

National Report Card 2025: Environmental Scan

Expanded



Australian Government
National Mental Health Commission

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Acknowledgement

Acknowledgement of Country

The National Mental Health Commission (the Commission) acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters on which we live, work and learn.

Recognition of Lived Experience

We recognise the individual and collective contributions of those with a lived and living experience of mental ill-health and suicide, and those who love, have loved and care for them. Each person's journey is unique and a valued contribution to Australia's commitment to Mental Health and Suicide Prevention systems reform.

The Commission's National Report Card Environmental Scan Report 2025 takes a population-level view of mental health in Australia, drawing together major events and trends at an aggregate level. We recognise that behind every statistic is a person and their lived experience.

We are privileged to draw on high-quality data and evidence, and we thank the researchers and professionals who continue to strengthen knowledge and practice in this field.

A note on language

The Commission acknowledges that language relating to mental health and suicide is not neutral and evolves over time. It can influence how people experience, interpret and respond to these issues, carry different meanings for different people and communities, and may at times be contested. The Commission has been conscious to use terminology throughout this report that is respectful of those whose experiences we are describing and is well understood by the audience reading this report.

The Commission endorses and follows the Mindframe guidelines: Our Words and Images Matter. The Commission also endorses the Mindframe Guidelines on Media Reporting of Severe Mental Illness in the Context of Violence and Crime and requests that media using this report do so in accordance with the Guidelines.

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Executive summary

The National Report Card Environmental Scan provides a contextual overview of major events and new or continuing trends in 2025 that had the potential to influence the mental health and wellbeing of people in Australia.

The National Report Card Environmental Scan (the environmental scan) is the precursor to the National Mental Health Commission's (the Commission's) annual National Report Card, which objectively reports on the performance of Australia's mental health system. The environmental scan contextualises the data in the National Report Card by identifying emerging events and trends that may have impacted mental health outcomes, and the accessibility and performance of the mental health system across the calendar year.

The environmental scan identified several interconnected themes across 2025, with young people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often disproportionately impacted. Cost-of-living pressures and housing stress continued to place sustained strain on individuals and households, impacting financial insecurity and healthcare seeking behaviours. Young people were disproportionately affected by these pressures, alongside their experiences of loneliness, workplace burnout, and a growing demand for accessible, flexible mental health supports.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experienced intensified racism, placing record demand on mental health supports. Social cohesion remained broadly stable but under pressure from discrimination, polarisation and misinformation in the context of global conflicts and growing local populism. At the same time, rapid technological change created both opportunities and risks. Artificial intelligence and digital mental health tools were increasingly used for mental health support, while concerns about the online harms of social media and AI-enabled abuse were particularly pronounced for children and young people.

Climate change and extreme weather events continued to affect communities across Australia, with growing recognition of their direct, indirect and anticipatory mental health impacts, including eco-anxiety and distress connected to loss and displacement. Psychosocial health in the workplace also remained a growing concern, with mental health-related workers compensation claims increasing and new shifts in potential psychosocial hazards including the changing role of technology.

The mental health system continued to face increasing demand, workforce constraints and access pressures. Policy responses in 2025 included bolstered investments in free mental health services, suicide prevention, peer workforce development, workforce standards, and initiatives affecting children and young people. Significantly, the Productivity Commission's review of the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement highlighted the fragmentation and inequity of the current mental health system and the need for a stronger national policy architecture.

Overall, the findings of the environmental scan reinforce that mental health outcomes are shaped by cumulative and interconnected determinants that extend well beyond the health system. Improving mental health and wellbeing in Australia will require more than simply expanding mental health services. The environmental scan highlights an opportunity to shift the focus of reform from responding to mental distress once it has emerged, to a preventative, coordinated, and whole-of-government approach across the wider determinants that shape mental health such as housing, education, employment, social services, justice, technology and climate policy. To help achieve these reforms, the Commission will continue the vital task of monitoring emerging events and trends to inform national mental health reporting, policy development and efforts to ensure all people in Australia can live thriving and contributing lives.

Introduction

Independent and impartial monitoring and reporting is essential to improving Australia's mental health system. It helps build a clearer national picture of how the system is performing, whether people are getting the support they need, and highlights which emerging issues may affect mental health and wellbeing over time.

The Commission is an Australian Government body that provides independent advice and supports governments to lead and shape the mental health system. The Commission achieves this through evidence-based advice, independent monitoring and reporting on system performance, and engagement with people with lived and living experience, governments, experts and relevant sectors. The Commission takes a broad view of mental health, recognising that outcomes are shaped not only by services, but also by the wider social, economic, environmental, cultural and technological determinants of mental health.

Since 2012, the Commission has produced an Annual National Report Card (Report Card) on the performance of Australia's mental health system. Since 2023, we have strengthened our monitoring and reporting function to provide a more objective, future-focused view of system performance over time. Establishing a standalone Annual Environmental Scan Report is the next step in this work, complementing the Report Card by examining the wider events and trends that may have shaped mental health and wellbeing across the calendar year.

While previous Report Cards included a brief environmental scan, this standalone report provides a more systematic way to identify, interpret and translate emerging issues. It helps governments, services and communities understand the broader context in which mental health outcomes are shifting, including emerging threats and opportunities. By looking beyond the mental health system, the scan highlights how mental health and wellbeing are shaped by broad, interconnected determinants, including factors outside the mental health system.

The environmental scan does not seek to establish direct causal links. Instead, it considers how these influences are connected, cumulative and experienced differently across population groups over time. By providing this wider context, the environmental scan supports a stronger basis for policy advice, service planning, accountability and system improvement.



Our approach to environmental scanning

The methodology

We conducted a retrospective environmental scan to identify major events and trends between 1 January and 31 December 2025 that may have affected the mental health of people in Australia.

The scan involved a desktop review of reports, publications, media releases, peer-reviewed literature and other relevant outputs from organisations and institutions across sectors that influence mental health. The review aimed to identify:

- key events and trends that occurred in 2025 that had the potential to impact the mental health and wellbeing outcomes of people in Australia.
- government activities and responses announced in 2025, especially at the national level, which had the potential to influence future changes to the mental health system.

Each event or trend that emerged was assessed based on:

- the estimated reach and size of the expected impact on the mental health of people in Australia
- the strength of the evidence supporting a potential link between the event/trend and mental health outcomes
- the general relevance of the event/trend to the mental health of people in Australia.

A thematic analysis of the key events/trends identified was then conducted and iterated through consultation with subject matter experts across the Commission and the Report Card Working Group, which the Commission established to support the development of the 2025 Report Card. This group included a cross-section of organisations with relevant expertise including lived experience, policy, data and measurement.

Note, the environmental scan only captures a sample of events and trends from 2025 and is not intended to be a complete and exhaustive list. Instead, these themes provide insight into the contextual environment of the 2025 calendar year and are intended to frame the changes in mental health outcomes described in the 2025 Report Card without suggesting they had a causal impact.

Continually improving our approach

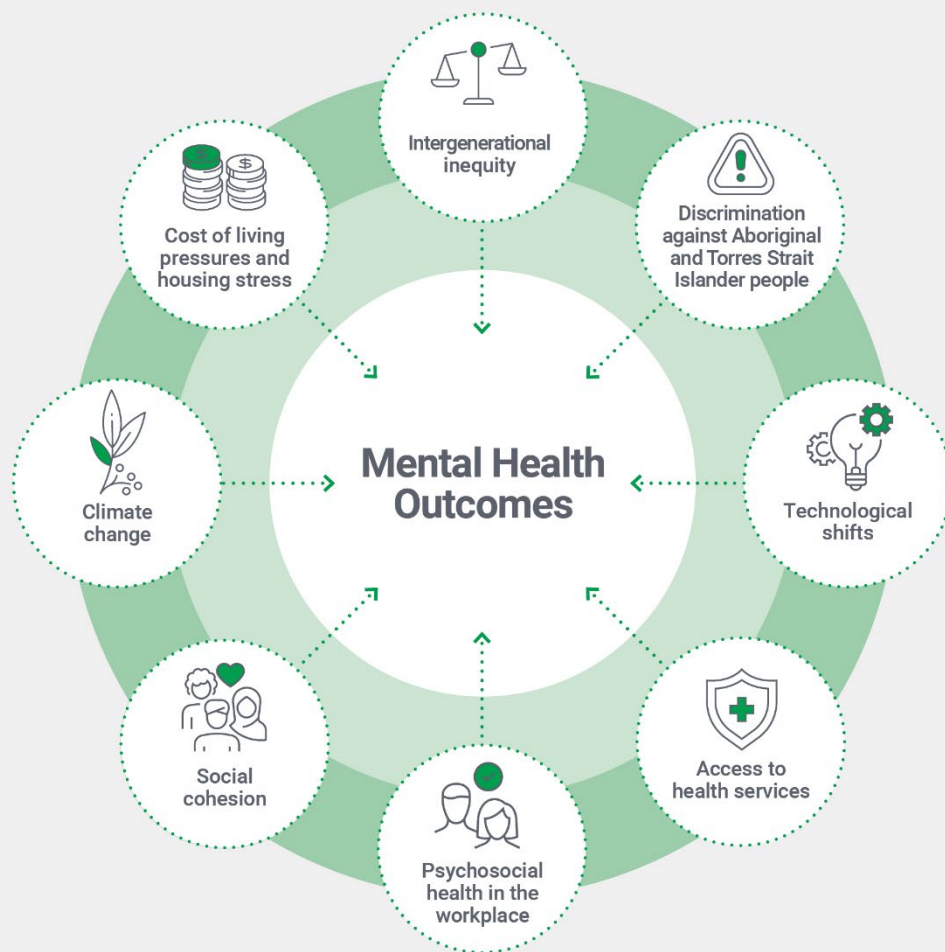
The Commission has an adaptive and iterative approach to the environmental scan to ensure it is comprehensive and best practice. In previous Report Cards, we used a PESTEL methodology (i.e., political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal) to identify and group key events and trends in the environmental scan. For the 2025 environmental scan, the Commission has refined its approach to better reflect the nuanced and interconnected nature of the themes identified and their differing impacts across population groups.

The Commission will continue to iteratively strengthen and refine the environmental scan as new evidence, methods and tools emerge. This will help ensure key events and trends that may affect the mental health of people in Australia are identified early, interpreted clearly and translated into timely insights. A stronger regular monitoring function will also help the mental health system better prepare for, and respond to, future challenges.

2025 in review – Environmental scan findings

The environmental scan identified several key themes. It is evident that improving mental health and wellbeing in Australia will require more than simply expanding mental health services. These are discussed separately below but are closely connected and can affect some population groups more than others, as shown here.

Cumulative and interconnected determinants that extend well beyond the health system...



Young people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were disproportionately impacted by these themes.



Cost of living pressures and housing stress

The cost-of-living pressures observed and reported in 2023¹ and 2024² continued throughout 2025. Cost of living was named in people's top 3 most important issues, along with housing and healthcare.^{3 4} The Selected Living Cost Indexes recorded rises between 2.3% and 4.2% in the 12 months leading up to the December 2025 quarter.⁵

Rental stress continued to worsen over the period, with 1 in 5 renting households considered a low-income household in financial stress in 2024-25.⁶ Regardless of income level, 1 in 4 households were spending more than 30% of their disposable income on housing related costs.⁷ Rising financial stress and out-of-pocket costs also influenced how often people in Australia visited health providers and filled prescriptions, including for mental health.^{8 9}

Financial hardship or insecurity can negatively influence mental health through impacts on stress levels, relationships, reduced help-seeking and reliance on negative coping strategies.^{10, 11, 12, 13} Once housing costs exceed 30% of an individual's income, risk factors for homelessness and mental health challenges increase.^{14 15} Financial barriers to accessing timely healthcare are also likely to have mental health impacts beyond those of financial hardship, including due to poor broader health outcomes.^{16 17}

Given the persistence of cost-of-living pressures and housing stress observed across the last few years, we no longer consider financial stress to be an emerging trend, but rather a new societal norm. These persistent challenges increase the risk of longer-term mental health impacts for affected people in Australia, eroding their ability to live thriving, contributing lives.^{18 19}

Intergenerational inequity

Surveys conducted in 2025 found that 64% of young people in Australia (aged 14-19) identified cost-of-living concerns as the most pressing national issue, and 85% of young people (aged 18-24) had experienced financial difficulties over the previous 12 months.^{20 21} Fewer than half of young people (aged 18-24) indicated they thought they would ever purchase a home, and young people were more likely to be spending more than 30% of their disposable income on housing – a key marker of housing stress.^{22 23} These financial challenges and uncertainties diminished young people's confidence and optimism of the future, which is inextricably linked to mental health.²⁴

While financial strain has become a consistent challenge for people in Australia over the past few years, in 2025, young people experienced a disproportionate impact of cost-of-living pressures and housing affordability, as well as increased loneliness, and workplace burnout.

Young people in Australia reported higher levels of loneliness and workplace burnout than any other age group.^{25 26} School attendance rates remained below pre-pandemic levels at 89%, which can impact not only a child's education, but their social, emotional and mental wellbeing.^{27 28} Persistent loneliness was reportedly experienced by 1 in 7 people aged 15-25, driven by low community participation, financial strain, poor neighbourhood cohesion, and low physical activity.²⁹ Loneliness and workplace burnout are linked to poor physical and mental health outcomes, including an increased risk of psychological distress.^{30 31}

The Federal Government initiated the National Health and Medicare Research Council (NHMRC) review of the Australian Standards of Care and Treatment Guidelines for Trans and Gender Diverse Children and Adolescents in 2025.^{32 33} This occurred in the context of some local and international jurisdictions pausing access to gender-affirming care.^{34 35} While the Australian reviews were launched to ensure quality and evidence-based healthcare for trans and gender diverse children and adolescents, there were concerns they have generated uncertainty and distress for young people and their families.^{36 37 38} Effective care and support is vital for the young trans and gender diverse community who experience higher rates of discrimination and adverse health and mental health outcomes.^{39 40}

Young people increasingly sought mental health support, but demand for care continued to outpace service availability in 2025.^{41 42} Kids Helpline responded to more than 128,000 young people in 2025, mostly in the evenings or on weekends when other services are generally closed.⁴³ For the first time ever, webchat became the primary way young people connected with Kids Helpline counsellors. Crisis and safety interventions in response to calls still had not returned to pre-pandemic levels, with 5,190 crisis interventions required – more than triple those of 2018. Positively, three quarters of users surveyed felt better after speaking with a counsellor, expressing gratitude for feeling respected and heard, often

for the first time when seeking support. The need for accessible, flexible, trusted, and immediate mental health support remains a significant necessity for young people in Australia.

Climate change

In 2025, Australia continued to experience severe heatwaves, bushfires and flooding. These natural disasters are no longer seen as ‘once in 100-year events,’ but common and frequently occurring.⁴⁴ Australians faced on average, one national disaster per week across 2025.⁴⁵ The National Emergency Management Agency stood up their Crisis Coordination Team for a total of 191 days across 2025.⁴⁶ The total insured cost of extreme weather events that impacted Australia in 2025 was \$3.49 billion in insured losses from 264,000 claims.⁴⁷

Australia’s first National Climate Risk Assessment (National Assessment) was published in 2025.⁴⁸ The National Assessment notably recognised the risks to health and wellbeing from climate dangers as a priority focus, with the climate risk to the health and social support system rated as “moderate-high” but predicted to reach “severe by 2050.” Those with pre-existing health conditions, including mental ill-health, were identified as most at risk to any current or future impacts, particularly the very young, our older populations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The impact of climate change is cumulative and can lead to both physical and mental health consequences in response to lived experience or vicarious or anticipated experiences.^{49 50 51} Eco-anxiety is associated with increased rates of mental disorders especially if individuals and communities do not receive adequate support.^{52 53}

Indigenous people are among the most vulnerable to the adverse mental health impacts of climate change globally, particularly as climate health impacts are rooted in and inseparable from Indigenous Peoples’ connections to place.^{54 55}

In 2025 there were local and international calls to better embed Indigenous knowledge in mitigating and adapting to climate change, including protecting mental health and wellbeing in the face of increased distress from loss of land and displacement.^{56 57 58}

In 2025, the link between climate change and mental health in Australia was increasingly recognised, internationally and in Australia, including integrating mental health into climate adaptation plans.^{59 60 61} Climate disaster recovery packages funded by governments in 2025, such as those for Tropical Cyclone Alfred and the east coast floods, included investments specifically targeted to supporting the mental health of communities.^{62 63} The climate sector also recognised the potential mental health impacts of climate change, developing new resources to help people in Australia understand and manage eco-anxiety.⁶⁴ There is growing evidence that climate change will continue to be a major factor impacting the mental health and wellbeing of people in Australia, and in potentially worsening ways.^{65 66 67}



Discrimination against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

In 2025, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported increased experiences of racism in the wake of the 2023 Voice Referendum.^{68 69} These experiences included stereotyping, hate speech, discrimination, lack of recognition of cultural rights, verbal abuse, bullying, and institutional racism. At universities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reported the highest proportion of experiences of racism (both directly and indirectly) compared to other groups, with 7 out of 10 of these students reporting these experiences had a negative impact on their mental health.⁷⁰ Racism is significantly associated with psychological distress and poor social and emotional wellbeing, and poses a barrier to accessing mental healthcare in Indigenous communities.⁷¹ Calls to 13YARN, the national crisis helpline for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people surged to over 100 a day in late 2025, up from 65 calls per day in 2024, the highest level since the service launched in 2023.⁷²

In 2025, the Australian Human Rights Commission published a scoping review that affirmed racism is embedded in Australia's social and institutional systems, affecting health outcomes and access to health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and other negatively racialised communities.⁷³ Experiences of racial discrimination in healthcare settings were found to result in delayed care, poorer health outcomes, including mental health outcomes, and compounded mistrust with the health system. A total of 17 recommendations are made in the report to address the findings, including strengthening/developing cultural capabilities, standards and frameworks in healthcare and developing culturally tailored mental health interventions to improve mental health outcomes by addressing specific community needs.

Over-representation of Indigenous people in the justice system also reflects systemic and structural racial discrimination.⁷⁴ The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prison,⁷⁵ and deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody reached a record high in 2025, reflecting disproportionate justice system representation.⁷⁶ This disproportionate representation was particularly evident amongst youth, as 7% of Indigenous people in detention were aged 10–13, compared to 2.3% of non-Indigenous young people.⁷⁷ Incarceration has profound mental health impacts and the mental health consequences of incarceration are amplified for younger offenders.⁷⁸

Social cohesion

Social cohesion is a recognised determinant of mental health and wellbeing that is broadly defined as the extent to which societies are unified or divided. It is measured by community participation, trust in government, economic equality, and sense of belonging.⁷⁹

Experiences of discrimination and persistent prejudices continued to challenge social harmony in 2025, compounded by global events including intensifying conflict in Gaza and the Middle East, Russia and Ukraine, Africa and other parts of the world.⁸⁰ Australia's research institutions and private sector were tested by anti-diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies.⁸¹ The Australian Institute of Criminology was also prompted to develop a National Hate Crimes Database to track hate crimes and incidents on behalf of the Federal Government.⁸²

The year featured 'March for Australia' rallies and surges in reports of racism, particularly Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.^{83 84 85} There was also a discourse around migration rates being too high and directly negatively impacting housing availability in Australia.^{86 87 88} This was despite a 14% decline in migrant arrivals, with media selectively reporting on portions of available data, or less reliable measures including net permanent migration and long-term arrivals.^{89 90} The broader issues of housing supply, including the supply of new housing being at its lowest in nearly a decade,⁹¹ were often left out of the discourse.

Despite these anti-immigrant sentiments, 83% of adults indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, and 67% agreed that immigration from many different countries makes Australia stronger.⁹² These findings highlight that an increase in support for reducing immigration should not be interpreted as a rapid and widespread increase in anti-immigrant sentiments.

However, perceptions of social division are a cause for concern, as 35% of adults viewed Australia as extremely divided or very divided on key political, economic and social issues, an increase from 27% of adults in 2024.⁹³ The Bondi Beach terror attack on 14 December 2025 also had a profound and devastating impact on communities within Australia, especially Jewish and local communities.

The Federal Government subsequently established the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion, reflecting the significance of the attack and concerns for the social fabric of Australia.⁹⁴ Misinformation and disinformation, particularly online and through the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), increasingly threatened to distort public perceptions, trust in institutions and social cohesion in 2025.^{95 96} For example, of those surveyed, 60% indicated they had come across misinformation in the lead up to the 2025 federal election – mostly from politicians and political parties themselves.⁹⁷ There was low confidence in whether online information could be trusted, particularly through social media. Most respondents (70%) supported the view that the government should take steps to restrict false information on social media, and 83% supported truth in advertising laws to be implemented at a national level.

Despite these new and ongoing challenges, indicators of social cohesion remained stable in 2025 which was attributed to individuals' strong interpersonal connections and active participation in community.⁹⁸ Although Australia remains resilient under strain, persistent disruptions to social cohesion influence mental health and wellbeing, as social cohesion is a recognised determinant of mental health.⁹⁹

Technological shifts

The changes in social attitudes and pressures discussed above occurred in the context of a rapidly shifting technological environment. The way people engaged with digital technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) and social media, changed in 2025.

AI was increasingly used for mental health support in 2025, including general purpose chatbots like ChatGPT, and targeted digital mental health tools (DMHTs).^{100 101} Survey data published in 2025 suggested nearly half of adults in Australia had recently used a generative AI tool, with a subset specifying they were seeking social connection or had been emotionally vulnerable with an AI chatbot on multiple occasions.^{102 103} This tendency doubled for users aged 18-24 or in remote areas.

Young people in Australia are also notably turning to digital tools designed to provide mental health support, with approximately 1 in 10 people surveyed aged 16-24 using DMHTs in the past year, doubling among those with a mental health condition (18.8%), and increasing with severity (mild or moderate: 14.2%, severe: 33.6%).¹⁰⁴

The increasing use of AI and DMHTs in 2025 was significant enough to prompt the Therapeutic Goods Administration to review the development and use of DMHTs, a process that was still underway by the end of the calendar year.^{105 106 107}

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Healthcare introduced digital mental health modules for community and health organisations that deliver digital mental health apps, programs or other offerings to ensure alignment with the National Safety and Quality Digital Mental Health Standards.¹⁰⁸ The rising use of AI for mental health support prompted the development of resources and recommendations to government by the mental health and suicide prevention sector, to guide informed and safe use of these technologies for mental health.^{109 110}

Access to free DMHTs was expanded in 2025, with the government investing \$135.2 million into the Digital Mental Health Program to assist 12 mental health services provide access to digital and online mental health support for new parents, younger Australians, LGBTIQ+ people and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.¹¹¹ A parliamentary roundtable on AI in mental health was also hosted at Parliament in November 2025, to identify the opportunities for AI to strengthen the mental health system, as well as how to ensure AI use is equitable and complements but does not replace human care.^{112 113} Later in November 2025, the Federal Government announced an AI Safety Institute would be established in 2026 to evaluate emerging AI capabilities, share information and support timely actions to address potential risks.¹¹⁴

Concerns about the potential impacts of digital technologies including AI and social media were particularly pronounced in relation to young people in 2025. The under-16s social media restrictions came into effect in early December.¹¹⁵ The change was designed to protect young people from the risks of harm from social media and to support their mental health and wellbeing. Between December 2024 and February 2025, nearly all children aged 10-15 (96%) sampled in an eSafety Commissioner survey had ever used social media, with over half reporting experiences of cyberbullying and over 70% encountering harmful content (e.g., content with themes of violence, discrimination or self-harm).¹¹⁶

Over half of adults separately surveyed encountered harmful content on social media despite most of them not actively searching for it.¹¹⁷ Exposure to this kind of content can cause decline in mood, feelings of distress, and in some cases even trigger engagement in self-harm, particularly in young people.¹¹⁸



Engaging in online spaces can pose other risks to mental health and personal safety, especially in young people. Almost a quarter of children in the eSafety survey had ever experienced online harassment, including sexual harassment, and nearly 10% had experienced image-based abuse.¹¹⁹ AI-generated abuse, particularly “nudify” services, were of particular concern in 2025, prompting the eSafety Commissioner to launch enforcement action against these services.¹²⁰ Exposure to childhood trauma including harassment and abuse is associated with significantly higher odds of any lifetime mental health disorders, as well as suicidal ideation and attempts.^{121 122} The shifts in potential avenues of technological abuse pose a significant threat to the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

While the new social media restrictions are intended to mitigate some of the potential harms discussed above, young people previously engaging with social media are experiencing a significant transition in how they socialise and engage with online content. Within the first three transitioning weeks after 10 December 2025, Kids Helpline counsellors had reportedly received an increase in contacts explicitly about distress associated with the social media restrictions for young people.¹²³

Psychosocial health in the workplace

In 2025, mental health in the workplace emerged as the most significant area of growth in terms of workers compensation.¹²⁴ Data released in 2025 showed claims for mental health conditions continued to increase in 2023-24, as has been the case over the last ten years, accounting for 12% of all serious claims (17,600 claims in total).¹²⁵ The median time lost from work in these claims was 35.7 weeks, almost five times that recorded across all other injuries and diseases.

Harassment and workplace bullying accounted for 33.2% of mental health claims, work pressure 24.2%, and exposure to violence and harassment 15.7%.¹²⁶ Women had a much higher share of work-related injury or illness accounted for by mental health conditions (17.2%, compared to 8.2% for men).¹²⁷ Psychosocial hazards are also one of the costliest forms of workplace injury as they lead to significantly more time off work and more than four times the compensation paid when compared to all other serious claims.¹²⁸

More broadly, there were an increased number of industrial disputes in Australia in the December 2025 quarter, compared to the December 2024 quarter and with a greater number of employees involved.¹²⁹ The vast majority of these industrial disputes were Enterprise Bargaining related.

Working environments also continued to shift in 2025, including concerns that the increasing spread of AI across workplaces was starting to pose a psychosocial threat.¹³⁰ The challenges and opportunities of AI in workplaces were increasingly acknowledged, with the Federal Government indicating a focus on ensuring technological shifts empower workers rather than replace them.¹³¹ While AI has the potential to reduce worker mental workload and improve performance, it may also negatively impact psychosocial factors, such as workers' sense of purpose, autonomy, and motivation – particularly when they are not involved in decision-making around AI adoption.¹³²

Hybrid-workplaces were sustained as one of the most common work arrangements, a pattern since 2023 that is expected to remain based on the realisation of benefits from both employers and employees.¹³³ A key challenge remains balancing the work-life benefits of hybrid arrangements with the need to maintain workplace social connections and collaboration.¹³⁴ The right to disconnect laws and "employee choice pathway" for changing from casual to permanent employment also came into effect for small business owners (with <15 employees) from August 2025, building on the reforms of 2024 for all other businesses.¹³⁵ All employees are now able to refuse unreasonable work-related contact outside of agreed working hours, further promoting work-life balance and mental wellbeing.

In response to the significant rise in mental health-related worker compensation claims over the last few years and increasing psychosocial risks in workplaces, some governments also acted in 2025 to improve how psychosocial risks are managed and increase the thresholds for how psychological injury claims are defined and compensated.¹³⁶ ¹³⁷ Safe Work Australia also began a Best Practice Review of Australia's model work health and safety laws.¹³⁸

Access to health services

The public mental health system, particularly emergency and acute hospital services, continued to experience increased demand in 2025. Long wait times for emergency department mental health presentations and increased demand for both acute and non-acute mental health care continued to be reported in hospital environments.¹³⁹ ¹⁴⁰ ¹⁴¹

GPs also continued to see a rise in complex mental health care needs in patients, with mental health reported as a top reason for GP visits.¹⁴² ¹⁴³ In 2025, most jurisdictions also began to allow GPs with specialist training to diagnose and treat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in certain circumstances.¹⁴⁴ Psychiatrist workforce challenges continued in relation to shortages, and an ageing workforce that is unevenly distributed and heavily reliant on international graduates, especially in rural areas.¹⁴⁵ The role of the peer workforce in providing mental health supports was also increasingly recognised, with various initiatives launched to clarify the role of peer workers and ensure they are

supported.^{146 147} This included the announcement that a National Professional Association for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Peer Workers would be established in the new year.¹⁴⁸

We saw a range of other policy responses to mental health system and workforce challenges in 2025. Over \$1 billion in federal election commitments and other announcements were made for more free mental health services and to support the mental health workforce.^{149 150 151} By the end of 2025, 50 Medicare Mental Health Centres were operating across Australia providing additional access to free, walk-in mental health support and care.¹⁵² The National Suicide Prevention Strategy 2025-2035 was released along with an additional \$69 million in federal funding to ensure that support is available for people in Australia affected by suicide and distress.^{153 154} Mental Health Treatment Plan review and mental health consultation MBS items were removed, in place of the use of general attendance items.¹⁵⁵ New codes of conduct and standards for the mental health workforce were developed, including the National Standards for Counsellors and Psychotherapists,¹⁵⁶ and the Psychology Board of Australia's new code of conduct.¹⁵⁷ These changes aim to strengthen the profession with clear and consistent expectations, helping more people access safe, high-quality mental health care.

The Federal Government announced Thriving Kids in August 2025, a new national program aimed at supporting children under 8 with mild to moderate developmental delay and their families, outside of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.¹⁵⁸ The proposed initiative was sent to an inquiry through the House Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Disability, which handed down its final report in December 2025.¹⁵⁹

The Committee heard significant stakeholder concerns about the changes and made 16 recommendations to assist the Australian Government and the Thriving Kids Advisory Group to design the Thriving Kids program in 2026. This program has potential implications for psychosocial supports for children and their families.

The Productivity Commission also finalised their review into the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement (National Agreement) in 2025. The inquiry report concluded that the mental health and suicide prevention system is fragmented and inequitable, and the National Agreement does not address these issues in its current form.¹⁶⁰ Instead, a new overarching policy architecture is needed to outline the nationally coordinated actions that will deliver positive changes to the mental health and suicide prevention system and improve outcomes in the years to come. As per the inquiry's recommendation, the existing agreement was extended until June 2027 while a new agreement is negotiated by governments.

Opportunities for system reform

The findings of the environmental scan reaffirm that mental health outcomes are shaped by a broad and interconnected set of wider determinants including social, economic, environmental and technological influences.

The environmental scan identifies a range of distinct events and trends across 2025 that collectively illustrate how many of the most influential drivers of mental health sit outside the health system, including financial strain, housing stress, social cohesion, climate change, and technological shifts. These factors are interconnected, cumulative and often disproportionately experienced across the population. Together, they have the potential to shape both the onset and severity of mental health challenges and people's capacity to access support.

Expansion of mental health services alone cannot shift the trajectory

The findings of the environmental scan point to a clear implication: improving mental health outcomes in Australia will require more than expanding access to services. Investment in treatment, crisis response and workforce capacity remains essential, but it will be insufficient if the upstream drivers of mental health challenges are not addressed.

The system needs to rebalance towards a preventative approach

There is a need to rebalance Australia's mental health system so that prevention and action on the underlying social drivers of mental health are given greater weight alongside treatment and crisis response. This does not diminish the importance of services. Rather, it recognises that services cannot offset, on their own, the growing burden created by financial insecurity, housing stress, discrimination, social isolation, climate disruption, unsafe digital environments and psychosocial risks at work.

A stronger focus on prevention will require more than additional programs. It will require a deliberate change management approach that shifts how the system plans, invests and measures effectiveness and outcomes. It will require a whole of government approach.

Reform needs to be coordinated, measurable and sustained

Meeting societal shifts and challenges will require a preventative, coordinated and whole-of-government approach. The Productivity Commission's review of the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement reinforces this point, highlighting how the current mental health system lacks a clear overarching policy architecture to guide nationally consistent, cross-sectoral action. Responsibilities remain fragmented across portfolios and jurisdictions, without a unifying framework to align planning, priorities, investment and outcomes.

National monitoring and reporting keep reform focused

The Commission's monitoring and reporting role is central to this task. By tracking emerging events, trends and evidence, the Commission can help identify where pressures are growing, where risks are concentrated, and where reform effort needs to be directed. A regular monitoring function, like the Commission's National Report Card, helps ensure mental health policy is informed not only by service activity and investment, but by the wider social, economic, environmental, cultural and technological conditions shaping mental health and wellbeing.

The opportunity is to act earlier and more deliberately

The environmental scan highlights an opportunity to shift from a system that is primarily responding to mental distress once it has emerged, to one that also acts earlier to reduce the conditions that contribute to mental health challenges. This will be critical if Australia is to improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes over time and support all people in Australia to live thriving and contributing lives.



Acronyms and abbreviations

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AI	Artificial Intelligence
DEI	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
DMHTs	Digital Mental Health Tools
MBS	Medical Benefits Schedule
National Agreement	National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NMHC	National Mental Health Commission
PESTEL	Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal

Glossary

Loneliness

The loneliness measure is based on a 3-item scale ('People don't come to visit me as often as I would like', 'I often need help from other people but can't get it', 'I often feel very lonely').

Mental Disorder

A mental disorder is characterised by a 'clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviour¹⁶¹'. The term itself covers a range of disorders including anxiety, affective and substance use disorders.

Psychological Distress

Measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale. The scale measures the level of current anxiety and depressive symptoms a person may have experienced in the 4 weeks before the interview.

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