

**HEALTHY
NORTH COAST**

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NORTH COAST
An Australian Government Initiative

RESILIENCE SURVEY SUMMARY REPORT

Resilient Kids Program

May 2023



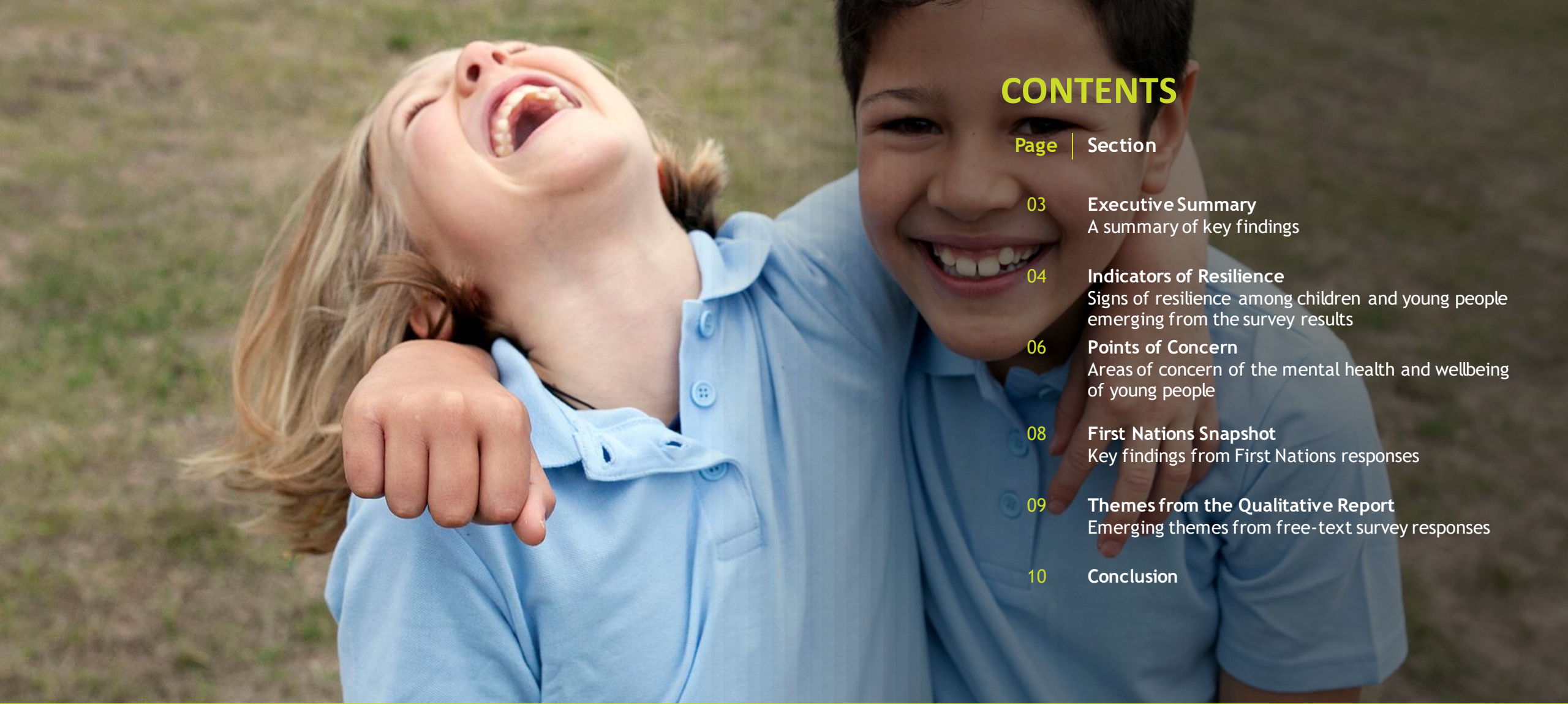
The Resilient Kids program is funded by Healthy North Coast and supported by a \$10 million grant from the National Emergency Management Agency. We acknowledge and thank the students, teachers, principals and staff of participating schools for their contribution to the 2022 Northern Rivers Resilience Survey. The Resilience Survey and the information in this summary report were delivered through our research partnership with Resilient Youth Australia Pty Ltd and the University of Adelaide.

For more information, visit hnc.org.au/resilient-kids or contact resilientkids@hnc.org.au

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands across our region, and pay our respect to Elders past, present and on their journey. We recognise these lands were never ceded and acknowledge the continuation of culture and connection to the land, sky and sea. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the Land's first peoples and honour the rich diversity of the oldest living cultures.





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Executive Summary

Resilience refers to the capacity of individuals to adapt positively in the face of challenging situations like natural disasters. It is a skill that can be learned and nurtured and has a protective effect on health and well-being. The 2022 floods in the Northern Rivers region presented unique difficulties for children and young people, impacting their physical health, mental well-being, and ability to learn. Understanding the factors that influence child resilience in the context of these floods is crucial. By identifying the specific needs of young people affected by the floods, we can develop support services and effective strategies to provide them with the assistance necessary to aid their recovery.

Administered by Resilient Youth Australia in collaboration with Healthy North Coast, the Resilience Survey was conducted in October and November 2022. With the participation of 6,611 young people from 75 Northern Rivers schools, this was the largest group to ever complete the Resilience Survey following a natural disaster.

The survey measured six aspects of wellbeing:

1. **Mental wellbeing**, including depressive and anxiety symptoms, frame of mind, trauma symptoms, and life satisfaction.
2. **Learner's mindset**, including factors related to educational engagement and resilience building.
3. **Physical wellbeing**, including diet, sleep, and exercise levels.

4. **Social environment**, including perceived levels of support at home, at school, and from peers.
5. **Social identity**, including perceived levels of trustworthiness, helpfulness, and responsibility.
6. **Safety and risk factors**, including frequency of bullying and the use of illicit substances.

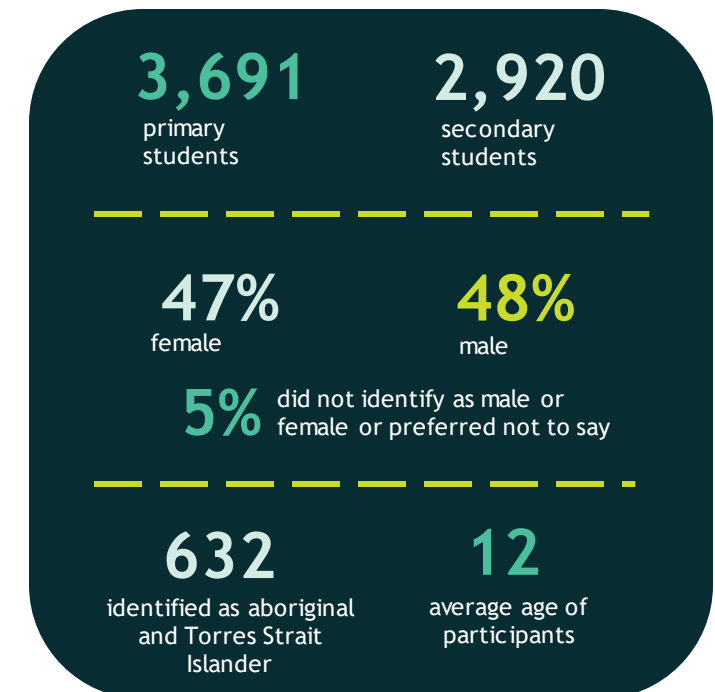
Key findings

Indicators of resilience and points of concern were identified for each aspect of wellbeing. In terms of mental health concerns, almost one-third of primary school children and nearly four in ten secondary school students are at risk for depression and/or anxiety-related problems. The proportion of students at risk for trauma-related stress is larger in primary school (around 40%) compared to secondary school (under 20%). Disengagement and avoidance as coping strategies are reported by approximately a third of primary school students and four in ten secondary students. First Nations students, female students and children who do not identify as male or female generally fare worse on measures of wellbeing and engagement across both primary and secondary cohorts.

The survey also identified wellbeing risk factors, with both primary and secondary students reporting high rates of in-school bullying compared to the national average. Secondary students in the Northern Rivers are also more likely to engage in risky behaviours like drinking alcohol and using illicit drugs.

Despite these concerns, children in both primary and secondary schools generally display moderate to high levels of hopefulness and satisfaction with life. They enjoy and care about their school, feel well supported by family, peers, and the school environment, value helping others, and consider school a positive and safe place.

These positive findings can serve as the foundation for a comprehensive response to the challenges facing students in the Northern Rivers.



Indicators of Resilience

The survey findings revealed several indicators of resilience among children and young people. Particularly promising were the presence of protective factors associated with social support, as well as overall levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction close to the national average.

Students displayed high levels of physical wellbeing and generally felt supported by their peers, teachers, and families. Primary students tended to try hard at school and enjoyed learning, while both primary and secondary students reported eating healthily and getting good levels of physical exercise.

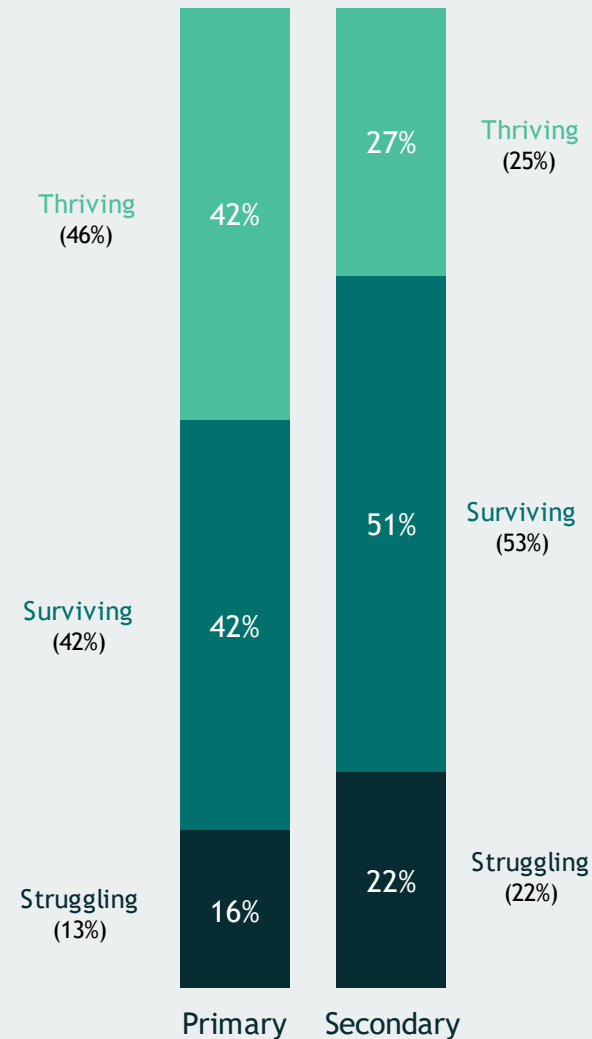
Mental Wellbeing

Primary students reported mean scores of depressive symptoms within the healthy range, while secondary students' scores were slightly higher but in line with the national average.

Trauma-related stress - comprised of intrusive and avoidant thoughts and actions - can be particularly acute in the wake of natural disasters like floods. Mean scores for trauma-related stress for both primary and secondary students fell in the healthy range, although a large proportion of primary students were in the at-risk category.

Students were asked to score their life satisfaction according to an imaginary ladder with the best possible life at the top and the worst at the bottom. Both primary and secondary students' mean responses were in line with the national average.

Life Satisfaction (national average in brackets)



Learner's Mindset

The learner's mindset takes into account factors that influence learning engagement and resilience building at school. One of these factors, avoidance coping / disengagement, involves the avoidance of difficult thoughts, feelings, and activities, and is a coping strategy employed when faced with stressful events like natural disasters. Both primary and secondary Students in the Northern Rivers reported levels of avoidance coping / disengagement in line with the national average.

Students also reported levels of hopefulness in line with the national average, reflecting a feeling of agency and control and a perception that their goals can be met.

Student engagement can help to build resilience and have a positive effect on self-esteem. 7 in 10 primary students and 6 in 9 secondary students reported often or always trying hard at school. 7 in 10 primary students and 5 in 9 secondary students care about their school, while 8 in 10 primary students and nearly 7 in 10 secondary students are often or always engaged in extra-curricular activity.

"I would make all the damage of the flood repair itself like nothing ever happened!"

(Grade 4 student)

Indicators of Resilience

Physical Wellbeing

Most students in both primary and secondary school eat well and stay physically active. More than 85% of primary and 70% of secondary students say that they ‘eat well to stay well’, in line with the national average. Nearly 85% of primary and more than 70% of secondary students report often or always trying to keep fit.

Social Environment

Students generally reported feeling supported at home, with primary students in particular showing high levels of perceived family support. More than 90% of primary students had family members who they felt often or always loved, supported and encouraged them.

Primary students in particular felt supported at school, with 82% having teachers who often or always care and 79% having teachers who encourage them.

There were also high levels of peer support reported, with around 90% of both primary and secondary students having at least one good friend at school. Nearly 90% of primary and almost 80% of secondary students reported often or always getting time to spend with friends.



“We know with trauma – kids are disempowered and stuck with things happening to them. Resilience is giving that power back to actively take back control ... do something positive out of the pain.”

-Youth Mental Health Expert

Social Identity

Most students value helping others, with 91% of primary and 85% of secondary students believing that it is always or often important to help people in need. Nearly 90% of both primary and secondary students always or often felt trustworthy, and around 80% of primary and 75% of secondary students reported often or always taking responsibility for their actions.

Safety Factors

Nearly 90% of students reported always or often feeling safe at school, while more than 85% of primary and more than 80% of secondary students often or always felt safe in their neighbourhood. Primary students were less likely to get bullied online or threaten to harm others compared to the national average.



More than 90% of primary students felt loved, supported and encouraged by their family.



86% of primary and 75% of secondary students eat well to stay well.



90% of primary and 85% of secondary students believe it is important to help other people.

Points of Concern

Despite the high levels of resilience demonstrated by Northern Rivers students, the survey also identified some areas of concern. Following the floods, more than 2 in 5 primary school children are at risk of trauma-related stress, and only 27.7% of primary students display the low levels of disengagement and anxiety that make them ready to learn. Although secondary students have a lower risk of developing trauma-related stress, they fared worse on measures of school engagement, with only 23% ready to learn and over 35% disengaged from learning. Secondary students also displayed several safety and risk factors, such as being more likely to drink alcohol, use illegal drugs, smoke, or vape compared to the national average. Both primary and secondary students are more likely to be bullied in school than the national average, although they are less likely to be bullied online.

Mental Wellbeing

Primary students were particularly vulnerable to developing trauma-related stress, with 43% of students falling in the 'at risk' category compared to only 18% of secondary students. This score takes into account both avoidant and intrusive thought patterns, behaviours, and actions.



2 in 5 primary students are at risk of developing trauma-related stress.

Primary students' mean scores for depressive symptoms and anxiety symptoms were both slightly higher than the national average, with the former falling in the healthy range and the latter in the borderline range. Secondary students' scores were slightly higher than primary students' scores, but fell just below the national averages. For secondary students, female students and those who did not identify as either male or female had higher rates of depressive and anxiety symptoms.

Mental Wellbeing for Non-Binary Students

Primary students who did not identify as either male or female displayed higher levels of depressive symptoms and anxiety than their peers. They also tended to display lower levels of life satisfaction than their male and female counterparts, although they were at no greater risk for trauma-related stress.

Amongst high school students, those who did not identify as either male or female displayed the highest rates of depressive symptoms. Both non-binary and female students showed far higher levels of anxiety than male students, while non-binary students were at the highest risk of developing trauma-related stress and reported the lowest levels of life satisfaction.



40%

OF SECONDARY STUDENTS are disengaged from learning.

46%

OF FEMALE SECONDARY STUDENTS

show high rates of anxiety symptoms.



80% OF SECONDARY STUDENTS

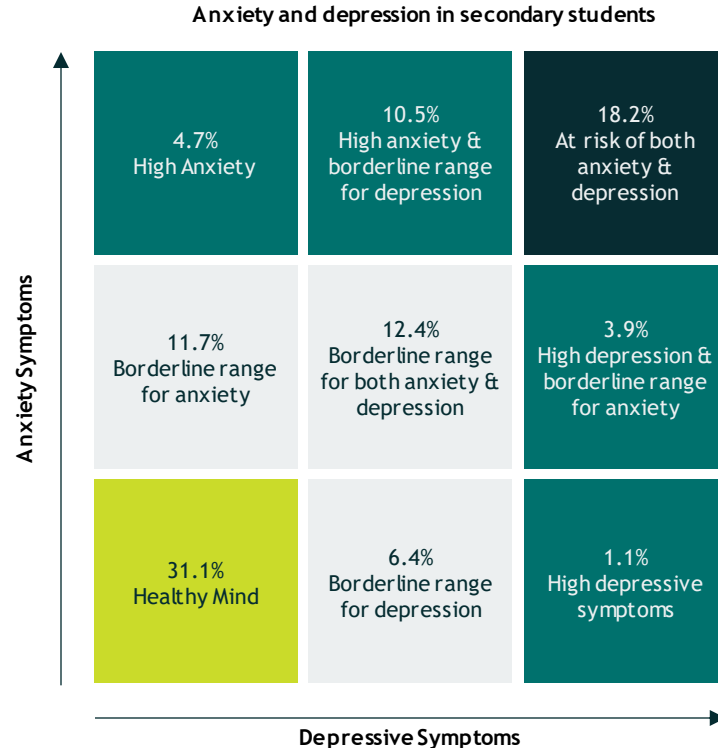
who did not identify as male or female are 'surviving' or 'struggling'.



Points of Concern

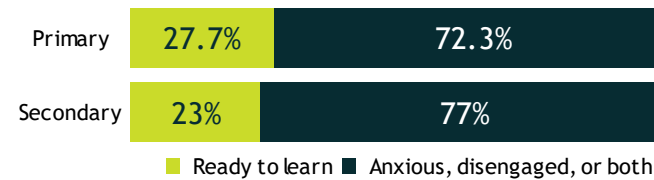
Frame of Mind

Scores for depressive symptoms and anxiety symptoms were combined to represent levels of risk amongst students. Only 35% of primary and 31% of secondary students displayed low levels of both depressive and anxiety symptoms and fell into the 'healthy mind' category. 11% of primary and 18% of secondary students (below) were at risk of both anxiety and depression.



Learner's Mindset

A learner's mindset score was created by combining measures of anxiety and avoidance coping / disengagement. Students who scored in the healthy range for both anxiety and disengagement were rated as 'ready to learn'. On this unique identifier, only 27.7% of primary and 23% of secondary students in the Northern Rivers were rated as 'ready to learn'. 12.1% of primary and 19.9% of secondary students were both anxious and disengaged.



Primary students generally showed higher levels of engagement than secondary students. For example, nearly 70% of primary school students reported always or often enjoying learning, compared to 56% of secondary students. Primary students were also more likely to report having fun at school (69% vs 53% 'always' or 'often'), being given useful jobs (61% vs 36%), and reading for fun (49% vs 28%).

Physical Wellbeing

Only 40% of primary and 27% of secondary students reported getting enough sleep each night. Despite these low scores, sleep responses were in line with national averages.

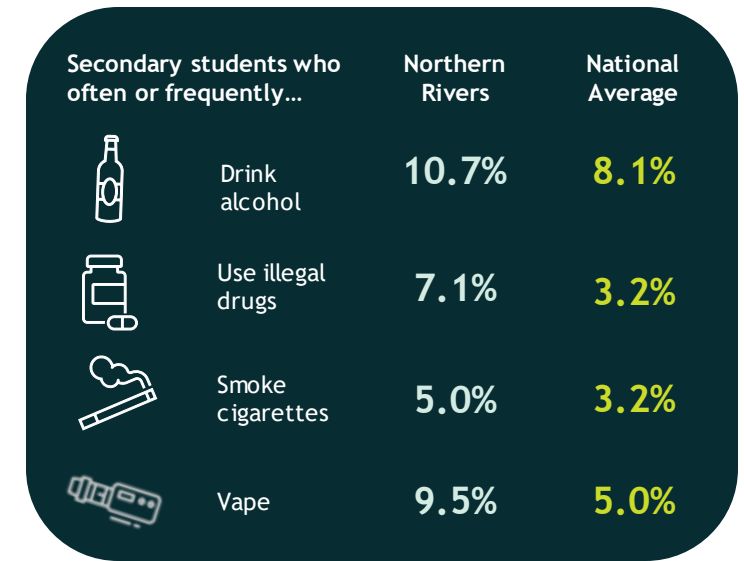
Social Environment

Around 15% of secondary students reported only rarely being encouraged by a teacher, and around 10% reported rarely having a teacher who cares.

Safety factors

The reported rate of in-school bullying for both primary and secondary students was higher than the national average. 21% of primary and 16% of secondary students reported often or always being bullied at school, while 55% of primary and 63% of secondary students reported being bullied only rarely.

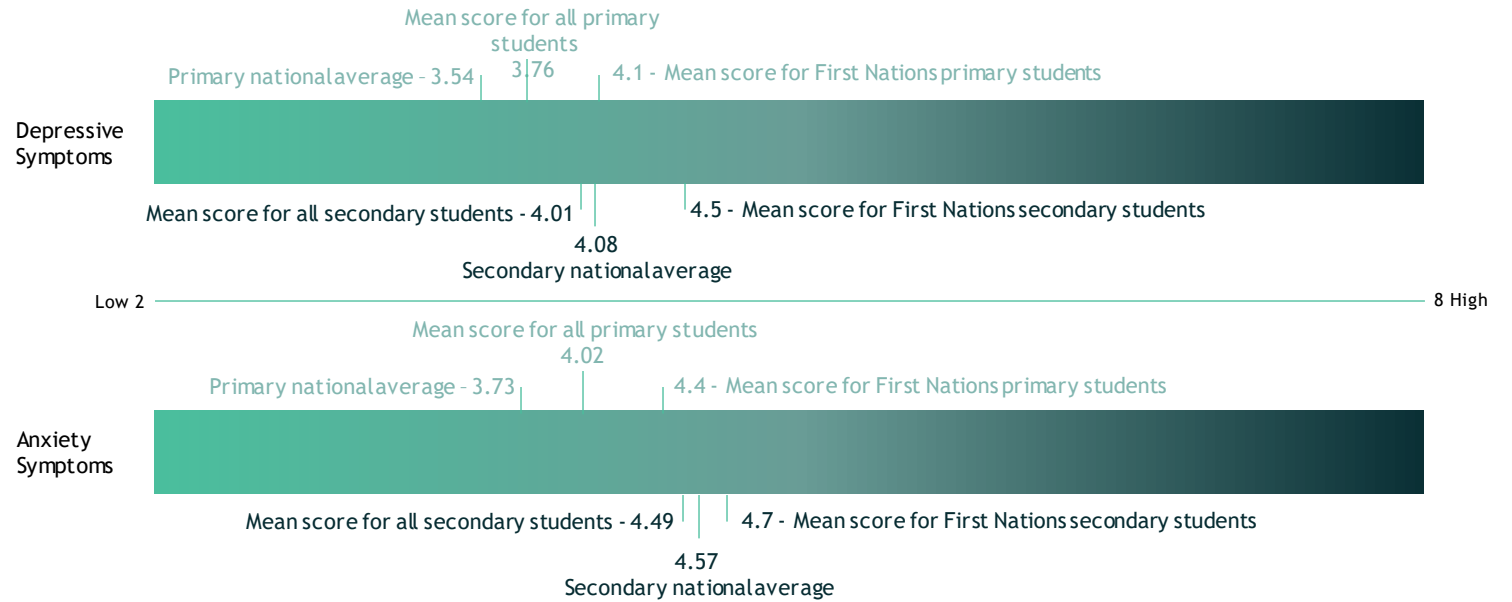
Risky Behaviours



First Nations Snapshot

Depression and Anxiety

Depressive symptoms and anxiety symptoms were measured on a scale from 2 (low) to 8 (high). First Nations primary and secondary students reported higher levels of both depressive and anxiety symptoms than their non-First Nations peers and the national average (right).



Life Satisfaction

Primary

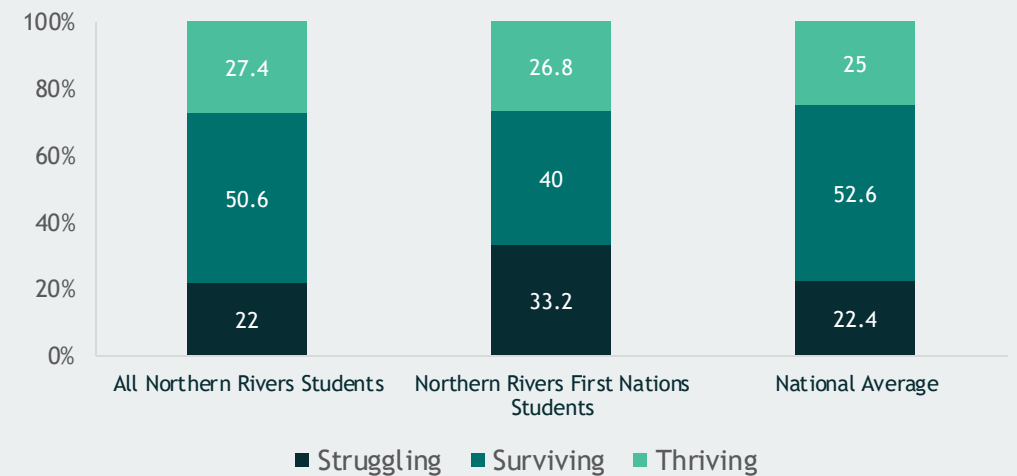
First Nations primary school students reported levels of life satisfaction in line with their peers. 45% of First Nations primary school students fell into the ‘thriving’ category, indicating strong, consistent and progressing wellbeing. However, the number of First Nations students who are struggling (16.5%) was slightly higher than the national average (12.5%).

45% of First Nations primary school students are thriving, in line with the national average (45.7%).

Secondary

Life satisfaction amongst First Nations secondary students was lower than their peers, with 33.2% falling into the ‘struggling’ category compared to 22% of all students and the national average of 22.4%.

Life Satisfaction in Secondary School Students



Themes from the Qualitative Report

One free-text response question was included in the Resilience Survey: *“If you could magically do anything, what is the one thing that you would do to support the wellbeing of young people?”*. Of the 6617 students that completed the Resilience Survey, 1858 free-text responses were analysed in response to this

question, providing an insight into what young people in the Northern Rivers say and believe about the wellbeing needs of children and young people. The responses were similar across genders and cultural backgrounds. The survey findings highlighted that secondary school students had a greater focus on systemic issues

(e.g. substance use, education system, social media, access to therapy), while a higher proportion of primary students concentrated on the availability of basic needs and secure access to food, clean water, money, a home, and a supportive family.

What students need to be well

The most common response was that basic needs have to be met for young people to be well.



Students also spoke of the need for more recreational activities, fun days, and sport.

Young people valued loving and positive social connections to friends, family, and community.



What students need from others

Students said that checking in on them, being there for them, and giving them someone to talk to would improve their wellbeing.



“Be kind and respectful to other people no mater there (sic) appearance or beliefs etc, and encourage them to do the same”
- Grade 10 student

Students emphasised the importance of being kind, supportive, compassionate, encouraging, and caring.



What students need from systems

Students want access to free and effective therapeutic services and funding for youth mental health.



Young people spoke of action on bullying, social media use, substance use and climate change.

Students want a voice and a say in decisions that impact their lives. Many feel as though young people are being ignored.



Conclusion

The findings from the Resilience Survey shed light on the health and wellbeing of students in the Northern Rivers, providing a representative and comprehensive baseline evaluation of child and youth perspectives on many aspects of their resilience and wellbeing. The rates of depression, anxiety, and trauma-related stress indicate a significant psychological impact of recent events and a need for targeted services and support systems in both primary and secondary schools, and the community more broadly. A significant portion of students, particularly First Nations students, female students, and those with non-binary gender identities, are facing challenges that require attention and resources to ensure their wellbeing.

Despite the identified mental health issues, there are encouraging aspects to note. The majority of both primary and secondary students are physically healthy, report positive perceptions of their schools, and feel supported by family, peers, and the overall school environment. The value placed on helping others and the overall satisfaction with life, particularly among primary students, are hopeful signs that resilience and positive attitudes exist within the community. These strengths can serve as foundations for the development and implementation of strategies that address the identified concerns while building on the existing positive aspects of school and community life.

“

I would make sure that every child has a good school, friends, and family.

Grade 4 student

”

Recommendations

Primary focus should be on ensuring that basic needs are fulfilled.



Trauma-informed prevention programs for teachers, parents, and community leaders.

Easily accessible support networks specifically for young people.



Co-designed and co-facilitated targeted supports.



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