

# The scarily secret lives of our teens online

## EDITORIAL

The logo for The West Australian newspaper, featuring the text "The West Australian" in a white, serif font on a dark green rectangular background.

A landmark survey of more than 16,500 WA schoolchildren has uncovered some disturbing insights into their lives, wellbeing and their concerns.

One of those disturbing insights revealed is the extent of stranger danger facing WA kids when they venture online.

Nearly half of all WA high school students told the survey they regularly talked to strangers online.

One-third of primary school students — some as young as nine — said they used the internet at least once a month to talk to people they had never met.

More young people told the survey, compared to the previous one in 2019, that they had received unwanted sexual material.

More than half — 56 per cent — of female students and 30 per cent of boys said they had received sexual material, including pornographic images, videos or messages. The survey of Year 4 to 12 students was done earlier this year by the Commissioner for Children and Young People Colin Pettit and was tabled in State Parliament on Tuesday.

Writing in today's newspaper, Mr Pettit said: "What is of great concern is that mental health remains a critical issue for many, and the number of young people experiencing emotional distress has risen since the inaugural survey in 2019."

Mr Pettit said this could not be attributed to the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic because children had told the survey that school and study, family relationships, body image and other factors were impacting their emotional wellbeing. Mr Pettit, who ends his tenure as commissioner at the end of this year, said there were constant themes he had heard from children and young people over the past six years.

"Children and young people who are vulnerable are calling out for help, they want, and deserve, to be heard," he wrote.

Children's attachment to, and use of, smartphones could well be connected to the alarmingly high level of young people communicating with strangers online.

More than one-third of Year 7 to 12 students said they were often bothered when they could not use their phones.

More than one in five high school girls said they went without food and sleep because of their phone.

Fortunately, 65 per cent of students said they felt safe at home all the time but sadly 3 per cent said they rarely or never felt safe at home.

Girls as young as 14 said they “expected” to feel unsafe when out.

Mr Pettit rightly said that this should concern us all.

“Some children and young people continue to say that they do not always feel safe at home, at school or in the community. This should concern us all — every child has the right to be safe, feel safe, be respected and have their voices heard,” Mr Pettit wrote.

The findings of this comprehensive survey of so many WA children could be seen as a warning beacon of the worrying issues that are affecting, and damaging, our kids.

It should be of interest and of concern, and an impetus for action for every parent, teacher, politician and, indeed, adult across this State.

**Responsibility for the editorial comment is taken by WAN Editor-in-Chief Anthony De Ceglie**