

# Part 1:

## Background

### 1.1 Introduction

Youth is a period of rapid emotional, physical and intellectual transition, where young people progress from being dependent children to independent adults. This is often a period where young people face a range of life events and make decisions that can impact on their immediate and longer term health and wellbeing. Some of these include decisions on schooling and career paths, relationships with families and peers, sexual behaviours, employment, financial decisions and contact with drugs, alcohol or the justice system.

For young people in Australia, the transition to adulthood is made more complex by the social, economic, environmental and rapid technological changes in Australian society over recent decades. Compared with young people from previous generations, young people today have fewer siblings and are more commonly living in either single-parent or blended families, or families with both parents in the workforce. The pathways from education to work are more varied and complex than in the past and often extend over longer periods; coupled with decreased job security this means that young people often live in the parental home for longer.

Young people who are unable to make the transition to adulthood smoothly can face significant difficulties and barriers in both the short and long term. As such, positive protective factors introduced in childhood need to be reinforced throughout these critical years as young people go through various transition points in life and this is a role for families, communities and governments alike. All levels of governments are interested in positively influencing the environment of young people by providing support to them and their families in areas such as health, education, welfare, employment and safety. Prevention and early intervention are the key themes for current policies.

Timely, accurate and comprehensive information on factors that influence young people's health and wellbeing is required for the formulation of appropriate and effective policies and interventions to achieve long-term health and wellbeing outcomes for young people. Trend information can then be used to evaluate the effectiveness of policy-based interventions.

*Young Australians: their health and wellbeing 2007* is the third in a series of national statistical reports on young people aged 12–24 years produced by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) in addressing this information need. The first report on Australia's young people was published in 1999 and the second in 2003 (AIHW 2003a; AIHW: Moon et al. 1999).

In recognising that young people's health and wellbeing are influenced by a multitude of factors, the AIHW has broadened its list of indicators in the reporting framework of this current report. New topics in this edition include: burden of disease; parental health, disability and socioeconomic status; social support; assault and victimisation; environmental factors; and health system performance. This new information enables us to build a more comprehensive picture of the wider social, economic and community contexts in which young people today are growing up and how these factors affect their health and wellbeing.

## Defining ‘young people’

This report defines ‘young people’ as those aged 12–24 years and this is consistent with the previous AIHW publications on Australia’s young people. However, this age range overlaps with the age group defined as children (aged 0–14 years) in previous AIHW reports on Australia’s children (see AIHW 2005i; AIHW: Al-Yaman et al. 2002; AIHW: Moon et al. 1998). The overlap is deliberate and recognises the fact that transition from childhood to youth is a gradual process, beginning and ending at different ages for different individuals (AIHW: Moon et al. 1999). In recognising these differences, the report presents information by different age groups within the 12–24 year age range as permitted by the data or as considered to be appropriate for the indicator.

Defining young people as those aged between 15 and 24 years is a widely accepted statistical convention and is used by most studies on youth (see ABS 2005a; United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2005). But, it is much harder to specify a set age group when a sociological definition of young people is employed. The period of transition from childhood to adulthood varies greatly between societies and even within the same society. This critical stage in the life-cycle may begin as early as age 10 (for street children, for example) and may in some cases continue into the mid to late 30s, suggesting that the process of achieving an independent, sustaining livelihood can take a relatively long time, depending on the society (United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2005).

However, there are a number of ways to define young people, which can be dependent upon particular data collections or legal requirements. In most Australian jurisdictions, young people aged 15 years and over are permitted to work or leave school, while in some jurisdictions, the legal compulsory age of leaving school is higher than 15 years. As such, children under the age of 15 years are generally regarded as dependent on their parents for support, wellbeing and development. Eighteen is the legal age at which young people attain adulthood, are allowed to vote, usually finish senior school and undertake the transition to independent living and/or further studies. Consequently, a number of data collections use age 18 as the cut-off point between adolescence and adulthood (see Fraser & Fraser 2002; Pitman et al. 2003; Queensland Commission for Children and Young People 2004).

## The National Youth Information Framework

This report is based on a set of key national indicators developed by the AIHW in consultation with an advisory group comprising experts in the areas of child and youth health, as well as other stakeholders. The indicators for this report were based on a conceptual framework that was a modification of the National Health Performance Framework (NHPF) developed by the National Health Performance Committee. The NHPF is a nationally agreed framework endorsed by the Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council (AHMAC). A detailed description of the process of developing indicators for young Australians is given in the bulletin *Young Australians: their health and wellbeing, key national indicators* (AIHW 2006h).

The National Youth Information Framework (see Box 1) used for developing indicators for the *Young Australians: their health and wellbeing 2007* report is aligned very closely with the NHPF, with minor modifications to better capture issues relevant to young people. The revised National Youth Information Framework also reflects improvements in the information available, and is designed to provide a comprehensive set of indicators across a range of dimensions that will help monitor the health and factors influencing the health and wellbeing of young Australians.

The National Youth Information Framework consists of three tiers: ‘Health status and outcomes’, ‘Factors influencing health and wellbeing’, and ‘Health system performance’ and a number of dimensions within each tier. For example, there are four dimensions within the ‘Health status and outcomes’ tier: health conditions, human function, life expectancy and wellbeing, and deaths. Socioeconomic, environmental, community, person-related factors and health behaviours are included in the tier ‘Factors influencing health and wellbeing’. Since most areas covered under the person-related factors dimension have no national data, they have been incorporated into the health behaviours dimension in this report.

### Box 1: National Youth Information Framework

<b>Tier 1: Health status and outcomes</b>				
How healthy are young Australians? Is it the same for everyone? Where is the most opportunity for improvement?				
<b>Life expectancy and wellbeing</b>	<b>Human function</b>	<b>Health conditions</b>	<b>Deaths</b>	
Broad measures of physical, mental and social wellbeing of individuals and other derived indicators such as disability adjusted life expectancy	Alterations to body structure or function (impairment), activities (activity limitation) and participation (restrictions in participation)	Prevalence of disease, disorder, injury or trauma or other health-related states	Age-specific and/or condition-specific mortality rates	
<b>Tier 2: Factors influencing health and wellbeing</b>				
Are the factors determining young people’s health changing for the better? Are they the same for everyone? Where and for whom are they changing?				
<b>Environmental factors</b>	<b>Socioeconomic factors</b>	<b>Community capacity</b>	<b>Health behaviours</b>	<b>Person-related factors</b>
Physical, chemical and biological factors such as air, water, food and soil quality resulting from chemical pollution and waste disposal	Socioeconomic factors such as education, employment, per capita expenditure on health and average weekly earnings	Characteristics of communities and families such as population density, age distribution, health literacy, housing, community support services and transport	Attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and behaviours, e.g. patterns of eating, physical activity, excess alcohol consumption and smoking	Genetic-related susceptibility to disease and other factors such as blood pressure, cholesterol levels and body weight
<b>Tier 3: Health system performance</b>				
How well is the health system performing in delivering quality health actions to improve the health of young Australians? Is it the same for everyone?				
<b>Effective</b>	<b>Appropriate</b>		<b>Efficient</b>	
Care, intervention or action achieves desired outcome	Care, intervention or action provided is relevant to the client’s needs and based on established standards		Achieves desired results with most cost-effective use of resources	
<b>Responsive</b>	<b>Accessible</b>		<b>Safe</b>	
Service provides respect for persons and is client orientated, including respect for dignity, confidentiality, participation in choices, promptness, quality of amenities, access to social support networks and choice of provider	Ability of people to obtain health care at the right place and right time irrespective of income, physical location and cultural background		The avoidance or reduction to acceptable limits of actual or potential harm from health care management or the environment in which health care is delivered	
<b>Continuous</b>	<b>Capable</b>		<b>Sustainable</b>	
Ability to provide uninterrupted, coordinated care or service across programs, practitioners, organisations and levels over time	An individual’s or service’s capacity to provide a health service based on skills and knowledge		System’s or organisation’s capacity to provide infrastructure such as workforce, facilities and equipment, and to be innovative and respond to emerging needs (research, monitoring)	

Note: Based on the National Health Performance Framework (NHPC 2001).

## Report structure

There are six major parts to this report. Key statistics addressing the indicators are also presented under 'Snapshot of health and wellbeing of young Australians', following the Executive Summary.

The first part has provided an introduction to the report, the indicators and the reporting framework and gives a description of the population characteristics of young people in Australia. The remaining parts of the report are structured closely following the headings of the various tiers and dimensions of the National Youth Information Framework presented in Box 1.

Part 2 of the report examines health status and outcomes of young people, including information on overall health status, disability, mental health, injury, chronic disease, communicable diseases, oral health and mortality.

Part 3 of the report looks at a number of broader factors influencing young people's health. These include: health behaviours such as physical activity, body weight, nutrition, sun protection, substance use and sexual and reproductive health; community factors including family capacity, community support and legal and justice issues; socioeconomic factors such as education, employment and income; and environmental factors.

While the majority of young people are faring well, as evidenced by rapid declines in mortality over the last two decades, not all are doing so well. Information on the health and wellbeing of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, young people from rural and regional Australia, and young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds have been included in the report where possible, in order to explore some important differences in the experiences of these groups of young people.

This report also includes a feature chapter on young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Part 4, which brings together the information on young Indigenous Australians dispersed throughout the report and also further explores issues affecting the health and wellbeing of this population group.

Part 5 discusses aspects of health system performance in terms of its effectiveness, efficiency, appropriateness, responsiveness, accessibility, safety, capability, sustainability and continuity. This part of the report includes a limited number of indicators used to measure some of these components, on the basis of their relevance to young people, and the availability of data for this population group.

Part 6 of the report identifies areas where information is currently lacking and discusses new data developments that are relevant to young people.

## 1.2 Young people in Australia: an overview

### Demographic characteristics of young people in Australia

This section provides information about the demographic characteristics of young people in Australia aged 12–24 years, including the size, composition, regional distribution and cultural diversity (Indigenous and overseas-born) of this population. All of these characteristics relate to young people's health status and the factors influencing their health and wellbeing.

In June 2006, there were approximately 3.7 million young people (1.9 million males and 1.8 million females) in Australia, representing 18% of the total population.

**Table 1.1: Distribution of young people in Australia aged 12–24 years, by age and sex, June 2006**

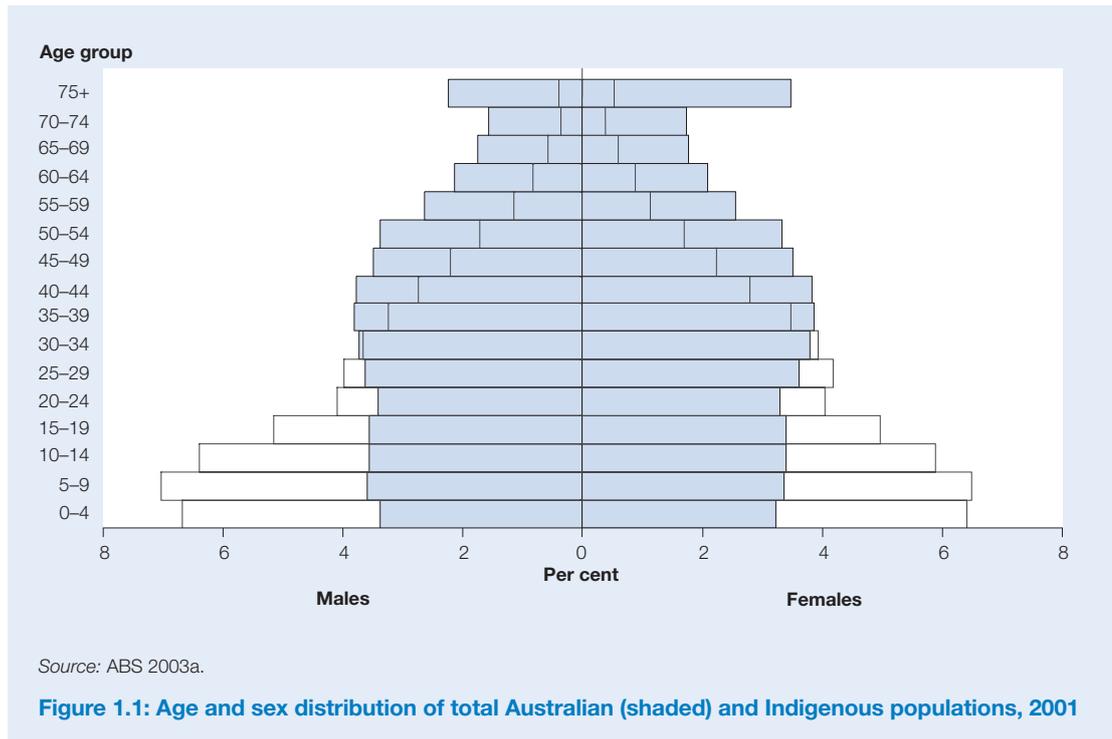
	Number	Per cent
<b>Age group</b>		
12–14 years	840,079	22.7
15–19 years	1,405,419	38.0
20–24 years	1,453,429	39.3
<b>Sex</b>		
Males	1,899,867	51.4
Females	1,801,066	48.7
<b>Total young people</b>	<b>3,698,927</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: ABS various years.

- Of all young people in Australia in 2006, 23% were aged between 12 and 14 years and 38% were aged 15–19 years. Combined, those aged 12–19 years comprised 61% of young people in Australia aged 12–24 years.
- There was a slightly higher proportion of males compared to females (51% compared to 49%).
- Of all Australians in 2006, 4.1% were aged 12–14 years, 6.8% were aged 15–19 years and 7.1% were aged 20–24 years.

### Age and sex distribution of all Australians and Indigenous Australians

In 2001, there were 116,698 Indigenous young people aged 12–24 years, making up 3.4% of all young people in Australia and less than 1% of all people in Australia.



- Compared to the Australian population pyramid, the Indigenous population pyramid has a much broader base and a narrow apex. This reflects the high birth rate and high death rates among the Indigenous population, especially in the mid-adult and older age groups. A relatively small proportion survives to ages above 50 years. The median age (the mark at which half the population is older and half is younger) of the Australian population in 2001 was 35 years and for the Indigenous population it was 20 years.
- In contrast, the Australian population indicates low birth rates, low death rates at all ages and a high proportion of people surviving to older ages.
- Young people made up 26% of the total Indigenous population in 2001, while the proportion of all young people in Australia in the whole population was 18%.

**Table 1.2: Distribution of young people in Australia aged 15–24 years, by regional status, June 2005**

Region of residence	Number	Per cent
Major Cities	1,928,124	68.4
Inner Regional	552,620	19.6
Outer Regional	256,108	9.1
Remote	38,909	1.4
Very Remote	25,909	0.9
All regions <sup>(a)</sup>	2,801,670	99.4
<b>Total young people aged 15–24 years</b>	<b>2,819,834</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(a) Excludes migratory and 'Other Territories'.

Source: ABS various years.

- In 2005, 68% of young people lived in Major Cities, 20% in Inner Regional areas and 9% in Outer Regional areas. Those living in Remote and Very Remote areas accounted for just over 2% of all young people.

**Table 1.3: Overseas-born young people in Australia aged 15–24 years, June 2006**

Overseas-born young people	Number	Per cent
From mainly English-speaking countries	152,377	5.3
From mainly non-English speaking countries	288,320	10.1
<i>Total overseas-born young people</i>	<i>455,443</i>	<i>15.9</i>
<b>Total young people aged 15–24 years</b>	<b>2,858,848</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: ABS 2007a.

- Young people aged 15–24 years born overseas represented 16% of young Australians in this age group (2.2% of the total population) in 2006. This figure does not include young people born to overseas-born parents, but does include, for example, young people who are overseas students and long-term residents of Australia. Around two-thirds of overseas-born young people were from mainly non-English speaking countries. The most common countries of birth were China, Philippines, India, Viet Nam, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Indonesia. Of those born in English-speaking countries, more than three-quarters came from New Zealand or the United Kingdom (ABS 2007a).

**Table 1.4: Distribution of young Indigenous Australians aged 15–24 years, by region, 2001**

Region	Number	Per cent
Major Cities	25,923	30.9
Inner Regional	16,627	19.8
Outer Regional	18,737	22.3
Remote	7,408	8.8
Very Remote	15,294	18.2
<b>Australia</b>	<b>83,988</b>	<b>100.0</b>

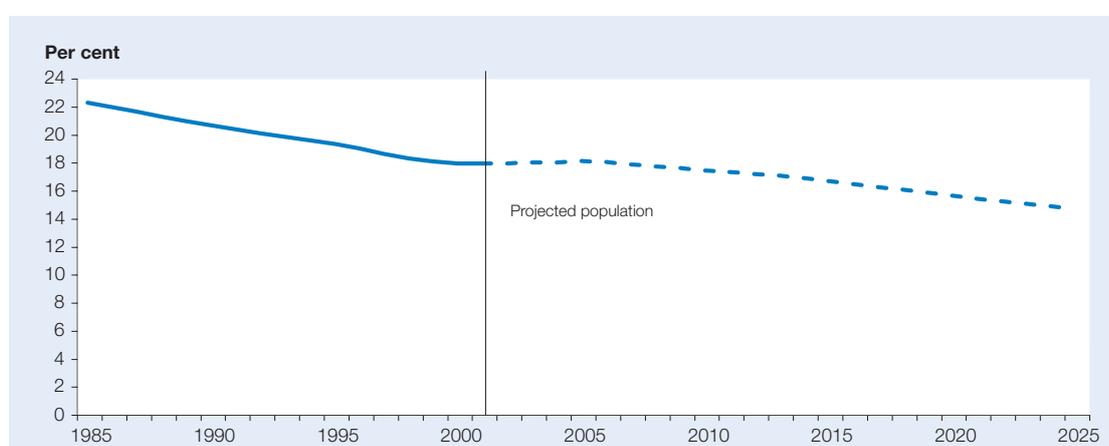
Source: ABS various years.

- Most young Indigenous people aged 15–24 years lived in Major Cities and Inner and Outer Regional areas. Indigenous young people accounted for over 50% of all young people in Australia living in Very Remote areas.

### Interstate movement

Young people are more likely than others to move interstate. In 2005–06, the largest single group to move interstate was those aged 20–24 years. For young people, the most popular destination was Queensland, where the net gain for the period was just over 4,900 young people aged 15–24 years (ABS 2007a).

### Past and future population trends



Source: ABS 2003d, various years.

**Figure 1.2: Young people in Australia as a proportion of the total Australian population, 1985–2025**

- The proportion of young people aged 12–24 years in the population declined in the 1990s, from 21% in 1990 to 18% of the Australian population in 1999. This is a reflection of the decrease in the fertility rate that occurred since the 1970s and increased life expectancy. The number of young people also declined over the same period, from 3,506,897 to 3,400,309 young people. Although the number of young people has increased since 2000 (from 3,417,272 in 2000 to 3,698,927 in 2006), the proportion of young people in the Australian population remained steady at approximately 18%.
- The proportion of young people in 2025 is projected to fall to about 15% of the total projected Australian population.

The projected decrease in the proportion of young people in the general population has implications for the growth of the economically active population compared to the dependent population, particularly at older ages.

### The families young people live in

A supportive and stable family environment in which young people grow up is important for their healthy development and social and emotional wellbeing. Families have the main responsibility for the care of young people until they become independent adults. Family is where young people gain their basic social skills including building and maintaining healthy relationships with friends, other family members and the wider community (Hemphill et al. 2004; Pitman et al. 2003).

With the changing social attitudes towards marriage and fertility choices, the composition of Australian families has changed over the last 3 decades. The result has been an increasing diversity of family types in which Australia's young people are raised (AIHW 2006a).

Despite this change, the majority of young people still live in couple families. The proportion of young people living in couple parent families remained fairly stable between 1992 and 2003 with 81% and 80% respectively living in such families. Over the same period, the proportion of young people living in lone-parent families was similarly stable (19%–20% respectively). The proportion of young people in lone-parent families living with their mother increased from 75% to 80% (ABS 2004d).

**Table 1.5: Number and proportion of young people in Australia by family structure, 2003**

Family structure	Number ('000)	Per cent
<b>Couple families</b>	<b>2,101.1</b>	<b>80.3</b>
Children aged 12–14 years	624.6	23.9
Dependent student aged 15–24 years	848.8	32.4
Non-dependent aged 15–24 years	627.7	24.0
<b>Lone-parent families</b>	<b>517.1</b>	<b>19.8</b>
<i>Lone mother</i>	<i>414.0</i>	<i>15.9</i>
Children aged 12–14 years	145.8	5.6
Dependent student aged 15–24 years	153.6	5.9
Non-dependent aged 15–24 years	114.6	4.4
<i>Lone father</i>	<i>103.1</i>	<i>3.9</i>
Children aged 12–14 years	31.1	1.2
Dependent student aged 15–24 years	34.7	1.3
Non-dependent aged 15–24 years	37.3	1.4
<b>Total young people in all family types</b>	<b>2,618.2</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: ABS 2004d.

At the 2001 Census, approximately 786,000 young people aged 15–24 years did not live with their parents (30%). Of these, 34% were married or in a de facto relationship, 5% were in lone-parent families, 27% lived in group households, 15% lived with related individuals (other than their parents), 8% were living with an unrelated family and 11% lived alone (ABS 2004a).

## Marriage, cohabitation and divorce

The marriage rate among young people in Australia has declined over time. The rising median age at which men and women first marry and the noticeable increase in cohabitation has contributed to fewer marriages among young people in recent years.

**Table 1.6: Median age at first marriage for selected years**

Sex	1970	1980	1985	1991	1996	2001	2005
Males	23.4	24.2	25.4	26.7	27.6	28.7	30.0
Females	21.1	21.9	23.2	24.5	25.7	26.9	28.0

Source: ABS 2006k.

- Between 1970 and 2005, the median age at first marriage for Australian males and females increased by almost 7 years.

According to the 2001 Census, approximately 4% of young people in Australia aged 15–24 years were in a registered marriage and a further 7% were in a de facto marriage. Among young Indigenous people, 5% were in a registered marriage and 9% were in a de facto marriage. The corresponding proportions among overseas-born young people in 2001 were 6% and 3% respectively (ABS 2004a).

**Table 1.7: Age-specific rate of first marriage for selected years (rate per 1,000 people)**

Sex and age	1976	1982	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005 <sup>(a)</sup>
Males							
≤19 <sup>(b)</sup>	9.9	5.0	2.2	1.5	1.0	0.9	0.5
20–24	122.6	85.0	58.6	43.3	29.1	23.1	15.6
Females							
≤19 <sup>(b)</sup>	49.0	28.1	13.5	8.0	5.1	4.2	2.3
20–24	187.5	136.9	104.3	78.0	53.4	42.3	28.9

(a) Calculated using all marriages (including first marriages and remarriages).

(b) For the purpose of calculating rates for this row, only the populated aged 5 to 19 years have been included in the denominator.

Source: ABS 2005d.

- In 1976, the rate of first marriage among young males under age 20 was about 10 per 1,000 males and in 2004 the rate was less than 1 per 1,000. Among females under age 20, the rate of marriage in 1976 was 49 per 1,000 females and in 2004 it was less than 5 per 1,000.
- Similarly, the marriage rate among those aged 20–24 years declined between 1976 and 2004, from 123 per 1,000 to 19 per 1,000 for males, and from 188 per 1,000 to 33 per 1,000 for females.

The proportion of young people aged 15–24 years in a de facto relationship increased from 5% in 1991 to 7% in 2001.

Few divorces occur at younger ages. The age-specific divorce rate among married young people fluctuated over time but increased between 1991 and 2001. For males, the rate increased from 10.6 per 1,000 married males aged 24 years and younger in 1991 to 13.6 per 1,000 in 2001. The respective corresponding rates for females aged 24 years and younger were 16.1 and 17.4 per 1,000 married females (ABS 2006f).

## Fertility

Over the last quarter of a century, the total fertility rate (TFR) in Australia has fallen below the replacement fertility level of 2.1 births per woman and in 2005 it was 1.8 births (ABS 2006d). The TFR is the number of babies a woman could expect to bear during her lifetime if she experienced the current age-specific fertility rate throughout her child-bearing age. The TFR appeared to have stabilised between 1998 and 2005 (AIHW 2005b), but there is some speculation that it may be rising (McDonald 2005).

Relatively few young people have children before they reach age 25. The median age of mothers at birth in 2005 was 30.7 years, a substantial increase from 25.4 years in 1971, which was the lowest median age at birth recorded (ABS 2006d). In 2005, the median age at first birth among Indigenous women was 24.5 years, which is similar to the median age for all women in the early 1970s (ABS 2006d).

**Table 1.8: Fertility rate among young people, selected years (rate per 1,000 females)**

Age (years)	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
15–19	27.6	22.8	22.1	20.4	17.7	16.0
20–24	107.0	95.8	79.4	67.1	59.2	52.9

Source: ABS 2006d.

- The age-specific fertility rates among 15–19 and 20–24 year old women have fallen over the last two decades, to 16 births per 1,000 and 53 births per 1,000 for women aged 15–19 years and 20–24 years respectively in 2005.

In the same year, the age-specific fertility rate among young Indigenous women was 69 and 122 births per 1,000 women aged 15–19 years and 20–24 years respectively (ABS 2006d). For those aged 15–19 years, this is a rate 4.3 times as high as that of non-Indigenous females, and for those aged 20–24 years it is 2.3 times as high as that of non-Indigenous females.