



Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement Review

*Supplementary Submission by the
Youth Climate Policy Centre (YCPC)*

Introduction

The Youth Climate Policy Centre (YCPC) is an independent youth-run climate policy think tank which provides research services to youth-led climate initiatives to further climate advocacy in Australia. The YCPC represents young Australians, aged 18-30, who are concerned with the state of climate-related policy in Australia. Young people are particularly vulnerable to climate anxiety, driven by the uncertainty surrounding our future in an increasingly unstable global environment. This unique perspective offers critical insights into how climate change is already impacting our mental health, intensifying existing challenges, and creating new ones. Our voices are essential not only for shaping comprehensive and targeted mental health policies which are prepared to respond to the emerging priority of climate change.

Executive Summary

Climate change will result in more frequent and severe extreme weather events which will inevitably have negative mental health impacts on the Australian population, particularly in youth and First Nations people. In responding to the Productivity Commission's interim report and drawing on the perspectives of young people, YCPC recommends that:

- **Climate change should be made a priority** to address the numerous climate-related mental impacts which the national mental health system will face;
- **Climate change be acknowledged as a challenge faced by Indigenous peoples** because climate change poses an endangerment on their unique connection to land; and
- **Youth leadership in mental health governance is established** to ensure sustainable and resilient mental health policy for young people across Australia.

Climate Change and Youth Mental Health

YCPC is pleased that youth have been acknowledged as a priority group in the Productivity Commission's interim report, but recognition of youth should be extended to also consider our priorities. As such, we call upon the Productivity Commission to recommend that **climate change should be made a priority** under the new National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement because of the risk that climate-related mental illnesses pose to the general Australian population and youth in particular.

Due to climate change, Australia is expected to experience more frequent and intense weather events including heat, fire, drought and precipitation in the near-term.¹ As the state of the environment worsens, mental health impacts associated with climate change are expected to increase,² especially in young Australians.³ This may be caused by the experience of acute and sub-acute climate-related events or through the perception of an existential threat.⁴ Youth, in particular, are affected by the frequent exposure to acute climate-related weather events^{5,6} such as tropical cyclones, floods, bushfires and droughts¹ which result in anxiety, mood disorders, post traumatic stress disorders and a loss of sense of self, identity and place.⁴ Moreover, suicidality, particularly in youth, increases with every 1°C rise above average daily mean temperatures.⁷

Apart from the physical experiences of climate change, the recognition of global warming as a threat to the future has been linked to increases in psychological distress and anxiety.⁸ These long-term feelings of distress are prevalent in youth and young people, with one quarter of children worrying that the ‘world will end before they get older.’⁹ Hence, a changing physical environment and the uncertainties presented by climate change will have negative impacts on Australian mental health outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge climate change as a mental health priority because it will inevitably drive increasing occurrences of mental impacts such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly in young people. The Productivity Commission should strongly consider recommending climate change as an emerging priority for mental health services to improve the preparedness and effectiveness of the mental health system to respond to climate-induced mental illness. This aligns with previous recommendations by the Productivity Commission which stated that future mental health policy should consider emerging risks such as environmental instability.¹⁰ An acknowledgement of climate is particularly important because a 5-year National Mental Health Agreement will need to manage psychological responses to more frequent and extreme weather events in the distant future.

Additionally, given that interdisciplinary collaboration is required to mitigate contributions towards climate change and address the challenges faced by climate change, a whole-of-government

¹ International Panel on Climate Change (2022). *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*.

² Charlson et al. (2021). *Climate Change and Mental Health: A Scoping Review*.

³ Gunasari et al. (2022). *Hope, Coping and Eco-Anxiety: Young People’s Mental Health in a Climate-Impacted Australia*.

⁴ Palinkas and Wong (2020). *Global climate change and mental health*.

⁵ Sewell et al. (2024) *Impacts of compounding drought and heatwave events on child mental health: insights from a spatial clustering analysis*.

⁶ Rodney et al. (2021) *Physical and Mental Health Effects of Bushfire and Smoke in the Australian Capital Territory 2019–20*.

⁷ Dey et al. (2024) *Youth suicidality risk relative to ambient temperature and heatwaves across climate zones: A time series analysis of emergency department presentations in New South Wales, Australia*.

⁸ Fritze et al. (2008) *Hope, despair and transformation: Climate change and the promotion of mental health and wellbeing*.

⁹ Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard (2007) *Children’s fears, hopes and heroes: Modern childhood in Australia*.

¹⁰ Productivity Commission. *Mental Health: Productivity Commission Inquiry Report No. 95*.

approach should be taken to ensure that climate-related mental health impacts are reduced in Australia.¹¹

Climate Change as Mental Health Risk for Indigenous Communities

YCPC is encouraged by efforts made to improve mental health outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities including the creation of a dedicated schedule. However, the YCPC calls on the Productivity Commission to recommend that **climate change be a priority for addressing Indigenous mental health**.

A key shortfall in the National Agreement on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention is its failure to acknowledge climate change as a critical driver of mental ill-health, particularly for Indigenous communities. Although the previous Agreement referenced past disasters like bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, it does not address the ongoing and cumulative effects of climate change, such as ecological degradation, sea-level rise, and habitat loss, as risk factors for psychological distress.¹² Indigenous youth in particular are experiencing solastalgia, climate anxiety, and cultural dislocation as a result of these changes.¹³ These impacts are not isolated or episodic, but part of a systemic and intensifying burden. Based upon the National Suicide Prevention Adviser's advice to address place-based and intergenerational trauma in policy and service frameworks,¹⁴ it is imperative that the new Agreement addresses the lived realities of climate-affected Indigenous communities.

Although the Agreement outlines some commitments to suicide prevention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, it largely approaches these through a clinical and service-delivery lens rather than one grounded in cultural and ecological wellbeing.¹² Research shows that connection to Country, cultural continuity, and Indigenous ecological knowledge are essential to maintaining mental health, particularly among youth.¹³ The destruction of land, biodiversity loss, and restrictions on traditional practices due to climate change are not only environmental losses but deeply affect identity and emotional resilience. However, the Agreement does not integrate cultural frameworks such as land-based healing or traditional knowledge systems into suicide prevention planning. This oversight runs counter to the National Suicide Prevention Adviser's recommendation to embed cultural authority and lived experience at all levels of service delivery.¹⁴ The lack of a cultural-ecological lens risks delivering support that is misaligned with Indigenous conceptions

¹¹ Wohlgezogen et al. (2020) *The wicked problem of climate change and interdisciplinary research: Tracking management scholarship's contribution*.

¹² Commonwealth of Australia. *National Agreement on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*.

¹³ Brown et al. *Walking Forward Together—The Next Step: Indigenous Youth Mental Health and the Climate Crisis*.

Missing Youth Leadership in Governance

Overall, YCPC is encouraged by the recommendations by the Productivity Commission in its interim report regarding the participation of the public, in particular representatives of priority groups, to shape the Mental Health Agreement. However, we recommend that the Agreement be amended to contain **dedicated provisions for youth leadership or co-design in mental health governance**. Youth leadership is essential as young people are often excluded from policymaking, resulting in an implementation gap which fails to address their needs. This notion is supported by the National Suicide Prevention Adviser which recommended that youth perspectives be embedded in service design and evaluation.¹⁴

Youth leadership is especially important for Indigenous communities as a form of agency in response to climate-related mental impacts such as climate anxiety. Across Australia, young Indigenous people are using storytelling, cultural practice, and activism as tools of resistance against climate anxiety and grief,¹³ becoming key actors in climate resilience and wellbeing strategies.¹² However, these efforts often occur in spite of systemic neglect and lack of support.¹⁵ The absence of these mechanisms in the Agreement reflects a missed opportunity to elevate youth-led responses and build culturally safe, climate-resilient mental health systems.

¹⁴ National Suicide Prevention Adviser. *Final Advice to the Prime Minister*.

¹⁵ Shoib et al. *Climate change and Indigenous mental health in Australia: In the aftermath of the defeat of the Voice referendum*.