel safe, and comfortable. A forgiving place that accepts the fact that everyone is learning, especially teenagers.” (14, female, Adelaide Hills)
- “Try not to get too angry. Be understanding, encourage them. Don’t yell if they make mistakes.” (15, female, Eyre and Western)



“ Make sure their young employees have someone to help mentor and give direction when first starting.” (15, female, Yorke and Mid North)

“ Try your best to explain everything because sometimes they are scared to ask a question.” (14, female, Adelaide Hills)

## Supportive and professional management

Employers who help set the tone for a welcoming and friendly environment are instrumental in creating workplaces where young people want to work. Young people want workplaces where all workers are encouraged and supported in their work, and where learning opportunities are made available to all.

Ultimately, young workers want an employer or boss who is understanding and kind, but who is also a strong manager; someone who is both responsible and professional. This was described variously as ‘kind but tough,’ ‘patient but professional,’ and ‘fun but firm’. The relationship between teenagers and their boss or managers can be crucial to shaping their early work experiences.

They describe a good boss as someone who is understanding and supportive, providing them with ‘clear instructions and leadership’. They also want employers to be kind and approachable if they have questions or problems, and respectful and supportive of them in their new roles. Praise and encouragement were also viewed as being important to young workers. Teenagers want to know when they are doing a good job, and for this to be recognised and acknowledged.

Employers need to be open to working with teenagers and be prepared to show or advertise clearly that they are a teenager friendly workplace where young people’s needs and situations are being actively taken into account.

Teenagers want employers to understand that they are often balancing paid work with study and other commitments. As such, it is important for young people to be able to say when they are available or unavailable for shifts, to have flexible rosters, and to be given reasonable notice of a change in shifts. This includes not being expected to work too many late hours. They want employers to be mindful that shifts should not ‘compromise our sleep or homework time’ and that they may need to decrease their work hours around exam time.



- “ I would like to work for a business that is accepting of everyone and is understanding of my commitment to my education. I would like to work at a place that will give me experience in customer service and understand that I may struggle/make mistakes sometimes.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)
- “ Respect our boundaries such as work hours and mental well-being. Realise that most of us are still in school so we can't be overworked, or we won't perform well in either situation.” (16, Trans Masculine, Northern Adelaide)
- “ Properly instruct and demonstrate what they're supposed to be doing and make it clear that questions can be asked and issues can be brought up. Be accommodating/ understanding of someone's individual limits/ boundaries. Step in if a customer, or otherwise is potentially making them stressed. Create an open and safe space for all employees.” (16, prefer not to say, Adelaide Hills)
- “ Give employees credit for good work. Make the job a good place to be.” (15, female, Murray and Mallee)
- “ Advertise that they are willing to work with high school students.” (15, female, Eastern Adelaide)
- “ Co-workers who are 'good workers' and 'are willing to work' [with] you when you make a mistake.” (14, male, Western Adelaide)

### Friendly team environment

Working with friendly co-workers in a positive team environment is important to young people's work lives as it is these experiences that reinforce their sense of safety and enjoyment. They want workplaces where they can comfortably interact with others in supportive ways.

For many teenagers, working alongside other young people, and not being the only young person in the workplace, is also important. Some young workers thought that workplaces with more young employees were more likely to be understanding and supportive of young people overall. Others enjoy mixed age workplaces and value the support of senior co-workers.

Many teenagers want to be part of a 'community of workers' in a 'collaborative environment'. They consider clear and open communication between co-workers as key to a workplace culture that has been built on trust and teamwork.

- “ A safe environment where your peers feel like a family away from home. Trust amongst all and use of constructive criticism.” (17, female, Adelaide Hills)
- “ A workplace that has clear and consistent online and in person communication between all workers.” (16, female, Southern Adelaide)
- “ Feeling safe and comfortable in your working environment and having trust in bosses/other workers that you can communicate and learn with.” (17, female, Eyre and Western)
- “ Somewhere that is openly supportive of younger people, hiring many young people.” (17, female, Western Adelaide)
- “ Employ a diverse group where possible age-wise, meaning a young worker isn't the only young employee, but also there's enough experienced employees to help them out.” (16, male, Eastern Adelaide)

## Conclusion

Teenagers want workplaces which understand and value young people. They want to be supported to learn new skills and gain knowledge that will help them throughout their working lives. They also want to be able to make ‘mistakes’ as part of this process. They view good workplaces as those that are welcoming and encouraging, physically and emotionally safe, with supportive and professional management, friendly co-workers, and which offer fair and flexible work conditions. These are things that workers of all ages are entitled to experience in their workplaces and should not be any different for the youngest members of South Australia’s workforce.

This report seeks to provide a greater understanding of the impact workplace cultures and practices have on teenagers in the workforce. It highlights the importance young people place on obtaining paid work when they are teenagers, with attention given to their current experiences, as well as to how these experiences may impact on the kind of paid work they will seek in the future.

As expected, teenagers are often found working in food and hospitality, fast food, supermarket, and retail or sales. They form an important part of the workforce, doing jobs aimed at meeting the needs of everyday South Australians.

Teenagers are also working in a wide range of jobs that can often be overlooked. These are jobs that include working in the family business, or in their own business, informal types of work, or occasional work. These employment types, where it is harder to monitor if their work conditions are fair, need to be considered as part of the overall experience of work for many teenagers.

While several young people reported enjoying their jobs, many mentioned challenging or negative experiences that they had encountered. This included the difficulties they have balancing paid work with school, study and other commitments, and how these are not always considered or taken seriously by their employers.

Young people have asked for more guidance and resources to increase their confidence in preparing for work and applying for jobs. They see opportunities for these skills to be taught more consistently while they are at school, and alongside more practical guidance about what to expect from employers and workplaces, including where they can seek support if it is needed.

If teenagers have worries about work, they are more likely to talk to their family or friends outside of work than to people at work. Bosses need to be more approachable if they want young people to come to them with their concerns.

Young people see their managers as those who are best placed to take action on a workplace issue, particularly when it relates to work conditions.

Young people had mixed responses to unions, indicating that they felt some unions needed to engage more proactively with teenagers, and be more approachable and accessible. Young people need to be taught which unions represent them, and how to contact them. They also need to know about the range of supports available to them, as well as how to access them.

The findings explored in this report have implications for schools, families, employers, and workplaces.

**If we are to encourage more teenagers into the workforce we need to create the legal frameworks as well as the youth friendly environments they seek to ensure they know what they are entitled to and are supported and protected while at work.**

Experiences working as teenagers will shape how young people approach work in the future, not just in terms of the jobs they choose, but also in terms of the relationships they will have with co-workers, supervisors and customers. It is important their particular needs are considered, and that employers who are interested to create teenage friendly workplaces be prepared to adjust their operations and conditions to better suit these needs. If they are to enjoy the benefits that employing young workers brings with it, they will need to demonstrate their desire to be flexible and adaptable, respectful and fair, ensuring that entitlements and conditions are upheld and that young workers are given the guidance and time they need to learn what is required of them with the right levels of support and understanding.

This report sets out the ways in which young people would like to see workplaces change. It is now up to businesses and employers to enact the recommendations it contains, which have come direct from young people themselves.

## Endnotes

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