

## Position Statement: **Young women's mental health in rural, regional and remote Australia**

February 2026

### Problem identification

Young women living in rural, regional and remote Australia experience disproportionately high rates of psychological distress, suicide risk, and barriers to accessing timely mental health support. Young women aged 16-24 report the highest rates of mental disorder of any population group, while 25-34 years are also experiencing higher rates than their male counterparts.

Despite increasing national attention on mental health, the needs of young women in rural areas remain insufficiently recognised. Without targeted action, the mental health gap between young rural women and their metropolitan peers will continue to widen.

### Definitions

For the purposes of this statement:

- Young women refer to women aged 18-30 years.
- Rural, regional and remote will be collectively referred to as rural.

### Policy landscape

A third of Australians reside rurally, with females aged 20-24 years making up 2.59 percent of Australia's population living outside of major cities, and 25-29 years are 2.88 percent.<sup>1</sup>

These young women and their metropolitan counterparts are experiencing the highest levels of psychological distress across all age and gender groups.<sup>2</sup> The ABS states that 'almost half of females (45.5 percent) aged 16-24 years had a 12 month mental disorder' compared to a third (32.4 percent) of males of the same age.<sup>3</sup> While females aged 25-34 years had higher rates of 12 month mental disorders (29.6 percent) than their male counterparts (22.8

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2024). *Rural and remote health*. AIHW website. Accessed on 26 June 2025 at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/rural-remote-australians/rural-and-remote-health#:~:text=These%20remoteness%20areas%20are%20centred,MM%207:%20Very%20remote%20communities>; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2025). *Regional population by age and sex, 2024*. ABS website. Accessed on 17 November at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-population-age-and-sex/latest-release>

<sup>2</sup> ABS. (2023). *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 2020-2022* (Catalogue No. 4326.0). ABS website Canberra. Accessed on 17 November at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-study-mental-health-and-wellbeing/2020-2022>

<sup>3</sup> ABS. (2023).

percent).<sup>4</sup> Young women at risk of persistent depression are those who are educationally or financially disadvantaged, lack social support, experience poor health, or have a history of child sexual abuse or intimate partner violence.<sup>5</sup>

While young people and women are both more likely to see a professional for their mental health, differences in statistics are 'not simply related to greater help-seeking' behaviour.<sup>6</sup> These are due to 'biological differences (such as hormonal differences), social determinants (such as differential access to power and resources) and environmental factors (including early and later life trauma) all of which impact women differently'.<sup>7</sup> Also, gender inequality is shown to detrimentally impact women's wellbeing and mental health.<sup>8</sup>

Young adult mental health risks are elevated in rural areas, as mental health and suicide rates increase with remoteness.<sup>9</sup> The Victorian Population Health Survey identifies higher rates of anxiety and depression diagnoses among women in rural and regional areas compared with metropolitan women.<sup>10</sup> The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reports that the age-standardised<sup>11</sup> suicide rate for residents of very remote areas was 2.1 times that of the rate for residents of major cities.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, the issues impacting the mental health of all Australians are amplified in rural communities. Climate crisis and disasters, such as droughts and floods, have greater impact on regional communities. Women living in rural areas are more likely to have experienced domestic and family violence than women in cities.<sup>13</sup> Also, external fluctuations impacting rural livelihoods, such as exchange rates, commodity fluctuations, impact mental health.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ABS. (2023).

<sup>5</sup> Holden, L., Harris, M., Hockey, R., Ferrari, A., Lee, Y. Y., Dobson, A. J., & Lee, C. (2019). Predictors of change in depressive symptoms over time: Results from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 245, 771-778.

<sup>6</sup> ABS. (2023).; Women's Mental Health Alliance & Women's Health Victoria. (2025). *Snapshot of Australian women's mental health: Gendered discrepancies in mental health outcomes*. Melbourne: Women's Health Victoria.

<sup>7</sup> Women's Mental Health Alliance & Women's Health Victoria. (2025).

<sup>8</sup> Webster A, Anderson R, Barr M (2017) *Growing up unequal: how sex and gender impact young women's health and wellbeing*. Women's Health Victoria. Melbourne.

<sup>9</sup> AIHW. (2025). *Regional and remote communities – Suicide & self-harm monitoring*. AIHW website. Accessed 7 November 2025 at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/population-groups/regional-remote-communities>

<sup>10</sup> Women's Mental Health Alliance & Women's Health Victoria. (2025).

<sup>11</sup> **Note:** Age standardised means adjusted to account for differences in population age structure, allowing valid comparison between populations or over time.

<sup>12</sup> AIHW. (2025).

<sup>13</sup> Campo, M., & Tayton, S. (2015). *Domestic and family violence in regional, rural and remote communities: An overview of key issues*. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Melbourne.

<sup>14</sup> National Rural Health Alliance. (2021). *Mental health in rural and remote Australia: Fact sheet*. ACT.

Mental health issues are compounded further in rural areas because access to services is limited.<sup>15</sup> They are 'often inconsistent and uncoordinated' with long waitlists, and patients have to travel long distances.<sup>16</sup> Other barriers faced rurally are health literacy levels, fear of stigma and increasing mental health out-of-pocket costs.<sup>17</sup>

Limited access to mental health services restricts the quality of care.<sup>18</sup> A study data from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health of 7642 women found 'those living outside metropolitan areas or with lower education levels disproportionately used antidepressants without a treatment plan or psychological treatment', which are a central part of the governments' primary care mental health service.<sup>19</sup> Also, rural populations are less likely to access primary mental health care meaning they access acute services when more ill contributing to poorer outcomes for rural communities and greater health system costs.<sup>20</sup>

Further, there are limited mental health services tailored and targeted for young rural women.<sup>21</sup> The NRWC's Young Rural, Regional and Remote Advocacy Panel made up of young rural women raised the lack of gender and age-appropriate services. Along with the rural access issues discussed above, stigma and confidentiality are preventing young women accessing mental health services.<sup>22</sup> Online supports and telehealth have improved access and privacy, but their impact is reduced by patchy connectivity, digital exclusion, long waits, minimal after-hours options and expense.<sup>23</sup> Further, having privacy to access telehealth can be an issue for young people living with family and friends. Also, face-to-face services are still preferred by rural young people.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> National Rural Health Alliance. (2021).

<sup>16</sup> Klinner, C., Glozier, N., Yeung, M., Conn, K., & Milton, A. (2023). A qualitative exploration of young people's mental health needs in rural and regional Australia: engagement, empowerment and integration. *BMC Psychiatry*, 23(1), 745.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, L. F., Dobson, A. J., Wallis, K. A., Doust, J. A., & Mishra, G. D. (2025). Use of mental health treatment plans, psychological treatment services and antidepressants in young Australian women: A cohort study. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*. 59(10), 906-916.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson et al. (2025).

<sup>19</sup> Wilson et al. (2025).

<sup>20</sup> National Rural Health Alliance. (2021).

<sup>21</sup> Women's Health Victoria. (2020). *Submission to the National Youth Strategy consultation*. Women's Health Victoria. Melbourne.

<sup>22</sup> Qian Meng & Mel Gray. (2025). Attention to Rural Populations in Social Work Journals: Findings from a Scoping Review. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 22:5, 750-784.; National Rural Health Alliance. (2021).

<sup>23</sup> Rowlands, I. J., Loxton, D., Dobson, A. J., & Mishra, G. D. (2015). Seeking health information online: Association with young Australian women's physical, mental and reproductive health. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 17(5), e120.

<sup>24</sup> Mseke, E. P., Jessup, B., & Barnett, T. (2023). A systematic review of the preferences of rural and remote youth for mental health service access: Telehealth versus face-to-face consultation. *The Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 31(3), 346-360.

To access young rural women, services need to be timely, located nearby, affordable and age appropriate.<sup>25</sup> Telehealth and digital services need to be credible and supplemented with other mental health services and referral pathways.<sup>26</sup> All supports should collaborate with local providers and communities, as rural residents want skilled clinicians who have strong rural and local understanding, and can build connection and trust.<sup>27</sup> Preventative strategies should focus on reducing gender inequality, expanding educational and financial opportunities, fostering strong social support networks, and promoting healthy lifestyles.<sup>28</sup>

### Examples of what is working

Evidence on effective mental health services for rural women aged 18–30 is limited, with few evaluations reporting outcomes disaggregated by age, gender and locality. NRWC network insights and available evidence highlighted some effective programs for young adult women in rural areas. One of these is headspace, which is an Australian-wide service providing information, support and services for people aged 12 to 25 years, and their families and friends across Australia. The program works for rural young women because it offers free or low cost services, combines physical centres with online and telehealth delivery, and allows self-referral, as well as confidentiality and low-stigma access.<sup>29</sup> Another service, was The Royal Flying Doctor's Services' variety of mental health programs, such as their governess wellbeing service.<sup>30</sup>

### Policy recommendations

- Young women in rural, regional and remote areas need to be a priority population for mental health planning and services.
- Provide gender-responsive, tailored to young adults and culturally safe services across the spectrum of prevention to treatment and recovery.
- Access to young adult mental health services in rural areas needs to be more timely, locally accessible and affordable.

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<sup>25</sup> Qian Meng & Mel Gray. (2025).; National Rural Health Alliance. (2021).

<sup>26</sup> Rowlands et al. (2015).; Mission Australia & Black Dog Institute. (2021). *Psychological distress in young people in Australia 2012-2020: Fifth Biennial Youth Mental Health Report*. Sydney: Mission Australia. Retrieved from /mnt/data/Youth-Mental-Health-Report-2012-2020.pdf

<sup>27</sup> Qian Meng & Mel Gray. (2025).; Moody, M. P., Loi, N. M., Rock, A. J., Usher, K. J., & Rice, K. (2025). Mental health service preferences in rural Australia: the importance of culture and connection. *Australian journal of psychology*, 77(1), 2544924.

<sup>28</sup> Holden, L., Harris, M., Hockey, R., Ferrari, A., Lee, Y. Y., Dobson, A. J., & Lee, C. (2019).

<sup>29</sup> headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation. (n.d.). 'About headspace'. headspace website. Accessed on 2 February at <https://headspace.org.au/>.

<sup>30</sup> Royal Flying Doctor Service (South Eastern Section). (2023). *Year in review 2022–2023: An unwavering commitment to our communities*. Royal Flying Doctor Service.



- Strengthen the rural mental health workforce by valuing trust, local presence and rural experience, and by expanding training for clinicians in rural, gender and age responsive care.
- Assist and direct and provide safe spaces for young rural women to credible and affordable telehealth and online mental health services, which are connected to other face-to-face and local supports.
- Invest in gender equality, and expand educational and financial opportunities, social support networks, and healthy lifestyle initiatives for young women as preventative measures.
- Increase investment in the evaluation of young adult mental health programs, with outcomes disaggregated by age, gender, and locality to understand what is working and can be built upon.

This report was developed in consultation with National Rural Women's Coalition's volunteer, Young Rural, Regional and Remote Advocacy Panel.