

“It shows we are serious”: Young people in Australia discuss climate justice protests as a mechanism for climate change advocacy and action

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Abstract

Objective: This article aims to understand young Australians' perspectives of climate justice protests as a mechanism for climate change advocacy and action.

Method: A qualitatively led online survey was conducted with $n=511$ young Australians (15–24 years). Open-text questions prompted for young people's perceptions of the appeal, accessibility, and effectiveness of climate justice protests in climate change action. A reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to construct themes from the data.

Results: Participants perceived that protests were an important mechanism for young people to draw attention to the need for climate action. However, they also stated that the clear messages that were sent to governments via protests did not necessarily lead to government action. Young people perceived that there were some structural issues that prevented them from taking part in these types of activities, including living far away from protests, not being accessible for young people with disabilities, and limited support from family members and/or friends to participate.

Conclusions and implications for public health: Climate justice activities engage young people and give them hope. The public health community has a role to play in supporting access to these activities and championing young people as genuine political actors in addressing the climate crisis.

Key words: climate crisis, climate justice, advocacy, young people, public health

Background

The climate crisis has been described as one of the greatest dangers to current and future global public health.^{1,2} A range of individual and collective advocacy efforts have embedded climate action into global frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals,³ and multiple climate summits have been convened to discuss a range of strategies for reducing climate change and its harms.^{4,5} However, political decision-makers have been slow to develop effective strategies to address the range of socio-cultural, commercial, and political factors that contribute to climate change and its outcomes, including those pertaining to public health.⁶ There are increasing calls for governments to recognise that young people have unique perspectives on the

climate crisis and that they should have greater engagement in the decisions that are made about action on climate change.⁷ They are also the group who are most likely to experience the future impacts of government inaction on the climate crisis,⁸ and are well placed to challenge governments to address gaps in climate policy and demand “*ambitious climate action*” [p. 78].⁹ Researchers have stressed the importance of actively involving young people as political and democratic actors in responses to the climate crisis,^{10–12} including that young people are an “*untapped reservoir for changemaking*” [p. 78] in relation to the decisions that are made about climate.⁹ Creating mechanisms to engage young people in political responses to the climate crisis are also consistent with public health principles which recognise the need to create systems that “*encourage public engagement, contestation, and scrutiny of the status quo*” [p. 475].¹³

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One way that young people may be involved in climate action and decision making is through their engagement in environmental citizenship.¹⁴ Proposals to engage young people in environmental citizenship have included lowering the voting age to 16 to protect young people's rights to have a say on climate policies and decisions,¹⁵ developing citizen science initiatives, and embedding climate education in school curriculums to encourage broader and more critical thinking about climate change action.¹⁶ In developing such curriculums, Mayes and Holdsworth [2022]¹² emphasise the need for educators to deliver hope-focused education, while also harnessing feelings of grief and fear to help drive meaningful, non-tokenistic climate action. Young people are also using global networks to develop national and international responses to climate change, and have used a range of mechanisms (including legal action) to spread awareness and education, and call for government and industry to take responsibility for the climate crisis and enact urgent responses.^{17–19}

However, the most publicly visible mechanism for young people to have their voices heard about the climate crisis has been the youth climate justice movement, including initiatives such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future.^{20–22} Climate justice protests have increased public support for climate action and have pressured decision makers and other influential players to take meaningful action to address climate change.²³ They have also created intergenerational influence, with adults increasingly showing their support for these initiatives.²⁴ Some suggest that climate justice protests may also help with young people's experiences of eco-anxiety by helping to strengthen generational bonds, providing a powerful support system for young people to share experiences of climate frustration, anxiety and grief,²⁵ establishing a sense of solidarity and community,²⁶ and by empowering young people through the traditional and social media coverage that these protests receive.²¹ What is less clear from current research is how young people themselves conceptualise climate protests as a mechanism for civic engagement and advocacy in relation to climate action.

The following study builds on other published research that has stressed the importance and strengths of youth-led responses to the climate crisis.^{11,27,28} This includes recognising that young people are agents of change in relation to the climate crisis, and that they should be urgently engaged in policy making and governance activities.²⁷ Case studies of youth-led climate organisations show the benefits of empowering, educating, and connecting young people to drive climate action, but also the role that such organisations play in creating a discourse that young people are capable of engaging as genuine political actors in addressing the climate crisis.¹¹ The research was guided by three questions.

1. How do young people conceptualise the role of climate justice protests as a mechanism for climate action?
2. What are the key barriers and facilitators to young people's participation in these activities?
3. Do young people perceive that climate justice protests have had an impact on government responses to climate change?

Public health researchers argue that helping the public to raise its voice about important population health issues, as well as developing social movements for action and utilising human rights frameworks, are crucial for gaining political momentum in relation to important global public health issues.^{29,30} As such, this study also considers how

the public health community could further support young people to be engaged in climate advocacy and justice initiatives.

Methods

Approach

The data presented in this paper were part of a broader online qualitatively led survey investigating young Australians' perceptions of climate change. Online qualitative surveys offer many advantages, including being an easily accessible method of gathering both richly detailed and focused data, and providing flexibility for both researchers and participants.^{31,32} The focus of a qualitative survey is not on representation for the purposes of generalisation, but instead on gathering "*rich, complex and textured explanations*" [p. 30].³³ However, qualitative surveys do not allow researchers to prompt for more detail about the reasons why participants may respond the way they do (as in interview studies). Young people were selected as the population for the study given calls from the global public health community to platform the voices of young people, particularly regarding the climate crisis.⁸ Low-risk ethics approval was received from the Deakin University Health Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG-H 55_2020).

Sample and recruitment

Young people aged 15–24 years (the United Nations³⁴ defined age range for 'youth') were invited to participate via an online panel study through survey hosting company Qualtrics. Quotas were set to ensure that there was a relatively even split between genders and age groups (15–18 and 19–24 years). Soft quotas were in place to ensure that the sample was distributed across Australia, in line with population density (e.g., most of the sample came from the Eastern states). Given that online qualitative surveys provide shorter insights rather than depth of information, the study aimed to recruit approximately $n=500$ participants to ensure that a varied array of experiences were included^{35,36} and to collect adequate information to answer the study research questions.

Qualtrics were provided with the study information and the survey link. Qualtrics sent the survey link to young people aged 18–25 years and to adult caregivers of 15–17 year olds. These individuals were signed up to panel companies to receive such participation opportunities in Australia and met the participant eligibility criteria. Adult caregivers of 15–17 year olds were asked to consider the study with the young person in their household. Participants followed the link to the survey where they were provided with the Plain Language Statement, then asked to select 'I agree' to confirm their consent.

Data collection

Data for the study were collected between July and August 2020. The survey was piloted with 25 participants to assess suitability and comprehension of questions, and that the survey could be completed within 10–15 minutes. A total of $n=537$ participants completed the study, with $n=26$ participants removed following data cleaning and removal of nonsensical responses. In relation to this paper, participants were asked the following:

- Socio-demographic questions (age, gender, state of residence, and level of schooling).

Table 1: General characteristics and climate attitudes of young Australians aged 15–24 years.

Characteristics	n=	%
Age		
15–18 years	248	48.5
19–21 years	129	25.3
22–24 years	134	26.2
Gender		
Female	265	51.9
Male	233	45.6
Non-binary	11	2.2
Prefer not to say	2	0.3
Geographic location		
Victoria	186	36.4
New South Wales	134	26.2
Queensland	68	13.3
Western Australia	47	9.2
South Australia	47	9.2
Tasmania	13	2.5
Australian Capital Territory	10	2.0
Northern Territory	6	1.2
Highest level of education		
High school	315	61.6
University degree or diploma	128	25.1
TAFE degree or diploma	64	12.5
Other	4	0.8
Climate change is a 'real' phenomenon		
Strongly agree	377	73.8
Agree	111	21.7
Disagree	11	2.2
Strongly disagree	12	2.3
Sources of information about climate change^a		
Social media	369	72.2
School/teachers	285	55.7
Websites	240	47.0
Newspapers/television	234	45.8
Family/friends	215	42.1
Scientists	166	32.5
Other	4	0.8

^aCould select more than one category.

- Discrete questions about whether they agreed whether climate change was a 'real' phenomenon, and their main source of information about climate change.
- Open-text questions about whether they perceived that climate justice protests led by young people had drawn attention to climate change, whether these protests had made a difference to government action on climate change, and how they could be more involved in having a say about climate change.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's [2021] reflexive approach to thematic analysis³⁷ was used to construct themes from the data. The survey data were read and re-read, and initial team discussions focused on broad and interesting ideas from the data. Categories were developed to group data. Preliminary themes were then reviewed and reflected on by the team and were then refined and defined. Reflexivity practices (such as

journaling about data and frequent discussions with the research team) were used to ensure rigour and trustworthiness of data interpretation.

Results

General characteristics

Table 1 provides a summary of the characteristics of the sample. Participants were aged between 15 and 24 years old (mean 19.3 years), and slightly more participants identified as being female ($n=265$, 51.9%). The vast majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that climate change was a real phenomenon ($n=488$, 95.5%), and about three quarters ($n=369$, 72.2%) stated that they received information about climate change from social media.

Theme one: protests as a mechanism for young people to draw attention to the need for climate action

Young people stated that protests were an important and highly visible mechanism for raising awareness and drawing attention to the need for climate action. Some participants stated one of the benefits of the visibility of protests was that it led to significant coverage on social and traditional media—“they raise awareness in the media,” and “because it is seen on TV and social media.” Other participants described the importance of protests for “educating the population,” including the ability of protests to promote critical thinking about how behaviours and actions impact the climate crisis.

Many participants discussed that raising awareness and media attention about climate change could directly contribute to the policy decisions about climate action. Participants were hopeful and optimistic that the government would pay attention to, and act upon, a cause that young people and the general public cared about:

“It's forcing the media to focus on [and] to bring publicity to the issue of climate change. It's forcing the public to think about how climate change is affecting the future of the younger generation. It's forcing the government to listen to the people, to change the laws and restrictions on use of plastics and the reduction of pollution into our environment.”—17-year-old female, Western Australia

Some participants stated that the sheer numbers of young people who attended climate justice protests sent a clear message to government about the importance of the issue for young people. The combined effect of large crowds and regular, consistent dissent via mass protests meant that the government could not ignore young people's concerns about climate change. Participants stated that because the government was reluctant to educate themselves about the need for action, protestors needed to make sure that they were specific about what they wanted decision makers to act upon:

“Because the government won't listen to them if they aren't specific about what policies and procedures they want to see. The government will not educate themselves about how to stop climate change, so we as protesters need to be specific.”—18-year-old female, Victoria

Theme two: visibility does not necessarily lead to government action

While some participants acknowledged the importance of protests and other climate justice activities such as school strikes, they were less convinced that these initiatives had a significant impact on government willingness to develop strong responses to climate.

This was not necessarily because of the protests themselves but because of government unwillingness to listen, engage, and act:

“Where is the change in behaviour? The protests are good but no one is listening.”—17-year-old female, Victoria

Participants provided a number of examples of government failure to act on climate change, including dismissive comments from government officials about young people’s engagement in climate justice activities:

“I remember seeing a school minister or someone similar saying what’s more important is those high school kids staying in school and getting an education. I felt like he was totally deflecting the importance of climate change. There wouldn’t need to be mass protests if more was being done.”—22-year-old female, New South Wales

Other participants stated that despite engaging in protests to highlight the need for climate action, young people were frustrated that the government did not seem prepared to act or even listen to the views of young people. Participant responses highlighted the power disparities between young people who called for climate action, and the government who ultimately had the final say on legislation around practices that harm the environment and exacerbate climate change. Some young people highlighted that the government rarely listened to public opinion, with a number of participants specifically linking this to a lack of care shown by the government toward climate change:

“Government ain’t gonna bother listening, they don’t care enough.”—16-year-old female, New South Wales

*“The government doesn’t care about climate change. Thanks Scomo!”*¹—18-year-old male, Western Australia

Some participants clearly identified the current power disparities between young people and the government, stating that young people were rarely taken seriously by government, in part because they were unable to vote, or were seen as being too idealistic by governments. Participants also highlighted their lack of agency and power over the decisions that were made about climate action, in part compounded by their age and associated lack of political influence or power:

“There’s no reason why youth protests would make a difference since the youth aren’t the ones with any political or decision making power.”—16-year-old female, Victoria

While some stated that young people raising their voices was important, others perceived that ultimately a culture of vested political interests meant that government was much more likely to respond to the needs of powerful industries rather than young people:

“Because from my experience, nobody listens to children or their opinions, so it is practically impossible to change anything unless adults are convinced. The government aren’t going to do anything because a lot of the money they get comes from the carbon emitting companies.”—16-year-old male, Victoria

Theme three: negative perceptions of protests can damage the climate justice movement

Some participants perceived that climate justice protests could have a negative impact on engaging government and the broader public in discussions about climate change and could have unintended consequences for achieving climate change action. These young people perceived that the disruptive nature of mass protests could annoy and create inconvenience for the general public and lead them to form negative views about climate action:

“The protests are annoying everyone and that’s fuelling anti-climate change rhetoric which is powering the government to not act.”—21-year-old male, Queensland

A small number of young people stated that protests were disrespectful to the government and that there were more effective ways of engaging government and the general public in discussions about the need for action. Some participants suggested utilising other strategies in order to prevent public outrage about the disruptions caused by protests:

“They are doing the protest wrong. Instead of causing inconvenience to [the] public, start fundraising, by donations, going around [to] cars with cans, giving ways to reduce climate change, etc. Not just yelling and causing frustrations towards [the] public. It doesn’t help, two wrongs don’t make a right.”—21-year-old male, Victoria

Other participants discussed the importance of communicating a clear goal and/or specific demands when engaging in climate justice protests. While protests were considered important, a few participants stated they needed to be backed up with well-communicated goals and outcomes that the public and government could work towards.

A few participants cast doubt on the credibility of young people attending climate justice protests. These participants questioned how genuine young people were in attending climate justice events, perceiving that young people attended these protests *“to get out of school,”* or *“spend time with friends, protesting about an issue that probably doesn’t even affect them.”* Participants described the protests as a waste of time and resources, stating that young people were not aware of the truth behind what they were protesting for and were participating only because their friends were or to be viewed as *“social media warriors.”*

Theme four: systemic and structural barriers to youth climate justice activities

There were a range of structural factors that participants described as preventing both their own and other young people’s ability to participate in climate justice protests. A key barrier was the lack of access to protests, including living far away from mass protests that were often held in major cities. A number of young people from regional and rural areas commented on the lack of events in their local communities:

“I would very much like to attend one of these events, however I live in a small regional area where there are no protests.”—16-year-old female, South Australia

Lack of access to affordable transport to get to protests posed a major barrier for young people from these communities. Having spare time to participate in climate justice events was also a significant barrier to engagement, with school, work, and competing priorities all

¹“Scomo” is the colloquial term for Scott Morrison, who was the Australian Prime Minister at the time of the study.

restricting the ability for young people to become more civically engaged in climate justice protests:

“I am a full-time student and work too. So I am always busy.”—17-year-old female, South Australia

A small number of participants described feeling uncomfortable with attending protests, with some describing that mental health issues or physical disabilities meant they found it difficult to safely negotiate large crowds:

“They are great, but as somebody with a disability, I’m physically unable to safely attend.”—19-year-old female, Victoria

Young people also described having mixed support from family members and friends to attend these events. Some younger participants stated that their parents did not support them attending these types of events, while others stated that, although they wanted to participate in these events, their peers were not interested in being involved:

“None of my peers come to the events and I am not brave enough to go alone.”—22-year-old female, New South Wales

Sometimes protesting simply did not align with how young people wanted to engage in advocacy and action for climate change. Some young people stated that while they wanted to be involved in climate justice activities and do their part to address climate change, they did not believe that protesting was the best way to create change. These young people suggested alternative actions that they felt more comfortable engaging in, such as signing petitions, or taking individualised practical actions:

“I didn’t feel the need to protest, I know that climate change is serious and I am taking it seriously. I could protest but I didn’t want to, instead I put in place measures I can do to reduce my carbon footprint.”—21-year-old male, Victoria

A final group of participants simply stated that they lacked motivation to engage in climate justice activities, stating that they were *“uninterested,” “lazy,”* or *“just want to live comfortably while I’m alive.”*

Theme five: developing avenues for young people to engage in climate action as a mechanism for hope

Finally, young people stated that climate justice protests were a mechanism of hope. Many participants described how protests were tools for achieving not just action on climate change, but for achieving positive outcomes such as *“empowering”* and *“inspiring”* young people and creating a sense of solidarity. Participants described how protests created a feeling of unity with other like-minded young people and created a social space for different groups to contribute to climate change advocacy:

“I fully support them. My friends and I have all been to these protests.”—18-year-old female, New South Wales

This sense of collective responsibility for climate change and its solutions was also discussed in relation to a common participant perspective that when communities were united about an issue, they could be an effective force for driving policy change:

“I was motivated by the idea that so many people were coming together for one cause, united in their mission to raise awareness among the public about this issue and take a stance against the government’s damaging policies.”—20-year-old male, South Australia

Participants were able to describe a mix of both traditional and contemporary strategies other than protests for increasing their engagement in climate change advocacy and action. They recommended a range of innovative engagement activities, including hosting events, joining online movements, using internet platforms to connect with decision makers on public forums about climate action, and:

“...being provided with a stage that allows us to speak out sooner rather than later.”—18-year-old male, Tasmania

Young people also expressed the desire to be involved in high-level discussions about climate change, including through high profile media events and activities. Participants were strong advocates of the need for leadership opportunities for young people and formal discussions with those in positions of power:

“The government should ask young people for their opinion on things more often through incentivised surveys, and encourage events to be organised where youth can share thoughts and ideas, and people in power can be part of those discussions.”—18-year-old female, Victoria

Some participants described the value of social media for spreading public awareness and impacting government discussions and decisions around climate change. Participants also commented that engaging in climate justice activities across social media platforms provided an important alternative for people who were not able to physically attend climate justice protests:

“Share their ideas with everyone, you don’t have to join a protest to show that you care. You have social media, one of the strongest tools in human history. Use that to your advantage.”—17-year-old female, South Australia

Discussion and implications for public health

This study aimed to understand young Australians’ perspectives of climate justice protests as a mechanism for climate change advocacy and action. In doing so, we also aimed to provide suggestions about how public health might be able to work with, support and champion young people as legitimate political and democratic actors in climate justice activities and responses to the climate crisis, and to overcome any barriers that they may face in engaging in these activities.

Overall, young people perceived that climate justice protests were a highly visible form of advocacy. Climate justice protests drew attention to climate change (particularly through coverage on social and traditional media platforms), raised awareness of the need for climate action, and demonstrated the strength of community sentiment about the need for climate action to decision makers. These outcomes can be observed across other studies exploring outcomes of climate change protests.^{20,23,38} While social media may not be a practical or safe setting for all young people, it was recommended as an alternative mechanism for engagement in climate action, including raising awareness about climate justice activities through protest footage and messages.²¹ It is clear that protests are an important advocacy and activism mechanism for young people and have also been observed across a range of important public health issues, including gun control.³⁹ However, as with other studies exploring young people’s perceptions of responses to climate change,⁴⁰ there is a clear tension between young people wanting urgent climate action, and their perceptions of the willingness of governments to act.

While there was frustration about the lack of government motivation to act on climate change, climate justice protests appeared to empower many young people and give hope. Fostering hope is important for driving action on the climate crisis in the face of structural and institutional opposition; for creating trust and unity among group members, and for encouraging pro-environmental behaviours.⁴¹ While climate justice and other related environmental citizenship activities may act as a mechanism for spurring optimism around the success of climate justice movement, ultimately, as Hickman and colleagues [2021, p. 864] argue, nations must engage in “*ethical, collective, policy-based action against climate change*” in order to protect the wellbeing of young people.⁴⁰ Public health organisations should aim to provide more effective forms of support that empower young people, actively listening to their needs and concerns, and helping to “*prepare young people with the strength they will need to face the impending threats of their future*” [p. 190].⁴²

There were a range of barriers and facilitators to participation in climate justice protests, which provide important information about the range of strategies that are needed to engage young people in climate justice activities. These barriers were often structural, with commonly described experiences including not living near protests, having no access to affordable transport to attend, or not being suitable for young people living with health problems or disabilities. A number of researchers have highlighted the importance of developing inclusive structures and mechanisms for engaging young people in climate change action.^{17,18} Working alongside young people to identify and overcome these barriers is key to empowering young people to engage in climate action.¹⁶

Many young people expressed an interest in being engaged in decision making about climate change. This provides evidence to support global calls for young people to be centred in discussions about decisions that impact their futures and to develop strategies to engage young people in civic action and policy decisions.^{7,8,43} However, to date, there have been very few efforts to practically explore how to challenge the structural factors that may prevent young people from having a political and democratic voice in climate decision-making.¹⁰ As Thomas and Daube [2023, p. 1] argue, “*the science and the planet are showing us that in many ways the window for transformational change is growing smaller at an alarming rate,*” with bold and brave new approaches needed to counter the threats posed by powerful vested interests.³⁰ Public health organisations have an important role to play in helping advocate to policy makers that young people should not only have a central role in decisions made about climate change (and other health related issues), but should be key influences in setting the agenda for these events. We would also note that too often young people are not invited to participate in or set the agenda for public health events about issues that directly impact them. This needs to change. Public health researchers and stakeholders should aim to collaborate with young people to develop empowering and effective strategies for participating in climate action across varied levels of engagement, including individual, community, and civic decision-making.

Finally, this study provides novel insights into how young people themselves view climate justice activities. It also provides a challenge to the public health community to regard young people as “*more than victims of the climate crisis; they are individuals capable of positive change, who must be protected, consulted, and allowed to become full partners in the climate conversation*” [p. 79].⁹ This

provides a broad starting point for future research and consultations with young people. Young people are diverse, and it will be important to understand how we may learn from different groups of young people. This includes First Nations young people, those from different age groups, geographic locations, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and with a range of (dis)abilities, as well as those with different political beliefs. The public health community has an important role to play in platforming the voices of young people in policy making spaces, providing opportunities for them to shape the discussion and agenda in relation to climate change, as well as advocating for the structural changes that are needed to embed young people’s perspectives and ideas in policy making processes.⁹

Conclusion

Young people perceive that climate justice protests produce positive outcomes, including awareness raising, individual and collective empowerment, and establishing a culture of unity and shared goals among young people about responses to the climate crisis. While climate justice protests may not be a form of engagement that is accessible or appealing to all young people, young people are clearly motivated to be engaged in action on the climate crisis. Public health advocates, decision makers, and other relevant stakeholders must work alongside young people to develop strategies to identify and overcome a variety of barriers to environmental citizenship and to civic engagement more broadly. Young people are key in addressing responses to the climate crisis and must be empowered to develop strategies to politically and democratically engage themselves and their peers in climate action, and to take a much-needed seat at the decision making table.

Ethical approval

This study required the participation of human subjects. Ethical approval was granted by Deakin University’s Human Ethics Advisory Group for the Faculty of Health (HEAG-H 55_2020).

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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