

February 2023

# Future Proofing Study

## Summary of findings from Year 8 surveys (2019–2022)

### Introduction

In 2019, the Black Dog Institute launched the **Future Proofing Study**, now one of Australia's largest and most comprehensive cohort studies of adolescent mental health. The Future Proofing Study advances knowledge about the risk and protective factors associated with the onset and development of adolescent depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions. The findings are shared widely to inform healthcare and education policies and shape how mental health programs are designed and delivered for young Australians.

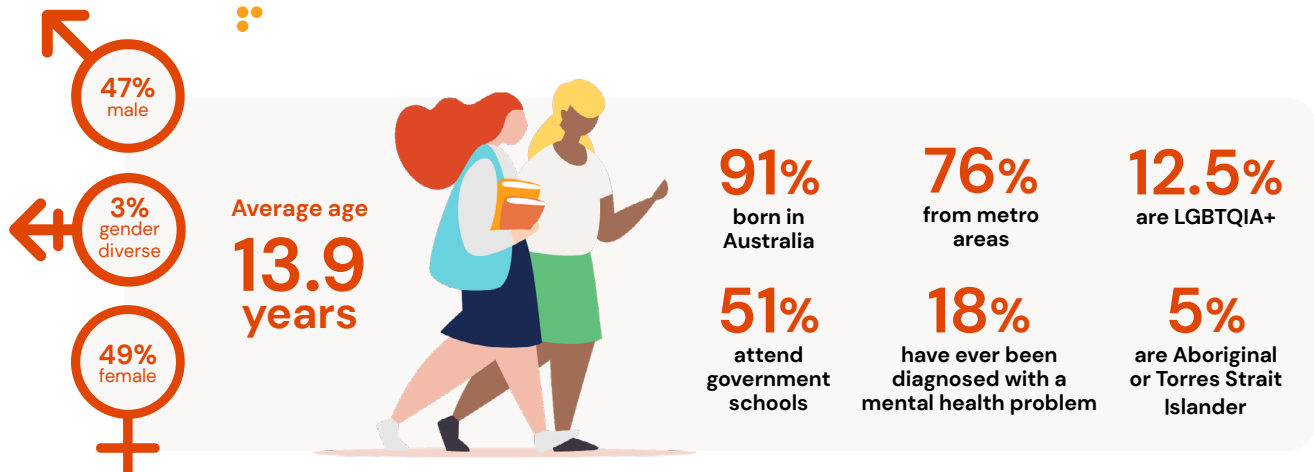
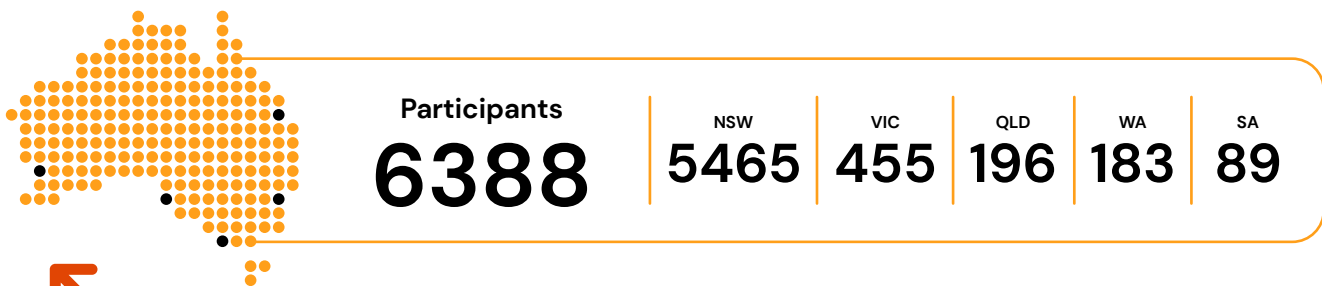
A total of 6,388 high school students from 134 Australian schools are participating, with cohort demographics representative of the Australian adolescent population. Participating students

complete annual questionnaires covering various topics, including mental health, wellbeing, quality of life, resilience, sleep, schooling, peer relationships, bullying, technology use, early life experiences, and puberty. They commence the study in Year 8 (mean age 13.9 years) and continue to be followed up annually at school for 5 years.

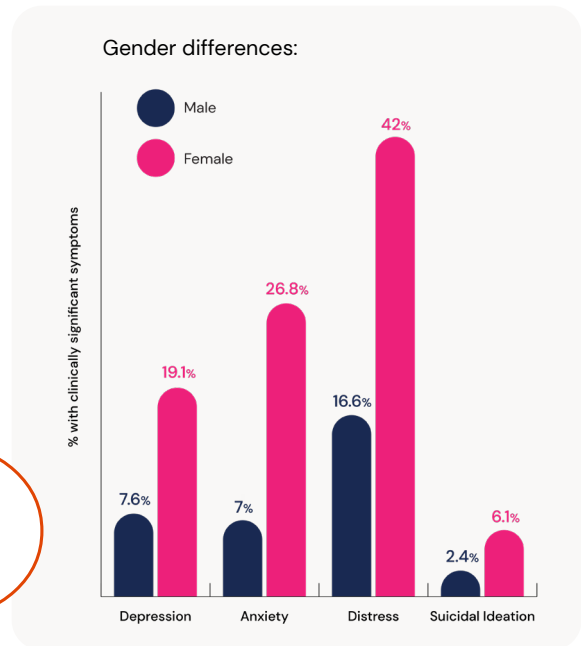
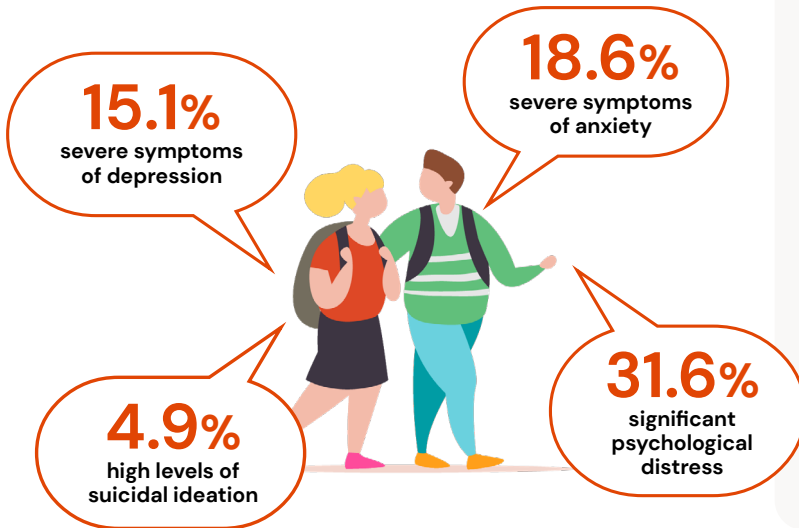
In this summary, we refer to baseline data from Year 8 students who participated in the study. This data was collected between August 2019 and March 2022.

### Who is participating?

The study is running across metropolitan and regional areas in government, independent and Catholic schools. We are working with secondary schools in NSW, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, and South Australia.



## The mental health of Year 8 students



## Impact of depression

Depression isn't just low mood. When depression occurs during the teenage years, it can have a host of adverse consequences that derail a young person's academic, social, and emotional development.

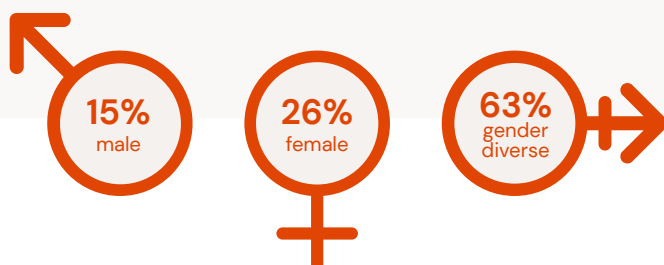
In Year 8, students with depression were:



## Rates of intentional self-harm

Rates of intentional self-harm were high in Year 8 students. We asked: 'Have you ever actually harmed yourself on purpose? For example, have you ever cut yourself or taken an overdose, and it was not an accident?'

These icons show those who responded 'Yes, once' or more.



## LGBTQIA+ identity of Year 8 students

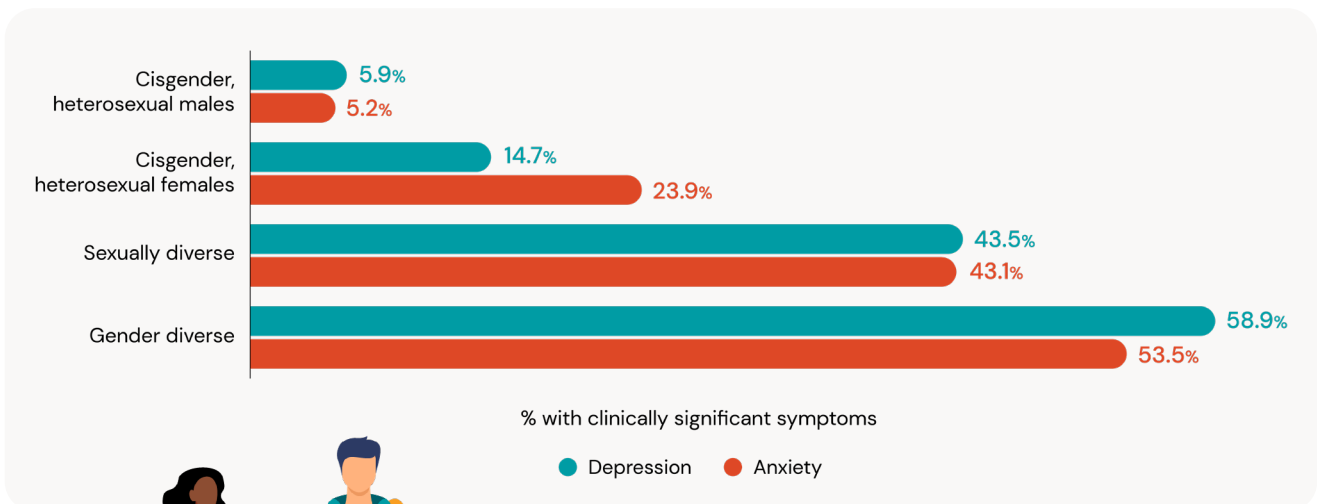
We found that gender and sexuality diverse students were at significantly higher risk of poorer mental health. More young people are identifying as LGBTQIA+ than ever before, however, many of these young people are still facing stigma, discrimination, and victimisation at home, school, and in the community.

The Future Proofing Study cohort gives a comprehensive picture of the prevalence of LGBTQIA+ identity in adolescents aged under 15 years:



## Mental health in LGBTQIA+ students

LGBTQIA+ students reported significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety when compared to cisgender, heterosexual students. They were also over 3 times more likely to report self-harm, 4 times more likely to report serious suicidal ideation, and had significantly lower feelings of connectedness to teachers and peers.



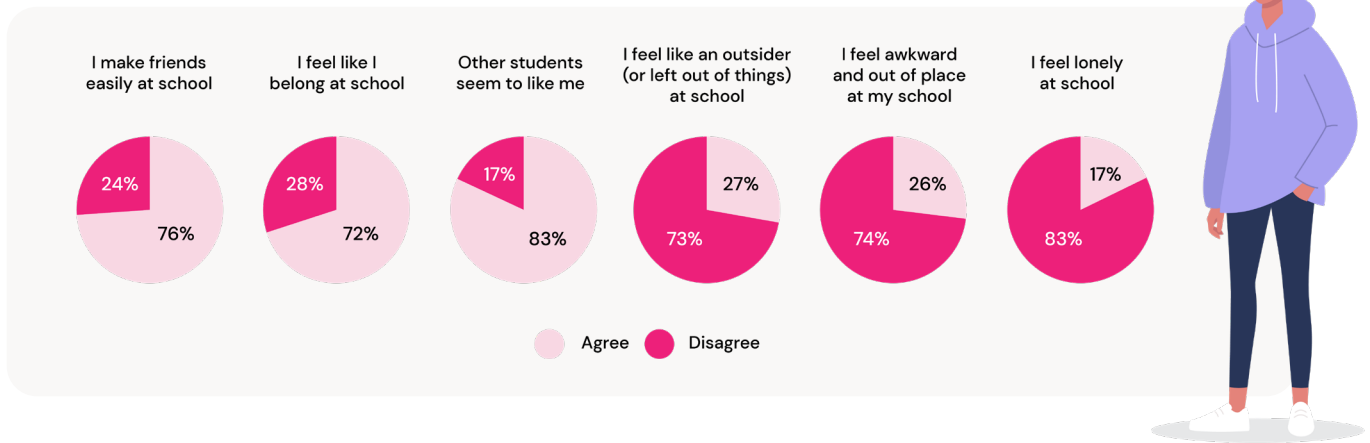
## School and peer relationships

Research demonstrates that supportive relationships and connections in the school context are vital in protecting against poor mental health in adolescents. Encouragingly, for most of our students, school is a safe, supportive place.

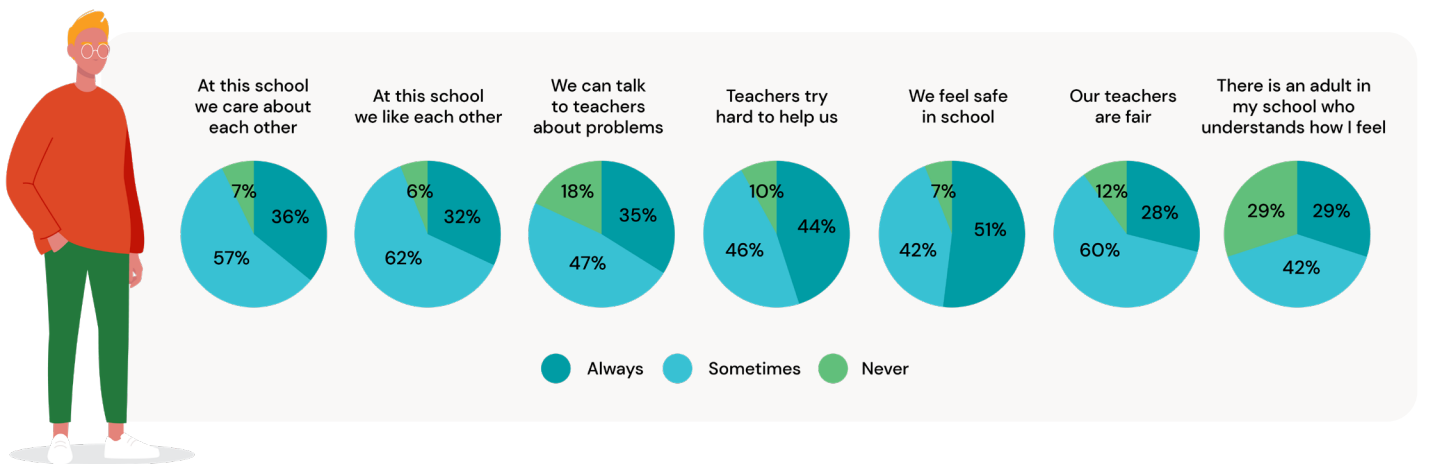
However, 12% of females and 11% of males reported being bullied regularly (once a month or more), which was twice as high in LGBTQIA+ students (23%).

In addition, students with depression were 3 times more likely to report being bullied regularly and 4 times more likely to report feeling lonely at school.

## Peer connectedness



## School climate



**Overall, ratings of school climate and connectedness were:**

- Similar in metropolitan and regional areas
- Slightly higher in males than in females

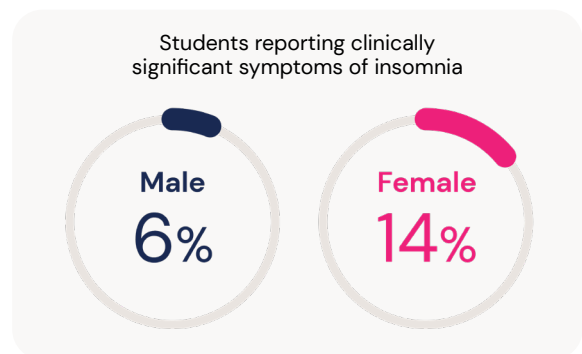
## Sleep and mental health

We know that quality sleep is crucial for optimal physical and mental functioning. Research suggests that teenagers should aim for 8-10 hours of sleep each night. In Year 8, our students fell short of this, sleeping on average 7 hours and 45 minutes each night, with 17% of students reporting less than 6 hours of sleep each night.

We found that females were twice as likely to report significant sleep problems (insomnia) compared to males.

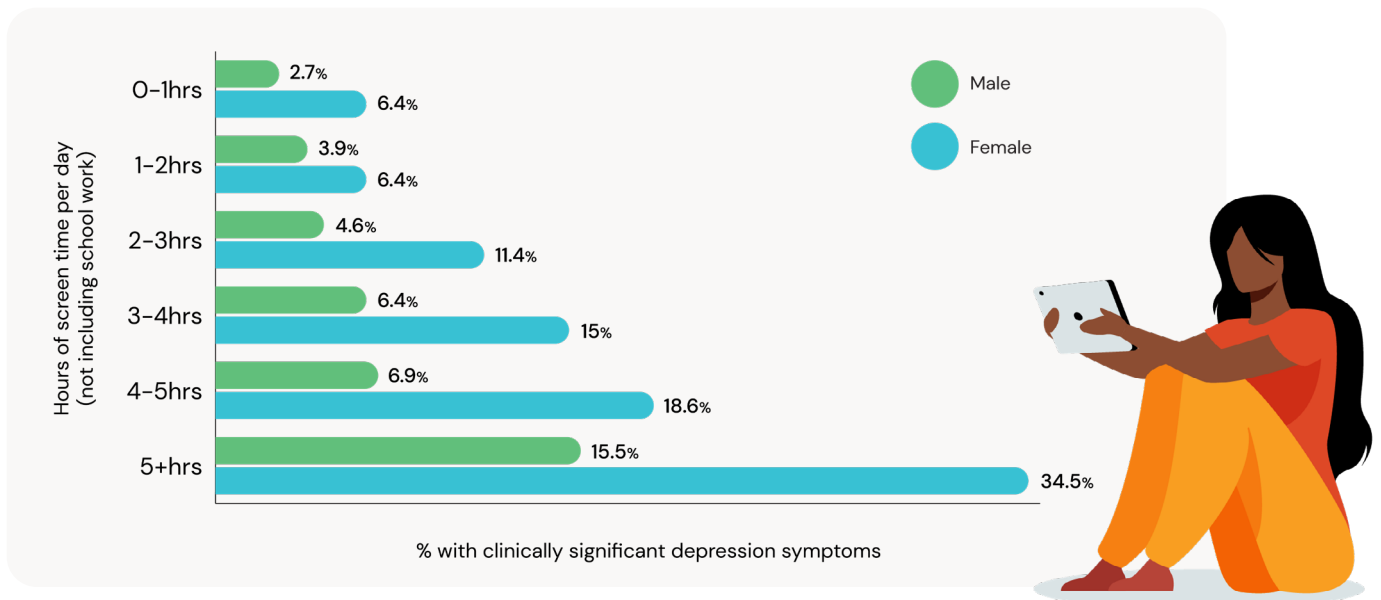
**We also found a clear link between sleep problems and mental health. Compared to students without sleep problems, students with insomnia were:**

- 6 times more likely to have high depression symptoms
- 4 times more likely to have high anxiety symptoms



## Screen time and depression

Screen time and symptoms of depression were closely linked, with more screen time being associated with higher rates of depression in adolescents, and this link was more pronounced in females.



**We tested a range of hypotheses to try and understand what explains the stronger link between screen time and depression in females, including:**

- Increased cyberbullying
- Detrimental impacts on sleep
- Negative self-evaluation from using social media
- Displacement of in-person social support networks

Our analyses showed that none of these factors, by themselves, fully explain the stronger links between higher levels of screen time and depression in females. Another explanation is whether the association between screen time and depression occurs in the opposite direction to what is typically assumed. That is, rather than being a consequence of higher levels of screen time, depression may actually lead adolescents to engage in higher levels of screen use. We will examine this hypothesis in detail as the Future Proofing Study progresses, with longitudinal data allowing us to explore causality in the relationships between technology, screen time, sleep, physical activity, social relationships, and mental health over time.

## Conclusion

The Future Proofing Study provides comprehensive, up-to-date Australian information about mental health during the early adolescent years. Findings from the study have been made available to schools, the media, at national and international conferences, in research and policy publications, and to the Australian government.

Looking ahead, we will continue to visit all participating schools until our students are in Year 12, with one final follow-up survey sent directly to students in the year after they have finished school.

We want to offer our heartfelt thanks to the wonderful young people, their families and school communities participating in this study.

Read more about the Future Proofing Study in our research paper here:



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