

## **“We deserve a say”: youth priorities for mental health and substance use research**

Felicity Duong<sup>1</sup>, Kate Ross<sup>1</sup>, Jessica Houston<sup>1</sup>, Emma Barrett<sup>1</sup>, Tanya Dearle<sup>2</sup>, Smrithi Ravindra<sup>2</sup>, Cheryl Ou<sup>2</sup>, Kirsty Rowlinson<sup>1</sup>, Marlee Bower<sup>1</sup>, Louise Birrell<sup>1</sup>, Katrina Prior<sup>1</sup>, Lucy Grummitt<sup>1</sup>, Chloe Conroy<sup>1</sup>, Anna Grager<sup>1</sup>, Maree Teesson<sup>1</sup>, Cath Chapman<sup>1</sup>, PREMISE/Matilda Centre Youth Advisory Board<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*The Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia*

<sup>2</sup>*The Matilda Centre Youth Advisory Board*

**Background:** The active involvement of young people in determining research priorities has the potential to improve the relevance and validity of research and contribute to improved health outcomes. Therefore, it is critical that new prevention efforts are efficiently targeted and align with the needs and priorities identified by young people. The Youth Priorities Project was co-produced by the PREMISE and Matilda Centre Youth Advisory Board (YAB) to seek Australian youth perspectives on research priorities for mental health and substance use prevention.

**Methods:** This co-produced project comprised three stages. Firstly, an online survey of N=653 young Australians (M age: 17.7yrs; 54% female, 29% male, 12% non-binary) was conducted. Secondly, a YAB member conducted focus groups involving a new cohort of N=7 participants. Lastly, YAB members convened for a workshop to establish a consensus on a list of top priorities and principles. A nominal group technique was used.

**Results:** In stage 1, over three-quarters (78%) of participants had lived experience with mental ill-health and/or alcohol or other drug use issue/s. The results strongly emphasised the need for increased investment in prevention, as well as addressing the full range of intersecting social and behavioural factors and their impacts on youth mental health. Stage 2 supported these findings and further underscored the need for changes within the healthcare system to ensure integrated, holistic, and accessible services to support young people’s needs. The final consensus workshop resulted in a list of top priorities and principles for mental health and substance use prevention research, which will be presented.

**Conclusion:** These findings will directly inform future prevention and early intervention research. This time-critical study not only provides valuable insights into youth perspectives on priorities for mental health and substance use research, but also represents an opportunity for young people to actively contribute to a mentally healthy future.