Never better - or getting worse?
The health and wellbeing of young Australians
Part I

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The parable of the drowned

- Individual vs population perspectives on wellbeing.
- Epidemiology: causes of cases can differ from causes of incidence.
- Need to enhance wellbeing across the spectrum.
- A parable.

'Children under 15 years are generally much healthier than in previous generations, with a fall in their death rates of over 90% over the past 100 years and a halving over the past two decades'.

Australia's Health 2006
AIHW

'…while most young people in Australia are doing well, there are areas where *further gains* in health and wellbeing could be made, particularly among young indigenous Australians, young people in regional and remote areas and young people suffering socioeconomic disadvantage' (italics added).

Young Australians:
*Their health and wellbeing 2007*
AIHW

Context of presentation

- Issues in the youth debate:
  - 'Moral panics' and generational conflicts.
  - Not 'a problem that needs fixing'.
  - Not 'cultural sponges'.
  - Can't generalise; not homogeneous.
  - Depression epidemic an artifact of diagnosis, the medicalisation of 'normal sorrow'.

A synthesis approach

- Time trends in youth mental health
- Cross-sectional studies
- Expert opinion
- Public attitudes
- Trends in explanatory variables
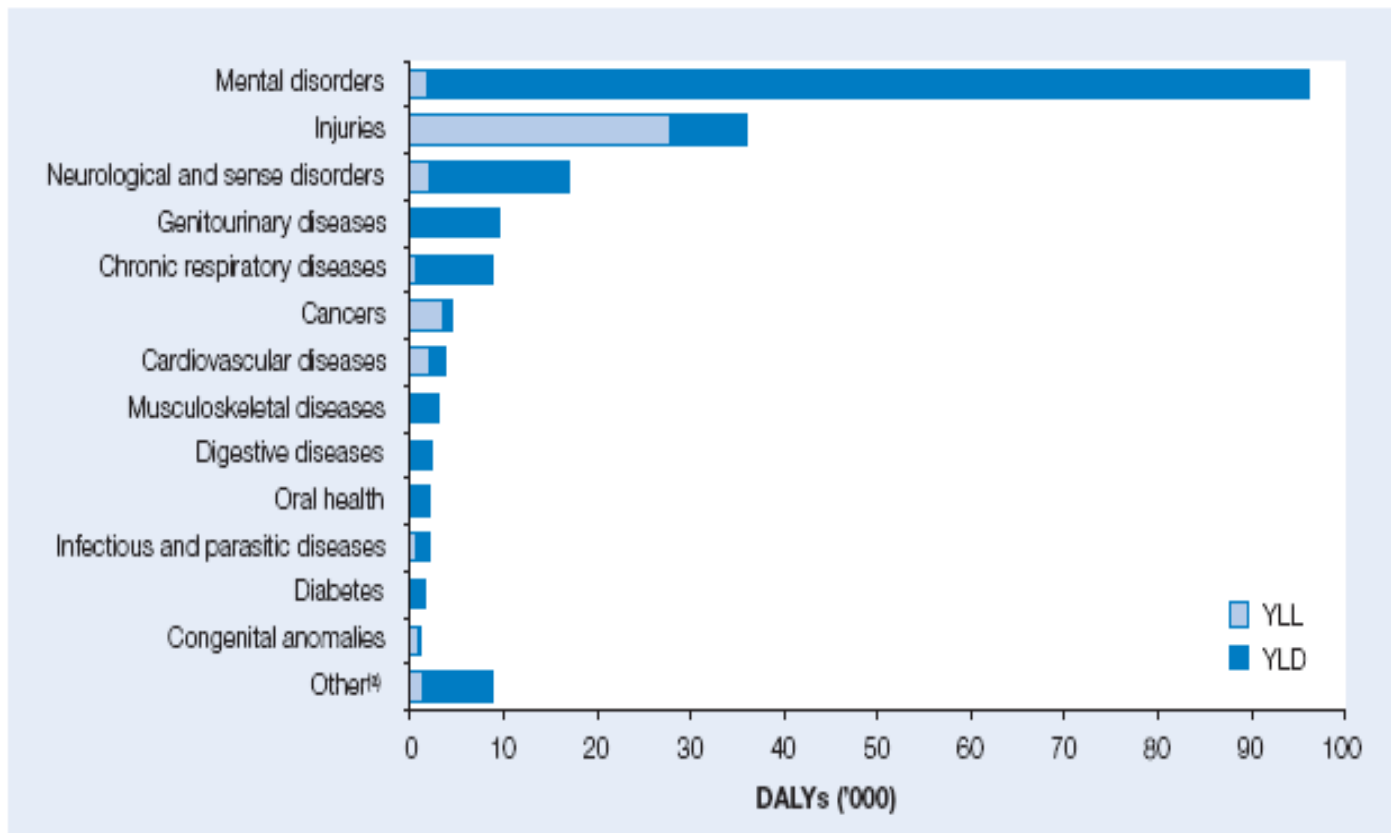
Source: Eckersley, in press

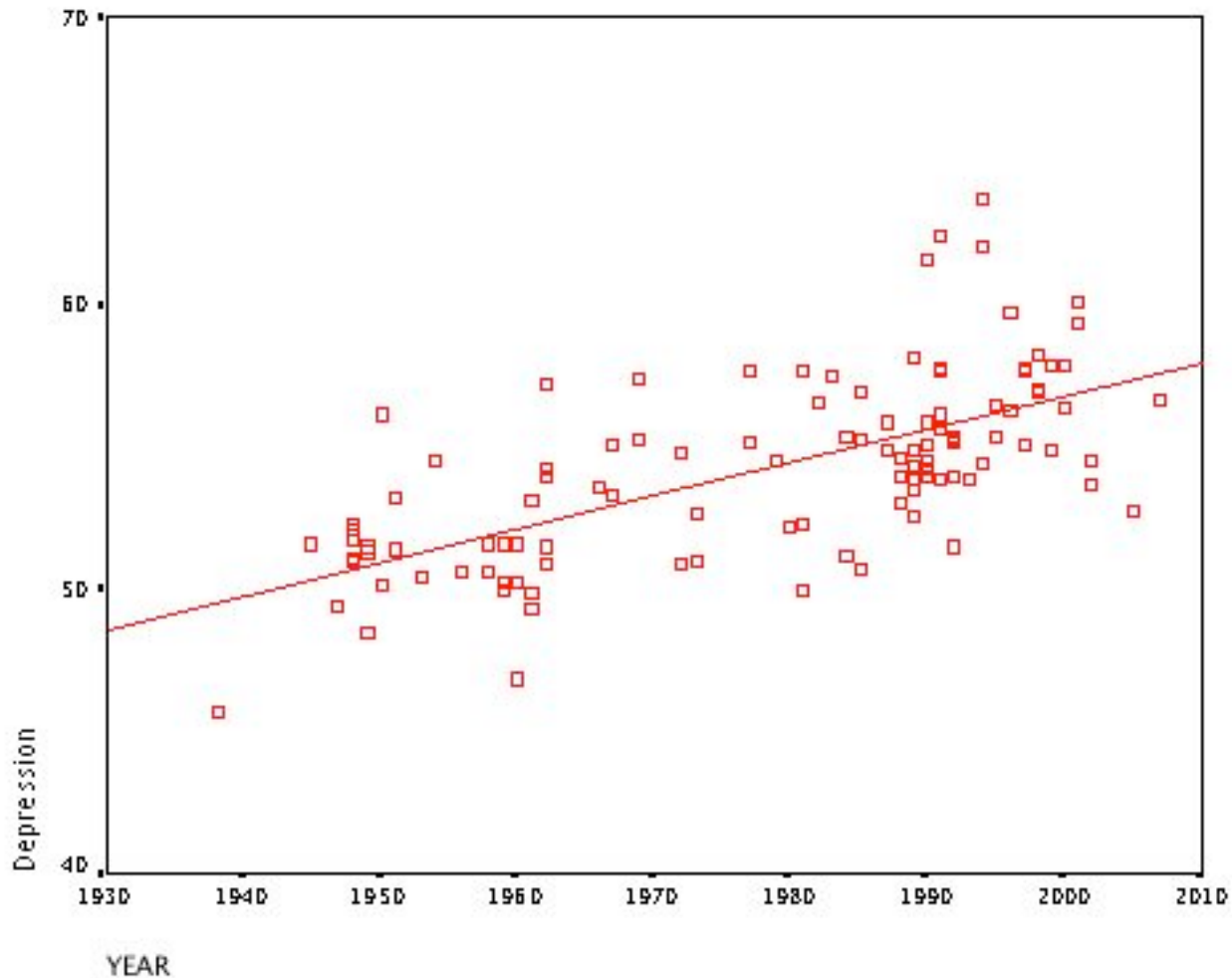# Declining mortality in Australia
age 12-24, 1980-2004
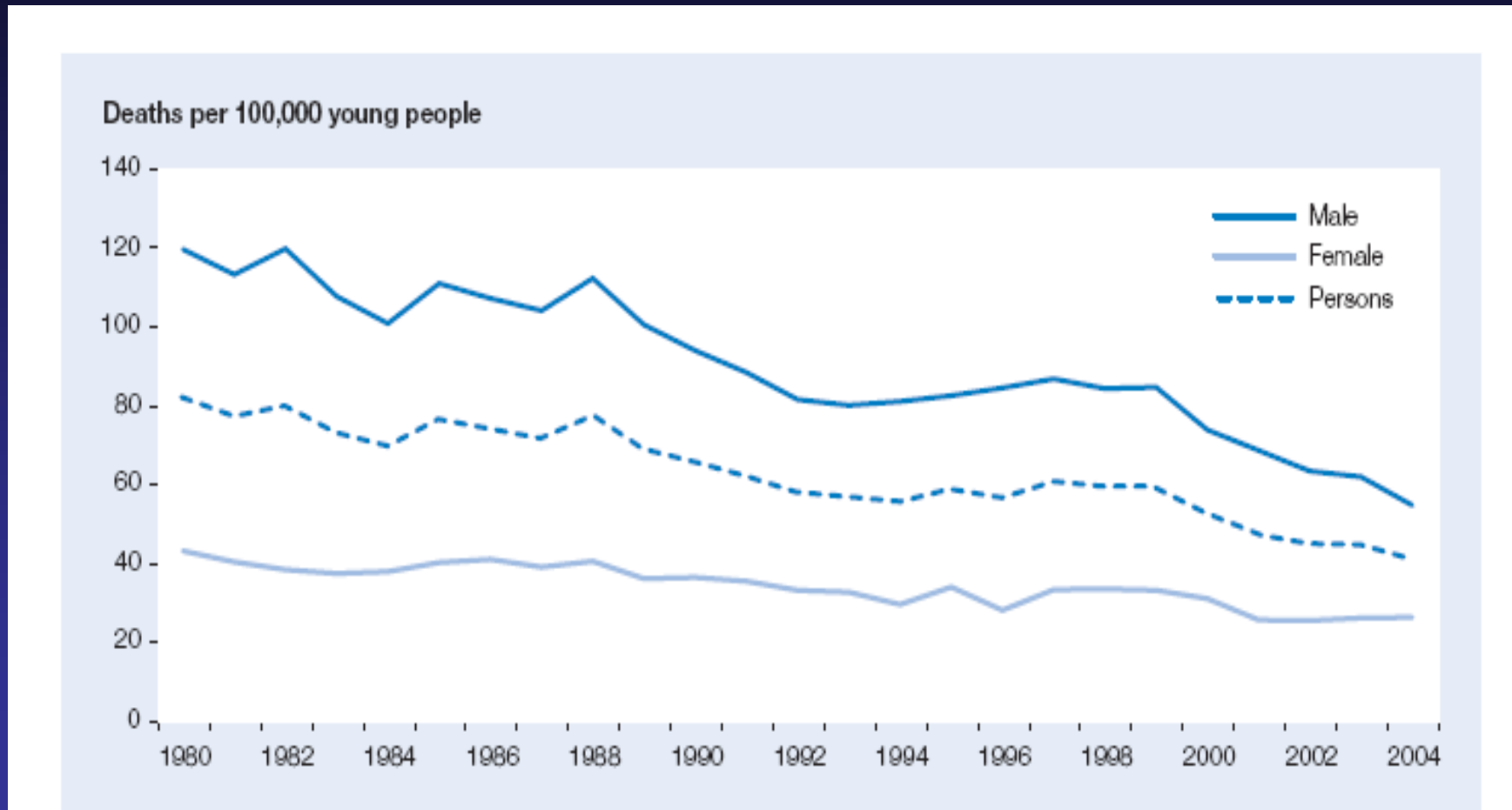
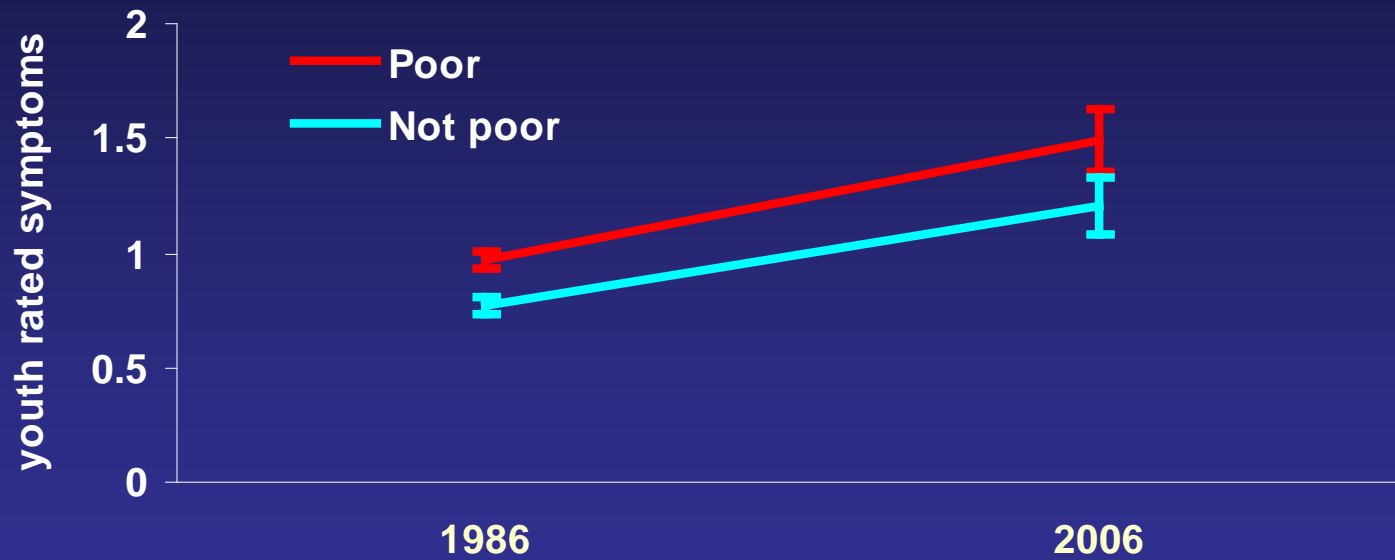Source: AIHW, 2007

Burden of disease in Australia age 15-24, 2003

Source: AIHW, 2007

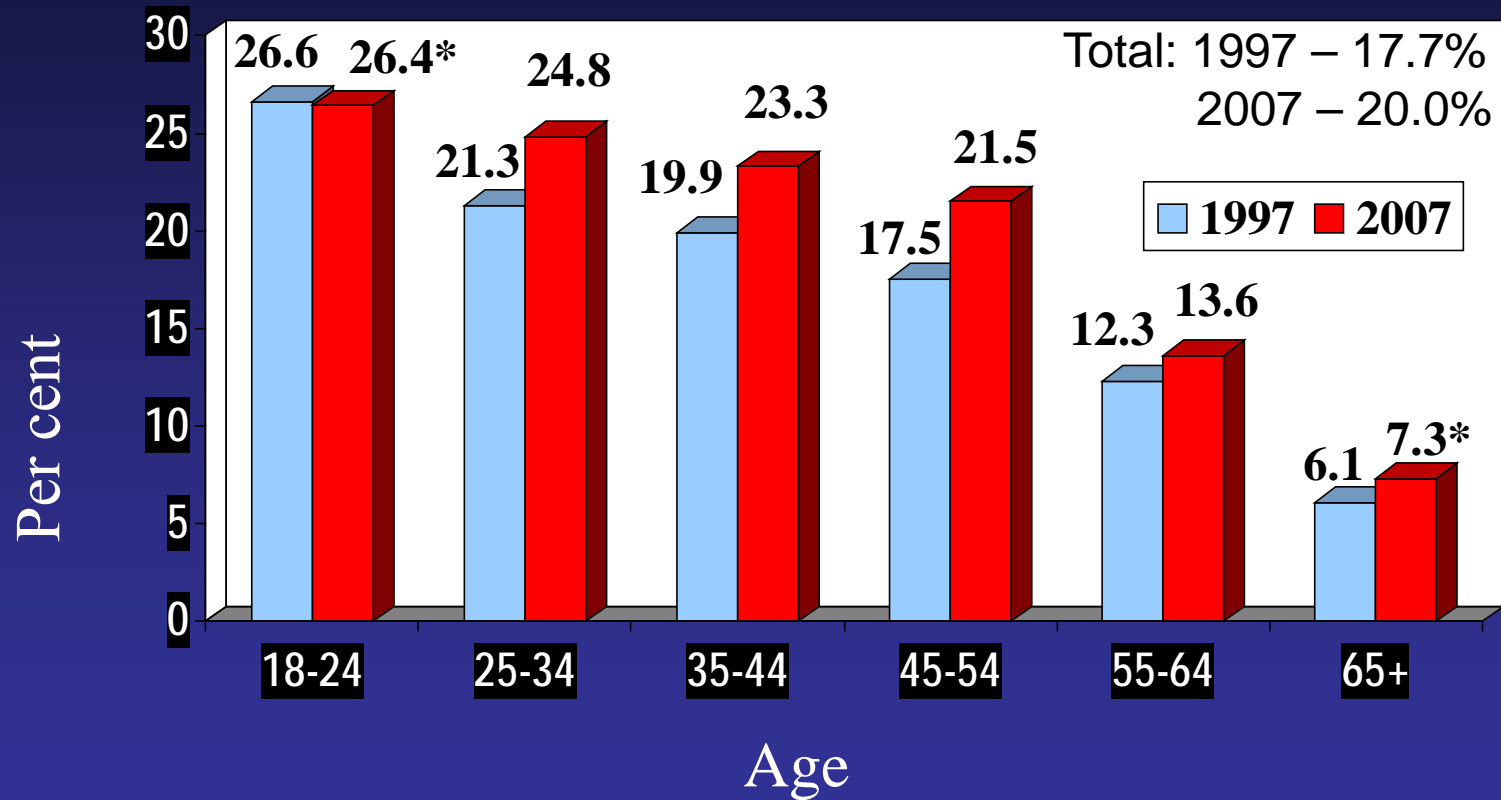# MMPI depression scale scores
US college students, 1938-2007

Trend in adolescent mental health – UK, 1986 -2006, by income

Source: Collishaw et al, 2007

Mental health problems
Australia, by age, 1997-2007

Source: ABS, 1998, 2008
Note * 2007 values for 16-24; 65+ mean of 65-74 (8.6) and 75-85 (5.9)

Student social and emotional health, Australia, Prep to Y12

- 89% of students say they are happy.

- 40% display 'lower levels of social and emotional wellbeing'.

- From 20-50% say they:
  - Worry too much (42%)
  - Are very nervous or stressed (31%)
  - Have felt hopeless, depressed…stopped regular activities (20%)
  - Lose their temper a lot…are mean to others (35%)
  - Have difficulty calming down (48%)

Source: Bernard, 2007

Young Australians' wellbeing

- Australian Temperament Project, age 23-24.
- 40% with depression, anxiety, antisocial behaviour and/or illicit substance use, including:
  - 16% moderate or severe depression
  - 16% moderate or severe anxiety
  - 20% binge drink more than once a week
  - 14% used marijuana in past month
  - 12% used other illicit drug in past month
  - 10% antisocial behaviour

Source: Smart, Vassallo, 2008

Other adverse patterns and trends

- **Rising obesity**
- **Physical inactivity**
- **Poor nutrition**
- Increasing allergies, disabilities
- Declining importance of health behaviours
- More in care and protection
- Rising violent crime

Children's physical condition

Changes in children in developed countries since WWII:

- *Fatness* (skinfold) increasing at ~7% per decade.
- *Aerobic fitness* improved to 1970, then declined at ~4% per decade.
- *Energy intake* has declined at ~3% per decade.
- *Physical activity* – inadequate data; possible rapid decline.
- *Sleep* is declining at ~10 min a decade.

Source: Olds, 2008

'Our evidence showed clearly how stressful life has become for many children in all social classes. We identified a common thread in these problems, which is excessive individualism in our culture.'

Richard Layard, co-author
A Good Childhood, 2009
The Children's Society (UK).

The world of today's children

'…we are deeply concerned at the escalating incidence of childhood depression and children's behavioural and developmental conditions.

'[Children] cannot adjust to the effects of ever more rapid technological and cultural change. They still need…real food…real play…first-hand experience of the world…and regular interaction with real-life significant adults.

Letter to the UK *Telegraph*, 12/9/2006
signed by 110 child health, development experts

There is 'a growing sense among parents that childhood is at risk because the daily environment in which children live is perceived to be increasingly less safe, stable and predictable.'

The changing face of parenting
Australian Childhood Foundation, 2005

Today's 'social evils'

Joseph Rowntree Foundation consultation found:
    'a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society'.

Top concerns: a decline in community; individualism, consumerism and greed; and a decline in values.

More concrete concerns: the decline of the family; young people; drugs and alcohol; poverty and inequality; immigration; and crime and violence .

'…many parents are now more concerned that their children are "happy" rather than "good", and the consequence …is increased anxiety. It undermines resilience…'

'We ask people to do simple things like taking their kid to the doctor and it doesn't happen.'

Relying on goodwill
Australian Primary Principals Association
August 2008

'…in a world stripped of meaning and self-identity, adolescents can come to understand violence itself as a morally grounded gesture, a kind of purifying attempt to intervene against the nothingness.'

Ron Powers
'The apocalypse of adolescence'
The Atlantic Monthly, March 2002

Self-harm among US teens

- Survey of over 600 US adolescents found 47% engaged in non-suicidal self-injury in previous year.
  - 28% at moderate/ severe level.
  - Average of 13 incidents.
  - No socio-economic differences
- Most common reasons:
  - 'to feel something, even if it was pain'.
  - 'to try to get a reaction from someone'.
  - 'to get control of a situation'.
  - 'to stop bad feelings'.

Source: Lloyd-Richardson et al, 2007

Health trends - explanations

1. **Structural changes** – eg, poverty, inequality, work-life pressures, family breakdown, urbanisation.

2. **Cultural changes** – eg, excessive materialism, individualism.

3. **Increasing media impacts** – eg, violence, envy, consumerism, disengagement, brain effects, lack of sleep.

4. **Decline of religion** – 'packages' many sources of wellbeing.

Health trends – explanations (cont)

5. Dietary changes – eg, less omega 3; implicated in mood disorders, heart disease.

6. Comorbidity – eg, drug use and mental illness.

7. Environmental degradation – eg, exposure to toxic chemicals, global warming.

Meaning or money?
The goals of US college students

% "Very important or essential"

Be very well off financially

Develop a meaningful philosophy of life

Source: Myers 2009

Education: The peril

Children who are not well, physically and mentally, are more likely to be poor students, difficult to teach, and less likely to achieve their full potential in life.

Education: The promise

- The challenge includes, but goes beyond, enhancing individual health and wellbeing.

- It must embrace a wider, social perspective that draws its legitimacy and inspiration from the fundamental goal of education:

  - to give young people a better understanding of themselves and their world so that they can, in turn, lead fuller, healthier lives.

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Being human and human wellbeing

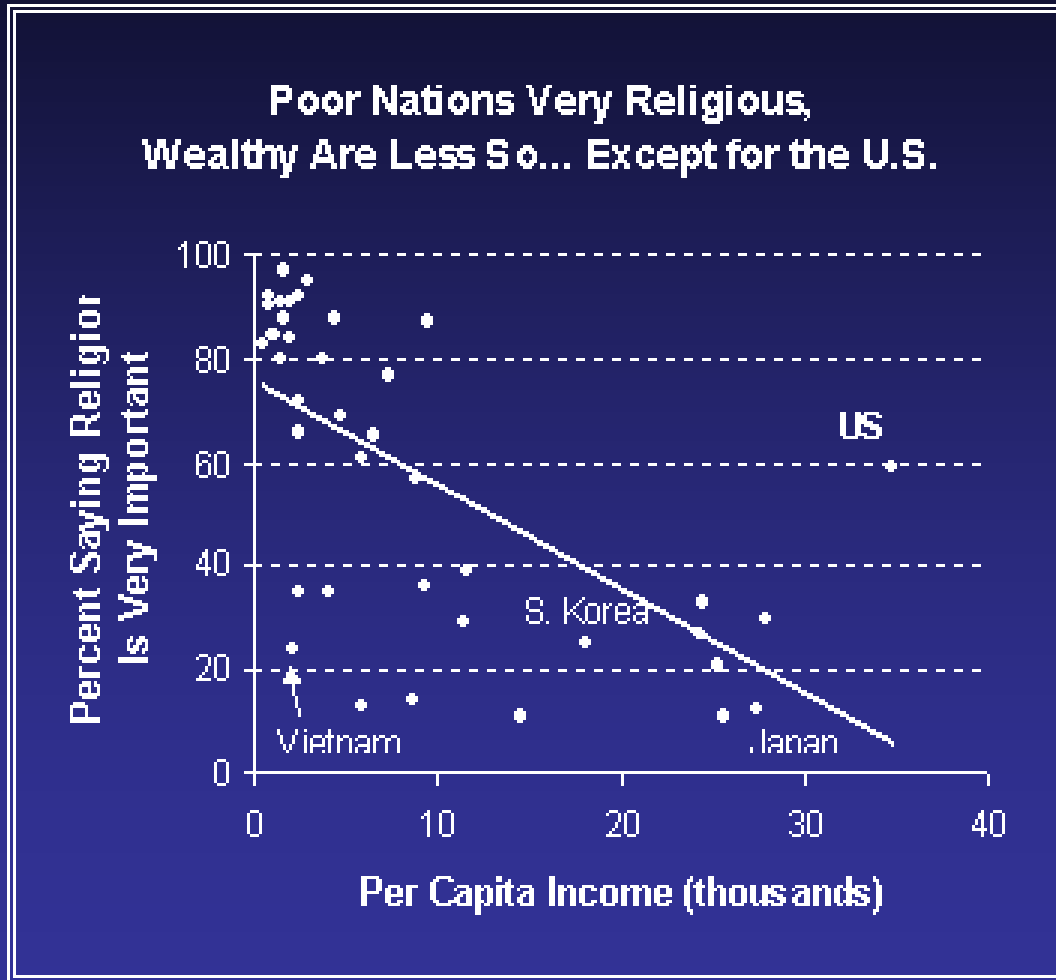*Dimensions of human health and wellbeing*

- *Material*: food, water, shelter, sleep, activity.

- *Social*: friends, family, community.

- *Cultural*: reasons to live.

- *Spiritual*: psychic connectedness to the world.

What religion does

'Religious belief and practice enhance health and wellbeing…. The benefits flow from the social support, existential meaning, sense of purpose, coherent belief system and moral code that religion provides.

'All these things can be found in other ways, although perhaps less easily; religions 'package' many of the ingredients of health and wellbeing.'

Source: Eckersley, 2007

Religion: US stands out

Poor Nations Very Religious, Wealthy Are Less So... Except for the U.S.

# Religion, spirituality and wellbeing

Source: Aust Unity/Deakin Uni, 2008

Materialism and wellbeing

- **Materialism:**
  - correlated with dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, social alienation and poorer personal relationships.
  - 'extrinsic goals' such as fame, fortune and glamour associated with lower overall wellbeing, compared to 'intrinsic goals' of intimacy, self-acceptance and understanding, contributing to community.
 - The more materialistic our values, the poorer our quality of life.

Money & happiness - USA
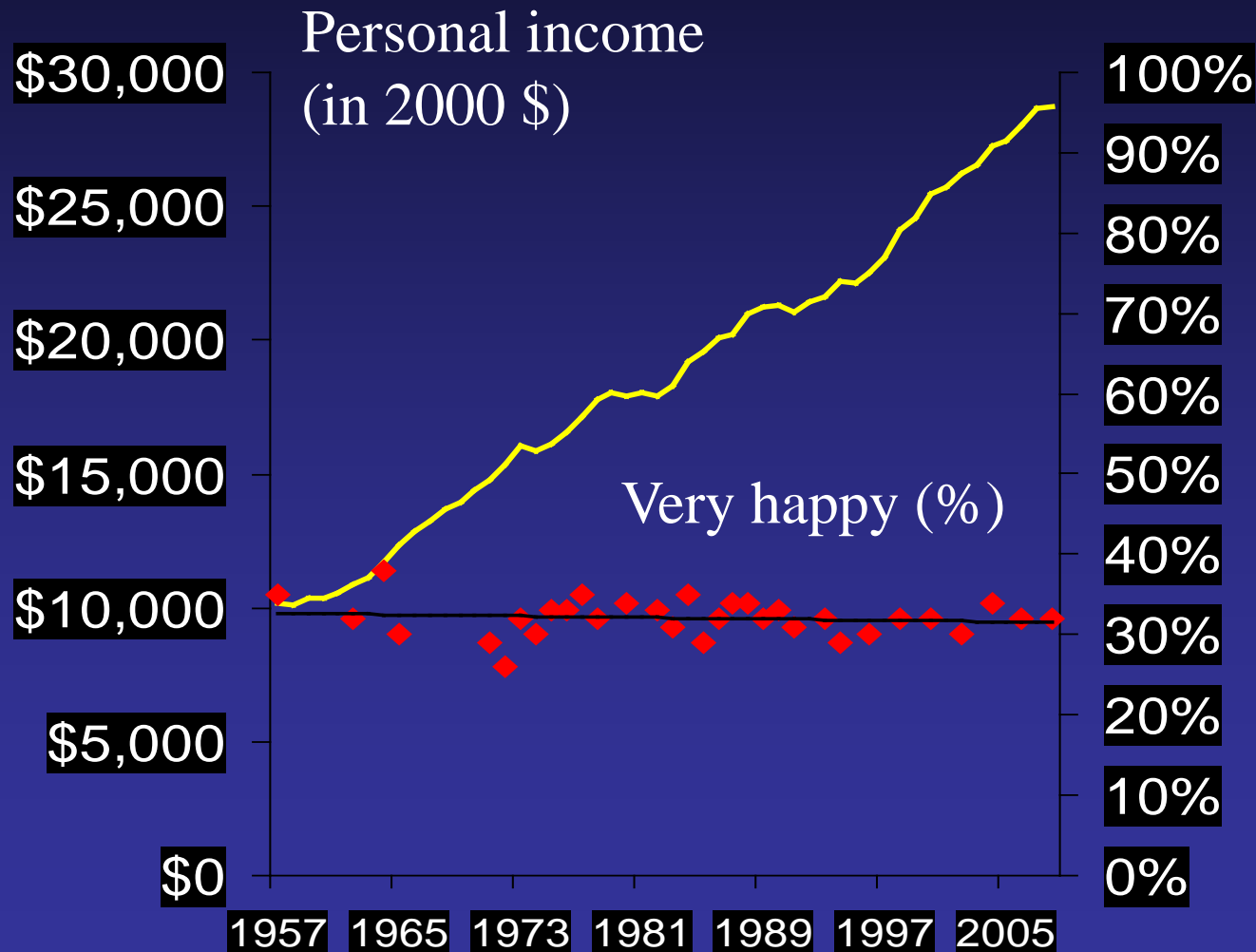
Individualism and wellbeing

- **Individualism:**
  - Increased risk, uncertainty, insecurity.
  - Lack of clear frames of reference.
  - Higher expectations.
  - Onus of success rests with individual.
  - Narcissism.
  - 'Tyranny' of excessive choice.
  - Autonomy confused with independence.

Narcissism over time
US college students
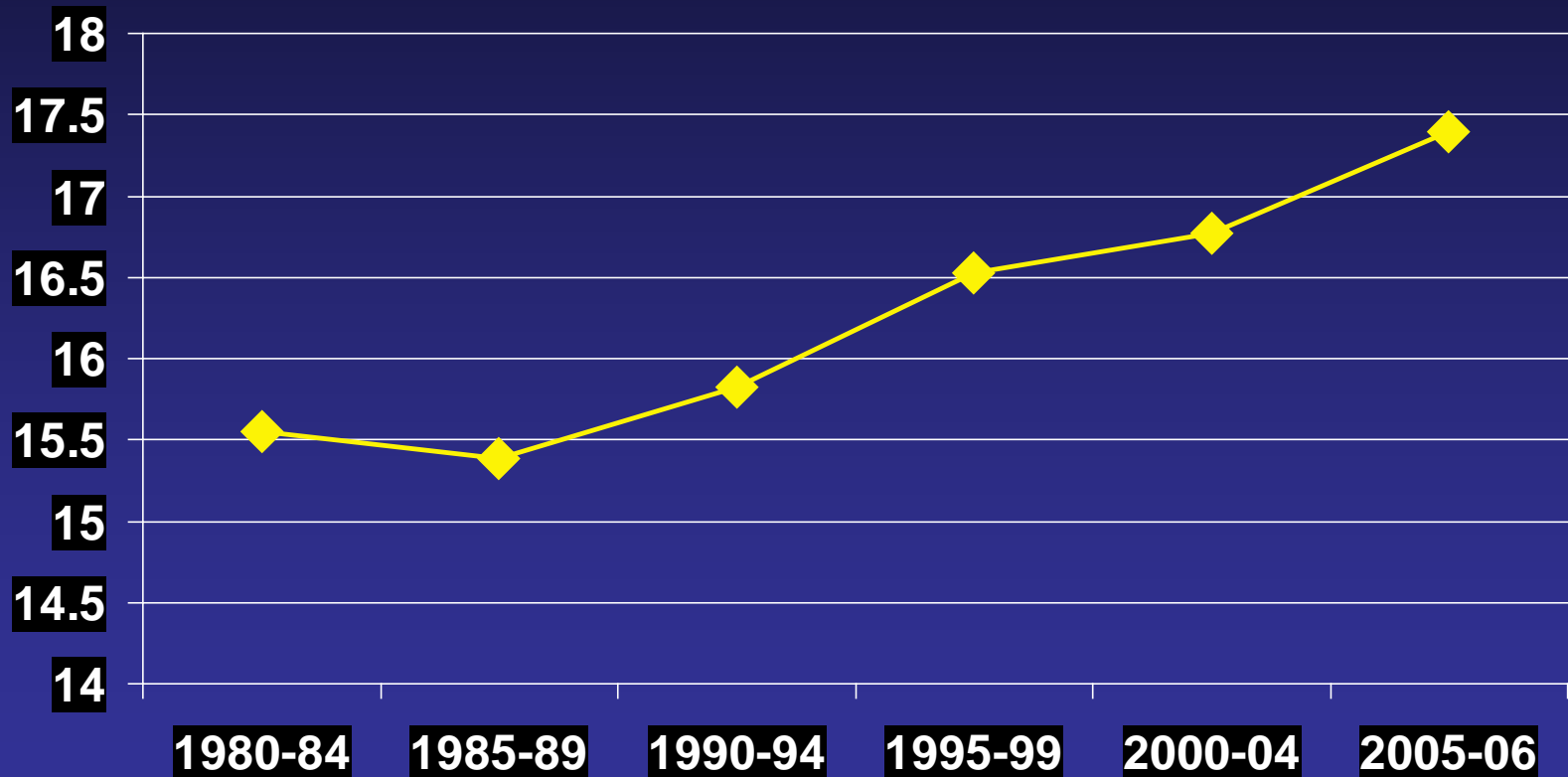
Source: Twenge 2007

Nine values for Australian education

- Care, compassion
- Doing your best
- Fair go
- Freedom
- Honesty, trustworthiness

- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Understanding, tolerance, inclusion

Source: DEEWR

St Thomas Aquinas
13th century

The Virtues
Faith

Charity

Hope

Prudence

Religion

Fortitude

Temperance

The Capital Sins

The Capital Sins
Pride

Gluttony

Lust

Avarice

Sloth

Envy

Anger

The Virtues

The Consumer Society
20th Century

The politics of depression

'In becoming depressed, we show the strain and effect of living with the disjuncture between the individualist 'ideals' of liberalism and the relational reality of our lives…Recognizing the politics of depression is a prerequisite of its healing'.

Living under liberalism:
The politics of depression in Western democracies
Pam Stavropoulos, 2008

Cultural fraud

'One of the most important and growing costs of our modern way of life is 'cultural fraud': the promotion of images and ideals of 'the good life' that serve the economy but do not meet psychological needs or reflect social realities.'

Richard Eckersley
Int J of Epidemiology, 2006

'One of the central themes of imaginative education is to make the knowledge accessible to children through their shared hopes and fears and passions so it becomes something that has deep emotional meaning to the kids.'
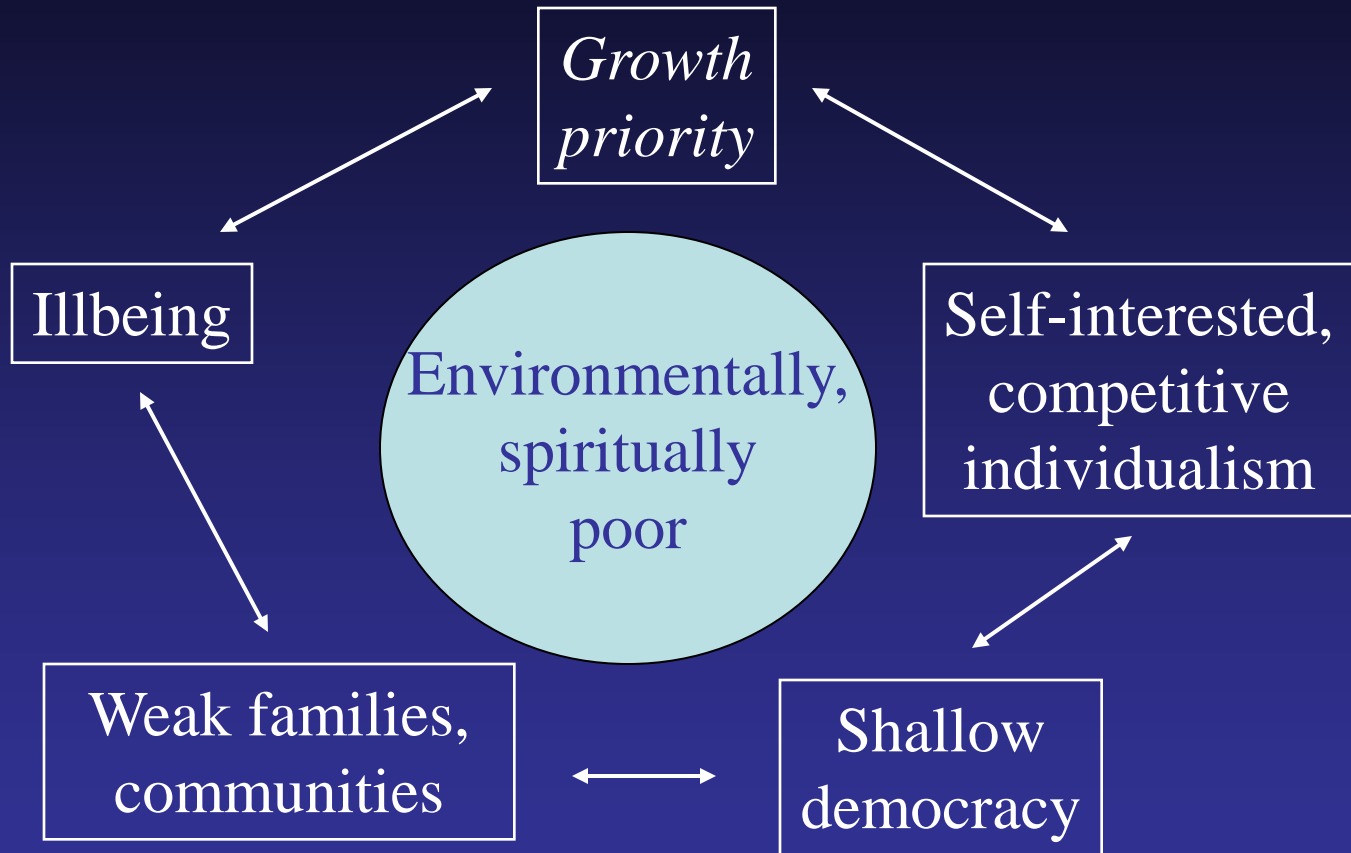
Prof Kieran Egan
Canadian educator, 2008

'What is the central purpose of highly industrialised societies when it no longer makes sense for that central purpose to be economic production…?

'...to advance human growth and development to the fullest extent, to promote human learning in the broadest possible definition'.
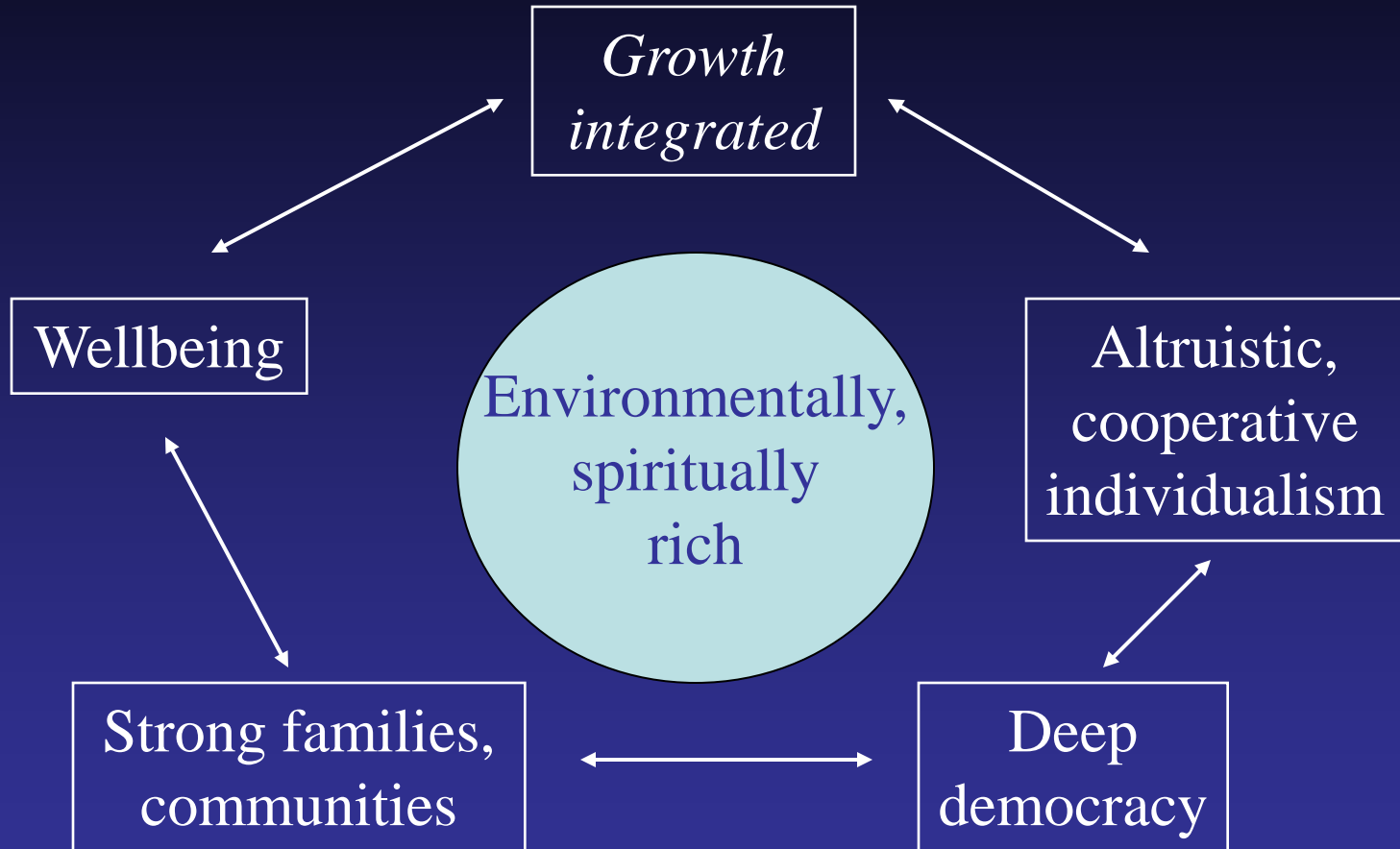
Willis Harman
American futurist
1995

Redirecting choice from:
Material progress

Growth priority

Illbeing

Environmentally, spiritually poor

Self-interested, competitive individualism

Weak families, communities

Shallow democracy

A vicious cycle

– to this:
Sustainable development

Growth integrated

Wellbeing

Environmentally, spiritually rich

Altruistic, cooperative individualism

Strong families, communities

Deep democracy

A virtuous cycle

Reading

- Eckersley, R. 2008 (Sept). Never better – or getting worse? The health and wellbeing of young Australians. Australia 21 Ltd, www.australia21.org.au .

- Eckersley, R. 2005, Well & Good: Morality, meaning and happiness (2nd edition) . Melbourne: Text Publishing.