



Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement Review

*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. YCPC represents young Australians, aged 18-30, who are concerned with the state of climate-related policy in Australia given the prospect of a future which is dominated by an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events such as bushfires and floods.

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 policies but also for ensuring that the solutions implemented today are informed by those who will live with their long-term effects. Only by listening to young people can policymakers create meaningful, forward-thinking approaches that address both climate and mental health crises simultaneously.

Executive summary

YCPC supports a mental health and suicide prevention strategy which addresses the threat that climate change poses to Australians' mental health.

Within the past three years, the existential threat of climate change has materialised through more frequent and severe extreme weather events and increase in ambient temperatures.

Consequently, there has been an increase in reports of anxiety, depression, suicidality and exacerbated mental health issues, especially in young Australians. Australians aged 16-25 who directly experienced the 2019-2020 'Black Summer' bushfires reported vastly higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress compared to those who were not exposed.¹

As these threats are projected to grow into the future, the Commission should consider recommending that the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention be amended to sufficiently recognise the cumulative impacts of more frequent and extreme weather events due to anthropogenic climate change.

Furthermore, while we welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission's Health and Ageing workstream, we are disappointed with the decision to task the Productivity Commission with undertaking this review. We believe that this inquiry would be better

¹ Lykins et al. (2021) [Australian Youth Mental Health and Climate Change Concern After the Black Summer Bushfires](#).

undertaken by the Department of Health and Aged Care because mental health policy should not be considered a productivity concern, but a health concern.

Climate Change and Mental Health

Due to climate change, Australia is expected to experience hotter days and more frequent and intense extreme weather events such as fires, droughts and heavy precipitation.² As the state of the environment worsens, mental health impacts associated with climate change are expected to increase,³ especially in young Australians.⁴ The impacts of mental health by climate change may materialise through the experience of acute and sub-acute climate-related events as well as through the perception of an existential threat.⁵

Acute climate-related events

Acute climate-related events such as more frequent and severe weather events including tropic cyclones, floods, bushfires and droughts⁶ have been connected to the emergence or exacerbation of mental health impacts. Those affected by acute climate-related events report anxiety, mood disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, suicidal ideation and a loss of sense of self, identity and place.⁷ While the mental health impacts from acute climate-related events tend to diminish over time for most individuals,⁸ it has been found that frequent exposure to extreme weather events may result in the exacerbation of mental health issues in younger age groups.^{9,10}

Sub-acute climate-related events

As climate change increases ambient temperatures, mental health issues will arise and worsen. An increase in ambient temperature is associated with poor community health and wellbeing, as well as increases in hospital attendance and admission for mental health.¹¹ Moreover, suicidality,

² International Panel on Climate Change (2022). [Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability](#).

³ Charlson et al. (2021). [Climate Change and Mental Health: A Scoping Review](#).

⁴ Gunasari et al. (2022). [Hope, Coping and Eco-Anxiety: Young People's Mental Health in a Climate-Impacted Australia](#).

⁵ Palinkas and Wong (2020). [Global climate change and mental health](#).

⁶ Lykins et al. (2021) [Australian Youth Mental Health and Climate Change Concern After the Black Summer Bushfires](#).

⁷ Gunasari et al. (2022). [Hope, Coping and Eco-Anxiety: Young People's Mental Health in a Climate-Impacted Australia](#).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sewell et al. (2024) [Impacts of compounding drought and heatwave events on child mental health: insights from a spatial clustering analysis](#)

¹⁰ Rodney et al. (2021) [Physical and Mental Health Effects of Bushfire and Smoke in the Australian Capital Territory 2019–20](#).

¹¹ Thompson et al. (2023) [Ambient temperature and mental health: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#).

particularly in youth, increases with every 1°C rise above average daily mean temperatures.¹² Additionally, other ambient conditions such as drought have been linked to psychosocial distress, generalised anxiety and depression,¹³ and, increased incidence of suicide in rural areas.¹⁴

Existential threat of climate change

Apart from the physical experiences of climate change, the recognition of climate change as a global threat to the future is linked to increases in psychological distress and anxiety.¹⁵ 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’.¹⁶ Moreover, the threat of a loss of permanence of nature, or a loss of ecosystems and landscapes, may result in a rise of psychoterratic disorders associated with a loss of self, belonging or place.¹⁷

Proposed Amendment

As illustrated above, climate change has and will continue to have a profound impact on the mental health of Australians, particularly with the ongoing challenges of more frequent and severe extreme weather events. Hence, we propose that the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement should be amended to acknowledge climate-related mental health impacts as a continuing challenge which the mental health system must address.

Our proposal is to amend cl 22 to include an acknowledgement of climate change as a significant, and often cumulative, mental health challenge of Australians. Our proposed amendment to cl 22 is:

This Agreement acknowledges the significant, and often cumulative, challenges for people living in Australia including the increase in frequent and severe extreme weather events such as drought and bushfires due to anthropogenic climate change. These challenges have amplified the need to improve our mental health and suicide prevention system to address the increased impact on mental health, increased levels of mental illness, and increased levels of suicidal risk, self-harm and distress.

¹² 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.](#)

¹³ Gunasari et al. (2022). [Hope, Coping and Eco-Anxiety: Young People’s Mental Health in a Climate-Impacted Australia.](#)

¹⁴ Hanigan et al. (2012) [Suicide and drought in New South Wales, Australia, 1970-2007.](#)

¹⁵ Fritze et al. (2008) [Hope, despair and transformation: Climate change and the promotion of mental health and wellbeing.](#)

¹⁶ Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard (2007) [Children’s fears, hopes and heroes: Modern childhood in Australia.](#)

¹⁷ Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) [Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss.](#)