BEYOND GIVING VOICE

PARTNERING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A LIVED EXPERIENCE TO IMAGINE AND CREATE RADICAL CHANGE

Y-CHANGE'S SUBMISSION TO THE VICTORIAN YOUTH STRATEGY

DECEMBER 2020
We were too young to go through what we went through, but it happened.

We aren’t too young to be involved in what happens next.
Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, the First Nations People. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and honour the self-determination and survival of Indigenous Australians. We recognise the continued impacts and violence of colonisation and our role in dismantling systems that harm.

We acknowledge that as people who use personal experiences to influence social and systemic change, we stand on the shoulders of giants. To the Australian and global consumer participation movement, without your continued advocacy and fight for the influence of lived wisdom, we would not be here today.

This submission is authorised by us, the Y-Change team of Lived Experience Consultants who worked on this project: Artemis Munoz, Beanz, Emilie Oraylia, Geordie Armstrong, Janelle Graham, Kaitlyne Bowden, K.C, Mikayla Ramm, Paige Glover and Tash Anderson.

Lead authors and process facilitators

Morgan Cataldo
Senior Manager Youth Engagement
mcataldo@berrystreet.org.au

Kirra-Alyssa Horley
Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant
kahorley@berrystreet.org.au

Lead research and co-author

Shakira Branch
Y-Change Project Administrator
scbranch@berrystreet.org.au

Process and research support

Bec Percy
Y-Change Project Administrator
rpercy@berrystreet.org.au
Table of contents

Introduction
Berry Street and Y-Change ........................................................................................................... 3
About our approach ...................................................................................................................... 4
Our concerns about whose voices will be heard ....................................................................... 5
Definitions .................................................................................................................................. 6
First things first – setting the scene .......................................................................................... 12
Summary of recommendations ............................................................................................... 15
Where we’re at – the research ................................................................................................ 17

Our reflections and responses to key Discussion Paper questions
THEME 1 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to pursue education and training that meets their needs and aligns with their aspirations? ........................................ 36
THEME 2 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to secure sustainable and equal employment opportunities? .......................................................................................... 52
THEME 3 – How can we support young people to connect with culture, community and opportunities? .......................................................................................................................... 71
THEME 4 – What can we do to enable young people to meaningfully contribute to decision-making? .................................................................................................................................... 83
THEME 5 – What is your experience of equality, safety and fairness living in Victoria as a young person? ....................................................................................................................... 100
THEME 6 – What ideas do you have for how we can work together to build a more equal and safe society for all young people? .................................................................................. 117

Our recommendations and big ideas for change
Our recommendations and big ideas for change .................................................................. 125
Bringing it all together ........................................................................................................... 154
Appendices and personal narratives ..................................................................................... 155

References ............................................................................................................................. 163
Berry Street and Y-Change

Berry Street is one of Australia’s largest independent family service organisations. We are committed to engaging young people as experts of their own experience and believe it is a fundamental right for children and young people to be partnered with to create change.

Berry Street’s Y-Change initiative is a social and systemic change platform for young people aged 18-30 with lived experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage. As Lived Experience Consultants, we challenge the thinking and practices of wider social systems through advocacy and leadership.

Our main aims are to:

1. challenge and change society’s perception of young people experiencing disadvantage as ‘limited’ because of their experiences

2. firmly place young people with lived experience of disadvantage at decision-making, policy-making and change-making tables.

We believe that young people who have experienced disadvantage are the only people who can tell us what a policy looks and feels like when it comes to life. We are key knowledge holders in the search for ‘what works’ and the understanding of what doesn’t, and must be partnered with to design solutions, always.
About our approach

This submission centres the lived experiences and expertise of young people.

Historically, young people with a lived experience of socioeconomic disadvantage are spoken about or to – we are often not the authors of our own narratives or stories. We are made to be passive voices, considered subjects of study rather than theorists ourselves.

We have intentionally centred our voices in the creation of every aspect of this submission: ideas, stories, recommendations for change and most importantly, the style of language.

We’re not hard to reach, we’re just not invited in

Young people who experience systemic oppression are often labelled as ‘hard to reach’ and ‘not engaged’. We intentionally seek to challenge this because we know we aren’t hard to reach – spaces just aren’t made for us.

From voices heard to actioning real change – the value of lived experience

When young people are invited to be involved in sector projects, it’s usually to tell our story and have our voices ‘heard’, but not to action change ourselves. Despite having significant knowledge, experience and insight, we are excluded from meaningful policy reform, systems change efforts and service design, and at decision-making tables.

We believe that all young people have a right to access information and policy documents in ways that make sense. For this reason, we have made sure this submission is written simply and so that you can hear our voices in it.

To do this, we used a method called co-production, which is defined as:

\[\ldots\text{a meeting of minds coming together to find a shared solution. In practice, it involves people who use services being consulted, included and working together from the start to the end of any project that affects them.}\]\(^1\)

As young people with lived experiences of systemic oppression, we have inherited and often internalised the faults of systems. We wear the cost. Now, what we seek to do is make our pain purposeful. This submission centres our voices, our stories and our ideas for change.

We’re big believers in using creative ways to express ourselves and share our insights. Towards the end of this submission, you’ll find personal narratives and artworks we’ve created for our visions for a fairer, more sustainable Victoria for young people.
Our concerns about whose voices will be heard

The most marginalised groups of young people have been extraordinarily worn down over the past 12 months, moreso than ever due to the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic. We hold concerns about these groups of young people being meaningfully engaged and represented throughout the process of the development of the Victorian Youth Strategy.

It is crucial that the voices of systemically oppressed young people are heard and their recommendations actioned, especially at this critical time when they are encountering deeper systemic challenges than ever before. All too often, institutions hold the expectation that those with a lived experience have to fit into pre-existing timelines and expectations, with no flexibility afforded to them.

As a sector, we must seek alternative ways of reaching people if we are going to meaningfully embed the views and recommendations of those who are suffering at the hands of systemic injustice. We don’t think that any young people are ‘hard to reach’, processes are just not set up with us in mind.

Our reflections on the age range of Victorian young people

The Victorian Youth Strategy Discussion Paper refers to young people as aged 12 – 25 years. We believe the age range of young people as a group should be at least 12 – 30 years. Most research suggests that young people are defined between the age of 15 – 25; however, we determine that this extends further to 30 years of age.

For young people who experience socioeconomic disadvantage, their ability to meet age and life milestones is delayed due to a lack of access to the resources they need. Trauma and other experiences may also set them back such as mental ill-health, homelessness and family violence. This needs to be reflected in the age bracket, so that programs and services can engage with young people beyond the age of 25.

A note on language used throughout this submission

We recognise that language is constantly evolving, which means we are ultimately guided by the individual preferences of people with a lived experience in regards to what terms or words they prefer using and identifying with.

---

Definitions

We’ve broken down definitions for some of the more abstract concepts we refer to in order to help make our submission easier to read and understand.

Ableism
Ableism is discrimination based on people’s perceived or actual ability.²

Accessibility
The extent to which something is able to be accessed by people with disabilities, such as offices, worksites and public areas.³

Acronyms
A word formed from the first letters of the words that make up the name of something, for example ‘DHHS’ is an acronym for the Department of Health and Human Services.⁴

Autonomy
Individual autonomy is an idea that is generally understood to refer to the capacity to be ourselves, to live life according to reasons and motives that are our own and not the product of external forces. Another way of describing independence.⁵

Civil society
Civil society refers to a wide array of organisations: community groups, non-governmental organisations [NGOs], labour unions, Indigenous groups, charitable organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, and foundations.⁶

Climate change and climate justice
Climate is different from the weather. When we talk about the Earth’s climate, we are referring to the average weather conditions over a period of 30 years or longer. Weather, on the other hand, refers to what you see and feel outside from day to day (e.g. sunny, rainy). So, climate change is any change in the climate, lasting for several decades or longer, including changes in temperature, rainfall or wind patterns.⁷

Climate justice shifts our thinking towards a civil rights movement with the people and communities who are most vulnerable to climate impacts.⁸

Co-design
Co-design is a movement, set of methods and mindsets. It is about challenging the imbalance of power often held within select groups of individuals, who make important decisions about others’ lives, livelihoods and bodies. Often, with little to no involvement of the people who will be most impacted by those decisions. Co-design seeks to change that through building new relationships, capability and capacity for boundless curiosity. It uses inclusive convening to share knowledge and power.⁹
Co-production
Co-production is not just a word or concept; it is a meeting of minds coming together to find a shared solution. In practice, it involves people who use services being consulted, included and working together from the start to the end of any project that affects them.¹

Conformity
Conformity is a type of social influence involving a change in belief or behaviour in order to fit in with a group. This change is in response to real (involving the physical presence of others) or imagined (involving the pressure of social norms/expectations) group pressure.¹⁰

Deep disadvantage and socioeconomic disadvantage (we use these interchangeably)
Disadvantage was traditionally understood as poverty, but low income does not necessarily establish disadvantage. Recognising the need for a better way of describing disadvantage that is linked more closely to living standards and quality of life, a number of broader concepts have emerged:

- deprivation — what people do not have because they cannot afford it
- capability — what people are effectively able to do and to be (their capabilities and functioning)
- social exclusion — the extent to which people are unable to participate adequately in economic, social and cultural life.¹¹

Socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage can be defined as people’s access to material and social resources, and their ability to participate in society.¹²

Delinquents
Showing a tendency to commit crimes.¹³

Disenfranchised
Not being able to participate or influence agenda-setting and decision-making.¹⁴

Dismantling
Refers to tearing down systems of power, dominance, and oppression that hurt marginalised communities of people.¹⁵

Diversity
Understanding that each individual is unique and recognising our individual differences, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs etc.¹⁶

Equality, equity and inequality
Equality is the right of different groups of people to have a similar social position and receive the same treatment.¹⁷

Equity is often used interchangeably with equality, but they have distinctly different meanings. While equality demands everyone should be treated the same regardless of differences, equity is giving everyone what they need to succeed.¹⁸

Inequality means the unequal distribution within society of income, wealth and goods.¹⁹
Feedback loops
The gathering of feedback from people and the communication of a response back to them, which forms a ‘feedback loop.’

“Too often we hear the same, loud voices, while others are disconnected or marginalised from our community-level decision-making. Implementing a Feedback Loop (FBL) process is one way to engage multiple stakeholders within a community.”

Gender conformity
Refers to the extent in which people experience pressure to conform to traditional gender norms (e.g. girls wear dresses and boys wear pants).

Gender non-conforming
A person or identity that doesn’t conform to conventional gendered behaviour, expression, or gender roles.

Holistic
A holistic approach means to provide support that looks at the whole person, not just separate parts (e.g. mental ill-health). This approach should also consider people’s physical, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing.

“Each person will have a different experience of mental ill-health and a path to recovery that is influenced by their age, gender, culture, heritage, language, faith, sexual and gender identity, relationship status, life experience and beliefs.”

Intersectionality
Intersectionality is a lens through which we can see where power collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Looking at these things separately often erases what happens to people who are dealing with these things all at once.

Lens
A ‘lens’ is a metaphor to communicate the idea of looking at an event, experience, and/or a set of data through a particular perspective. Each of us views the world through a set of lenses everyday – it is how we make meaning of the world.

Lived experience
Personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, firsthand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people. We often refer to this as the ‘raw data’.

Lived expertise
Knowledge, insights, understanding and wisdom gathered through lived experience. Lived expertise is what we develop as we sift through the raw data of lived experience through analysis and reflection.
LGBTQIA+

- Lesbian – used to describe a person who identifies as a female who is attracted to someone of the same identified gender.
- Gay – most commonly used to described someone who is attracted to someone of the same identified gender.
- Bisexual – described as an attraction to someone of the same gender and other genders. Everyone’s experience is a little different, and bi doesn’t necessarily mean being attracted to only two genders.
- Transgender – sometimes gender diverse people feel that their gender doesn’t match the sex they were assigned at birth, i.e. – someone born with a penis might identify as a girl – this is referred to as being transgender. Sometimes trans people change their name, their clothes, or even make change to their bodies. Sometimes they don’t.
- Queer – a common umbrella term used to mean anyone who is same gender attracted or gender diverse.
- Questioning/Unsure – most people will question their sexual or gender identity at some point throughout their life. It can be confusing stuff, but it’s also pretty normal.
- Intersex – people are born with different kinds of bodies. People who are intersex are born with natural variations in their body that differ from what we might expect to be ‘typically’ male/female. This can include (but is not limited to) variations in hormones, chromosomes, and sexual organs. A lot of us are taught that when you have high testosterone that you’re male, but if you’re a male that is born with low testosterone you may describe yourself as intersex. There are heaps of ways that you can be intersex!
- Asexual / Ace – someone who has little or no sexual attraction to other people.
- + – used to describe communities outside heteronormative and cisgender identities that fall under the queer umbrella.

Marginalised
Sometimes also called social exclusion – refers to people being pushed to the fringes of society due to a lack of access to rights, resources, and opportunities.28

Neurodiversity
Neurodiversity consists of normal and natural variations of brain function and behavioural traits. Neurodiversity avoids looking at neurological differences as disabilities. Someone who is neurodiverse does not have incapacities, they just function in different ways to those who are neurotypical.29

Othering
A term that not only covers the many expressions of prejudice on the basis of group identities, but also provides a clarifying frame that exposes a set of common processes and conditions that spread group-based inequality marginalisation.30

---

Paternalism
In relation to public policy, paternalism refers to the interference of a government or state with a person without their consent and such action is defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm.\(^{31}\)

Police brutality
The term ‘police brutality’ is sometimes used to refer to various human rights violations by police. This might include beatings, racial abuse, unlawful killings, torture, or indiscriminate use of riot control agents at protests.\(^{32}\)

Privilege
The unearned social, political, economic, and psychological benefits of membership in a group that has institutional and structural power. Living and existing in a world where standards and rules assume your needs, wants and desires. To identify with or be identified as a member of a dominant social group (as opposed to a marginalised group).\(^ {33}\)

Punitive
Intended as punishment.\(^ {34}\)

Racism
Racism takes many forms and can happen in many places. It includes prejudice, discrimination or hatred directed at someone because of their skin colour, ethnicity or national origin. People often associate racism with acts of abuse or harassment. However, it doesn’t need to involve violent or intimidating behaviour – it can also mean racial name-calling and jokes. Or consider situations when people may be excluded from groups or activities because of where they come from.\(^ {35}\)

Secondary and tertiary education
School education is similar across all of Australia with only minor differences between states and territories. Secondary school runs for three or four years, from Years 7 to 10 or 8 to 10. It is compulsory up until the age of sixteen (Year 9 or 10). Senior secondary school runs for two years, Years 11 and 12.\(^ {36}\) Tertiary education includes both higher education (including universities) and vocational education and training (VET).\(^ {36}\)

Service system
A service system is a coherent combination of people, processes, and technology that delivers some value to the people who are using services.\(^ {37}\)

Social capital
The goodwill available to individuals or groups.\(^ {38}\)

Steward
A person whose job is it to organise a particular event, or to provide services to particular people, or to take care of a particular place.\(^ {39}\)

Systemic oppression
Systemic oppression is systematic and has historical pasts; it is the intentional disadvantaging of groups of people based on their identity while advantaging members of the dominant group (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, language, etc.).\(^ {26}\)
Systems change
Systems change is about addressing the root causes of social problems, which are often inflexible and embedded in networks of cause and effect. It is an intentional process designed to fundamentally alter the components and structures that cause the system to behave in a certain way.  

40

Systems leadership
Systems leadership is a set of skills and capacities that any individual or organisation can use to catalyse, enable and support the process of systems-level change. It combines collaborative leadership, coalition-building and systems insight to mobilise innovation and action across a large, decentralised network.  

41

White supremacy
The idea (ideology) that the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to people of colour and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. White supremacy also refers to a political or socioeconomic system where white people enjoy structural advantage and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, both at a collective and an individual level.  

42
First things first – setting the scene

“There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” – Audre Lorde

Being asked about what needs to change is overwhelming – it’s a huge question with so many layers. The truth is, there needs to be more than this submission and more than some consultations with young people. We need an ongoing commitment to work in partnership so we can make Victoria a better place for young people, side-by-side.

Young people who experience socioeconomic disadvantage, systemic oppression, and intergenerational trauma have been some of the hardest hit people in 2020. Making this submission due in December with little to no flexibility will exclude many important voices from being captured as part of the development of the Victorian Youth Strategy.

We are not hard to reach; your processes are what continue to get in the way of meaningful engagement with us. There needs to be adaptability, flexibility and creativity on the part of government to ensure marginalised young people can contribute to Victoria’s future visioning. You have to develop deep connections and relationships with us and our communities so that we can work together on what needs to change.

The reason young people like us are facing disadvantage is because of systems that have been designed to exclude us and ignore intergenerational trauma. We shouldn’t be ‘behind’ or disadvantaged because of who we are and what we are being forced to carry. We don’t just need more programs, we need to get to the roots of deep, systemic issues instead of throwing money at superficial solutions.

The Victorian Youth Strategy Discussion Paper\(^1\) acknowledges that, “no two young people are the same. They represent a wide range of identities, personalities, experiences and communities. A youth strategy must recognise that young people have multiple experiences and characteristics that combine to influence their journey through life.”

We wholeheartedly agree and so, it’s important to remember that the issues young people are experiencing are deeply interrelated. We want to begin by setting the scene about where we’re coming from so you keep our framing in mind as you read on.

Everything is interconnected

No issue can be looked at in isolation. We need to support young people holistically, rather than compartmentalising issues that intersect, are intertwined and that keep compounding.
Punitive approaches and blaming the individual

Moving through the service system, we have often been punished for ‘acting out’, when most of our ‘behaviours’ relate to defence and coping mechanisms – mechanisms that have been in place in order for us to survive. Zero tolerance approaches can have serious consequences on people with little social capital. Everyday decisions and inflexible policies and procedures often have disastrous and ongoing consequences in our lives.

Services and paternalism

It is an ingrained belief of services and systems to think they know what’s best for people doing it tough, especially young people. There is often an inherent paternalism to how services act and react. We need to shift the culture of our community sector towards working with, not for young people as the standard.

Servicing the ongoing cycles of crises

As young people who have a continued need for support, we want to make the pressure that exists to either play up or down our own personal crises to get access to basic care visible. We often need to be in ‘just the right amount of crisis’ to be eligible for services. The tick boxes and categories that currently exist act as massive barriers, blocking us from getting access to the resources we need.

Treating the symptoms, not the cause

We’re missing the bigger picture while we’re all kept busy servicing the crisis. We need more investment in early intervention and prevention. We can’t keep moving from short-term solution to short-term solution. We won’t ever be able to thrive if we can’t get access to regular income, sustainable housing and meaningful education and employment.

We are not the problem

Service systems often refer to young people as ‘manipulative’ and call us out for ‘playing the system.’ We’d like to remind people that we are often put in this position by the way service systems have been setup. We are fighting to survive in the only ways we know how and there are limited opportunities available. We are trying to navigate services that are more like mazes while dealing with impossible sets of circumstances.

We are worn-down by the obsession with economic growth

We are tired of our contributions and value being measured through the limitations and metrics of productivity. Many people seem to believe that money measures worth and moral character – we disagree. Our society needs to stop punishing young people who are trying to survive intergenerational and systemic poverty and trauma.

---

iii Rick Morton reflects on how Australia’s leaders don’t try to understand the working poor in The Guardian: [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/26/australias-leaders-dont-even-try-to-understand-the-working-poor](www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/26/australias-leaders-dont-even-try-to-understand-the-working-poor)
We need you to take us seriously

The development of this Strategy is great and we are supportive of it, but we are getting frustrated at having to repeat ourselves. Partner with us to design and develop alternative solutions, rather than taking what we say and making it fit into your boxes.

When looking through the lens of intersectionality, class is getting missed

As young people who continue to experience significant disadvantage, we know firsthand that conversations about diversity and inclusion are nearly always missing the important element of class. This has profound flow-on effects for how programs and services are designed, tailored and delivered to young people.

Content warning

For anyone reading beyond this point, our submission covers some tough topics. These include mentions of homelessness, family violence, mental ill-health, sexual abuse and assault, and other intersecting issues such as systemic racism and oppression; in addition to detailed descriptions of excessive force being used by the Police. If you choose to read on, take care of yourself. You’ll also find a list of helplines on pages 161–162 if you need to reach out.
Summary of recommendations

1. Move beyond giving voice
   In our sector, ‘giving’ young people a voice and a chance to ‘have our say’ is often seen as good practice. We don’t need to be given a voice; we have voices – the problem is that people aren’t listening to us. Partnering with young people isn’t just a good opportunity for us, there are many benefits for others too and this needs to be better understood.

2. Share your power, help us build our own toolboxes
   As sector staff, you have access to spaces, networks and decision-making tables that we don’t get invited to. You’ve got keys that we don’t. But we have access to keys that you don’t, like how to connect with our communities and understand ‘othered’ wisdom. We have important lived experiences that can’t be found anywhere else. This doesn’t make us ‘special’; it means we have expertise that is needed to create systems change.

3. Educate young people on what matters (to us)
   A lot of young people from marginalised backgrounds miss out on significant learning about culture and identity, which can lead to us not having a sense of belonging. We also don’t have anyone to teach us the skills we need to just function and make sense of the world. Without these stable foundations it is almost impossible to build something without it all falling down. But we can’t get what we need if the systems we are being told to access aren’t working for us.

4. Support us to break patterns of intergenerational trauma
   At Y-Change, we call young people who are breaking cycles of intergenerational trauma, abuse, violence, addiction, poverty and imprisonment ‘circuit breakers’ – and it’s no easy task. We are often holding indescribable pressure on our shoulders, being the ones in our families who decide on treading a different path. We must be supported and not made invisible. Investing in us is investing in prevention.

5. Uphold and protect our human rights
   Young people have to rely on laws, rights, and policies and we need to be aware of what they are to make sure the people around us are upholding them. We need to imagine and then work towards building a world that young people can feel safe in.
6. **Imagine and design services with us, not for us**
   Our lives are constantly changing and moving, there’s so much instability and so few places we can stop and just take a breath out, realise we’re home and that we belong there. We need free spaces, events, and services that we can go to escape all that’s going on in our lives and these need to be built with us, not for us. We want to be a part of creating the services that we will use so they work for us.

7. **Enable our agency and autonomy**
   We know and understand a lot because of what we’ve lived through. We’ve been forced to navigate systems and make sense of a lot to survive, usually before we were ready to. We need autonomy and to be part of decisions that are made based on our interests and values. We need to be seen and respected as key decision-makers in our own lives and for people who are representing us to keep us informed so that we can meaningfully contribute.

8. **Offer us the same access as other kids**
   If life was a race, some young people get to keep taking two steps forward, while those of us who face systemic barriers are 10 steps behind the starting line. We shouldn’t be at a disadvantage because of our postcode, our class status, or the families we’re born into.

9. **Build accessibility in from the start, not as an afterthought**
   Without accessibility built in from the start, young people are coming up against constant barriers and discrimination in schools, services and workplaces. It’s often not thought about until a young person shows up and then it’s left up to us to ask for what we need. We need to be able to bring our whole selves into spaces.

10. **Partner with us to create equitable and safer systems**
    Children and young people are often not involved or spoken to because of potential and assumed risk, but by not including and speaking to us it can be more of a risk to our safety. We need to be part of building our own spaces. Our perspectives, experiences, worldviews and priorities are distinct and must be deeply considered.

These recommendations are detailed in full on pages 125–153 of this submission.
Where we’re at – the research

Before we dive into our submission themes, we want to share some insights and statistics about young people in Victoria so you can see where we’re at.

Zooming out – where we’re at now

An estimated 5.2 million young people aged 15-30\(^iv\) live in Australia, with young people making up 20.7% of the Victorian population.\(^{43}\)

Due to a range of social, economic, political and technological changes, young Victorians live in a rapidly evolving world where they are exposed to new opportunities and challenges that can enhance, protect or damage their health and wellbeing.\(^{44}\) Unprecedented events over the last 12 months such as the bushfires and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, alongside political instability and concerns about climate change, have made things significantly more challenging for young people.\(^{45}\) Education opportunities, employment prospects, housing security, mental health and connection to community, family and friends have all been significantly impacted due to these challenging events.\(^{46}\) Young people who were already struggling before the pandemic due to generational disadvantage, can expect a more difficult future.\(^{47}\)

Some young people facing these challenges are supported by strong social networks, stable housing and family circumstances, have easier access to health and community services and are engaged in education.\(^{46}\) However, this is not the case for all young people who have experienced disadvantage. Many are faced with a lack of access to basic social and family supports.\(^{46}\) These young people are left feeling vulnerable and disengaged from education and community and are further marginalised and oppressed on both an individual and community level.\(^{46}\) Research suggests that strengthening and integrating key services in the community to support the growth and development of young people could significantly improve outcomes for young Australians.\(^{46}\)

Young people are our present and our future. It is vital that all young people have equal opportunities to grow, learn, play and explore in safe and stable environments and it is our collective responsibility to make sure that happens.\(^{48}\)

\(^{iv}\) As discussed on page 5, we believe the age range for young people should be at least 12–30 years old.
Zooming in – who’s being affected?

Broad statistics often fail to centre the systemic barriers marginalised young people who are predominantly affected by politics, power and privilege are facing. This section aims to dig deeper into the intersecting issues that young people in our communities are facing and the specific groups of young people who are most affected.

Although we cannot speak to every lived experience, we have worked to ensure accurate and fair representation of young people experiencing systemic oppression and socioeconomic disadvantage, and also recognise that there are groups who are unintentionally missing from this narrative.

We’re also conscious about how we refer to First Nations young people, multicultural young people and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Echoing the sentiments and reflections in this written piece\(^\text{v}\), we recognise that these terms still work to centre the white perspective and experience. We remain dedicated to learning and unlearning as a team and acknowledging and amplifying the voices and views of our peers.

As part of ‘Zooming in’, the groups of young people and themes we are focusing on are:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people
- Disability justice
- Education and training
- Employment
- Family violence
- Health
- Homelessness and housing
- LGBTQIA+ equality and inclusion
- Mental health
- Multiculturalism and diversity
- Rural and regional young people
- Young people in out-of-home care and child protection
- Young people with caring responsibilities
- Young people with parenting responsibilities
- Youth engagement, leadership and decision-making

\(^{v}\) Jay Ooi (2020) writes for ABC Everyday, compiling reflections about ‘What to consider when using the term BIPOC’.  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people

Although we do not have a Y-Change team member who can speak from the specific lens of First Nations People, it’s important for us to acknowledge and centre their experiences.

In 2016 there were 241,824 Indigenous young people in Australia, with 17,465 living in Victoria representing 7.2% of all young Indigenous people in the country. Wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal young people in 2020 remain poor with Aboriginal people still experiencing shorter life expectancy, overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, higher rates of infant mortality, higher rates of disability and lower levels of education and employment than non-Aboriginal Australians.

Health outcomes for Aboriginal young people do not solely focus on the physical wellbeing of an individual, but refers more broadly to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community. The vast difference in health outcomes for Aboriginal young people compared to non-Aboriginal young people, is largely the result of unequal access to the resources and opportunities necessary for good health such as quality housing, income, education, freedom from discrimination and participation in community activities. As a result, Aboriginal young people have an increased risk of anxiety, depression, psychological distress and chronic diseases.

Since colonisation, Aboriginal people have been internally displaced from their country. We must acknowledge the contributing factors arising from colonisation and systemic discrimination against Aboriginal people, which cause high levels of family violence, homelessness and mental ill-health.

These systemic factors include intergenerational trauma, dispossession of land, forced removal of children, interrupted cultural practice, disproportionate rates of criminalisation and incarceration, economic exclusion and poverty, and systemic and indirect racism. Failure to recognise the systemic challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, erases years of disruption and trauma that is still impacting them today.
Disability justice

Young people with disability are far more susceptible to social, educational and emotional inequities. In 2015 there were around 140,600 people with disability under the age of 25 years in Victoria, up from 135,200 in 2012. Young people with disability reported they are twice as likely than their counterparts to feel negative feelings about their life in general and their future.

Young people with disability face prejudice, stigma and discrimination in wider society. Accessing public transport, education and finding employment are examples of countless barriers that they may face and are more likely to experience poverty or end up homeless. These barriers affect the mental health, academic ability, finances and physical health of young people with a disability.

Young people with a disability already faced significant challenges as a result of underlying social structures and systems, but these were exacerbated by COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges for everyone but has significantly impacted already vulnerable people such as young people with disabilities. In particular, the pandemic disproportionally impacted their education opportunities, with little to no support offered from schools and other supports during lockdown.

Superficial approaches to inclusion and accessibility are often exclusionary, harmful and insincere. We need a cultural transformation in the ways we perceive young people with a disability and work towards disability justice.
Education and training

For many young people, engaging in education and training is challenging due to a range of factors such as housing instability, homelessness, mental ill-health, family violence and poverty. Young people from marginalised backgrounds are not often granted the same opportunities, resources and support as their peers to get into school or successfully complete their education. Housing instability and homelessness can interrupt education opportunities for young people, causing them to miss out on school and disconnect from their peer and teacher support networks. This can lead to an entrenched cycle of disadvantage.

Many young people reported missing out on valuable learning opportunities, leaving them to feel excluded and further marginalised and stigmatised. 64% of Australians say children and young people’s education costs are unaffordable and 76% said children in struggling families should be given extra assistance for uniforms, books and excursions to ensure they are not disadvantaged at school.

The current education system is failing our young people. Educational inequality contributes to social and income inequality, resulting in a constant poverty cycle. Our education system measures success with standardised tests – creativity in the classroom is silenced and low-income students are disadvantaged and further marginalised. This conventional approach to education does not consider learner differences, out-of-the-box thinking, or the individual qualities, talents and passions of students and creates additional barriers for marginalised young people to engage in education and training opportunities.

The education system is flawed, unaffordable and inaccessible to many marginalised groups of young people. It must be transformed to ensure that no young person is left behind.
Employment

Young people are constantly targeted for a lack of work ethic and motivation, when in fact they are struggling to find employment due to the economic recession, with Australia’s rising unemployment rates and shortage of jobs hitting young people the hardest. Young unemployment hit a record high in 2020, with 1 in 3 young people unable to find employment. It is estimated to have reached more than 60%, figures not seen since the Great Depression. Contrary to mainstream media representation, 17% of young people wish to work more hours but cannot secure them or cannot find jobs in their field even after obtaining an education.

Young people struggled to find employment prior to COVID-19, however since the pandemic, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have been hit the hardest. Between March and April 2020, almost 600,000 of Australian workers – about 3% of the workforce – lost their jobs due to COVID-19, with 1 in 3 being young people. Hospitality, tourism and the retail sector where young people are more likely to work, have been decimated by lockdowns, causing many to be out of work. Young people have reported difficulties securing a job, with workplaces only hiring people with extensive experience, leaving them feeling defeated and challenged.

The government introduced JobKeeper but failed to protect many young people. Those who were in casual work for less than 12 months were ineligible, leaving them with no financial support from the government. The government’s logic is to set the welfare benefits at such a low rate that they provide an incentive for people to search for employment and take any opportunities that arise. This is extremely problematic as it means that young people are living under the poverty line, on an average of $40 per day. This often forces them into jobs they do not want to do. Taking autonomy away from young people and forcing them into the workforce is archaic – our approaches and ideologies need an upgrade.
Family violence

For many young people, growing up in safe, secure and predictable environments is far from their reality. Family violence can happen to anyone, and it knows no socioeconomic or cultural boundaries. However, there are some groups of people who are more vulnerable to family violence, such as young people who, due to their age and when combined with other factors such as race, class and gender, are at significantly higher risk.

Indigenous young people, young people with disability, young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, LGBTQIA+ young people, young people with mental health and/or substance use issues and young people from rural and remote areas are just some of the intersecting identities that are impacted by family violence. It is important to recognise and consider the intersectionality of experiences that exist within the broader issue of family violence.

The common narrative is that family violence is predominantly perpetrated by men against women and children. While this is true, it is important to acknowledge that family violence is not only a gendered problem but also an intersectional problem, driven by complex hierarchies of power, privilege and oppressions with far reaching impacts that reinforce structural disadvantage and marginalisation. Violence can also occur within different family dynamics such as sibling to sibling, mother to child, extended family and within LGBTQIA+ relationships. Whether the young person experiences violence directly, or are witnesses to violence, the resulting trauma can have profound long-term effects on their development and increase the risk of mental health issues, behavioural and learning difficulties.

Children and young people are often unacknowledged victims of family violence. The Royal Commission into Family Violence found that young people are commonly overlooked in the family violence narrative and that children and young people have been the silent victims for too long. The language commonly used in literature around young people describes them largely as ‘witnesses’ or ‘secondary’ victims of violence, which understates the impacts on young people who experience family violence. Additionally, most of the research conducted on children and young people who are affected by family violence is from the perspectives of caregivers and professionals – instead of listening to the direct experiences of children and young people.
Health

Youth is a period of life where individuals are developing physically, intellectually and emotionally and are usually marked by significant transitions in education, work, health and living arrangements. Young people who experience socioeconomic disadvantage face additional challenges in achieving their full potential. These challenges can significantly impact the health outcomes for these young people, and in turn impact their ability to work and study, form autonomous identities, and build independent social networks and intimate relationships.

In Victoria, socioeconomic disadvantage is the greatest cause of health inequality, with the greatest difference in health status between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians and others. Acting on health inequities reflects a commitment to ensuring that all young people have an equal and fair opportunity to receive the highest standard of care. For young people who experience disadvantage, health inequities are often exacerbated by barriers to economic participation such as poor mental health, homelessness and family violence.

Many young people also experience barriers to improved health, such as stigma and discrimination, exclusion and lack of access to opportunities. Health services do not recognise the diversity of young people using their services such as cultural background, religion, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, Aboriginality, education and occupation. It is not enough to only create equal opportunities; we must work towards equitable health outcomes for every young person. All young people must have access to safe, inclusive and affordable health and community services.
Homelessness and housing

Young people are significantly over-represented in homelessness statistics, with over 39% of Victorians experiencing homelessness being under 25 years old.71 The homelessness service system across Victoria only has 423 government funded crisis beds, when there are over 24,000 Victorians homeless on any given night.72 Victoria has historically spent less than half the national average on social housing – $83 per person in 2017–18 compared to the national average of $167.73

One of the main causes of homelessness in Australia is the lack of affordable housing options.74 Housing is rapidly becoming more expensive and access to safe and secure housing is further out of reach for young people than ever before.75 Most young people experiencing homelessness are staying in severely crowded residences, refuges and other forms of crisis accommodation.76 Not only are most of these options temporary, they are extremely unsafe.76

For most young people, becoming homeless is a result of family or relationship breakdowns, mental health issues, drug and alcohol problems, housing crisis, inadequate or inappropriate living conditions and insufficient income.77 Young people who are homeless often experience poor mental health, poverty, trauma, substance abuse, social isolation, violence, and are more likely to be involved with the justice system.77 These issues make it more challenging for young people to escape homelessness and result in young people ending up in cycles of housing instability and poverty.77

It is important to acknowledge that homelessness is not an isolated issue and there needs to be recognition and a greater understanding of its complexity and the many intersecting challenges. We need to address the deeper, systemic issues that cause people to become homeless. This cannot be done by individuals and organisations alone. We need all levels of government to commit to and expand the supply of social and affordable housing.

---

LGBTQIA+ equality and inclusion

Young people who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community are at increased risk of experiencing discrimination, isolation, rejection, phobia and marginalisation in their home, medical and mental health services, educational facilities and wider society.\textsuperscript{78} Navigating sexual feelings, attractions and identities within rigid heteronormative environments can create significant consequences to the mental and social health for LGBTQIA+ youth.\textsuperscript{78} For instance, 2 in 3 LGBTQIA+ youth reported that someone had tried to convince them to change their sexual orientation or gender identity.\textsuperscript{78}

Studies suggest that family acceptance has a strong influence on the mental health of LGBTQIA+ youth.\textsuperscript{78} Family rejection, violence and discrimination are just some of the reasons why LGBTQIA+ young people are at least twice as likely to find themselves without a home. When forced out of the family home, many of these young people end up sleeping rough, couch surfing or in boarding houses.\textsuperscript{79}

Discrimination is also experienced in schools and workplaces by LGBTQIA+ youth. Research suggests that 63% of teachers in Victoria felt it would not be safe for a young person to come out at their school, and 91% of students and teachers expressing a need for more LGBTQIA+ awareness and education.\textsuperscript{80}

LGBTQIA+ young people are one of the most vulnerable groups in society due to their increased risk of mental health issues.\textsuperscript{78} They are more likely to experience discrimination within medical and mental health services than their peers.\textsuperscript{81} Research has found that 60% of trans youth reported feeling isolated from medical and mental health services and 42% reported that they felt misunderstood and disrespected when they did reach out to service providers.\textsuperscript{81} Young trans people living in Australia are at an alarming risk of mental ill-health:

- 3 out of 4 young people experience anxiety and depression,
- 4 out of 5 engage in self-harm and
- almost 1 in 2 young people report having attempted suicide at some point in their lives.\textsuperscript{81}

Young LGBTQIA+ people who are homeless, live rurally, have a mental ill-health or who are substance users face additional barriers to accessing support.\textsuperscript{78} Stigma and shame create personal barriers for young people to access services.\textsuperscript{78} LGBTQIA+ young people are calling for inclusive environments, acceptance and support from service providers and workers, and a community to which they can safely belong.\textsuperscript{78} We need to address the impact of marginalisation, isolation, stigmatisation and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ young people in our community for this to be achieved.\textsuperscript{78}
Mental health

Young Victorians who experience socioeconomic disadvantage are increasingly at risk of mental ill-health due to factors such as family violence, homelessness and poverty and experience significantly poorer mental health outcomes than the broader community. In 2020, rates of psychological distress remain high among Australian young people, with 1 in 3 reporting high or very high levels of distress. In 2018, Victoria had the lowest per person funding for mental health in the country; access to services was 39% below the national average.

Victoria’s mental health system was broken long before COVID-19, and the pandemic hit when the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System had just released the initial recommendations and interim report, overwhelming an already broken system. Since the pandemic there are more young people in crisis than ever, with 1 in 2 young people struggling to manage their daily activities at school, home and work due to a significant decline in wellbeing.

For young people trapped in cycles of poverty, accessing long-term treatments for mental health conditions aren’t only difficult, but also impossible. This means many young people in our community rely on emergency departments and crisis services, as opposed to accessing support services prior to crisis. Even if a young person attempts to access a service prior to crisis, many mental health services are underfunded, under-staffed and overstretched, resulting in young people not receiving the support they want and need.

We cannot look at mental ill-health in isolation of intersecting oppression and traumas. We need radical, progressive action that addresses the underlying systemic inequalities impacting young people’s mental health.
Multiculturalism and diversity

The cultural diversity of Victoria’s youth population is on the rise, with 48% of Victoria’s young people either born overseas or had one or more parent born overseas. Multicultural youth are a highly diverse group and their specific issues and challenges may differ depending on the particular cultural group, the number of years they have been in Australia and the level of community and family support received once they are living in Australia.

Multicultural young people stated that diversity and discrimination, education and jobs and employment were the top 3 issues in Australia today. 49% of multicultural young people have reported experiencing discrimination or unfair treatment in the last year, taking place at a range of sites including in public spaces, work and education institutions. These young people also highlighted that it was difficult for them to find work due to racial discrimination, lack of experience and social networks, qualifications and study requirements. For multicultural young people cultural differences and the challenges of having to navigate an unfamiliar process in a new country, exacerbate barriers to the job market.

Young people from diverse backgrounds can face additional barriers to getting the support they need, and this places them at greater risk of experiencing family violence, poverty, mental ill-health and homelessness. It is important that workers and organisations recognise the diverse experiences of multicultural young people and work towards reducing the levels of stigma and discrimination they continue to experience.
Rural and regional young people

There are over 230,000 young people growing up, studying or working in rural and regional Victoria. When compared to metropolitan Victoria, rural and regional Victoria have a higher representation of young people who experience significant levels of disadvantage. Young people who live in rural and regional Victoria reported that they face barriers to access opportunities close to where they live and services that meet their needs. They have limited access to recreational facilities, basic services, employment opportunities, education facilities and transport compared to metropolitan Victorians. This lack of transport makes it difficult for them to work, study, see a doctor and socialise.

We know that just some of the complex challenges faced by rural and regional young people are:

- higher youth unemployment rates
- lack of retail properties and crisis support for young people at risk of, or facing homelessness
- lack of local specialist medical providers and lack of awareness about local healthcare services available, including sexual health care
- a lack of opportunity to be engaged and involved in the community and contribute to decision-making
- a lack of post-high school and higher education opportunities.

It is important that we work with young people in these areas to help them overcome the hurdles they face and to support their voices to be heard. Young people from regional and rural areas are often left out of the discussion, and it is our responsibility to ensure that this does not happen.
Young people in out-of-home care and child protection

Young people living in out-of-home care are some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our community. The number of children in care has doubled since 2008-2009, with a total of 10,553 children in care in Victoria as of December 2018. This includes a disproportionately high and growing number of Aboriginal children and young people.

Many young people in care have been exposed to multiple traumas from a young age. Research suggests that young people in care experience poorer health outcomes than their peers without an experience of care.

A 2006 Australia-wide survey of children with high support needs in out-of-home care found that 75% came from households with a history of family violence or physical abuse; 66% had parents with substance misuse problems; 58% suffered neglect and over half had parents with mental health and significant financial problems. At least one third of young people become homeless within three years of leaving care, half require acute mental health services, 70% live below the poverty line and one quarter have contact with the criminal justice system.

The voices of young people in care are not well represented in practice and research and are being excluded from significant decision-making processes that impact their lives. Most research is conducted from the perspective of workers and caregivers and does not recognise the diverse experiences of young people in care.

Research suggests that the leaving care transition needs to be flexible, gradual and well planned. To be effective, it must include individual transition planning based on the young person’s needs, flexible post-care options and ongoing emotional and financial support until young people reach at least 25 years of age.

At the end of 2020, the leaving care age was increased from 18 to 21 years old in Victoria. Although this has been a long-awaited decision, it should not be seen as ‘the solution’ to the problems continually faced by children and young people in out-of-home care.
Young people with caring responsibilities

Many young people are forced into caring roles for a parent, grandparent or sibling with mental ill-health, disability, drug and/or alcohol addiction or chronic illness. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found that there are more than 71,600 young carers in Victoria, with some taking on care as young as 5 or 6 years old. It is likely these figures are underestimated, as many young carers do not identify as such or are hidden in the community.

Young carers often have additional responsibilities which may include housework, providing financial and emotional support, administering medications and helping with personal care tasks such as toileting, showering and dressing.

Studies suggest that caring at a young age is associated with a range of outcomes that can affect their life chances, including health and wellbeing. These outcomes include balancing schoolwork and caring responsibilities, social isolation and difficulty maintaining friendships, limited support networks, stigma and discrimination and financial disadvantage. This can also lead to fewer education and employment opportunities.

Young carers are less likely to have support networks and to seek help, so it is important that they are included in conversations about young people and are provided with equal opportunities.
Young people with parenting responsibilities

Young parents face the unique challenge of raising children while experiencing their own major life changes as they grow up and develop. Social stigma, isolation, difficulty accessing education and employment opportunities are just some of the challenges and barriers that are faced by young parents. These barriers are already challenging for young parents, but for young people who have experienced socioeconomic disadvantage, having parenting responsibilities may make them more vulnerable to experiencing homelessness, poverty and family violence.

Research suggests that young parents experience significant economic strain while having to care for themselves and a child, and this is exacerbated by the low rates of support payments from the Government. These structural inequities have left many young parents with limited financial, childcare and housing support making them more economically reliant on their families and communities. For young parents who can’t access financial or emotional support from their families, they are left with limited opportunities to safely care for themselves and their child/ren.

Stigma and discrimination are one of the main reasons that prevent young parents from accessing services. Young mothers with an out-of-home care experience are particularly vulnerable as they bear a double burden as a young mother and as a young person in care.

Services and organisations must work to develop and foster young person-centred and judgement free support environments for young people with parenting responsibilities. This needs to happen in education and employment settings, as well as primary points of contact for young parents such as GP’s, schools, hospitals and early childhood, Centrelink and housing services. Creating safe and supportive environments will reduce the likelihood of young parents experiencing stigma and enable them to access the support they need.
Youth engagement, leadership and decision-making

Youth engagement actively involves young people in decision-making processes and challenging actions to create positive social change.\textsuperscript{101} Young people who have experienced disadvantage are some of the most skilled strategists, creative problem solvers, organisers, thinkers and researchers.\textsuperscript{102} However, the value that young people draw from their experiences is largely underestimated.\textsuperscript{102} Some examples of the skills young people draw from their experiences are:

- communication skills – developed through telling their story and communicating their needs to workers
- negotiation skills – developed through ensuring their needs are met in complex service systems
- problem solving abilities – shaped by having to navigate through barriers, crises, relationships and unfamiliar environments
- creative resourcefulness – in response to the absence of food, money, clothing and opportunity
- a deep understanding of the way a policy or legislation looks and feels like when it is lived.\textsuperscript{102}

Research suggests that children and young people want to contribute to the decisions being made about their lives.\textsuperscript{103} Workers, teams and organisations need to be proactive in creating opportunities for young people to contribute to these decisions.\textsuperscript{103} Research also suggests that youth engagement and participation is empowering; however, it is important to highlight that participation is arguably not empowering because of the concept of ‘power’.\textsuperscript{104} Farthing highlights that simply engaging young people through participation does not empower them.\textsuperscript{104} Instead of aiming to ‘empower’ young people through participation, we should be actively seeking to include them in a process of exchange and interchange.\textsuperscript{102}

Within the practice of youth engagement, there is often a lack of diversity and representation of young people from different backgrounds and cultures.\textsuperscript{103} For example, the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are under-represented, even though they receive services at a significantly higher rate than non-Aboriginal young people.\textsuperscript{103} It is important that when organisations encourage youth engagement, they ensure disadvantaged young people are involved to capture the diverse range of experiences.\textsuperscript{103} Young people are being left out of the conversations and decisions made about their lives. There needs to be a fundamental shift in relation to young people, not only at an organisational level, but at a national youth sector level.\textsuperscript{105}
Youth justice

Instead of being viewed solely as a legal problem, youth crime needs to be addressed as a social problem. There needs to be a broader understanding of the impact that family breakdown, mental ill-health, sexual abuse and violence, poverty, family drug use, barriers to accessing education and unemployment have on young people and how these factors increase the risk of a young person becoming involved with the youth justice system.106

Young adulthood is a period of significant change for all young people, but particularly for those who have experience childhood trauma or disruption.106 This is the case for many young people who have contact with the criminal justice system, and as a result of their underlying vulnerabilities, may act in ways are ill-considered, disruptive, harmful or illegal.106 Currently, the national age at which a young person can be charged with a criminal offence is 10 to 18 years old, with close to 600 children aged 10 to 13 years locked up across Australia in the space of one year.107

The criminalisation of children in Australia disproportionately impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.107 The criminal legal system does not hold the answers to strengthen and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families – the solutions lie within families, communities, country and culture.107 It is important to acknowledge that the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in the youth criminal justice system stems from systemic bias, racial discrimination and institutional racism.107 Without a deep recognition and understanding of this, radical change to the over-representation of Indigenous young people in the criminal justice system will not be seen.

Approaches to crime that rely on punitive methods have been proven to do more harm than good.108 Research suggests that increasing prison sentences and sending young people to detention centres does little to deter criminal behaviour and has worse outcomes for young people returning to the community.108 There are alternative ways to support young people who offend, with a focus on rehabilitation and support instead of punishment and crime. If more funding and focus went into addressing the underlying reasons as to why young people offend, outcomes for young people will significantly improve.
Our reflections and responses to key Discussion Paper questions

Over the coming pages, you’ll find our themed responses to key questions set out in the Victorian Youth Strategy Discussion Paper. We chose to reflect on what’s not working first before we dive into our recommendations and big ideas for change.

The 6 key themes we’re reflecting on from the Discussion Paper:

1. What can we do to effectively enable young people to pursue education and training that meets their needs and aligns with their aspirations?

2. What can we do to effectively enable young people to secure sustainable and equal employment opportunities?

3. How can we best support young people to connect with culture, community and opportunities?

4. What can we do to enable young people to meaningfully contribute to decision-making?

5. What is your experience of equality, safety and fairness living in Victoria as a young person?

6. What ideas do you have for how we can work together to build a more equal and safe society for all young people?

Our insights aim to provide more detailed context for the challenges and issues we feel are most significant for young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and systemic oppression – in our words, through the lens of our own lived experience.
THEME 1 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to pursue education and training that meets their needs and aligns with their aspirations?
“The fact is that given the challenges we face; education doesn’t need to be reformed – it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardise education, but to personalise it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions.” – Sir Ken Robinson

Young people have the right to accessible education. When thinking about what effectively supports young people to pursue education and training, we need to be thinking about how the education system needs to transform to meet the needs of young learners. Young people must have access to educational spaces, to be equipped with the critical thinking, skillsets and environments that enable them to be able to learn well.

The following sub-themes emerged from Y-Change’s conversations about what needs to change in the education system, so that young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds have access to equitable opportunities to get through school.

**Education is unaffordable for young people from marginalised backgrounds**

“No one is that fortunate to have the resources and support to successfully finish school. If a rich kid is struggling in school, they get a tutor and support to learn. What about the rest of us?” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

According to a 2019 survey commissioned by The Smith Family, nearly two-thirds (64%) of Australians say children’s education costs are unaffordable for many families. The survey of more than 1,000 Australians also found an overwhelming majority (84%) do not want to see children missing out on educational opportunities because their family can’t afford it; while three-quarters of respondents (76%) said children in struggling families should be given extra assistance for uniforms, books and excursions to ensure they aren’t disadvantaged at school.

The increasing privatisation and exclusivity of education means that young people with the least resources are made to fight to get access to primary, secondary and tertiary education. We need to go back to making education free, so it is more accessible. Young people should not be worrying about carrying massive higher education debts into young adulthood and beyond.
Children and young people from marginalised backgrounds often miss out on opportunities for additional support if they are struggling at school. Not everyone is fortunate to have the resources and support they need to get into or even successfully complete their education, such as stable and safe housing, physical and mental health supports, access to specialist supports (such as tutors), and equipment such as computers, schoolbooks and uniforms.

Being able to access a broad range of education is crucial. For example, the Skills First ‘upskilling’ criteria is often confusing, complex and creates barriers for young people who need to skill up or down in different fields of study.\textsuperscript{112} This can create disincentives for young people who are trying to figure out what jobs and career paths might be right for them.

These disadvantages are especially relevant for young people who want to pursue an arts or humanities degree, with fees being substantially increased\textsuperscript{113} and even doubled\textsuperscript{111} in some cases.

"Being able to assess and solve thorny problems will be even more important in the coming decades than it is today. But the real point here is that Dan Tehan is asking a small group of students to bail out higher education more broadly. That is unfair and unconscionable."\textsuperscript{114} – Alison Barnes, national president of the National Tertiary Education Union

As part of a planned overhaul to the university system, university students who fail more than half of their subjects will lose access to Commonwealth-supported places or HECS-HELP or FEE-HELP loans.\textsuperscript{115} For young people who fit this criteria, this means we will have to pay the full cost of our studies if we want to continue.

This makes studying higher education even harder for young people who are facing socioeconomic disadvantage and life pressures that inevitably impact on their grades and studies. For young carers, young people dealing with mental ill-health, young people in out-of-home care or experiencing homelessness and other groups who are doing it tough, studying just got a whole lot more overwhelming to even consider.

The separation of public and private schools creates a substantial class divide and sees less resources for young people who are in the public school system.\textsuperscript{116} For example, private schools have two public sources of capital funding – the Commonwealth and the states – whereas public schools only receive capital funding from state governments.
We don’t have access to meaningful short courses

“When young people are looking for work, we don’t have money to pay for courses to help us get a job.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Young people need to know the different education options available and be supported to know which ones are the right fit for us at any one time. Not all courses and learning should be directed towards ‘getting a job’. Learning life skills or learning for enjoyment are just as important. These learning opportunities may also support young people during the transition phase to young adulthood, helping them identify what they want to study in the future or prepare them for entering higher education.

There are young people who aren’t able to commit to higher degrees due to caring and financial responsibilities, and the general inflexibility of the education system. Introductory courses would especially benefit these groups of young people who are wanting to enter the education system in some form but may not know where to start.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- We strongly recommend expanded and sustainable funding for the School Breakfast Clubs Program, which is vital for young people who don’t have access to a sufficient daily breakfast.118

- We strongly recommend a state-wide funding pool for students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, where they can access no strings attached funds for school uniforms, camps, activities and excursions, textbooks, stationery and other school related expenses.

- We want to continue to see strong advocacy from the Victorian State Government through campaigns such as ‘Fairer funding for our schools’.119

- We want to see the Victorian State Government fight to protect arts, humanities and social science degrees by advocating to the Federal Government to withdraw the proposed massive fee increase and removal of public funding from arts, humanities, social sciences, business, and law courses and degrees.120

- Ensuring free introductory certifications such as the Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA), First Aid Training, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training, barista, retail and food safety and handling courses, provides young people with more accessible pathways into employment and further education opportunities.
Education isn’t accessible or inclusive for all of us

“I also needed support with my mental ill-health, housing, sexual abuse, family violence, assault, and the grief and loss of losing my protector in a car crash. To me, education was the least important thing in my life. I had to focus on surviving, I couldn't look into the future because I didn't think I would be alive to see it.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

As populations in contemporary Western societies grow more diverse, the need for teachers to better understand and work effectively with difference becomes increasingly critical. However, research shows that historically, teacher education programs have aimed to address diversity with add-on or disjointed approaches, with little success.121

In 2019, a ground-breaking report122 authored by Dr Jim Watterston and Megan O’Connell of The University of Melbourne revealed that there were at least 50,000 young Australians who have ‘disappeared’ from the education system nationwide.123

Supporting young people in the context of their education includes thinking about and approaching who they are in a holistic way. When we talk about ‘looking through an intersectional lens’, what we mean is that all the parts of young people’s identities need to be considered, not just the ‘learner’ part.

To ensure an intersectional approach to students’ learning experience, we need to implement standards of training for teachers, education professionals and specialists, i.e. understanding accessibility and disability and looking at school cultures.

“We need to think about how we can make education more accessible for students that come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, young people of colour, young people in out-of-home care, and many other marginalised demographics. We then need to consider how these identities intersect and how systemic barriers are compounded for people who exist at the intersections of these demographics.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Accessibility is having adequate access. Creating a sense of welcome and safety is not just lip service – it must be ingrained into practice and culture. It is not enough to only be seen to be inclusive and accessible; education providers need to listen to our needs and create safer spaces and systems to learn within.

Making something free is not enough. For education to be truly equitable, it needs to be accessible to people who are experiencing poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage.
For people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, time is often in short supply and needs to be spent working to get money to make ends meet.

There is a need to listen to students about what they need when they are trying to communicate with us. Creating spaces where these needs can be asked and listened to is crucial if young people are to successfully complete their education. There needs to be adequate time built into the education model for teachers and educators to get to know their students and what they need. This includes generous teacher to student ratios.

We need young people to feel safe at school, which includes having accessible and gender-neutral bathrooms, prayer and sensory rooms and having support animals present. It’s also important to remember that not all disabilities are mobility based or visual.

“Currently, education is made for people who are neurotypical and able-bodied. When we have disabled people enter the system, we then have to change it. From the foundation, it’s never going to be a perfect system that is accessible for everyone, but there is so much more that we can be doing to make it more generally accessible and then building from there.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

“I’ve experienced being told not to use the disabled toilet because apparently I am not disabled, which was a completely wrong assumption anyway. There were no gender-neutral bathrooms available. This situation made me feel extremely unsafe.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Education needs to be more practically accessible by offering more flexible options for different styles of learning and using as many platforms as possible.

“A lot of the education system and the ways it is currently set up can actually harm young people, especially those of us who are already struggling. We need ways to learn without the pressure.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

“The constant catch up game. If you don’t get the fundamentals or miss out on school, you will have to constantly work to catch up. If you are hospitalised for a period of time, which is out of your control, you may miss fundamental learning opportunities. We shouldn’t have to try and stay on top of schooling while we’re in hospital or sick. There should be opportunities for other ways of learning once you are able to resume.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Young people need more flexible times, night courses and safe transport to be able to get to school and back home again. Not all universities or TAFEs currently offer a mix of in-person and online options, which makes it difficult for students needing to prioritise other commitments such as employment.
Young people require access to the tools and resources they need so that they can successfully complete their education (e.g. computers, food, transport, etc.). Computers are necessary but are not always accessible. We cannot submit our work while also being forced to use computers we don’t have access to.

Young people need adequate sleep, time to get to and from school, time for sports, music and exercise, time to see our friends and family, and free time. Children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds also have caring roles, jobs, and other things going on at home that we have to manage. On top of that, we’re expected to manage homework, which leaves many children and young people stressed. We need to re-think it.

“There is research to suggest that later school starting times are better for young people. Children and young people sleep more than adults. Schools should adjust start times and rest breaks in response to research.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Kicking us out of school does not support us to complete or pursue our education

“I got expelled in year 8 with no support to find other education options that were suited to my style of learning. I was seen as a disruption and a troublemaker instead of a child trying to ask for help. I didn’t know that there were other education options instead of high school and it’s really important we teach children and young people about different types of flexible education that are accessible to their learning styles and trauma-informed.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

We need to support young people to continue their education and not exclude them. Young people from marginalised backgrounds are disproportionately expelled. For example, the Victorian Ombudsman’s 2016 Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions found that students in out-of-home care, students with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are all over-represented in expulsion figures.

The education system is not inclusive of LGBTQIA+ students

The education system is not inclusive for LGBTQIA+ students and plays an active role in discrimination, bullying and unsafe learning environments. The 2015 National School Climate Survey of 10,000 students found that:

- over 85% of students have experienced verbal harassment
- 66% have been discriminated against based on their sexual orientation or gender identity
- over half reported hearing biased remarks from school staff, and school staff often failed to intervene when hearing these remarks at school.
Education needs to be LGBTQIA+ inclusive, which is more than just not excluding LGBTQIA+ young people but actively creating supportive and safe environments. It needs to be built in from the start, as educators won’t know if they have LGBTQIA+ students in their classrooms.

Making classrooms more broadly safe and supportive for LGBTQIA+ students is suicide prevention. Up to 50% of trans people have attempted suicide at least once in their lives. The average age of a first suicide attempt is 16 years – often before ‘coming out’.127

Splitting the class into ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ can cause students who don’t fit into the gender binary to feel unsafe. There needs to be a broader representation in health classes and an understanding that there are different types of diverse bodies including disabled bodies, trans bodies and intersex bodies.

In sex ed there is an assumption that all young people will have sex when not everybody will be interested in sex. It’s important to not make statements implying that everyone will want to have sex at some point.

Keep religion out of school, it does not represent diversity. Everyone has a right to choose their own religion if they want to and follow that. We should be teaching about different religions and letting young people choose if they want to learn about one or none.

We believe there needs to be more of a focus on the following topics in secondary schools:

- education on consent and healthy relationships that is actively LGBTQIA+ inclusive
- gender, sex and sexuality – learning the difference between gender and sex, different types of attraction, what is ‘intersex’, what is ‘transgender’, what is ‘asexuality’, helping end stigma around the LGBTQIA+ community
- sex education that is LGBTQIA+ inclusive.

The education system is not inclusive for students with disability

Schools must be a safe space for students with disability. Young people and staff must be supported to learn about and normalise disabilities to develop a greater understanding and stop discrimination and bullying.

Findings from Children and Young People with Disability Australia’s 2019 National Education Survey report, ‘Time for change: The state of play for inclusion of students with disability’ found that:

- 24.2% of students with disability were enrolled in segregated education in either dual enrolment with a special school or attending a special school
• another 15.5% of students who attended a ‘mainstream’ school were separated from their peers, either on a full-time basis in a special unit or withdrawn to the special unit for instruction in combination with attending a ‘regular’ class
• 12.5% of students with disability have been refused enrolment
• 16.6% of students with disability do not attend school full-time
• 14.7% of students with disability were suspended in the last year and 1.8% were expelled in the last year. 40.2% of students with disability have been excluded from events or activities at school in the last year.\textsuperscript{128}

The education system needs a complete overhaul to stop excluding young people with marginalised identities. It should not be on us to change the system to be more inclusive, it’s up to all of us to ensure we are not being left to fight for change alone.

\textit{Stop forced participation}

There isn’t a right way to learn or be a student. There is more than one way to learn and everyone learns differently. A complete culture shift in the education system is needed where we value and seek consent from young people.

We need to rethink what’s considered compulsory, for example presentations in front of the class. This can have negative impacts on young people, especially those who suffer with anxiety-related disorders. We shouldn’t be forced into participation through fear tactics or threats of failure as this actively disadvantages young people and makes education inaccessible. These approaches can make students feel disempowered with the way systems and processes are enforced, even if we can do the task.

Students should be able to wear the clothes they feel comfortable in. If a school uniform is mandatory, students should be able to choose what clothing items they want to wear, outside of gender conformity. We should also be allowed to wear makeup and have piercings because it’s our body and it should be our choice how we decide to present ourselves. Discovering and exploring identity is such an important and powerful factor for young people. Having this actively drilled out of us during our most formative years feels controlling and confusing.

\textit{Support teachers to support students}

Students from marginalised backgrounds may need individualised support and learning. One teacher can’t be expected to engage, teach, and provide meaningful support for up to 25 students. We need more specialist support workers and social workers in the classroom to offer one-on-one and holistic support to students who are trained in trauma-informed teaching and have a deep understanding of mental ill-health, neurodivergence and learning needs.
We need to consider trauma-informed practice at the centre of all education. For young people who have experienced extreme traumas, we lose the feeling of safety and this may never come back. This impacts our studies and ability to learn and should always be accommodated within the education system.

“The student is seen as the problem. That they aren’t capable or are too traumatised, instead of changing the units and curriculum to be accessible to students that experience disadvantage and disability.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

The education system needs to provide opportunities for students to participate and present information in formats that work for us. This will still show that we have understood course content but not force participation and further disadvantage students. This is reflected well in trauma-informed practice models, such as the Berry Street Education Model.129

**Corresponding recommendations**

- We urge the Victorian State Government to support the Victorian Council for Social Services ‘Stronger Schools Campaign’[vii] and partnering education action plan, to make our public education system stronger, fairer and more inclusive for every Victorian child.130

- Not everything should fall onto teachers’ shoulders. Specialist support must be integrated into classrooms and available to support young people with their learning and wellbeing such as the School Focused Youth Service.131

- We encourage greater funding, support and promotion of the Berry Street Education Model, which incorporates evidence-based trauma-aware teaching, positive education, and wellbeing practices in support of students with complex, unmet learning needs.132

- We support the expansion of Body Safety Australia and the integration of a team of Lived Experience Consultants as part of their team of educators.133

- We recommend an expansion of the Victorian School Building Authority’s Inclusive Schools Fund and other Schools Funding and Grants Programs specifically for public schools.134

---

[vii] Victorian Council of Social Services’ ‘Stronger Schools Campaign’ has a clear set of evidence-based policies that will make our public education system stronger, fairer and more inclusive for every Victorian child. [www.strongerschools.org.au/](http://www.strongerschools.org.au/)

[viii] The Berry Street Education Model is a practical approach to teaching and learning that enables teachers to increase engagement with students with complex, unmet learning needs and successfully improve all students’ self-regulation, growth and academic achievement. [https://learning.berrystreet.org.au/focus-areas/berry-street-education-model](https://learning.berrystreet.org.au/focus-areas/berry-street-education-model)
• We urge the Victorian State Government to commit to the recommendations outlined in the Victorian Ombudsman’s 2016 Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions, to improve our education system and its support for all children and young people.\textsuperscript{125}

• That more agency and autonomy is afforded to school students through reviewing mandatory dress codes and forced participation activities.

Our education system isn’t taking mental health and illness seriously

“Young people do not have as much knowledge of mental health and mental ill-health as adults. We need to be given more advice and tools (i.e. age-appropriate wellbeing sessions in primary school), so that when we’re older we have those strategies in place to rely on. Practice these strategies with young people, so that once something happens, they can use them and feel comfortable with their knowledge and understanding.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Resilience, life satisfaction and mental health have declined significantly among adolescents, and although mental health service usage is increasing, concerns about access remain.\textsuperscript{54} The proportion of adolescents using mental health services has almost doubled since 2012. Only 2 in 5 Year 8 and 11 students believe they can access mental health services when needed.\textsuperscript{54}

Census data indicates that approximately 3 in 5 students are aged between 15 and 24 years and at least 1 in 4 of these young people will experience mental ill-health in any one year.\textsuperscript{134}

Based on findings from the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, young people experiencing mental ill-health have more absences from school.\textsuperscript{135} Across Years 1 to 6, students experiencing mental distress missed an average 11.8 days per year compared with 8.2 days per year for students without a mental disorder. In Years 7 to 12 students with a mental disorder missed an average 23.8 days per year compared with 11.0 days per year for students without a mental disorder.\textsuperscript{135}

In 2019, the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union found that half of all state schoolteachers and staff in Victoria say they know of students in their school who had self-harmed in the past year.\textsuperscript{136} Teachers in Victoria also said they were struggling to support students experiencing a host of mental health problems including anxiety, anger, depression and those who experience drug and alcohol abuse.\textsuperscript{136}

The education system must work to normalise speaking about and encouraging students to access mental health services. Staff and students also need to be equipped with the knowledge and tools to support young people’s, and their own, mental health to create safer, more supportive learning environments that emphasise the importance of everyone’s mental wellbeing.
To receive special consideration for class assessments, young people are told they must access mental health services and be diagnosed by a medical professional. This is an added pressure on students from already marginalised backgrounds, and often causes high levels of anxiety and stress for those who have to care for others as well as themselves.

Universities often don’t understand the mental health needs of students, nor offer or provide relevant support referrals. Students should not have to get to crisis points to get the assistance they need.

To truly integrate young people’s mental health considerations into the realm of education, we need to completely rethink the education system and the intersecting systems that young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are forced to access.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- That Mental Health First Aid becomes a compulsory unit for all Victorian primary, secondary and tertiary schools, so that we can learn the tools we need to support each other as a community to build cultures of inclusion and belonging.\(^\text{137}\)

- Not everything should fall onto teachers’ shoulders. Specialist support must be integrated into classrooms and available to support young people with their learning and wellbeing such as mental health practitioners in secondary schools.\(^\text{138}\)

- That Mossfolk\(^\text{ix}\) receive targeted funding to run primary and secondary school workshops across Victoria that focus on providing accessible peer-led mental health workshops, events and resources for young people by young people with mental ill-health.\(^\text{139}\)

**There is insufficient awareness about and funding of alternative education pathways**

“There’s more than one pathway, talk to young people about every education option – even the uncommon ones that you may not personally agree with.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

The mainstream curriculum has a one-size-fits-all approach, which leads to young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds falling through the cracks. This mainstream approach often forces students to fit the national curriculum instead of working to understand how young people learn uniquely and what they want to be learning about.

Over one-fifth of school students in Australia do not complete high school, leaving school without a Year 12 or equivalent qualification.\(^\text{140}\) Alternative learning programs and

\(^\text{ix}\) Mossfolk is a not-for-profit community for young adults with mental ill-health created by young adults with mental ill-health. [www.mossfolk.org/](http://www.mossfolk.org/)
initiatives seek to redress this disengagement by stimulating and supporting young people’s engagement in learning both inside and outside of schools.\textsuperscript{140}

Crucial programs that educate thousands of students at risk of dropping out of school are often highly vulnerable to funding cuts.\textsuperscript{141} A study by Victoria University found that alternative or ‘flexible’ schooling programs help 70,000 students a year gain an education.\textsuperscript{141} It also found that the majority of students enrolled in these programs were marginalised or came from disadvantaged backgrounds.\textsuperscript{141}

There is little incentive for mainstream schools in today’s narrow and competitive educational environment to attempt to take in and rehabilitate detached and disengaged young people because the consequences appear too negative.\textsuperscript{122} Therefore, students who are seen as having ‘high needs’ often become collateral damage in the quest for higher academic performance and enhanced reputation.\textsuperscript{122}

There needs to be greater awareness, encouragement and funding of alternative education models for young people who are suited to more flexible, specialised and trauma-informed learning environments. No young person should be left behind, especially due to circumstances that are out of their control.

**Corresponding recommendation**

- We encourage greater funding, support and promotion of alternative schooling models for young people experiencing disadvantage such as The Hester Hornbrook Academy\textsuperscript{142} and The Pavilion School.\textsuperscript{x}

**Standardised testing isn’t equitable for all young people**

“I felt really stupid because I couldn’t concentrate and wasn’t good at what the teachers were trying to get me to learn. Instead of identifying all the unique skills students have and helping us develop them, they teach and mark us all on the same subjects. The message that some of us receive is that we’re ‘not good enough’, especially those of us who are already struggling.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Standardised tests are exams administered and scored in a standard, or consistent, manner. They are scored using particular scales of standards in knowledge and skills. Such tests can be given to large groups of students in the same area, state or nation, using the same grading system to enable a reliable comparison of student outcomes.\textsuperscript{143}

---

\textsuperscript{x} The Pavilion School aims to re-engage young people who are currently disengaged from any form of education, by providing students with a relevant and individually tailored education program. [https://pavilionschool.vic.edu.au/](https://pavilionschool.vic.edu.au/)
Standardised assessment data plays a key role in the work of educators. Part of this involves identifying the most appropriate learning pathways for students who learn differently from their peers. Standardised assessment data helps teachers see where and how they differ. But this is insufficient. Teachers also need to analyse more specifically how each student learns, through individual interviews and error analysis.\textsuperscript{144}

It is argued that standardised testing in the 20th century marginalises low-income students and students of colour and will continue to do so as long as they are heavily relied upon as measures of intelligence and success.\textsuperscript{145}

In an Australian context, it has been shown that NAPLAN testing causes ‘unintended side effects’ due to the pressure on teachers and students,\textsuperscript{146} and most negatively impacts on students with disabilities and from non-English speaking backgrounds.\textsuperscript{147}

Standardised grading and testing are not the most effective measures of how much content young people are retaining, digesting, and able to put into practice. Rather, it shows that some students can cope well under pressure and repeat back information, while invisibilising the contexts in which young people are living and surviving within.

“This way of measuring ‘success’ in students is ableist, disadvantages students with anxiety disorders, students who have difficulties with focus and concentrating and a whole range of other difficulties that may arise from being asked to sit in a quiet room for two hours. It is not an accurate reflection of how well we understand content.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

We need to move beyond the superficiality and simplification of grading and ‘failing’ students and instead focus on supporting them to successfully develop the skills they need and taking a ‘whole child’ approach.\textsuperscript{148} We must move towards seeing young people for their unique strengths and capabilities and enable students' agency in showing their own unique understanding of course content.

**Corresponding recommendation**

- That the Victorian State Government continues to advocate for an overhaul to standardised testing in Australia,\textsuperscript{149} based on findings from the independent review of NAPLAN.\textsuperscript{150}

**Redefining and transforming how we do education – the curriculum needs to change**

“We should be teaching students critical life skills that will help them function as they transition into adulthood, so we’re not just focusing on making them ‘workforce ready’ but also ensuring that they are equipped to survive the world in general.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant
Australia is currently ranked as having the fourth-most socially segregated school system in the OECD, with 51% of disadvantaged students concentrated in disadvantaged schools. We have also seen the largest increase in social segregation since 2006.151

The Foundation for Young Australians’ New Work Order report tells the story of an Australia that is undergoing the most significant disruption in the world of work since the industrial revolution. How we respond has huge implications for us as the next generation.152

Our current school curriculum feels like it’s becoming less relevant. Attempts have been made to update information and the way we teach and understand Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), but we’re still falling behind.153

The current education system’s goal is to prepare young people to enter the workforce, but the workforce is changing rapidly and we aren’t adapting the curriculum at the same pace. We have no idea what jobs are going to be available in 10, 5, or even 3 years from now.

We are putting a lot of energy and time into an education system that is already or will soon be irrelevant.151

We aren’t being taught relevant skills that will effectively support us into the future. Schools need to be teaching practical and transferable skills in new and different ways that young people can understand and real-life skills that we need to survive in the world.154 The Foundation for Young Australians describe these skills as ‘enterprise skills’, which are:

- problem solving
- creativity
- financial literacy
- digital literacy
- critical thinking
- presentation skills.155

Being taught about how to think in a big picture way and better collaborate are fast becoming invaluable skills, not only for the workplace but in our world. We’re tired of crucial skills like these, which we have in spades, being considered ‘soft skills’.156 We know they’re not. They’re hard-won through our lived experience and require an ongoing dedication to deepening self-awareness, something most courses don’t teach.

As young people who are living and surviving through systemic oppression, our skills are often undervalued, overlooked and othered.30 We think the education system just needs to catch up to what we already know.

We aren’t being educated about how to confront and manage systemic issues that affect our everyday lives. By not teaching us about experiences such as mental ill-health, family
violence and homelessness, the tool of language and ability to communicate about what we’re experiencing is being withheld from us. We’re then left with suffering the raw emotion of these experiences on our own, all while attempting to navigate broken service systems.

We know there is training available for staff, services and professionals, but the education system is missing the opportunity to equip young people with the tools we need to communicate effectively with others about what we are experiencing – to know where to get help, and how to help our friends.

“We need to be supporting young people to develop the life skills that they need to thrive outside of the education system. Generally, it’s perceived that parents will teach these life skills but for so many children and young people, we miss out for various reasons. Our curriculum needs to reflect that. We aren’t saying don’t teach maths or science, it’s more about understanding what transferable skills are being developed. We need to be critical of why we are teaching what we are teaching and how it will be useful in a broader context.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

People change jobs and careers so often that expecting students to know what they want to do for their entire life makes no sense, especially considering the likelihood of a 15-year-old today potentially having 17 different jobs over 5 careers in their lifetime.157

We need the curriculum to focus on flexibility, adaptability, creativity, and critical thinking and be clear about this and have goals attached to them. We need schools to be transparent about how these skills are being developed with young people so we know why we are learning them.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- We advocate for Learning Creates Australia, a first of its kind national initiative that brings together diverse stakeholders across the Australian community to create innovative, practical solutions to deeply entrenched and systemic educational challenges.158

- We also recommend that young people with a lived experience of socioeconomic disadvantage are partnered with to reimagine our future education system.
THEME 2 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to secure sustainable and equal employment opportunities?
“How we define systemic issues determines how we frame solutions. Public discourse that suggests young people are to blame for their unemployment leads to policies and systems that will not address youth unemployment.”

– Youth Affairs Council of South Australia

When it comes to securing sustainable and equal employment opportunities, there’s a lot stacked up against young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Access to basics such as good quality clothes and shoes for interviews and money for public transport doesn’t sound like much, but when it comes down to the wire, these are just some of the small yet very big things that severely limit young people’s chances.

We need to be thinking about how social class is influencing our mindsets, processes and organisational cultures. These threads run through the fabric of every aspect of our social systems and deeply affect the lives of marginalised young people every day.

The following sub-themes emerged from Y-Change’s conversations about what needs to be confronted when it comes to equal employment and training opportunities, so that young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds actually get to have a fair go.

**There aren’t enough employment pathways for disadvantaged young people**

“It would be good if there were better jobs to be able to apply for. Flexible jobs that are more suitable for young people and what we want.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

One in three young Australians is unemployed or needs more hours, with youth unemployment hitting a 23-year high in June 2020. In 2019, Victoria’s youth unemployment rate was 11.4%, just above the national rate of 11.2% – however some areas, mostly in regional Victoria, were well above it.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, young people were already disproportionately adversely affected in the labour market compared to other age cohorts. Underemployment rates (the percentage of workers who want more hours) had overtaken unemployment rates, especially for young people aged 15 to 24. This age group has also been much more likely to be underemployed than those aged over 25. Underemployment of young people spiked during the crisis, peaking at 23.6% in April 2020, then falling to 17.9% in October 2020 but remains high.

New modelling from the Mitchell Institute at Victoria University estimates 130,000 fewer new apprenticeships and traineeships will be offered as a result of the economic fallout
from COVID-19, leading to a 50% increase in school leavers that will not be in employment, education or training. \(^{162}\)

There aren't enough jobs for young people and those experiencing disadvantage are at risk of being left behind in the future economy. \(^{163}\)

When we do manage to find employment, we aren't getting paid a fair rate. Young people are often doing the same work and getting paid less. Some young people are working to support themselves but almost 60% of young people under 20 are earning less than the national minimum wage. \(^{164}\)

For rural and regional young people, the range of education and employment options available is narrower than their city peers. This means young people seeking employment or higher education are under pressure to move away from home. \(^{165}\)

“We need more employment opportunities for young people in rural Victoria. Bring more manufacturing jobs back here and help keep us self-sustainable. Bring industry back to Australia and make it cheaper to do so.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

The Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies in their 2015 report, ‘Engaging young people in regional, rural and remote Australia’ describes 3 distinct factors/issues facing rural communities that relate to engaging young people:

- encouraging return – the importance of maintaining ties with young people who have left rural communities
- overcoming disadvantage – increasing young people’s health and wellbeing, improving their engagement with education and educational outcomes and providing a smoother transition to employment
- involving young people in the community – supporting young people who stay in rural areas to have ways of being involved in their communities, that helps encourage them to remain in the area. \(^{166}\)

There is also a lot of pressure on year 12 students to perform, resulting in young people being pushed into debt with higher education. But what happens when we graduate and there are no jobs to go to? \(^{167}\)

**Corresponding recommendations**

- In addition to the strong Workforce Recovery Plan \(^{168}\) set out by the Victorian State Government, we support the continuation and expansion of the Community Traineeship Pilot Program \(^{169}\) and the Youth Employment Program. \(^{170}\)
The casualisation of our workforce

“We need more labour protections and legislation, as nothing we currently have is addressing the problems of casual employment for young people. As contractors, we have to manage our own tax, super and leave and there’s not much out there to help us learn how to do this.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

The Foundation for Young Australians’ ‘The New Work Standard: How young people are engaging with flexible work’ report reflects that:

- the number of young people in any form of casual employment was estimated to have increased from 15% of 25-year-olds in 2009 to almost 20% in 2016
- since 1992, the number of young people estimated to be in full-time casual employment without access to the security or benefits of permanent work has doubled
- real earnings for self-employed part-time workers (with no employees) declined from $719 per week to $528, representing a reduction of 26.5% in real earnings (in 2017).171

Compounding the problem, the rate of under-employment (people needing more hours) has overtaken the jobless rate, and most new jobs being created are part-time, casual or insecure options such as gig work.160

Between March and April, ABS figures show almost 600,000 of Australian workers – about 3% of the workforce – lost their jobs. Data has shown that these losses were concentrated among young workers, with almost 1 in 3 (28%) workers aged 18 to 24 losing their jobs. On top of that, half of workers aged 18 to 24 who managed to keep their jobs during the pandemic reported having had their regular working hours cut. With nearly half of workers aged 18 to 24 on casual contracts (79% in the most affected industries) and with little-to-no employment protection, they have been most expendable during the downturn.63

The Y-Change team consistently reflected that the biggest barrier to secure and sustainable employment for young people is the apparent movement towards a casualised workforce.172

“There needs to be greater protection for casual and young employees. There are loopholes that seem to exist that unfairly exploit casual workers.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

The Y-Change team also reflected that having casual employment makes applying for housing almost impossible, as housing is rarely accepted with only casual employment hours. The instability of income and housing has massive effects on our health, accessibility and safety.
Corresponding recommendations

- We support the Victorian State Government’s Secure Work Pilot Scheme and hope that the pilot successfully transitions beyond ‘priority industries’ to the entire casualised workforce.\(^\text{173}\)

- We urge the Victorian State Government to support The Foundation for Young Australians’ policy propositions for the ‘Good Work Standard’ for young people in flexible work arrangements.\(^\text{171}\)

- We urge the Victorian State Government to support the ‘Raise the Rate’ campaign recommendations, which includes an increase to Commonwealth Rent Assistance of 50%.\(^\text{174}\)

Workplace discrimination against young people

“It’s easier to exploit young people, which then makes it more difficult for older young people to secure employment.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

The Y-Change team reflected on discrimination and racism in the workplace, sharing that they know of young people who have to change their names on job applications so that they’re provided with more employment opportunities.

Research has shown that CVs featuring female names are less likely to lead to an interview or a job, and the same goes for non-Anglo names. A 2015 study by ANU found applicants with Chinese, Middle Eastern and Indigenous sounding names were far less likely to get called for an interview.\(^\text{175}\)

The team also reflected that when applying for jobs, they often won’t disclose whether they have a disability or mental ill-health due to previous experiences where they either never heard back from potential employers or were singled out in workplaces when what they were struggling with was made explicit.

It’s frightening for us to ask for support with our disabilities or illnesses once we’re employed, especially if we didn’t feel safe enough to originally disclose.

There is little to no accountability on hiring biases, as it’s so hard to prove. Our broader culture needs to change to help young people to rework the way organisations approach their workers and how they value people. Young people are valued in the workforce for being cheap, then dropped when they get older and are no longer cheap.

Organisations need to invest in educating themselves on what biases and assumptions are being ‘tested’ and then ensure their staff are being provided with resources and
professional development support to strengthen their practice. Standalone training isn’t enough either. There needs to be organisation-wide cultural transformation that measures the effectiveness of any diversity, equity and inclusion training.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- We strongly encourage the Victorian Government to continue to advocate for the Federal Government to restore penalty rates in the relevant awards to their previous levels and legislate to ensure the Fair Work Commission cannot vary an award and reduce take-home pay in future.¹⁷⁷

- We support the recommendations outlined in the Young Workers Centre’s December 2020 ‘Youth Strategy Submission’.¹⁷⁸

- We support the Victorian Public Sector Commission’s ‘Getting to work: Victorian public sector disability employment action plan 2018–2025’, in particular people with disability having fairer employment experiences.¹⁷⁹

- We encourage job sharing arrangements, which can improve access if one person with disability isn’t able to do the job but two people with disability can. We need to normalise and support flexible working arrangements such as these.

- We recommend an investment in organisation-wide cultural transformation that measures the effectiveness of any diversity and inclusion training or program offerings.

**The missing lens of social class in the workplace**

“We need to build a society where we see the value in diversity.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

A report by the Australian Council of Social Service and University of New South Wales found the incomes of the top 20% of Australian earners were 6 times higher than those of the lowest 20%. The gap widened since 2015–16, when top earners raked in five times more.¹⁸⁰

Mission Australia’s 2018 ‘Working through it: A Youth Survey report on economically disadvantaged young people’ noted a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people indicating that there were significant barriers impacting upon them finding work (51.9% compared with 38.0% of respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid employment).¹⁸¹
Young people from marginalised backgrounds find it increasingly harder to find employment, due to multiple and compounding barriers stacked against them, including:

- access to affordable and reliable transport to get to and from interviews\(^ {182}\)
- a highly competitive and weak labour market for young jobseekers\(^ {183}\)
- a lack of jobs, mental health, lack of family support and family responsibilities\(^ {181}\)
- ineffective employment service providers
- lack of access to education, training and support with job applications
- little to no support from parents or caregivers who are also struggling
- suitable clothing and personal grooming for presenting well at job interviews.

A 2020 research report commissioned by Diversity Council Australia, ‘Class at Work’\(^ {184}\) looked at 9 diversity demographics, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, age, caring status, class, cultural background, disability status, gender, religion, and sexual orientation and gender identity.

It revealed that class is most strongly linked to workers’ experience of inclusion at work over any other diversity demographic, and one of the most strongly linked to exclusion.

The research shows for the first time in Australia that diverse teams that are inclusive of all staff – whether lower, middle, or higher class – are more effective and innovative.\(^ {185}\) Lower class workers who were in inclusive teams were 17 times more likely to be in a team that worked effectively than lower class workers in a non-inclusive team.\(^ {185}\) They were also 15 times more likely to be in a team that was innovative, and 10 times more likely to be in a team that provided excellent customer service.\(^ {185}\)

It also found that only 53% of lower class workers indicated that they trusted their organisation to treat them fairly, compared with 73% of middle class workers, and 82% of higher class workers.\(^ {185}\)

As young people who continue to suffer the punishing effects of systemic oppression and governments who make decisions at the expense of our livelihoods, we’re tired of being told that if we just work that bit harder, we’ll somehow ‘make it’. So many of us are doing everything we can and we’re still just hanging in there. It’s time for systemic responses to step up in a big way if we’re really serious about giving young people a fair go.\(^ {186}\)

**Corresponding recommendations**

- That a state-wide youth employment equity fund be set up exclusively for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds to access no strings attached funding for new clothes and shoes for job interviews, inclusive of haircuts and other personal grooming services, and specialised coaching and support services for job application preparation.
• We applaud the Victorian State Government’s investment in public dental care services, but we know waiting lists are long and orthodontic care is mostly out of our reach. We strongly recommend that a state-wide youth dental and orthodontic equity fund be set up exclusively for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds to access no strings attached and ongoing funding for dental care.

• That social class is seen as a foundational barrier for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds to gain employment. We support the adoption of Diversity Council Australia’s ‘Class at Work’ report recommendations for meaningful and measurable diversity and inclusion practices relating to social class in the workplace.

• That organisations commit to professional development and training for all staff about creating cultures of belonging and inclusion.

• That the Fitted for Work enterprise concept be expanded to include young people of all gender identities, and that a team of young Peer Workers be employed to exclusively support other young people as a key feature of the model.

• That the Learner Driver Mentor Program be expanded, and ongoing funding committed beyond 2023 to support more young people to gain the driving experience required to apply for their probationary licence. We also recommend increasing the eligibility age from 16 to 21 up to 30 years of age (for reasons we have shared above on page 5).

Unconventional expertise and lived experience isn’t considered as valuable

“We are missing out on having diverse thinkers by employing cookie cutter staff.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Most jobs require a university degree to even be considered as a potential employee, but some young people may not want to further their education or be able to due to financial and other constraints. Businesses and organisations exclusively seeing university degrees as a baseline requirement for employment excludes the unique contributions of large groups of young people.

xi We recommend Barasa Consulting Group’s, ‘Create a culture of inclusion and belonging’ Masterclass session as part of their Leading with Nobility for a New Era Masterclass Series. www.barasaconsult.com/masterclass-series/

xii Fitted for Work helps Australian women experiencing disadvantage get work, keep work and strive at work. https://fittedforwork.org/
Although lived experience is becoming more broadly recognised as a valuable lens and expertise, we still have a long way to go. Lived experience isn’t often seen as a valuable source of wisdom and the realms in which it is, are usually limited to the field of mental health. As young people from marginalised backgrounds, we know that we gain unique knowledge and skills from what we’ve lived and survived through, and that this experience is transferable in the workplace.

For example, if a young person has been caring for their mum with a disability and their family, they have developed transferable skills such as time management, financial management, deep empathy and emotional intelligence, scheduling and delegation skills. Skills such as these should acknowledged and sought out in the workforce. Particularly as these responsibilities may have made going to school difficult or impossible, which further disadvantages young people with a lived experience.

Our team members reflected that the overemphasis on higher education creates deeper class divides in our society, where those with access to the most resources and supports have far greater chances of succeeding. As with most things, this way of thinking traps us into one-size-fits-all offerings, but we know that doesn’t work for everyone.

“The hardship of lived experience can make people a better social worker. The end result is that future clients will miss out on having access to social workers with lived experience – of childhood trauma, spent time in prison, who’ve overcome addiction – because those workers would not have been able to get into the program in the first place.” – Peter Young, Social Work Lecturer at Griffith University

Seeing the expertise lived experience can bring into the workforce, as well as the opportunities to learn on the job for those who aren’t able to access traditional employment and education pathways, means that this is an area well worth exploring.
The value of lived experience in the social sector

The following lists summarise some of the key benefits of meaningful engagement with lived experience in social change work, adapted from Baljeet Sandhu’s 2017 report, ‘The Value of Lived Experience in Social Change: The Need for Leadership and Organisational Development in the Social Sector.’

Benefits of working with lived experience for young people

- finding opportunities to participate in decisions that affect us and others with similar lived experiences
- having a voice; being valued, listened to and appreciated; not feeling that expressing our concerns are a waste of time; understanding that our opinions hold value and matter to others
- movement from being uncertain of our identity and place towards knowing our own value
- solutions emerging from group interactions between people who had previously been alienated from each other, bringing people and communities together to achieve mutually agreed and desirable goals and outcomes
- stability and safe spaces, improved trust in and understanding of services and community, greater hope and optimism
- strengthening our professional and personal skills and abilities.
Benefits of lived experience in social change work for our sector

- allows organisations to design and develop high-quality, effective and relevant policies, projects, interventions, services and initiatives
- breaks down organisational hierarchies and helps avoid stagnation – ‘humanises’ activities and services
- brings policy issues to life by illustrating real life challenges
- enables organisations to draw upon and make effective use of people’s unique skills, capabilities, diverse perspectives, experiential knowledge and insights, allowing this to contribute to all decision-making
- improves sense-making and sense checking; inspires innovation and rejuvenates and reinvigorates activities
- strengthens identity, credibility and legitimacy within communities, the social sector, government and wider society.

Benefits of lived experience in social change work for our broader communities and civil society

- developing a sense of pride within, and for, communities
- discovering and exploring community identity, along with distinct and/or connected identities
- dispelling community fears and anxieties and promoting social inclusion
- ensuring that services and activities are relevant to local needs
- promoting collective action and self-determination and raising community consciousness
- strengthening the role of communities in policy change and creating new political accountability structures.
Spotlight on key lived experience driven initiatives in Victoria

Below are 4 key initiatives across Victoria who are using lived experience driven approaches to create and influence systems change.

**Berry Street – Y-Change**

Y-Change began as a pilot in 2016. Developed as a concept over 2 years, we emerged out of frustrations and discussions between Berry Street representatives and young people with a lived experience who shared a passionate desire to see drastic change to systems that had supported them throughout their childhood and adolescence. The aim was to address the problem of having no voices of young people with a lived experience of socioeconomic disadvantage at the centre of service system and public policy design.

Based in transformational identity work, a deep respect for the expertise young people develop through their lived experience, and a firm belief that their exclusion from decision-making circles is fundamentally negligent, Y-Change represents a radical shift in how we work alongside young experts.

Y-Change is built on the belief that marginalised or systemically oppressed young people are the experts of their own experiences and that society benefits when we can influence agenda-shaping and the co-design and production of systems that affect us. This engagement strengthens our service sector, government and wider community. Most importantly, it builds the social capital of young people with a lived experience.

Y-Change recruits, trains and employs a pool of young Lived Experience Consultants for external consultation on a fee-for-service basis. The Lived Experience Consultants draw on the Y-Change specialist methodology that equips us to precisely and critically reflect on our own lived experience in order to deliver professional inputs and advice on the design of solutions for similar cohorts. It is built on principles of knowledge exchange, collective learning and responding to emergent ideas and information.

Y-Change are focused on breaking the cycles of disadvantage young people are experiencing, so we can then work towards breaking the cycle with others. We are an emergent enterprise, currently incubated at Berry Street and are in the very early stages of working towards becoming a sustainable social enterprise.

---

xiii We want to see an investment in our Y-Change model, so we can continue building a workforce of quality young Lived Experience Consultants who are supporting the re-design and transformation of government systems and policy across Victoria and Australia.
Family Safety Victoria – Victim Survivors’ Advisory Council

The Victim Survivors’ Advisory Council (VSAC)xiv was created to give people with lived experience of family violence a voice and ensure they are consulted in the family violence reform program.

Formed in July 2016, VSAC represents the lived experiences of people of different ages, genders, demographics and communities across Victoria.

VSAC’s role is to:

- place people with lived experience at the centre of family violence reform
- include people who have experienced family violence in service design of family violence reforms
- advise on how family violence reform initiatives will impact on people who use services
- ensure the government’s response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence meets the expectations of people with lived experience
- ensure advice to the government reflects the diversity of the family violence experience.

Tash Anderson, a Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant, was the Inaugural Youth Representative on VSAC. Y-Change has two other Lived Experience Consultants as youth representatives of the current cohort.

Mental Health Complaints Commissioner – Driven by lived experience framework and strategy

Consumer, family and carer perspectives have shaped the Mental Health Complaints Commissioner (MHCC) since its beginnings. However, in 2018 the former Commissioner, Dr Lynne Coulson Barr, made an even stronger commitment: that the MHCC would be driven by lived experience in everything they do.

To strengthen their approach to being driven by lived experience, a project team led by the Senior Advisor, Lived Experience and Education was established – the framework and strategy is the outcome of that work.xv

The outcomes of this project – the framework and MHCC’s commitment to a 3-year strategy to continue to strengthen how they are driven by lived experience – are consistent with the

---


recommendations in the 2019 interim report of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System, which recognises that lived experience is crucial to the design and delivery of the mental health system.

YLab and Shark Island Institute – The Oasis Project

In partnership with Shark Island Institute, YLab launched The Oasis Project in 2020.xvi

Schools are often at the frontline of support for young people and with homelessness among 12 to 24-year olds increasing almost 10% in the past 5 years, now more than ever, they need renewed support and new ways to respond to youth homelessness.

By combining 21st century skills development, community service, and wellbeing outcomes, The Oasis Project supports teachers by providing relevant and engaging content and tools for youth homelessness education. Built to supercharge the impact of the Oasis Films, the project was co-designed with teachers and students and led by young people with a lived experience of homelessness.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- We strongly encourage investment in our Y-Change model so that we can:

  - continue to build a workforce of quality young Lived Experience Consultants who are supporting the re-design and transformation of government systems and policy across Victoria
  - co-produce a world-first accredited training package for young people who are wanting to learn how to translate their lived experience into a professional skill set.

- We strongly recommend a funding and scholarship pool so young people can access Intentional Peer Support training, an exciting approach that works to broaden the lens to support and enhance localised models of peer support.xvii There is currently very little opportunity available for young people with a lived experience to skill up.

- We strongly recommend the creation of a suite of Lived Experience roles for young people within government, the not-for-profit and wider community sector. For

---


example, Lived Experience Advisors embedded within the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

Centrelink and Employment Service Providers aren’t working for us

“When COVID-19 hit, the government upped payment rates and accessibility for those who had just lost their jobs to access money, even though this has been an issue for people already using government assistance and who have been struggling to live off the basics for a long time. It’s unfair that it was only because of a pandemic that the rate was raised, but never considered pre-COVID-19 for those who rely on support payments to survive.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

At the age of 25, young people are increasingly reporting they feel like they can’t get anywhere and are struggling to navigate a career path in a rapidly changing world of work. This has been termed by some as the quarter life crisis. 31.5% of young people are unemployed or underemployed. Having so many young people out of the workforce costs our economy 790 million lost hours of work each year, equating to up to $15.9 billion in lost GDP to the Australian economy annually. The social impact is equally compelling – loss of confidence, hope and self-esteem has led to mental health issues costing Australia $7.2 billion per annum.

There are over 650,000 people engaged with jobactive at any one time and the majority receive Newstart or Youth Allowance. The services funded by the Federal Government to help them in their search for work cost $1.3 billion per year, making it the second largest area of government procurement outside the defence portfolio. Backing up this system is a strict enforcement and compliance framework. Support from jobactive and Centrelink is conditional on a host of ‘mutual obligation requirements’ and financial penalties are imposed if these requirements are not met. Since the introduction of jobactive in July 2015, employment services have imposed 5.2 million penalties on unemployed workers, just under the total imposed in the previous 12 years combined. Of the penalties imposed during the 2015–16 financial year, around 50% were found by Centrelink to have been imposed in error, meaning that close to one million unemployed workers that year were penalised when they had done nothing wrong.

There have long been complaints from job seekers that the system does not serve them well and that it prioritises profits instead of good job outcomes, but for job service providers it has become a lucrative multibillion-dollar business.

---

xviii The Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) works for the people of Victoria by helping the government achieve its strategic objectives. They do this by supporting the Premier, Deputy Premier, the Ministers for Aboriginal Affairs, Equality, Multicultural Affairs, Industrial Relations, Veterans, Youth and Women, as well as the Cabinet. www.vic.gov.au/department-premier-and-cabinet
“Young people need more than Centrelink job agencies. Job agency quotas of how many jobs you need to apply for make it really difficult to find a job. To meet the quota, you have to apply for positions that you aren’t qualified for or have no interest in just so you don’t get your payments cut off. You get to spend less time applying for jobs you actually want because you have to meet their quotas.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

As of February 2020, there were about 630,000 people in the jobactive system, but according to a COVID-19 Senate Committee hearing, that number had grown to 1.4 million by July 30. More people are coming into the system, but there are fewer jobs to place them in.197

“Once the middle and upper class were affected by COVID-19, support payments were raised, Centrelink waiting times were shorter on the phones, and staff were focused on customer service. It goes to show that the government doesn’t care about the people who already need support and are living in poverty.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Users report that the current system operates as a one-size-fits-all system. A system which does not recognise the variety in job seeker needs or abilities. A system which does not prepare job seekers for the digital age. As a result, almost two thirds of current job seekers are in jobactive for more than 12 months and 1 in 5 for more than 5 years.198

“There is no fairness when you depend on Centrelink. If you’re in high school, you can’t get to Centrelink during their opening times and it puts everything in our lives at risk. We often need to skip school to get there.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Beyond the announcement of the Coronavirus Supplement falling from $550 to $250 a fortnight in September, and the reintroduction of asset testing, there has been little in the way of a roadmap for our nation’s unemployed in a landscape where job seekers outnumber jobs 13 to 1.199

“Modelling by Deloitte-Access Economics predicts that removing the coronavirus supplement entirely (as is due 28 March 2021) would cut $31 billion from the economy, resulting in the loss of a further 145,000 jobs.200 We don’t need more reports, inquiries, surveys. We need the Federal Government – this prime minister and minister for social services – to act, and fast.201 We need a permanent, adequate increase to jobseeker urgently, and it needs to be extended to everyone hit by unemployment now.”201 – Cassandra Goldie, CEO Australian Council of Social Service

In terms of capability, the jobactive model is already undergoing significant reform in response to government and stakeholder recognition that it has failed to provide real
assistance to most people seeking work. As a result of this, a ‘New Employment Services Model’ has been developed. This new model has advantages over the jobactive model in that it has introduced the capacity for large numbers of unemployed workers to agree to a job plan and meet job search requirements using digital self-servicing. It also introduces an Enhanced Services model intended to provide higher levels of intensive case management for unemployed workers with complex needs.

However, it is argued that neither the existing jobactive system, nor the New Employment Services model, is a good fit for the post COVID-19 unemployment scenario. This is because both models are hamstrung by a dependency on job outcome payments, which leads to under-investment in the needs of people most at risk of long-term unemployment.

“Young people from families without paid employment are more likely to remain disadvantaged across their life course. These young people grow up and form their identities in a ‘social context defined by limitations, deprivations and stigmatisations,’ which arise from economic circumstances ‘neither of their own making nor within their control.’ All this has repercussions for young people’s transition into adulthood and their potential for upward social and economic mobility.”

We need more targeted resources from job agencies to support marginalised young people, instead of Centrelink forcing us to apply for jobs that do not align with our aspirations. We need support to figure out our career path and what jobs we might be interested in.

We know of young people who are being forced to Work for the Dole in op shops to keep their payments. We need more flexibility for young people who need extra support, especially those of us with disabilities who make up 27% of all job seekers in employment services, but only 15% of job seekers who stay in employment for 26 weeks or more.

“The stigma against ‘dole bludgers’ is incredibly damaging for those of us who need assistance at no fault of our own. It’s also a myth.”

Many young people are fully supporting themselves financially needing to pay for rent, food, electricity, water, and other expenses. However, in the eyes of Centrelink, we still aren’t considered ‘independent’, and therefore not eligible to receive financial support.

It is expensive to live out of home and Centrelink does not adequately cover the costs of living, with more than 300,000 Australians forced to survive on $40 a day, before rent, utilities and food.
Governments must review what ‘independent’ means in the eyes of Centrelink for young people under the age of 22. Young people from marginalised backgrounds are being forced to support themselves due to issues such as family violence and homelessness but Centrelink’s inflexible criteria means they miss out on critical financial support.

“To be eligible for the Centrelink ‘unable to live at home’ allowance you have to get a parent’s signature, which is fucking ridiculous and needs to change. You need to trust children and young people if we have left an unsafe environment and praise us for looking after ourselves – don’t punish us.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Governments must also review the ‘unreasonable to live at home’ application process so more young people can access the financial support they need and are entitled to. Currently, young people who need to leave home require parental signatories and phone numbers to ‘allow’ young people to receive the ‘unreasonable to live at home’ allowance.

The language in the application isn’t accessible to young people and needs to be co-designed with young people with lived experience. Questions such as, “why haven’t you and/or your parent(s)/guardian(s) tried to sort out your differences?” are extremely naive. Young people cannot just ‘sort out differences’ with abusive family members.

For some young people, especially those managing complex family dynamics like domestic and family violence, asking for a parent’s signature and phone number for the form can put them and/or their siblings at risk of exposure to child protection and is not an option. Although this might be a pathway that ideally needs to be explored for reasons of children and young people’s safety, for any young person to hold the weight of this responsibility on their shoulders on behalf of their families is unjustifiable.

Another option offered to us is to have a social worker speak with a Centrelink representative, which still requires a statement by a parent or guardian and again brings its own challenges and complexities.

Parents can and do make untrue claims that ruin our chances of being able to live independently, especially when they rely on receiving our support payments. Centrelink relies on parents’ testimony and this is not safe for all young people.

Corresponding recommendations

- We want to see a Royal Commission into Centrelink and Employment Service Providers, so that the continued harm these agencies inflict on the most marginalised young people in our communities is formally exposed and they are held accountable for their actions.
- Governments must review what ‘independent’ means in the eyes of Centrelink for young people under the age of 22.\textsuperscript{206} Young people from marginalised backgrounds are being forced to support themselves due to issues such as family violence and homelessness but Centrelink’s inflexible criteria means they miss out on crucial financial support.

- Governments must also review the ‘unreasonable to live at home’ application process so more young people can access the financial support they need and are entitled to.\textsuperscript{207} Currently, young people who need to leave home require parental signatories and phone numbers to ‘allow’ young people to receive the ‘unreasonable to live at home’ allowance.

- We urge the Victorian State Government to support Per Capita’s key recommendations from their ‘Working it Out: Employment Services in Australia’ 2018 report.\textsuperscript{196}

- We urge the Victorian State Government to support the ‘Raise the Rate’ campaign recommendations to fix our social security net for good so that it keeps us out of poverty, with income of $500 per week.\textsuperscript{208}
THEME 3 – How can we support young people to connect with culture, community and opportunities?
“In the absence of love and belonging, there will always be suffering.” – Brené Brown

When it came to reflecting on this question about culture and community, one of the strongest threads that emerged was around the importance of place. If we think about belonging, we think of having a sense of place – perhaps in one specific place or with specific people. In these places, with these people, we make sense when we’re there.

For young people who are forced to continually endure systemic oppression, connecting to culture, community and place can be challenging. Whether that be because they’ve lost connection to their families or cultures of origin, missed hearing stories about themselves from other family members or elders, or have never felt a sense of ‘home’ anywhere - being disconnected from place and people is painful. This pain isn’t simple to process, either.

When we think about diversity, culture, community and place - we also need to be thinking about the internal and collective ruptures for young people who may not have their own sense of belonging. Who haven’t felt connected to any roots. These kinds of feelings influence our identities in a powerful way and cannot be understated.

The following sub-themes emerged from Y-Change’s reflections on culture and community – what they feel is preventing them from having their own unique sense of place.

**We don’t have access to enough free spaces**

“We need spaces to have longer opening hours – we have nowhere else to go.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Research indicates that adolescence is a period of significant mental and social development, where peer influence and a developing sense of belonging are critical issues as young people become more susceptible to the effects of social exclusion.  

As young people become more independent, they look for places where they feel safe, and which can fulfil their needs for social interaction, self-expression and retreat. Public spaces can meet these needs and be sites for new experiences. This can then produce tolerance and a greater understanding of difference during the formative period of adolescence.

Yet public space is formed and transformed by multiple factors – including economic, social, cultural, political and conceptual factors. How do these factors affect young people’s access to space, ability to socialise, be expressive and play?

For a public space to be seen as safe, comfortable and successful, a diverse range of people need to actively use it.
Young people need more free spaces where we can safely gather and exist without having to commit to or sign up for anything. A lot of us gather at train stations and shopping centres because there isn’t anywhere else for us to hang out.

“Places can be meaningful for the emotions that they produce, either in the person who is in that place or a place itself can have an emotion. A place can be important because it provides you an identity or helps you realise your identity, and places are important because of the experience, both positive and negative, that happen there.” – Ryan Bleam

For young people experiencing homelessness and family violence in particular, there is often very little stability in our lives. We need a safe base that we can always come back to and that we know is waiting there for us. Somewhere to go when we have nowhere else to go, somewhere that we can go for food, somewhere we can go to talk to people, somewhere we can bring our friends to just hang out. For a lot of young people this ‘somewhere’ is often with family at home, but for others like us – we don’t get that choice.

“People without stable homes, and those with restricted access to domestic space, tend to live more of their lives in public. Public space restrictions have far greater consequences for these people.” – Kurt Iveson

Once you leave school, you move away from friendship groups and support networks. For young people who are no longer engaged in school, excluded from education, or have finished their education with nowhere to land next, they can feel disconnected from friends and community and it can be hard to create new connections. These are times where we can fall through the cracks if there aren’t places available to catch us.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- We recommend a state-wide, specialist Youth Central Hubs pilot project, where accessible 24/7 centres for young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage can drop in to get their needs met and find community, without being forced to sign up for services. These Hubs would include no strings attached access to food and meals, laundry facilities, beds, sensory and prayer rooms, activity days and therapeutic services. The hubs would be staffed by specialist youth workers and Youth Peer Workers, who are available to support other young people doing it tough. These hubs would also be co-designed with young people across the state.

---


• We recommend extending the operating hours for services that young people need access to, including libraries, youth crisis services and youth spaces, especially for young people experiencing homelessness, family violence and mental health crises. This includes the recruitment of specialist Youth Peer Workers who can assist young people doing it tough and to help them navigate service systems in a paid capacity.

• We recommend running regular free events showcasing local support services for children, young people and the wider community in metro and regional and rural Victoria. These events would provide casual and non-confrontational ways for children and young people to learn about what services are available to them, while getting some free food, jumping on rides and connecting with the broader community. These events need to be inclusive, as well as co-designed and led in partnership with young people with a lived experience.

• We need access to multiple services in the same place, which means greater investment in co-located services, so we can access help where we go to get it. We need multidisciplinary workers – communities of practitioners working together in the same spaces.

• We need holistic services and places to go that address homelessness and other issues surrounding it, such as family violence, mental ill-health, and health. Religious beliefs should never dictate people’s eligibility to receive the services and support they are entitled to, either.

**Our identities are being overlooked by service systems**

“Anytime I’ve had feelings of being unsafe or unfairly treated is because a part of me is not being seen, protected or has been shut out or disrespected. It’s when I have felt like the whole of me is not being welcomed.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Most community service organisations would have something similar to what's called a client management and information system. These systems are built so that anyone in the organisation can look up a person's information, such as who they identify as and what services they are using and have used.

These records systems hold important information, but something that is often missed is whether young people identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Instead, the question gets marked as ‘unknown’ or ‘didn’t ask’, as some staff members don't specifically ask young people. This missing information can prevent young people from getting access to the care and services they need, especially in family violence and out-of-home care contexts.
“The findings of the Royal Commission into Family Violence [in Victoria] highlighted that while data currently available indicates an overrepresentation of Aboriginal people affected by family violence, there are considerable inadequacies in the collection of data concerning Aboriginal people across agencies and departments. This hinders our full understanding of the extent of family violence experienced by Aboriginal people.”\textsuperscript{211} – Victorian State Government

When this information is not asked for, young people also miss out on being connected with their communities, culture, country and their Elders.

In our experience, it’s also a common occurrence for support staff to miss out on asking whether young people are multicultural, or from migrant or refugee backgrounds. They often assume our identities on face value without asking us directly. Not all young people are aware of their family history either, so then it’s inevitably up to case managers to assume the backgrounds of young people rather than investigating further.

“It is the responsibility of all organisations, not only those with a specialised focus on migrant, refugee or multicultural communities, to ensure that young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds have access to the services and programs that all young people do.”\textsuperscript{212} – Centre for Multicultural Youth

Organisations must ensure good practice standards are upheld across youth services in Victoria. This also isn’t limited to finding out whether a young person needs an interpreter or information in a different language, but so workers and organisations know how to better support and nurture young people’s cultural identities.

Another common barrier is the tick box ‘male’ or ‘female’ gender binary option, which continues to exclude genderqueer young people from being identified by service organisations accurately and respectfully. This can mean young people don’t come back to services or feel unsafe accessing them in the first place.

We know that Indigenous\textsuperscript{213} and multicultural\textsuperscript{86} young people experience significant discrimination and systemic racism in Australia, and that young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ continue to experience stigma, discrimination and abuse on the basis of being considered ‘different’.\textsuperscript{214}

As a sector, we need to be actively working towards connecting young people to their distinct cultures and communities and celebrating and learning about their cultures and identities alongside them.
Corresponding recommendations

- Youth service organisations across Victoria integrate and follow the Indigenous Status Standard – Standard Indigenous Question (SIQ) as part of client data collection.\textsuperscript{211}

- Youth service organisations across Victoria integrate and follow the Centre for Multicultural Youth’s practice recommendations from their ‘Inclusive Organisations Good Practice Guide’ as part of staff induction and training and professional development.\textsuperscript{212}

- Allocate funding to specialist youth service organisations across Victoria to undergo The Rainbow Tick accreditation,\textsuperscript{xxi} in partnership with young people from the LGBTQIA+ community who are paid in their capacity as Lived Experience Advisors. We’d also like to emphasise that Rainbow Tick accreditation is only the beginning of the journey. Being committed to diversity and inclusion is an ongoing process, which requires ensuring your service is evolving in response to community needs, in partnership with community members.

Checkbox diversity is affecting our access to meaningful participation

“When creating multicultural events, it at times feels forced and for the organisers to be praised, ‘look, we have ticked the box, but we want everyone to know we have ticked the box. Look how inclusive, diverse and cultured we are.’ It feels tokenistic, forced and over the top.” – Y -Change Lived Experience Consultant

Good intentions to increase the diversity of organisations have led to ‘checkbox’ approaches that don’t account for hegemony, marginalisation, and the creation of sustainable shifts in power.\textsuperscript{215} Without a closer examination of these practices, we may wake up in a few years wondering what went wrong.\textsuperscript{215}

A strong theme throughout our team reflections has been how diversity and inclusion approaches and targets are failing young people who are socioeconomically disadvantaged due to the broad lack of analysis and awareness regarding social class.

We talk about the importance of accessibility of information, opportunity and services, but how can we hope to reach inclusion without an analysis of how class privilege has built so many of the systems, processes and programs young people are expected to be able to access?

\textsuperscript{xxi} The Rainbow Tick accreditation is a world first quality framework to help organisations become safe and inclusive for the LGBTIQ community. www.rainbowhealthvic.org.au/rainbow-tick
For young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds to see ourselves reflected, we must become the creators, designers and policy-makers. Government and organisations should own the responsibility of helping us get there.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- When recruiting for lived experience and youth participation roles, employers must analyse how class privilege influences the hiring process. This includes whether asking for young people’s home addresses and which universities they have studied at is necessary.

- When recruiting for youth roles and co-design projects, the accessibility of expressions of interest applications must be reviewed. Online forms need to be inclusive of diverse groups of young people, which means ensuring applications are:
  - written in simple language
  - not pages and pages long
  - take experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage into account and how these may influence and reflect in young people’s responses and overall employment experience.

- Our recommendations under the sub-theme, ‘The missing lens of social class in the workplace’ are also relevant to this section (pages 133–134).

**We aren’t meaningfully partnering with young First Nations People or being taught about history and culture by First Nations People**

“We need to be doing more than Acknowledgments. We need to be actively seeking active and meaningful involvement.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

In 2015, 5.3% of students were Indigenous in primary and secondary Australian schools, yet only 1% of the teaching workforce identified as Indigenous.216

Currently, there’s not enough representation of First Nations People in schools or informing our school curriculum. There’s a strong and critical need to consult with Elders and First Nations young leaders on the education system as a whole, so it can remove barriers for Indigenous young people and challenge widespread myths about Indigenous Australians.217

“I have to say that racism continues to play a part in this in schools too, because we [Aboriginal people] are a minority. Our numbers in most cases in mainstream schools are very small, so kids being kids will point out the differences. Your desire to go to school drops when you feel you are targeted or exiled.”218 – Lois Peeler
The History Teachers Association of Victoria has said that when it comes to coverage of the frontier wars in classrooms, the problem wasn’t the curriculum but limited time. This isn’t acceptable. Sufficient time needs to be allocated to learn about Australia’s history, our collective role and responsibility in dismantling white supremacy and the continued effects of colonisation on First Nations People.

We must learn about and confront the truth of Australia’s history. This needs to be part of our curriculum and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It also needs to be done meaningfully, and not with the attitude or intention of needing to ‘tick a box’.

All Victorian organisations need to work on being in relationship with Aboriginal Elders and actively consult with Indigenous communities. We must be seeking consultation, guidance and feedback on how we can work better with First Nations People and commit to measuring and reviewing our progress and outcomes so that we are held accountable.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority commits to including education about Australia’s true history, including the Frontier Wars and effects of colonisation and racism on First Nation Australians in The Victorian Curriculum F-10.

- The Victorian State Government continues leading the country with its work on Treaty in Victoria, ensuring that the process is led by Aboriginal Victorians at every stage and that their communities are being listened to and centred in all decision-making.

- The Victorian State Government continues its investment and support in the Koorie Education initiative, to ensure greater numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are employed within the Victorian education system and school operations.

- The Victorian State Government advocates for reinstating funding to the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples entering and remaining in professional teaching positions across Australian schools.

---

xxii The Victorian Curriculum F-10 sets out what every student should learn during their first eleven years of schooling. [https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/](https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/)


xxv More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative: final report. [www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A75784](www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A75784)
- Establish an authentic pilot mentoring program to engage prospective young Aboriginal Victorian teachers from as early as year 11 and year 12.

- Guarantee ongoing funding for the Koorie Youth Council to ensure continued support of and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Victoria.\textsuperscript{xxvi}

- Expand and fund the National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition to run workshops in Victorian schools and support their ‘Learn Our Truth’ campaign.\textsuperscript{xxvii}

\textbf{We aren’t being taught about or connected to our culture in out-of-home care}

“For children and young people in out-of-home care, it’s hard not knowing our culture or not having one at all. Wanting to have a community and culture but not knowing how to find them because we don’t have a strong connection to family, family has passed, or is violent. Learning the history of family and having a sense of belonging is important. Culture is about more than just trying different foods.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

A lot of young people from marginalised backgrounds are disconnected from and unaware of their culture and community. We need and want to know where we’ve come from, about our history, and how it affects us now.

Young people in out-of-home care, particularly in residential care, are often not connected with their culture or getting the support they need to connect with a cultural support plan.\textsuperscript{222} The 2018 report published by the Commission for Children and Young People, ‘In our own words: Systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system’, stated that as of 31 December 2018, 61\% of Aboriginal children and young people who should have had a cultural support plan did not.\textsuperscript{90}

We believe all young people in out-of-home care and residential care should have the opportunity to connect to their culture, whatever that might look like for them. Young people who don’t have access to mainstream education must be taught about different cultures and explore what our own cultures are. This would especially benefit those of us who can’t get that information from our families. We should also be taught about culture and connection to land and country, through a First Nations lens and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

\textsuperscript{xxvi} The Koorie Youth Council is the representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Victoria. \url{https://koorieyouthcouncil.org.au/}

\textsuperscript{xxvii} The National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led organisation that brings together a diverse coalition of young mob from different Indigenous Nations, experiences and passions, who all share a commitment for good, quality education. \url{https://learnourtruth.com/}
Corresponding recommendations

- Offer all young people in out-of-home care, residential care and intersecting services a cultural support plan to help them engage with their own culture and heritage. For Indigenous children and young people, these would be developed in partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), with more targeted funding to ACCOs to be able to fulfil this task in ways that foster a creative (rather than a compliance) focus.

- Aboriginal foster and kinship carers receive improved cultural support planning training, in partnership with ACCOs and First Nations communities.

- That all young people in out-of-home care, residential care and intersecting services are taught about, and encouraged to keep learning about, Indigenous Australian history – co-led by young First Nations Peer Educators.

We’re not getting the support we need to connect with community

“That ‘turning point’ that everyone talks about starts when you find and connect with your community.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

While young people are often well-connected to strong social structures, critical transitions that characterise youth can be stressful and compromise these connections and supports, increasing social vulnerability, loneliness, and isolation.\(^2\text{23}\)

Loneliness can affect people at any point but is more common among 2 key groups: older individuals aged 75 and young people aged 15 to 25.\(^2\text{24}\) Although research in Australia is currently limited, a 2015 survey by VicHealth found 1 in 8 young people aged 16 to 25 reported a very high intensity of loneliness.\(^2\text{24}\)

Young people need to feel like they belong to a community and this will look different for each of us. When we talk about connecting with community, it’s more than a worker taking us to the grocery shop or the movies. It’s being able to build our own connections, friendships and relationships with people. It’s vital that support workers actively find out what the young people they’re supporting enjoy doing and are interested in and then build on that as part of tailored support plans.

Some of us haven’t been taught how to interact within the community or connect and have conversations with other people and our friends, especially for those of us who have grown up with family conflict and violence. Services need to be sharing examples of how to socialise and what hanging out with friends could look like, such as how to have conversations and going out for coffee.
Mission Australia points to the link between financial insecurities and impacts on family relationships and young people’s feelings of support within the family. National youth survey results reveal that 3 in 10 economically disadvantaged young people reported that their family’s ability to get along was either fair or poor (30.9% compared with 16.8% of respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work).\textsuperscript{181}

In order to break the cycle of unhealthy relationships, we need to be taught about what healthy ones look like. It’s hard for us to model certain behaviour and ways of relating if we’ve never seen it before in our own lives.

Young people go to their friends and their communities for support. There needs to be funding and more accessible and visible resources and support for us to learn the tools to build meaningful relationships in our own lives.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- We applaud the Victorian State Government’s recent investment of $37.5 million for Respectful Relationships education in the 2020/21 Victorian Budget.\textsuperscript{225} We want to ensure all young people get access to this education, even if they’re not engaged in school. We strongly recommend funding opportunities for community organisations to deliver this training to young people accessing their services, in partnership with young Lived Experience Consultants and Peer Educators.

- Co-produce a website with a group of young Lived Experience Consultants that focuses on how to build and maintain meaningful relationships. This resource would focus on how to build friendships, would include places young people can go together across Victoria to hang out, and a list of suggested activities young people can choose from.

**There is an increasing intergenerational gap**

There are a lot of stereotypes that make it hard to relate and see value between different generations of people. We need to be creating connections and bridging the gap between older and younger people as we have so much to learn from each other.

There is also a massive wealth gap between generations, with research showing young people’s incomes falling over the past decade as many older Australians power ahead.\textsuperscript{226} This is another factor that makes being young during distinctly different times harder to relate to.

Data from an 2015 Australian survey of around 1,500 people aged 18 years and over found that most respondents believed there was some degree of conflict between older people and younger people.\textsuperscript{227}
Research shows that social problems associated with young people are often caused by declining levels of inclusion in the community, lack of social cohesion at the local level, and a growing disconnect between generations.228 However, regular contact with older people during childhood and adolescence can reduce negative attitudes from young people towards ageing.228

An accumulating body of research on purpose, generativity, relationships, and face-to-face contact suggests that engagement with others that flows down the generational chain may well make you healthier, happier, and possibly longer-lived.229

We love the idea of having schools inside aged care homes, to nurture intergenerational learning.230 As we mention in this submission, not all of us have connection to our families of origin, including older parental figures and grandparents. Opportunities for us to have older people in our lives who want to listen and learn from us and who care for us are crucial for our own growth and development.

“At one and the same time, intergenerational exchange is like the metaphor of the bush fire that creates a mosaic of growth and regeneration. It creates the conditions that can help clean up, heal and restore the state of community relationships as well as cultivate the seeds of growth.”231 – Community Building Through Intergenerational Exchange Programs, Report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme

**Corresponding recommendations**

- A government supported pilot initiative focusing on reverse mentoring232 in the Victorian youth sector, where older professionals are partnered with young people who enter into a relationship of exchange. Our Y-Change model currently uses a training development approach called ‘Youth Exchange’, where people are taught how to partner meaningfully with young people with a lived experience of socioeconomic disadvantage.
THEME 4 – What can we do to enable young people to meaningfully contribute to decision-making?
“At the core of resistance to young people who have experienced disadvantage being recognised for their expertise is a fundamental failure to comprehend the value that they have to offer. [...] Once we are able to accept that they are capable social actors who also hold unique and valuable insight and expertise their exclusion from decision-making becomes negligent.” — Lauren Oliver

Over recent years, young people have been accused of disengaging from society. Much of the available research indicates that young people have been turning away from what is called more ‘traditional’ participation mechanisms such as voting in elections and membership of political parties and trade unions. Some insist that young people are not disengaging, they have just found different – new and innovative – ways to make their voices heard and that sometimes these methods are less visible to decision makers.

Youth participation in society can be viewed from different perspectives and depends on individual points of view. In general, it means taking an active part in decision-making processes at all levels in our lives. We take our working definition of youth participation from Rys Farthing:

“A process where young people, as active citizens, take part in, express views on, and have decision-making power about issues that affect them.”

As shared in the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) 2018 report, ‘Every Suburb, Every Town: mapping poverty in Victoria’, more than 1 in 6 Victorian children live in poverty (18.7%), and more than 1 in 7 young people (15.6%).

Despite having significant knowledge, experience and insight, young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are often excluded from meaningful policy reform, systems change efforts and service design – and we are consistently underrepresented at decision-making tables.

Young people who experience systemic oppression are often labelled as ‘hard to reach’ and ‘not engaged’. At Y-Change, we intentionally seek to challenge this because we know we aren’t hard to reach – spaces just aren’t made for us. We have been constantly hurt, ignored, and let down by systems and services that were meant to protect us and keep us safe. When those systems suddenly turn around and ask to hear our voice and share our opinion, it can come as a real shock.
In our minds, young people who have experienced disadvantage are the only people who can tell us what a policy looks and feels like when it comes to life. We are key knowledge holders in the search for ‘what works’ and the understanding of what doesn’t, and we must be at discussion and decision-making tables, always. We believe that young people don’t need empowering, we have voices – most people just aren’t listening.

The following sub-themes emerged from Y-Change’s reflections on meaningfully contributing to decision-making, identifying key barriers preventing us from creating the change we know we can.

**We’re not being invited into rooms where decisions are being made**

“If you want young people to contribute to decision-making, they have to be in the rooms where the decisions are being made.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Young people like us often aren’t even physically in rooms where decisions are being made about us. We don’t need to be enabled – we are here, we are capable, and we want to be included. Look at your decision-making tables, are there any young people there? If so, are they diverse young people with lived experience of deep disadvantage? How might you address this gap?

From government through to youth organisations, young people with a lived experience need to be sitting on boards, in working groups and working as advisors. It’s important that this isn’t in a tokenistic way, but in ways where we feel comfortable and have our input respected and valued. Shifting the power towards young people being able to meaningfully contribute to decisions has massive benefits for organisations, for communities and for the young people involved.

After all, who knows the needs of young people better than we do?

The young people who need to be involved are those who live with the daily repercussions of being directly affected by policies and services. We know what it’s like to be a client of service systems - both in where they have failed us, and in what works. We hold valuable and unique first-hand knowledge.

We’ve seen great shifts in youth participation over the years, but we still have a long way to go. Consulting with us is a great start, but the general approach seems to be picking out what you think is most important and bringing that to the table in your words, not ours. We need to have young people informing decisions while they’re being made, not after the fact.
Corresponding recommendations

- We recommend that alongside the development of a Victorian Youth Strategy is a youth participation and decision-making framework and guide that is co-produced in partnership with young people and Lived Experience Consultants, such as Y-Change.

- Expand the Department of Health and Human Services ‘Client voice framework for community services’ to include an edition focused on children and young people, co-produced with young people engaged in Victorian youth services. xxviii

- Ensure recruitment processes for young Lived Experience Consultants are accessible. This means taking into account the significant barriers facing young people from lower social classes. Governments and organisations must make it simple for young people who are experiencing deep disadvantage to apply for paid roles through online expressions of interest forms.

- Continue to fund the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), Victoria’s peak body for young people and the youth sector in Victoria, into the future to continue their important work in partnership with initiatives such as Y-Change.

- Fund YACVic to review and co-produce their ‘Code of Ethical Practice’ guide xxix alongside young people with lived experience.

We want more than Youth Advisory Groups

“There needs to be longer terms for youth advisory groups and councils because it takes a while to get comfortable and be able to learn how to use your voice in professional spaces. Then once you get comfortable the timeframe is over and it’s too late.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Although we understand the importance of youth advisory groups and think they still have a role to play, we want youth participation to be reimagined beyond this format. There are so many ways governments and organisations can partner with marginalised young people, but it takes thinking outside the box and investing in us.

---


The findings in the Department of Education and Training’s 2010 report, ‘Rewriting the Rules for Youth Participation: Inclusion and diversity in government and community decision-making’ are still relevant over 10 years later. Their research found that:

“Overall, although government and community organisations that run formal youth participation mechanisms (such as youth advisory groups) support the idea of involving a range of young people from diverse backgrounds in decision-making processes, this has not translated to widespread involvement of young people from the following backgrounds:

- young Indigenous people
- young people from culturally diverse backgrounds
- young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- young people who are, or have been, under the guardianship of the Minister
- young people who have disabilities.

Young people who identify with one or more of these backgrounds tend not to be involved in formal decision-making mechanisms, and if they are involved, they are likely to be from middle class families and be engaged in formal education. That is not to say that these groups of young people are not at all involved in decision-making processes [...].”

This mirrors the experiences we are still having as young people from marginalised backgrounds. We are often the only ones in rooms and groups of mostly middle-class young people.

Often, young people like us don’t get to contribute to decision-making processes because mainstream spaces are inaccessible to us. We’re excluded by how processes are imagined and designed. We need to take a closer look at what we’re offering young people – how it’s being structured, and the barriers that prevent us from access.

Many of us are excluded before we even get a chance to apply. If diverse groups of young people are not thought of at the start of processes, then organisational cultures become inaccessible. Not only do we miss out, organisations also miss out on partnering with extraordinary young people who have so much to offer.

We need to work towards more innovative ways for partnering with young people.

**Corresponding recommendation**

- The Victorian State Government funds and develops a workforce of Youth Consultants as community builders, project workers and Peer Support Workers that
are hired in a paid capacity to support youth-related projects and initiatives across government departments.

**Being paid for our involvement still isn’t the standard approach**

“Public speaking is fucking terrifying for me but because I was paid it gave me confidence. I was there doing my job, and this made me feel like I had a right to be there as much as everyone else.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

When young people are working but don’t get paid, it shows that you don’t value our time, contributions, or the work we’re doing. Sometimes, when young people are asked to contribute to a working group, we are the only people in that group who aren’t being paid.

**Not all young people have access to equal socioeconomic opportunity**

“Am I going to work to pay off my rent or can I go to the youth summit? It’s not that we only need opportunities, it’s that we need paid opportunities. We shouldn’t have to choose between our health and paying the rent, and opportunities to help us further our careers.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

All young people, especially those of us who are most marginalised, need more support. Young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds find it harder to get access to employment and so intergenerational cycles of poverty and employment continue.

Young advocates need to be paid for their work so that we can meaningfully contribute, or ensure organisations have funding allocated to pay us. We need job opportunities that we are interested in, as well as education and meaningful training and development opportunities so that we can advance.

**Being paid with gift cards**

Sometimes we are ‘paid’ in gift cards. It’s a good starting point, but would you pay your employees, consultants or advisors in gift cards? Some young people are fully supporting themselves and getting a gift card to use at specific stores such as JB Hi-Fi aren’t often useful if we can’t afford to buy food or pay the rent.

“It doesn’t matter that there might be other benefits that we’ll receive in exchange for the work – I learn plenty from my paid jobs, too. Ultimately, paying young people for our labour is fair, deserved, and vital to equity and genuine inclusion.” – Jane Chen

It’s also important to be upfront about how much you will be paying young people, the kind of gift card you are giving them and when. Will it be the final day of a project? Will it be
weeks after the project or meeting finishes? Like everyone else, we are often budgeting for food, rent and other living costs, and so knowing when to expect a gift card is a big help.

The unfairness of unpaid roles and labour

Having unpaid roles means that only young people from a place of privilege can afford to work for free and even then, it’s unfair. This approach continues to actively exclude a massive cohort of young people who have a lot to contribute but whose wisdom isn’t being tapped into. It also speaks volumes about undervaluing young people with a lived experience.

Any work that young people do should be paid. We shouldn’t expect young people to give their time and energy for free. Young people completing traineeships, work experience and apprenticeships should be paid a fair amount for the work they are doing. This would make these opportunities more accessible, especially for young people who experienced socioeconomic disadvantage.

Corresponding recommendations

- Pay young people for our time and expertise on projects and research. Even better, hire us as Lived Experience Consultants or Youth Peer Workers as part of your organisations, like Berry Street does with us at Y-Change.

- We strongly recommend a co-produced benchmarking payment guide for youth participation across Victoria, so that government and organisations know how to fairly pay young people for their contributions across varied projects and participation opportunities.

- Where gift cards have to be used, we recommend Eftpos, Mastercard and Visa gift cards so that we can use the money wherever we wish. Ensure you are upfront about the amount of the gift card, where the gift card is from, and exactly when we will be getting it (we’re managing our own budgets, too).

Your language excludes us

“How can we learn how to help design better services when the language being used doesn’t even make sense to us?” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

We generally find spaces that are bureaucratic, academic and loaded with jargon a lot less welcoming. For example, governments and organisations often use a lot of acronyms, so

xxx We recommend looking at Domestic Violence Victoria’s ‘The Family Violence Experts By Experience Framework’, in particular, the ‘Models of Engagement’ section in Appendix 2A. This can be used as a guide for the development of Victoria’s first benchmarking payment guide for youth participation. [http://dvvic.org.au/members/experts-by-experience/](http://dvvic.org.au/members/experts-by-experience/)
when new people come into these spaces it can sound like people are speaking a different language. This makes it hard for us to contribute because we don't have the context and aren’t able to make sense of what you’re saying.

There are different ways of communicating and you can use language that everyone understands. This doesn’t mean we need to be talked down to, it means that we need to create a shared language together that will benefit everyone.

“Language is a powerful tool for building inclusion and exclusion at work. It can be used to create a sense of being valued, respected and one of the team or of being under-valued, disrespected, and an ‘outsider’.” – Diversity Council Australia

As young people, we also use words that sometimes need explaining, so we can learn from each other and you can be up to date with the ways we speak, too. Remember – it’s all about the exchange principle!

**Corresponding recommendations**

- Create simple language guides that are co-produced with young people with a lived experience and followed by all staff, so there is consistency in your brand and style of communicating with young people.

- If acronyms need to be used, take the time to explain what they mean with young people or create an acronyms guide to hand out. Always check for shared understanding.

- Learn to be consistent – don’t just change your language when we’re around, do it all the time. It will help your style of communication be more accessible in general.

**We aren't being supported to meaningfully contribute**

“The young people who have the most problems or who use your services the most are the young people who have something so important to say and you’re not going to get the same quality of feedback, engagement, or experiences from anyone else.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Young people need more awareness about how to get involved in opportunities and have people personally inviting us into spaces where we get to make decisions. We don’t all have access to computers, newsletter mailing lists or time to keep looking for participation opportunities while we’re balancing caring responsibilities, jobs and study.

When bringing young people into spaces, it’s important to welcome us, help us feel safe and supported enough to be there and contribute. Safe spaces look and feel different for
everyone, so asking young people what they need to feel safe and what safety means to us is critical. These are elements that should ideally be explored before a meeting or project kicks off, not after the fact when shit hits the fan.

“Tending to people’s needs and welcoming them is critical to the work we’re trying to do and environment we’re aiming to create (one of co-design). Culturally, it is vital to many people. Neurologically, it can move people from fight to flight to rest and receptivity. To bring our best and most creative selves, we need to know we are welcome and valued, and that we will be taken care of.”238 – Kelly Ann McKercher

It’s also important to build in continuous feedback loops, so programs and services are constantly evolving in response to young people’s needs, rather than waiting for an evaluation period well into the future. Important things get missed and lost in this time.

We’ve found that creating space to check out and debrief after each opportunity is worthwhile, as it supports young people to know where we’re at, what supports we might need to participate in next time, and what tweaks we can make now.

It’s also important to be transparent about what is and isn’t possible and the parameters and constraints we’re working inside of. Don’t promise us anything you can’t deliver and trust us to be able to hold some of the complexity with you.

We also need to know upfront why you want us involved, what the end goal is, and what’s going to be done afterwards in terms of follow up. This allows us to make the best decision for ourselves about whether to be involved.

It can be really confronting when we’re asked to contribute our opinions and experiences because a lot of the time we’ve never been asked before. We have had people making most of our decisions for us, so when we are eventually asked it’s difficult to think of a response as it feels so strange and unfamiliar.

We may need time to sit with questions, process our experiences and think about what worked well and what didn’t. It can be difficult to believe that a staff member or an organisation has a genuine interest in what we have to say and take it seriously. We may also need time to find different ways of communicating that work for us.

Having genuine support speaks loudly to young people that you are invested in how you can learn from us and that you’re working to understand our views and experiences.

**Y-Change’s Youth Exchange model**

In our sector, there are a multitude of programs and services aimed at building the capacity of those with lived experience to be better connected, educated and employed. Almost
always, the emphasis is on people with a lived experience being and doing more. There is very little onus placed on employers, colleagues, educators and communities to be respectful, caring, flexible, open-minded and inclusive.

Here at Y-Change, we use a few foundational models. The one that sits at our very core is called Youth Exchange, which is co-produced and delivered with us (young people with a lived experience) and is designed to radically shift youth engagement practice from engagement to exchange.

One of the simplest and most useful aspects of our Youth Exchange model comes from our key principles in an exchange approach, called ‘respect and the essential e’s’.

Source: Y-Change’s ‘Respect and the Essential E’s’ diagram from the Youth Exchange model for youth participation
The investment of Lived Experience Consultants

For young people with a lived experience of deep disadvantage, our advocacy work often brings up extensive trauma that we have to sit with long after meetings end and project work finishes. It takes a lot to process what we’ve been through and then turn our lived experience into lived expertise, and we’re often tasked with finding our own supports. There are little to no opportunities for young people with a lived experience to hone their skills outside of traditional ‘youth leadership’ programs.

There is also a lot of personal and professional development that we do to become Lived Experience Consultants, all while managing complex situations and continuing to survive.

Key principles of Y-Change’s Youth Exchange model

These 5 key principles are how we understand and make respect visible when partnering with young people:

1. Humility – means you have as much to learn from us as you have to teach and give and understanding that you are not here to be our benefactor, but our navigator.

2. Curiosity – means being interested in who we are and what makes us tick. What do we value? What do we like to do? What do we believe in? Who influences us?

3. Transparency – means being honest with us, too. Be clear about what’s possible and explain barriers and constraints. Tell us when you’re unsure and when you need help and trust us to manage this information.

4. Consistency – means matching your language to your actions. If you talk to us about our expertise, treat us like we have expertise. If you engage with us as experts in a working context, do the same in other contexts too.

5. Money – the bonus principle! This means we hold an expectation that we will be paid for the work we do and ensure we’re paid fairly.
through the very experiences we are advocating systems change for. We can get tired and burnt out, especially when organisations and teams are not set up to support us effectively. These aren’t reasons for us not to be involved, it just means we may need some extra support and flexibility so we can contribute fully and equitably.

The support young people need will look different for each person. It could be debriefs, ongoing personal and professional development, regular check-ins, resources such as computers and access to the internet, links and referrals to other support services, and helping us to pay for transport and food costs.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- Integrate Y-Change’s Youth Exchange training across government as an ongoing professional development training package for staff who engage with young people.

- Use a ‘what, when, where, why, how, and how much’ template when sharing opportunities with young people. This helps us know all the information up front before we make decisions about whether we want to be involved.

- Ensure that enough time is built into all youth engagement and participation projects and consultations, to ensure our contributions are meaningful for everyone involved. We suggest always overestimating the time it takes, as there’s nothing worse than rushing – especially when we’re also processing painful experiences while we’re working. Rushing through experiences of trauma and retraumatisation is extraordinarily harmful, especially when we don’t have access to the support we need to get through it.

- We also recommend an ongoing commitment to training and personal and professional development. Some examples of training that would be beneficial include trauma informed care and practice xxxii, LGBTQIA+ training xxxii, disability

---


There is a massive power imbalance

“Usually when young people are invited to contribute, it is in adult-controlled environments and has to be in a way that adults and professionals are used to and understand. We need to be creating new shared spaces where everyone can contribute instead of young people bending over backwards to prove their worth and why we should be involved.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

When talking about power, there’s different ways in which professionals have power over young people and it makes it hard for us to engage. Here’s some important examples that come to mind that feel useful to share:

- **We know that staff might have access to our client files.** In addition to this, we know that workers might have read them before meeting us. This is in comparison to the huge barriers we come up against when trying to access and read our own files. Even when we make a successful freedom of information request to get our files, a lot of our information is blacked out. As people, we change a lot over the course of our lives and yet we continue to be judged by information about our past selves.

- **There’s a lot of inherent power in physical spaces.** We are coming into your environments where you work daily and probably feel much more comfortable than we do. When young people who have experienced trauma come into spaces like these, there can be triggers that make us feel unsafe or uncomfortable and can lead to us not being able to talk openly or wanting to come back. For example, coming into offices with heaps of security where we get scanned in can bring back bad experiences of courts and the justice system.

It’s vital to be mindful of the power dynamics that exist between young people and those working in positions of power in our service system. Professionals need to be educated about and aware of their privilege, influence and power so that they can actively create safer spaces for young people **before** inviting us in.

---


“If we want to prevent generations of young people from replicating the cycles of disadvantage that they have been born into there must be a radical shift in how we conceptualise, engage with and work alongside them. There is still a role for building young people’s capacity and for increasing their visibility in traditionally exclusionary spaces, however that work is all but pointless when the structures and systems they seek to address have no idea how to integrate their knowledge and their presence.”  

— Lauren Oliver

**Corresponding recommendations**

- We strongly recommend a board and governance development scholarship program specifically for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, so we can increase diversity throughout organisations and on boards and challenge positions and structures of power ourselves.

**There’s not enough flexibility in your approaches and workplaces**

Flexibility is a theme threaded throughout our submission, but we felt it needed to be highlighted as a standalone point here, too. We need flexibility as a foundation of being meaningfully involved and partnered with, and to be able to do our work well.

We need organisational processes to reflect and recognise that we need different levels of participation at different times, and different kinds of support at different times. Like everyone, our lives are unpredictable – the key difference is, we generally have a lot more instability, and much less access to the resources and support we need to get us through the tough times or to prevent those tough times from happening in the first place.

Often services give young people a time and day and just expect us to be there. It’s much more helpful to plan and organise meetings, projects and appointments in partnership with young people, as we are often managing many competing priorities, may have complex travel needs and find it a lot harder to come to work around you. This is especially true when agencies like Centrelink threaten to or end up cutting off our support payments if we miss our appointments.240

Flexibility also pertains to timelines and the ways we show up together and approach our work. Understanding that young people may have to step in and out as things come up in our lives and ensuring we have the right support we need is critical. We also may not feel comfortable in certain settings, so actively working to explore and find alternative ways that we can still be involved is all part of doing inclusive practice well.

It’s amazing to give young people the option to be involved but don’t force us to share our insights and opinions if we don’t feel comfortable. That’s forced participation.
Some services have policies where current or past clients can’t be consumer advocates within the same organisation. We understand and agree that there needs to be frameworks in place to ensure participation is being done ethically and based on good practice. We truly believe that clients are an incredibly valuable source of wisdom when it comes to gathering insights into how services are working and can be doing better.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- We strongly recommend that an Adversity and Trauma-Informed Practice Guide\(^{xxxvi}\) for working with young people is co-produced in partnership with young people with lived experience. We then recommend a partnering workshop training series be co-produced and co-facilitated in partnership with young people for the benefit of the Victorian youth sector.

**We’re not being partnered with from beginning to end**

“We need to create welcoming environments for diverse groups of young people, and we need to ask those very same people to be active participants in decision-making. We need to build this in from the start and this needs to be from the perspective of people with relevant lived experience. It needs to be meaningful co-production all the way through. We want more than youth advisory groups; we want opportunities where we are included the whole way through to the fucking end.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Young people need to be involved across all stages of decision-making, report writing, policy development, and service design and delivery. It can be confusing only being brought in for one part of a process or after the work has already been done. We need to have a broader context and be able to fully understand the project and why we’re being involved.

It can be frustrating to be asked for our input and then from our perspective to see nothing happen or get no feedback about what changes are made. It can create mistrust and seem like our input isn’t valued. We have also been in situations where the service will use those ideas and not credit us.

When we are brought in at the end of processes, it can come across as tokenistic and like our input is only being asked for to affirm pre-planned arguments or projects. We’ve been part of lots of consultation and co-design projects where we feel like we’re being led to the answers that organisations want from us, instead of hearing what we have to say organically.

Heaps of what we have to say also gets filtered through workers, who get to pick and

\(^{xxxvi}\) We think the ‘Adversity and Trauma-Informed Practice: A short guide for professionals working on the frontline’, developed by Young Minds in the UK is a good practice benchmark. https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3091/adversity-and-trauma-informed-practice-guide-for-professionals.pdf
choose what content works best for them, and what they decide is most important – not what we feel is most important, which could be completely different. None of this is meaningful participation or co-design/co-production.

It’s crucial to include young people in places we’re not typically used to being seen. We’re capable of more than only sharing our stories and there are plenty of us that want to be more involved. Workers will often hold different perspectives to the young people they work with, which is why it’s so important for young people with lived experience to be invited to share their unfiltered views and perspectives.

This co-production diagram from Kelly Ann McKercher clearly illustrates the components of co-production, in addition to 4 principles of co-design that sit alongside it:

1. Share power
2. Prioritise relationships
3. Use participatory means
4. Build capability

Kelly also highlights that in order to make co-design a reality, we need systems, organisations and communities to embrace the leadership and contributions of people with lived experience, which requires different ways of thinking and being.9

It is more important than ever that governments and the youth sector gets clear about what co-design and co-production is and isn’t, so we stop getting invited into processes that claim to be co-design but turn out to be consultations.
Corresponding recommendations

- We want to see young people reflected in positions of power like a young person as Youth Minister, having young people as Youth Commissioners and even a Minister for Lived Experience, eventually. We want to see scholarship programs where young people are mentored and supported specifically into roles like these.

- We want to see more support for young people to get elected onto local councils, committees and working groups.

- We want to see more young people with lived experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage be meaningfully partnered with in co-design and co-production projects. We’d also like to see a co-design scholarship program for young people to be mentored into becoming co-designers, themselves.

- We want to see young people specifically recruited on co-design and co-production projects as a result of the recommendations of the final Victorian Youth Strategy.
THEME 5 – What is your experience of equality, safety and fairness living in Victoria as a young person?
“It’s interesting the way this question is framed. It’s seeking positive reflections rather than asking for our experiences of inequality, unsafety or unfairness.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

The themes of equality, safety and fairness aren’t generally familiar ones with young people who continue to experience socioeconomic disadvantage and systemic oppression.

For example, in most parts of Australia, the age of criminal responsibility is just 10 years old – completely out of step with international standards – and yet, in 2020, a decision by the nation’s Attorney-Generals postponed raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 due to “more work needing to be done to determine ways to deal with young offenders.” This is archaic and morally wrong and shows just how far we have to go to see meaningful change and transformation happen at the highest levels of decision-making in our country.

In response to asking this question, most of the Y-Change team expressed frustration and felt like the government continues to vastly underestimate the weight of our everyday experiences of inequality and profound lack of safety beyond the statistics in front of them.

When we are asked to think about equality, safety and fairness, we immediately think of the opposite experiences because those are the ones we’ve mostly had. It’s not that we don’t hold hope for things getting better, it’s that we need government officials to be able to understand the gravity of what we’re having to live through, before we get to the good stuff.

Before we move on to the sub-themes that emerged from our reflections, we wanted to capture our honest and immediate reactions to this question about our experiences of equality, safety and fairness through an illustration.
We aren’t supported to understand our human rights

“As a child and young person there is no real equality, we have the least human rights.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Although there seems to be increasing opportunities for youth participation and youth voice, it is our experience here at Y-Change that many young people, especially young people who experience deep disadvantage, aren’t aware of their human rights. We think something needs to be done about it if we are to have equality, safety and fairness as young Victorians.

Corresponding recommendations

- We strongly recommend that every young Victorian receives a wallet card version of the Convention on the Rights of the Childxxxvii and that a poster size version be hung

up at every Victorian school and service system organisation. This project would be undertaken in partnership with young people.

- We recommend that regular Human Rights Consultations be conducted throughout Victoria in partnership with young people, so governments and organisations are staying up to date with the issues we are experiencing on the ground from our lived experience perspectives.

**Many of us don’t see the cops as safe**

“The way cops treat young people is disgusting. Bad cops don’t get disciplined when they do the wrong thing. It’s one rule for police, one rule for young people. Cops are way too hard on young people and have the assumption that we are ‘troublemakers’. There’s so many shitty cops it’s hard to tell the good from the bad, especially when all the bad cops are on display in the media.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

We think that young people have understandable reasons as to why many of us have given up on the police and the organisations affiliated with them. We know that there are police in Victoria who have acted and continue to act unlawfully towards children and young people because we’ve experienced violent assaults and unethical responses firsthand.

From what we see in the media, to our own personal experiences of being assaulted – it all adds up to leaving a sinking feeling of serious unsafety. Police are often first responders and meant to be officials we can turn to protect us when we’ve been harmed, but when they are also doing the wrong thing – who are we meant to turn to?

**Systemic racism and youth detention**

We know that Indigenous and minority groups in Victoria are more vulnerable to discriminatory targeting of young people.

There is an overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in youth detention, with Aboriginal young people accounting for 16.9% of all young people in youth detention despite making up only 1.3% of the Victorian youth population (10 to 17 years) in 2016–17. In comparison to this, the non-Aboriginal detention rate was 1.8 per 10,000 youth (10 to 17 years) in Victoria, while the Aboriginal youth detention rate was 23.2 per 10,000, 12.7 times the non-Aboriginal rate.

By putting children and young people in punitive systems such as youth detention, we are retraumatising children. We need to shift our focus towards community support and prevention rather than punishment. We need to end the stigma that children who behave
badly are ‘delinquents’ and need punishing. We need care, opportunity and a chance to survive.

Despite 432 Indigenous deaths in custody since 1991, no-one has ever been convicted.\textsuperscript{246} What makes Australian silence about deaths in custody so especially bizarre is that, unlike the US, we have a mandatory legal review of every death in custody or police presence.

Our country and our state has a systemic racism problem and it’s time to confront this truth before any transformative systems change can ever happen for young people.\textsuperscript{247}

\textit{Our experiences with the police}

Although there are some of us at Y-Change who have had positive interactions with police, these have been few and far between and mostly depended on the quality of individual police officers, rather than as a reflection of the entire police force. We know that there are ‘good cops’ and we are not trying to argue this point. What we are wanting to get across here is that the police force must confront its history if they are to ever become safer in our eyes.\textsuperscript{248}

For the majority of us in Y-Change, our experiences of the way police interact with young people who are victims (and also perpetrators) have been extremely damaging and traumatising. We have had especially violent interactions with police when responding to family violence, assault and sexual assault.

These experiences include forcing us and our friends to speak about our assaults through fear of being charged with contempt, guilt tripping, victim-blaming, coercion, using excessive force, not listening and being violently assaulted.

\textit{Police accountability}

We know that Victorian police officers can deactivate their body-worn cameras whenever they choose, edit footage before court cases and limit complainants’ access to images.\textsuperscript{249} It is difficult for us to feel any kind of trust towards police, especially when lawyers and human rights advocates fear that the system can easily be abused.\textsuperscript{249}

We don’t think the police can be trusted to oversee themselves, or that any organisation or official government body or service should ever be tasked to do so.\textsuperscript{250}
Police need to receive specialised and ongoing training, be held accountable for interactions with young people, and children and young people need to be protected by law so that we are kept safe. Police are meant to prevent harm and violence, not cause more of it.

The role of police in our communities

It can be almost impossible for young people to tell the difference between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ police as they all wear the same uniform. Police officers that are responding to high risk and dangerous crimes are often the same officers interacting with us.

This can lead to officers using excessive force with young people and also leaves us feeling confused due to some interactions being positive, and others being negative. When we have such negative experiences with the police, it can make us feel like we can’t go to them for help – even when we really need it.

When an emergency call comes through for young people struggling with their mental health or suicidal thoughts, the police are generally called as first responders. Victoria Police respond to a mental health call every 12 minutes and are increasingly acting as first responders as they attend a growing number of mental health callouts.251

“It shouldn’t be our core duty to be a transport for people experiencing [poor] mental health. We seem to have become the agency of first resort over the years.” – Glenn Weir, Assistant Commissioner Victoria Police

We think Glenn Weir is right: it absolutely should not be the police’s core duty to transport people experiencing mental distress. Our own experiences have shown that they aren’t meeting the needs of those of us experiencing mental health crises, either.252

We want to acknowledge that the police are increasingly wearing a lot of different hats, many of which they are not specially trained to wear. We think a question that needs to be answered is about what roles the police should ideally have in our communities, versus what areas require more community-focused responses?

We want there to be opportunities for us to work together, so young people’s experiences of the police might become more positive. For an equal and safe society, we need to connect, build trust, and have difficult and honest conversations if we want to create real change.
Corresponding recommendations

- We strongly advocate for ‘Raising the Age’— we don’t believe that children ever belong in prison. We want the Victorian State Government to advocate to all Australian governments to raise the age at which children can be arrested or locked up from 10 to 14 years. Although we don’t believe any child or young person should be imprisoned, this is a start.

- All young people need to know their rights with the police. We want all young people to have access to a wallet card that has information on it about their rights.

- We want to see Child Safe Police Officers who wear a separate uniform and who are specialised in trauma-informed and child safety practice. This is so we can easily recognise them as specific officers that we can go to for help.

- We want to see the law change, so that whenever the police are having any interaction with a child or young person under the age of 30, their body-worn camera must be activated.

- We want there to be independent oversight of police conduct to establish, build and maintain community confidence in police.

- We want the Victorian State Government to commit to an inquiry into systemic racism and commit to a plan and partnering framework as to how we will confront it.

Young people’s experiences of family violence remain mostly invisibilised

“We need to change the way systems view violence towards children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child – as a state are, we honouring these rights? In child protection and out-of-home care, we definitely are not.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

We are primary victims, not silent witnesses

While many family violence organisations were historically built upon survivor-led activism, a focus on meaningfully engaging victim survivor advocates has lost momentum over time.

---

xxxviii Raise the Age is a campaign advocating to all Australian governments to raise the age at which children can be arrested or locked up from 10 to 14 years. [www.raisetheage.org.au/](http://www.raisetheage.org.au/)

The voices of children and young people are especially invisible in family violence narratives, being seen as secondary – not primary – victims in the eyes of service systems.

The assumptions about how children and young people are seen in the context of domestic and family violence is also reflected in the Victorian Youth Strategy’s Discussion Paper:

“One thirds of women who experienced family violence from a former partner had children who had also seen or heard the violence” – Victorian Youth Strategy Discussion Paper

This statistic states that “children had also seen or heard the violence”, which invisibilises that we are also being directly affected by the violence and are victims survivors in our own right.

There is a common misconception that children and young people do not experience family violence firsthand, despite the fact that being exposed to or witnessing family violence is a form of child abuse that creates trauma and impedes our childhood development.253

We need to challenge the fact that children and young people aren't just witnesses; we are also primary victims of family violence.

**Family violence, children and young people – the statistics**

Children and young people are often unacknowledged victims of family violence. For all police reported family violence incidents occurring in Victoria from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019, 6 in 10 family violence incidents occurred between current or former partners.254 A child or children were recorded as present at 31.2% (25,760) of incidents. Further, 1 in 10 (10% of) affected family members recorded at a family violence incident in 2017-18 were adolescents aged 10 to 19 years, a rate stable since 2013–14.254

In 2015-16, family violence concerns were indicated in 47.5% of reports to child protection, and 68.7% of substantiated reports to child protection in Victoria.255 Exposure to family violence can have profound long-term effects on children’s development and increase the risk of mental health issues, behavioural and learning difficulties.255 Whether children or young people experience violence directly, or are witnesses to violence, the resulting trauma can affect their emotional and psychological wellbeing. In turn, family violence negatively affects children and young people’s learning and development and can impact upon their future outcomes.255

*We’re not seeing the full picture due to a lack of data*

The majority of research conducted in relation to children and young people who experience family violence is often from the perspectives of caregivers and professionals,
instead of hearing directly from children and young people themselves. This significantly impacts the data and research that is collected, as the experience recorded is not from the child or young person who is impacted.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports that:

“It is difficult to obtain complete and robust data on children’s exposure to family violence due to the sensitivity of the subject, with administrative sources only able to identify reported cases and most large-scale population surveys focusing on adult experiences and/or their perceived knowledge of child experiences. While administrative data collections can provide some insights, these data sources are likely to underestimate the true extent of children exposed to family violence [...]”

However, the small amount of research where children and young people were included show that they have articulate and coherent understandings of the violence that they and their family member(s) experience. Their views are extremely important to hear, particularly as they offer insight and expertise into how to best support children and facilitate them having greater agency in negotiating safety and decisions affecting their lives.

**Family violence and the COVID-19 pandemic**

In April 2020, the United Nations declared the heightened risk of family and domestic violence a “shadow pandemic.” A global survey conducted by Save the Children interviewed 8,069 children and 17,565 adults across 37 countries – the largest of its kind since the pandemic began. They found that the reported rate of violence at home doubled during school closures – from 8% to 17%.

An article published in The Conversation in August 2020 reported that during the first period of restrictions, there was an increase in the frequency and severity of family violence in Victoria and Queensland. Practitioners also reported an increase in first-time reports of intimate partner violence and the weaponising of children as part of shared care arrangements.

As reflected by Deputy Director, Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, Silke Meyer:

“If children continue to remain invisible in the discourse around COVID-19 and DFV-related support and recovery needs, Australia will see long-term effects on children that will likely exceed documented adverse effects in intensity and longevity.”

---

During this pandemic, we know that many children and young people across Australia and beyond will be made more vulnerable by what is happening. Job losses, economic hardship and the intensification of household stresses will work to further trigger episodes of family violence and see more of us harmed.

**We need to be partnered with, so our voices and experiences are centred**

Having one-dimensional family violence narratives mean that what we are going through is often made invisible, underplayed and that we are forced to become our own advocates.

Young people are often not involved or spoken to due to a perceived sense of risk, but by not including and speaking to us about our experiences, aren’t the risks already high enough? Every child or young person, even from the same family, is going to have a different experience of family violence and we need to be heard. We need services and the police to be able to safely speak with us, without our parents and caregivers being present.

When services and government don’t speak to children and young people, you are missing out on our perspectives and experiences through our own eyes. Through a worker’s perspective, you may see the risk may be seen as coming from a parent but to the child it is coming from a sibling or from many different people. It’s important not to let your own assumptions about risk or what family violence looks like take away from our own unique experiences.

> "I called a family violence service and the first thing I was told was that the service was for mothers and their children. What they didn’t know was that I called the service so they could help me get away from her, so from that first moment I knew they weren't going to help me.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

The current family violence service system, and channels that young people have to navigate, aren’t built with us in mind and so often end up causing us more pain and retraumatisation.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- Children and young people must be seen as primary victims in the eyes of the family violence service system and the courts and considered as their own people separate to primary parent victims – not as an extension of their mother or primary parent.

- Lived expertise must be a valued source of expertise within the family violence service system. Children and young people must be meaningfully partnered with in all aspects of policy development, service design and practice in the family violence service system. We need to move beyond giving voice and towards offering meaningful opportunities to influence policy and legislation change.
• We need to collect more statistics and data to show the full picture of how many children and young people are experiencing family violence.

• To our knowledge, there are very few child and young people specific family violence services within Victoria. Children and young people need spaces and services that are co-designed with them. These services must be able to address issues that include abuse, violence and neglect and that include a highly trained Peer Workforce to support young people who are seeking help.

• Police should be able to seek verbal consent from children and young people without their guardian or parent present to ensure their voices are heard as part of family violence. This would – of course – need to be done respectfully, with accountability centred throughout the process and with a significant auditing and evaluation process built-in to ensure children and young people are not being harmed.

• We strongly recommend that police receive specialised trauma-informed training as to how to respectfully engage with and respond to children and young people who are experiencing all forms of violence.

• The MARAM\textsuperscript{xli} must evolve beyond its current form and include a meaningful co-design process in partnership with children and young people, that:
  
  \begin{itemize}
    \item seeks to capture the complexity of violence against children and young people
    \item ensures that a range of risk factors are acknowledged
    \item ensures that in-depth safety planning is carried out with each person
    \item takes sibling perpetrators within families into account.
  \end{itemize}

• Organisations must be supported to better support young people. Although co-design and co-production are considered best practice, we have a long way to go to ensure these approaches become standard practice. This requires further investment in targeted opportunities for quality development and training and ensuring best practice frameworks and guidelines are created specifically in the family violence context in partnership with children and young people.

\section*{Out-of-home care isn’t working for the majority of us}

\textsuperscript{xli} Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework

“The government needs to take responsibility that the system is damaging and hurting children and young people. When the Stolen Generations happened, people didn’t accept their role in it for a long time. It was many years later that people started apologising and accepting responsibility. The government of the future will have to acknowledge and take responsibility for the damage they’re doing now. So, if not now, when?” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

The Commission for Children and Young People’s 2018 report, ‘In our own words: Systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system’ reported that between the years of 2008-2009 and 2017-2018 the number of children in care has more than doubled from 3,767 to 7,863 and that the number of reports to Child Protection has almost tripled from 42,851 to 115,600. It also reported that the number of Aboriginal children removed from their parents and living in the care system has tripled from 687 to 2,027.

It is widely recognised that children and young people in out-of-home care experience significantly poorer outcomes across developmental, psychosocial, emotional and behavioural domains compared to other children and young people in the community. We also know that in the absence of a specialised service response, children and young people who are forced to leave home, but who do not meet the criteria for a care and protection order, are often left to navigate complex and disjointed service systems on their own.

“There is no equality, safety, or fairness if you live in residential care. You get your shit stolen, put in a unit, not a house, with young people older than you that are doing drugs in their room and breaking shit.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

We know that 63% of homeless young people are placed in some form of out-of-home care by the time they turn 18 years old, and that a large proportion of young people who were in state care access homeless services when they turn 18. 35% of young people are likely to become homeless within the first year they leave care.

No young person exiting care should enter homelessness by losing their access to housing and supports. No young person should be abandoned by services or left desperate. Young people who are currently in and are exiting care need to know what they are entitled to in setting them up for their future.

The failings of out-of-home care cannot be looked at in isolation to other issues that intersect with it, such as family violence, homelessness and mental-ill health. Everything is interconnected and we must begin to focus our attention more closely on the often-overlooked impacts of intergenerational trauma on children and young people.
We need to urgently address the inadequate support of children and young people in out-of-home care and the need for lived experience representation to be more broadly and deeply integrated throughout the sector. Although many children and young people in care have been profoundly let down by our service system, it’s crucial we recognise that these children and young people continue to thrive despite the system failing them. It is equally important for us to celebrate their strengths, capabilities and survival.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- Young people in residential care need the option to be taught more life skills so they are better equipped to enter into young adulthood once exiting care.

- Greater investment is needed for specialised, trauma-informed support services, both direct and indirect, to improve the mental health of young people in out-of-home care.

- Greater investment in specialised and supported Youth Foyers for young people exiting care.\(^{xlii}\)

- There needs to be dedicated caseworkers and ongoing supported accommodation for every young person with an experience of care up to at least 25 years old.

- Other options to out-of-home care need to be explored and invested in, in partnership with young people with a lived experience – such as the Teaching Family Model.\(^{xliii}\)

- Dedicated, long-term peer support workers employing young people who have exited care to support their peers to navigate service systems.

**Rural and regional young people don’t have access to what they need**

“There is no such thing as fairness or equality being rural. Rural people are always left out of conversations and excluded from funding. We don’t have the same opportunities as young people who live in metro Melbourne and everything has lower funding.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Regional Victorians have the same stake in our democracy as people living in Melbourne.\(^{263}\) Their needs require the same recognition and respect, and their voices should not be

\(^{xlii}\) Foyers are integrated learning and accommodation settings for young people, typically aged 16–24 years, who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. [https://foyer.org.au/foyers-in-australia/](https://foyer.org.au/foyers-in-australia/)

dismissed or ignored based on their distance from more concentrated areas of institutional and political power.263

Public transport

4% of all Australians report having difficulty getting to places they need to go.264 Public transport is a social justice issue, and without good public transport people struggle with getting jobs and getting where they need to go.264

Young people living in rural and regional areas are not getting the same kind of access to public transport as their peers in metro Melbourne. Although the Myki smart card ticketing system was brought to metro Melbourne back in 2009, many rural and regional areas still don’t have it at all.265

Public transport is one of the biggest barriers for young people in rural and regional Victoria. We need access to modern and more regular public transport. We also need better quality trains and existing train tracks to be fixed for a safer ride.

Education and employment

It is more difficult for young people to find a job in rural and regional Victoria, with youth unemployment in the Greater Melbourne area standing at almost 12%, while nearly 16% across the rest of Victoria.165 To not have accessible transport to and from our schools and workplaces is yet another barrier.

The range of education and employment options available to rural and regional Victorians is less than their peers living in the city, which means young people looking for employment or higher education are under pressure to move away from home.165

We need to invest in schools in rural and regional Victoria. There is often not enough money to fix and upgrade them and limited resources for students and staff. This adds to the compounding disadvantages we experience as young people in rural and regional Victoria.

Research reveals a widening achievement gap between city and country students.266 The performance of regional and rural schools is as much as 20 points behind that of city schools, according to NAPLAN data.266 Victorian year 9 regional students are a full year behind city students, and lag by almost as much in reading.266

Although schools in regional and rural Victoria have received almost double the increase in funding per student compared to city students since 2015, it appears that more needs to be done to access early childhood education, coordinate between state and independent schools, and provide additional curriculum opportunities and financial support for young people to get to university.266
Coronavirus pandemic impact on rural and regional students

1 in 4 students at a prep to year 12 school in far-west Victoria cannot access the internet from home. Of the students without internet access, half were likely to be from homes who could not afford it and the remainder lived in an area where there is none.

Rural and regional young people have a lot less access to the internet at home. When at-home learning kicked off due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Victorian State Government made a commitment to loan resources like laptops and deliver free SIM cards or dongles to students who didn’t have access to digital technologies. Our Y-Change team know of young students in rural Victoria who received their equipment much later than their peers in metro Melbourne, with some students missing out on months of education.

Police presence in rural and regional Victoria

Our Y-Change rural representative shared that the police response time is too long in rural and regional Victoria and that they need a stronger police presence, especially down main streets and at shopping centres where young people go.

Research has also shown that rural residents who have interacted with a police officer with specialised knowledge – such as farm crime liaison officers – were more likely to report a crime.

Our rural representative also shared that young people in rural and regional areas like racing their cars and doing burnouts. They think a harm minimisation approach and finding safe ways for young people to do the things they enjoy, while also making sure the community is safe, is a good way forward. For example, having a burnout pad away from town.

Corresponding recommendations

- An expansion of the Myki smart card ticketing system into rural and regional areas in Victoria that don’t currently have it, including more places for people to top money up on their cards.

- Support the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria’s ‘COVID-19 Recovery Plan for Young People’, which includes a suite of strong recommendations that will support young rural and regional Victorians.

Sexual assault is a health crisis

“My question to the Victorian Government is how are you protecting our vulnerable young people from sexual assault and violence?” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant
In 2019, there were 26,892 victims of sexual assault in Australia, an increase of 2% from the previous year. Most incidents of sexual assault don't get reported to the police.

Here’s what we know about sexual assault:

- the sexual assault rate is higher for young people aged 15 to 19 (455 assaults per 100,000) than any other age group.
- there were around 7,900 reported sexual assaults against children aged 0 to 14 in 2018, with the rate of sexual assault being 3.5 times higher for girls than boys (266 sexual assaults per 100,000 girls, compared with 72 sexual assaults per 100,000 boys).
- 2 in 5 people (30% or 7.2 million) aged 18 years and over have experienced an incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 15.
- more than 140,000 sexual assaults were reported to the Australian police in the 10 years to 2017, with nearly 12,000 reports being rejected on the basis that the police did not believe a sexual assault had occurred.

There aren’t enough statistics out there that truly reflect young people’s experiences of sexual assault; but from the ones we have access to and that we’ve shared with you here, we see that the rate of sexual assault is highest for groups of young people.

“Sexual violence is highly prevalent in our society yet forms of sexual violence such as child sexual abuse, sexual assault and sexual exploitation remain some of the most under-reported of serious offences. Research has found that many people in the community hold attitudes and beliefs that justify, conceal, excuse, or minimise sexual victimisation. Victim/survivors often do not speak out about these experiences because of fear, shame and the lack of community understanding about the range of circumstances in which sexual violence occurs, and its impact on victim/survivors.”

– Australian Institute of Family Studies

If we want to stop the ongoing cycles of intergenerational trauma and violence, it’s critical that we act on the issue of sexual violence in our society and the profound damage and harm it’s doing to children and young people.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- We need additional funding and meaningful long-term support for victim survivors, especially young victim survivors. The Victorian State Government’s commitments in response to the 2017 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse recommendations are a strong start, but more needs to be done specifically for children and young people, in partnership with us.
• We need urgent reform into how the police and the justice system respond to sexual assault and offences, especially when it involves children and young people.

• We need more statistics on sexual assault in Victoria, so we can grasp the magnitude of this health crisis.\textsuperscript{xlv}

• We would like to see a lived experience advisory group set up that sits within government, similar to the Victim Survivors’ Advisory Council that came about as a result of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

\textsuperscript{xlv} We recommend looking at the American ‘Me Too’ website as an example of good practice. https://metoomvmt.org/learn-more/statistics/
THEME 6 – What ideas do you have for how we can work together to build a more equal and safe society for all young people?
“You’re not working for the world now; you’re working for the world your grandkids and the young people of the future will inherit.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Y-Change’s reflections to this question about working together to build a more equal and safe society for all young people begins here and continues with our final recommendations and big ideas for change (pages 125–153).

For us, youth engagement and participation sits at the heart of how we imagine and create a better society for all young people, especially those of us who continue to endure systemic oppression and deep socioeconomic disadvantage.

When thinking about the society we want to live in now and the future societies we want to leave for future children and young people, we resonate with what it means to be good ancestors. Based on research conducted by Bina Venkataraman about this very subject, there are 3 key insights they share about what this means in action:

1. *That it’s not good enough to predict the future, we need to imagine it*
   In the absence of certainty, we still need the ability to act on our concerns for the long-range future because we are implicated in it.

2. *That we must seek out and listen to the voices of the future*
   To hold ourselves accountable for acting like better ancestors, we’d be wise to ask the young people we know to be more vocal about what matters and to listen to them.

3. *That we leave behind heirlooms, not legacies*
   A more meaningful way to give to the future is to think bigger and leave behind something that can be stewarded – and used and adapted over time – as an heirloom. This means leaving behind resources with an eye to how they might endure for multiple generations, without prescribing what each generation does with them too narrowly.276

The following sub-themes emerged from Y-Change’s reflections on some of the key issues they think good ancestors should be focusing on, right now – if we are to help envision a Victoria that works for all young people.
Take our submission seriously

“It would be good if the Office for Youth emails us back with feedback and shows us what they have done with our submission. This will show that they respect and care for what we have to say.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

We’ve worked hard in pulling this submission together and wonder whether you will read it or take our experiences and opinions seriously. It can be difficult to know if our feedback has been taken on board when there isn’t a meaningful feedback loop. We understand that you have a lot of submissions to read through, but there must be a better way than getting us to share so personally without knowing if it’s creating any real change.

It’s particularly important that when you are reading submissions from young people that you don’t read them from an institutional perspective. It’s important to put your own assumptions to the side and make room to listen to what we have to say with an open mind. We acknowledge that we have our own assumptions about you too, for example thinking you will cherry pick parts of our submission that fit within pre-established boxes and not consider the rest.

Corresponding recommendations

- In future, it would be good to imagine more meaningful engagement opportunities with young people beyond submitting artworks, videos and written submissions to processes like this one. Although we appreciate the opportunity to have our say, we want to be more closely connected to this process. This might look like employing a group of young people to meet with other young people to listen to what they have to say and come back together to help co-produce the strategy in partnership with the Office for Youth.

We need systems change and systems leadership

“Governments need to address wider societal issues that are causing the issues explored in this discussion paper, rather than taking band aid approaches to temporarily fix deep rooted problems. These temporary fixes continue cycles of systemic oppression and don’t actually solve anything. The blame and stigma is then carried by marginalised young people, who are forced to struggle at no fault of their own.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

We are currently sitting at the intersection of a whole lot of service systems that aren’t meeting the needs of young people anymore and we’re stuck here until we create better systems that replace the ones that are no longer working for us. We need systems to evolve and change to meet our needs.
A system can be described as ‘anything that has been organised for a purpose’, like schools. So, systems change is about changing these systems so that they work better for young people and for everyone else, too.

“If we want to create change, we need to get better with diversity and change. There’s eternal roadblocks to progress because people don’t want to see change and think things are fine. We need shared accountability and responsibility – it’s up to all of us to change things for the better.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

If governments and organisations don’t involve us in the systems of the future, we’ll end up at exactly the same place we are now – working inside of and receiving services that don’t work well for or with us.

“With youth movements set to be protagonists of systemic change in the next decade, understanding how to equitably partner with and enhance the power of youth leadership is a priority for major international organizations interested in relevance and success.” – Oxfam

We can’t keep throwing money at surface solutions. We need to get to the ideological roots of these systems so we can diagnose the right problems before we even think about what the solutions might be.

“We’ve all learned that you can’t just throw money at a problem and solve it, you have to change the way you think about the problem. You have to think about new solutions, and you have to engage all kinds of [people].” – Kathy Calvin, United Nations Foundation President and CEO

Corresponding recommendations

- Governments take a systems thinking approach when tackling issues affecting young people. We recommend The Two Loop Theory of Organisational Change as a good tool.

- In partnership with young people, co-produce a systems thinking scholarship program specifically for young people with a lived experience of socioeconomic disadvantage, in order to support future generations of systems leadership in Victoria.

The Two Loop Theory of Organisational Change is a model that Meg Wheatley and Deborah Frieze from the Berkana Institute first pointed to in their paper, ‘Using Emergence to Take Social Innovation to Scale.’ It aims to work in communities to build their resilience while their group, environment, or society transitions from one social structure to another. https://margaretwheatley.com/articles/using-emergence.pdf
We want bold action on climate justice

“We can’t envision our future due to the devastation of the earth.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Australia is a very big deal on the world stage when it comes to contributing to climate change. In 2019, Australia was the world’s largest liquefied fossil gas exporter and the world’s second largest coal exporter. Combined with our very high emissions at home, Australia packs a big punch to the global climate.

We can’t think of what a safe and equal society would look like without taking into account the effects that climate change has on young people. Becoming good ancestors while our planet is actively being destroyed and rapidly deteriorating is frightening. We don’t know for sure if there’s even a future we will be alive to see or grow old in.

“The scale of the threats to the biosphere and all its life forms – including humanity – is in fact so great that it is difficult to grasp for even well-informed experts.” – Frontiers in Conservation Science

The Australia Institute’s ‘Climate of the nation 2020’ report revealed that 83% of 18 to 24 year olds are concerned about climate change. In 2019, an estimated 300,000 Australians gathered around the country for the global climate strike, and in 2020 – even though the momentum of the strikes were derailed by COVID-19 in April – an estimated 500 events took place across the nation.

We need to invest in sustainable measures that the world will benefit from. Young people are leading the charge but we need commitment from all generations as this affects us all. We need support and resources to create effective change.

We applaud the Victorian State Government recent investment in climate solutions that will drive economic recovery and want to see this momentum continue. Victoria has been claimed to be ‘the most progressive state in the nation’, and so it is our duty to step up and show Australia what it takes to lead the way to a sustainable future.

Corresponding recommendations

- Follow the City of Melbourne’s recommendations outlined in their ‘Action needed by Victorian and Australian governments’ guide.

---

• Echoing the City of Melbourne, we call on the Victorian State Government to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency and to commit to a 1.5°C science-based target in line with the Paris Climate Agreement.\textsuperscript{xlvii} If our Federal Government won’t do it, who will?

**Victoria must listen to Aboriginal young people and their communities**

“I and so many young people are disgusted with your decisions to destroy the Djab Wurrung sacred trees. You are destroying our future. Don’t pretend that you care about children and young people when you are killing the earth that we walk on.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

There is much deep work that needs to be done to own up to our history, apologise for the harm we’ve caused and for the mistakes we’ve made. It should not be left to First Nations People to fight alone to fix problems they did not create.

When hosting conversations with our Y-Change team, much anger was expressed over the cutting down of the sacred Djab Wurrung directions tree in late 2020. We wish to draw attention to the sacred directions tree that the Victorian State Government cut down, even amidst protest from First Nations communities. The timing of the tree’s removal was not lost on us – being cut down the same day as Melbourne’s high-profile lockdown lifted.\textsuperscript{286}

“We cannot separate climate justice from First Nations justice.” – Lidia Thorpe

The Supreme Court has now ordered work to be suspended, with the injunction remaining in place until a hearing into the case begins in February 2021.\textsuperscript{287} We have lost part of our history, and Djab Wurrung young people have had a significant part of their inheritance stolen from them.\textsuperscript{288}

If we are going to enter into a meaningful Treaty process with First Nations People, it starts with listening to Indigenous Victorians and protecting their land.\textsuperscript{289} It’s important to remain open to admitting when we get things wrong.

**Corresponding recommendations**

• We want to see the Victorian State Government show leadership and apologise to the Djab Wurrung community for cutting down their sacred trees and enter into dialogue with local communities to explore alternatives for the VicRoads project.

• That the government gives Aboriginal children services that work by following the solutions outlined in the Koorie Youth Council’s ‘Ngaga-dji’ report.290

• That creative projects led by Aboriginal children and young people around Victoria continue to be funded and their recommendations actively read, heard and acted on.

We need media equality and greater youth representation in the media

“The Murdoch empire should be exiled. We need media equality, now. News bias serves the agenda of the elite. People should have access to news that is not created to push a political agenda that oppresses people.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

The call for media equality

There were reflections and concerns shared from our Y-Change team about the current state of the media. What we are exposed to influences us. We need awareness and research to better understand how to spot fake news and how to combat it.291 The media should be using their power to educate us about the facts and uphold the truth without bias.

The recent petition launched by Former Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, called for a royal commission into media diversity and collected more than 500,000 signatures – making it Australia’s largest-ever parliamentary e-petition.292 The petition expressed concerns over mass sackings of journalists, newspaper takeovers, the undermining of regional and local news, the ABC’s independence and whistle-blower protections.292

"The bottom line is the lifeblood of our democracies depends on a fair, balanced, independent, free media which separates out two things: the reporting of facts and the expression of opinion."292 – Kevin Rudd, Former Prime Minister of Australia

The media has a huge influence on us, what we think and how we behave. Latest research shows that news coverage affects our attitudes to immigrants, the content of our dreams, can lead us to miscalculate certain risks, shape our views of other countries and even increase our chances of having a heart attack or developing health problems.293

There needs to be more protections to ensure the media behaves ethically and responsibly and so young people can be informed to decide our own perspectives.

We can’t be what we can’t see

Research from Western Sydney University and the Digital Media Research Centre’s 2019 report, ‘The inclusion and representation of young people in the Australian news media’ found that young people are rarely given opportunities to speak for ourselves in the
news. It also found that young Australians appear in news stories only as victims or family members; or we are spoken about, but not listened to.

In addition to this research, The Foundation for Young Australians found in their 2020 report, ‘Missing: young people in Australian news media’ that:

- between February 1 to July 31 2020, young people featured in less than 3.3% of articles
- articles about young people decreased 14% from 2019, even though young people have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19
- young people are rarely quoted in news articles about them – in analysing the news coverage of 6 major news outlets, 59% of headline mentions about young people were not supported by quotes or case studies in the body copy.

If we want to ensure young people stay connected to news stories, we need to make sure we’re reflected in them. This is another example of how society thinks it can speak on behalf of us, rather than supporting our agency and supporting us to speak on behalf of ourselves.

To build a more equal and safe society for and with young people, we need to be accurately and fairly represented, and be a key source of expertise that the media turns to. We need to listen to young people’s dreams, visions and plans for the future we want to see.

**Corresponding recommendations**

- Support The Foundation for Young Australians’ ‘Missing: young people in Australian news media’ report recommendations, which includes employing young people in newsrooms, reimagining cadetships and paid internship opportunities for young people in a post-COVID-19 world to improve youth representation in the media.
Our recommendations and big ideas for change

"Without leaps of imagination, or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities. Dreaming, after all, is a form of planning." – Gloria Steinem

We believe in dreaming big and in a future where all young Victorians are able to thrive, not just those who currently have the most access. Involving us in the Victorian Youth Strategy is more than asking us for submissions as a once off, we want to be actively partnered with to create solutions.

Given the depth and breadth of the Victorian Youth Strategy and how far it will reach across our state, our recommendations have implications for agencies outside the specific responsibility of the youth sector. As we’ve mentioned, no service system operates in isolation and the issues that young people are experiencing are deeply intertwined.

For this reason, it’s important that findings and recommendations from intersecting inquiries and Royal Commissions make their way into the Victorian Youth Strategy, to support the good work that’s already been done. We need opportunities for sharing practice wisdom across contexts that focus specifically on children and young people.

An overarching message that sits above our recommendations is the importance of collective responsibility as a community to look after one another, especially outside our immediate circles and networks. It takes a village, after all.

The following list of recommendations is not exhaustive and we expect you to explore the campaigns, policies, resources and services that we’ve mentioned to gain a broader understanding of our recommendations.

Our recommendations are based on each of the key themes and sub-themes from the main section of our submission (pages 35–124) and begin over the following pages.
Recommendation 1 – Move beyond giving voice

“We don’t want to be engaged or entertained; we want to create real meaningful change so other young people don’t have to face the same systemic failures that we had to.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

In our sector, ‘giving’ young people a voice and a chance to ‘have our say’ is often seen as good practice. We don’t need to be given a voice; we have voices – the problem is that people aren’t listening to us. Partnering with young people isn’t just a good opportunity for us, there are many benefits for others too and this needs to be better understood.

Our service systems need to move away from the assumption that young people should only be involved to tell our sob or success stories because we’re so much more than case studies. We’re systems leaders, weaving nets so we stop falling through the cracks.

THEME 4 – What can we do to enable young people to meaningfully contribute to decision-making?

We want more than Youth Advisory Groups

- The Victorian State Government funds and develops a workforce of Youth Consultants as community builders, project workers and Peer Support Workers that are hired in a paid capacity to support youth-related projects and initiatives across government departments.

Being paid for our involvement still isn’t the standard approach

- Pay young people for our time and expertise on projects and research. Even better, hire us as Lived Experience Consultants or Youth Peer Workers as part of your organisations, like Berry Street does with us at Y-Change.
We strongly recommend a co-produced benchmarking payment guide for youth participation across Victoria, so that government and organisations know how to fairly pay young people for their contributions across varied projects and participation opportunities.

Where gift cards have to be used, we recommend Eftpos, Mastercard and Visa gift cards so that we can use the money wherever we wish. Ensure you are upfront about the amount of the gift card, where the gift card is from, and exactly when we will be getting it (we’re managing our own budgets, too).

There’s not enough flexibility in your approaches and workplaces

We strongly recommend that an Adversity and Trauma-Informed Practice Guide for working with young people is co-produced in partnership with young people with lived experience. We then recommend a partnering workshop training series be co-produced and co-facilitated in partnership with young people for the benefit of the Victorian youth sector.

We’re not being partnered with from beginning to end

We want to see young people reflected in positions of power like a young person as Youth Minister, having young people as Youth Commissioners and even a Minister for Lived Experience, eventually. We want to see scholarship programs where young people are mentored and supported specifically into roles like these.

We want to see more support for young people to get elected onto local councils, committees and working groups.

We want to see more young people with lived experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage be meaningfully partnered with in co-design and co-production projects. We’d also like to see a co-design scholarship program for young people to be mentored into becoming co-designers, themselves.

We want to see young people specifically recruited on co-design and co-production projects as a result of the recommendations of the final Victorian Youth Strategy.
Recommendation 2 – Share your institutional power, help us build our own toolboxes

“It isn’t young people that are complex, it’s the system.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

As young people with lived experience, we have power and capability often learnt through adapting and surviving in the world. When young people with a lived experience come to work in the community sector, there are massive power imbalances between us and the services we’ve used. These need to be made visible and shifted.

As sector staff, you have access to spaces, networks and decision-making tables that we don’t get invited to. You’ve got keys that we don’t. We also have access to keys that you don’t, like how to connect with our communities and understand ‘othered’ wisdom. We have important lived experiences that can’t be found anywhere else. This doesn’t make us ‘special’; it means we have expertise that is needed to create systems change.

THEME 3 – How can we best support young people to connect with culture, community and opportunities?

There is an increasing generational gap

- A government supported pilot initiative focusing on reverse mentoring in the Victorian youth sector, where older professionals are partnered with young people who enter into a relationship of exchange. Our Y-Change model currently uses a training development approach called ‘Youth Exchange’, where people are taught how to partner meaningfully with young people with a lived experience of socioeconomic disadvantage.
THEME 4 – What can we do to enable young people to meaningfully contribute to decision-making?

We’re not being invited into rooms where decisions are being made

- We recommend that alongside the development of a Victorian Youth Strategy is a youth participation and decision-making framework and guide that is co-produced in partnership with young people and Lived Experience Consultants, such as Y-Change.

- Expand the Department of Health and Human Services ‘Client voice framework for community services’ to include an edition focused on children and young people, co-produced with young people engaged in Victorian youth services. xxviii

- Ensure recruitment processes for young Lived Experience Consultants are accessible. This means taking into account the significant barriers facing young people from lower social classes. Governments and organisations must make it simple for young people who are experiencing deep disadvantage to apply for paid roles through online expressions of interest forms.

- Continue to fund the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), Victoria’s peak body for young people and the youth sector in Victoria, into the future to continue their important work in partnership with initiatives such as Y-Change.

- Fund YACVic to review and co-produce their ‘Code of Ethical Practice’ guide alongside young people with lived experience.

There is a massive power imbalance

- We strongly recommend a board and governance development scholarship program specifically for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, so we can increase diversity throughout organisations and on boards and challenge positions and structures of power ourselves.

We aren’t being supported to meaningfully contribute

- Integrate Y-Change’s Youth Exchange training across government as an ongoing professional development training package for staff who engage with young people.

- Use a ‘what, when, where, why, how, and how much’ template when sharing opportunities with young people. This helps us know all the information up front before we make decisions about whether we want to be involved.
• Ensure that enough time is built into all youth engagement and participation projects and consultations, to ensure our contributions are meaningful for everyone involved. We suggest always overestimating the time it takes, as there’s nothing worse than rushing - especially when we’re also processing painful experiences while we’re working. Rushing through experiences of trauma and retraumatisation is extraordinarily harmful, especially when we don’t have access to the support we need to get through it.

• We also recommend an ongoing commitment to training and personal and professional development. Some other examples of training that would be beneficial include trauma informed care and practicexxx, LGBTQIA+ trainingxxxii, disability awareness trainingxxxiii, Indigenous Cultural Education Trainingxxxiv and Culturally Responsive Practice and Youth Settlement Training.xxxv

Your language excludes us

• Create simple language guides that are co-produced with young people with a lived experience and followed by all staff, so there is consistency in your brand and style of communicating with young people.

• If acronyms need to be used, take the time to explain what they mean with young people or create an acronyms guide to hand out. Always check for shared understanding.

• Learn to be consistent – don’t just change your language when we’re around, do it all the time. It will help your style of communication be more accessible in general.
Recommendation 3 – Educate young people on what matters (to us)

“Making our systems more accessible does not disadvantage anyone, but by not making them more accessible, we are further disadvantaging people who already face systemic barriers.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

A lot of young people from marginalised backgrounds don’t have strong or any connections to family, people, place and community. We often miss out on a lot of significant learning about culture and identity, which can lead to us not having a sense of belonging.

We also don’t have anyone to teach us the skills we need to just function and make sense of the world. Without these stable foundations it is almost impossible to build something without it all falling down. But we can’t get what we need if the systems we are being told to access aren’t working for us.

**THEME 1 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to pursue education and training that meets their needs and aligns with their aspirations?**

There is insufficient awareness about and funding of alternative education pathways

- We encourage greater funding, support and promotion of alternative schooling models for young people experiencing disadvantage such as The Hester Hornbook Academy and The Pavilion School.

Redefining and transforming how we do education - the curriculum needs to change

- We advocate for Learning Creates Australia, a first of its kind national initiative that brings together diverse stakeholders across the Australian community to create
innovative, practical solutions to deeply entrenched and systemic educational challenges.\textsuperscript{158}

- We also recommend that young people with a lived experience of socioeconomic disadvantage are partnered with to reimagine our future education system.

**THEME 3 – How can we best support young people to connect with culture, community and opportunities?**

**We aren’t being taught about or connected to our culture in out-of-home care**

- Offer all young people in out-of-home care, residential care and intersecting services a cultural support plan to help them engage with their own culture and heritage. For Indigenous children and young people, these would be developed in partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), with more targeted funding to ACCOs to be able to fulfil this task in ways that foster a creative (rather than a compliance) focus.

- Aboriginal foster and kinship carers receive improved cultural support planning training, in partnership with ACCOs and First Nations communities.

- That all young people in out-of-home care, residential care and intersecting services are taught about, and encouraged to keep learning about, Indigenous Australian history – co-led by young First Nations Peer Educators.

**We’re not getting the support we need to connect with community**

- We applaud the Victorian State Government’s recent investment of $37.5 million for Respectful Relationships education in the 2020/21 Victorian Budget.\textsuperscript{225} We want to ensure all young people get access to this education, even if they’re not engaged in school. We strongly recommend funding opportunities for community organisations to deliver this training to young people accessing their services, in partnership with young Lived Experience Consultants and Peer Educators.

- Co-produce a website with a group of young Lived Experience Consultants that focuses on how to build and maintain meaningful relationships. This resource would focus on how to build friendships, would include places young people can go together across Victoria to hang out, and a list of suggested activities young people can choose from.
Recommendation 4 – Support us to break patterns of intergenerational trauma

“We need to create cultures and systems where young people can become young adults who are safe and secure and that can contribute to the world.”
– Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

There is often intergenerational trauma and patterns that young people come up against and to process them, we need to be aware of what they are. It’s hard to know when there’s no one to tell us stories about our families and our histories.

At Y-Change, we call young people who are breaking cycles of intergenerational trauma, abuse, violence, addiction, poverty and imprisonment ‘circuit breakers’ – and it’s no easy task. We are often holding indescribable pressure on our shoulders, being the ones in our families who decide on treading a different path. We must be supported and not made invisible. Investing in us is investing in prevention.

THEME 2 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to secure sustainable and equal employment opportunities?

The missing lens of social class in the workplace

- That a statewide youth employment equity fund be set up exclusively for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds to access no strings attached funding for new clothes and shoes for job interviews, inclusive of haircuts and other personal grooming services, and specialised coaching and support services for job application preparation.
• We applaud the Victorian State Government’s investment in public dental care services, but we know waiting lists are long and orthodontic care is mostly out of our reach. We strongly recommend that a statewide youth dental and orthodontic equity fund be set up exclusively for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds to access no strings attached and ongoing funding for dental care.

• That social class is seen as a foundational barrier for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds to gain employment. We support the adoption of Diversity Council Australia’s ‘Class at Work’ report recommendations for meaningful and measurable diversity and inclusion practices relating to social class in the workplace.

• That organisations commit to professional development and training for all staff about creating cultures of belonging and inclusion.

• That the Fitted for Work enterprise concept be expanded to include young people of all gender identities, and that a team of young Peer Workers be employed to exclusively support other young people as a key feature of the model.

• That the Learner Driver Mentor Program be expanded and ongoing funding committed beyond 2023 to support more young people to gain the driving experience required to apply for their probationary licence. We also recommend increasing the eligibility age from 16 to 21 up to 30 years of age (for reasons we have shared above on page 5).

Unconventional expertise and lived experience isn’t considered as valuable

• We strongly encourage investment in our Y-Change model so that we can:
  o continue to build a workforce of quality young Lived Experience Consultants who are supporting the re-design and transformation of government systems and policy across Victoria
  o co-produce a world-first accredited training package for young people who are wanting to learn how to translate their lived experience into a professional skill set.

• We strongly recommend a funding and scholarship pool so young people can access Intentional Peer Support training, an exciting approach that works to broaden the lens to support and enhance localised models of peer support. There is currently very little opportunity available for young people with a lived experience to skill up.
• We strongly recommend the creation of a suite of Lived Experience roles for young people within government, the not-for-profit and wider community sector. For example, Lived Experience Advisors embedded within the Department of Premier and Cabinet. xviii

Centrelink and Employment Service Providers aren’t working for us

• We want to see a Royal Commission into Centrelink and Employment Service Providers, so that the continued harm these agencies inflict on the most marginalised young people in our communities is formally exposed and they are held accountable for their actions.

• Governments must review what ‘independent’ means in the eyes of Centrelink for young people under the age of 22. 206 Young people from marginalised backgrounds are being forced to support themselves due to issues such as family violence and homelessness but Centrelink’s inflexible criteria means they miss out on crucial financial support.

• Governments must also review the ‘unreasonable to live at home’ application process so more young people can access the financial support they need and are entitled to. 207 Currently, young people who need to leave home require parental signatories and phone numbers to ‘allow’ young people to receive the ‘unreasonable to live at home’ allowance.

• We urge the Victorian State Government to support Per Capita’s key recommendations from their ‘Working it Out: Employment Services in Australia’ 2018 report.196

• We urge the Victorian State Government to support the ‘Raise the Rate’ campaign recommendations to fix our social security net for good so that it keeps us out of poverty, with income of $500 per week. 208
Recommendation 5 – Uphold and protect our human rights

“Going back to basics, young people are people and we have human rights. If we are coming to you, meet us with trust and not defensiveness. So much about equality, safety and fairness is all linked back to trust.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

When you have experienced extensive trauma, sometimes you will never return to a feeling of safety. It changes your worldview from a young age to realise that this world isn’t always safe and that children and young people are more vulnerable, especially when we haven’t had safeguards.

Young people have to rely on laws, rights, and policies and we need to be aware of what they are to make sure the people around us are upholding them. We need to imagine and then work towards building a world that young people can feel safe in.

THEME 5 – What is your experience of equality, safety and fairness living in Victoria as a young person?

We aren’t supported to understand our human rights

- We strongly recommend that every young Victorian receives a wallet card version of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and that a poster size version be hung up at every Victorian school and service system organisation. This project would be undertaken in partnership with young people.
• We recommend that regular Human Rights Consultations\textsuperscript{241} be conducted throughout Victoria in partnership with young people, so governments and organisations are staying up to date with the issues we are experiencing on the ground from our lived experience perspectives.

Many of us don’t see the cops as safe

• We strongly advocate for ‘Raising the Age’\textsuperscript{xxxviii} – we don’t believe that children ever belong in prison. We want the Victorian State Government to advocate to all Australian governments to raise the age at which children can be arrested or locked up from 10 to 14 years. Although we don’t believe any child or young person should be imprisoned, this is a start.

• All young people need to know their rights with the police.\textsuperscript{xxxix} We want all young people to have access to a wallet card that has information on it about their rights.

• We want to see Child Safe Police Officers who wear a separate uniform and who are specialised in trauma-informed and child safety practice. This is so we can easily recognise them as specific officers that we can go to for help.

• We want to see the law change, so that whenever the police are having any interaction with a child or young person under the age of 30, their body-worn camera must be activated.

• We want there to be independent oversight of police conduct to establish, build and maintain community confidence in police.\textsuperscript{250}

• We want the Victorian State Government to commit to an inquiry into systemic racism and commit to a plan and partnering framework as to how we will confront it.

Sexual assault is a health crisis

• We need additional funding and meaningful long-term support for victim survivors, especially young victim survivors. The Victorian State Government’s commitments in response to the 2017 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse recommendations are a strong start, but more needs to be done specifically for children and young people, in partnership with us.\textsuperscript{275}

• We need urgent reform into how the police and the justice system respond to sexual assault and offences, especially when it involves children and young people.
• We need more statistics on sexual assault in Victoria, so we can grasp the magnitude of this health crisis. xliv

• We would like to see a lived experience advisory group set up that sits within government, similar to the Victim Survivors’ Advisory Council that came about as a result of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

THEME 6 – What ideas do you have for how we can work together to build a more equal and safe society for all young people?

We want bold action on climate justice

• Follow the City of Melbourne’s recommendations outlined in their ‘Action needed by Victorian and Australian governments’ guide. xlv

• Echoing the City of Melbourne, we call on the Victorian State Government to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency and to commit to a 1.5°C science-based target in line with the Paris Climate Agreement. xlvii If our Federal Government won’t do it, who will?
Recommendation 6 – Imagine and design services with us, not for us

“The reason you don’t get young people signing up to what you’re offering is because we’re not interested. Stop using funding for what you think we need and work with us instead to create something that’s useful.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Services that aren’t built with children and young people can end up causing more harm. When children and young people come into the service system, we have been through enough without systems that are meant to protect us causing further damage and trauma. Services that are built for us and not with us, won’t work.

A theme that came through strongly during our conversations was young people experiencing disadvantage having nowhere to go. Our lives are constantly changing and moving, there’s so much instability and so few places we can stop and just take a breath out, realise we’re home and that we belong there.

We need free spaces, events, and services that we can go to escape all that’s going on in our lives and these need to be built with us, not for us. We want to be a part of creating the services that we will use so they work for us.

THEME 3 – How can we best support young people to connect with culture, community and opportunities?

We don’t have access to enough free spaces

- We recommend a statewide, specialist Youth Central Hubs pilot project, where accessible 24/7 centres for young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage
can drop in to get their needs met and find community, without being forced to sign up for services. These Hubs would include no strings attached access to food and meals, laundry facilities, beds, sensory and prayer rooms, activity days and therapeutic services. The hubs would be staffed by specialist youth workers and Youth Peer Workers, who are available to support other young people doing it tough. These hubs would also be co-designed with young people across the state.

- We recommend extending the operating hours for services that young people need access to, including libraries, youth crisis services and youth spaces, especially for young people experiencing homelessness, family violence and mental health crises. This includes the recruitment of specialist Youth Peer Workers who can assist young people doing it tough and to help them navigate service systems in a paid capacity.

- We recommend running regular free events showcasing local support services for children, young people and the wider community in metro and regional and rural Victoria. These events would provide casual and non-confrontational ways for children and young people to learn about what services are available to them, while getting some free food, jumping on rides and connecting with the broader community. These events need to be inclusive, as well as co-designed and led in partnership with young people with a lived experience.

- We need access to multiple services in the same place, which means greater investment in co-located services, so we can access help where we go to get it. We need multidisciplinary workers – communities of practitioners working together in the same spaces.

- We need holistic services and places to go that address homelessness and the other issues surrounding it, such as family violence, mental health and health. Religious beliefs should never dictate people’s eligibility to receive the services and support they are entitled to, either.
Recommendation 7 – Enable our agency and autonomy

“Informed consent should be at the centre of everything when it comes to children and young people, no matter our age. We can be supported to make our own decisions and consent to what we want to do.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Often because of our age, we aren't allowed to make our own decisions or be part of making bigger decisions with organisations. It seems like everyone else makes decisions on behalf of us based on the idea of ‘our best interests’. Of course, we understand the need to be age appropriate, but we think autonomy is a skill we need to develop and practice.

We know and understand a lot because of what we’ve lived through. We’ve been forced to navigate systems and make sense of a lot to survive, usually before we were even ready to. We need autonomy and to be part of making decisions based on our interests and values. We need to be seen and respected as key decision-makers in our own lives and for people who are representing us to keep us informed so that we can meaningfully contribute.

THEME 1 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to pursue education and training that meets their needs and aligns with their aspirations?

Education isn’t accessible or inclusive for all of us

- We support the expansion of Body Safety Australia and the integration of a team of Lived Experience Consultants as part of their team of educators.132
• That more agency and autonomy is afforded to school students through reviewing mandatory dress codes and forced participation activities.

THEME 6 – What ideas do you have for how we can work together to build a more equal and safe society for all young people?

We need media equality and greater youth representation in the media

• Support The Foundation for Young Australians’ ‘Missing: young people in Australian news media’ report recommendations, which includes employing young people in newsrooms, reimagining cadetships and paid internship opportunities for young people in a post-COVID-19 world to improve youth representation in the media.
Recommendation 8 – Offer us the same access as other kids

“Young people facing disadvantage are always having to constantly catch up.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

If life was a race, some young people get to keep taking two steps forward, while those of us who face systemic barriers are 10 steps behind the starting line. We shouldn’t be at a disadvantage because of our postcode, our class status, or the families we’re born into.

**THEME 1 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to pursue education and training that meets their needs and aligns with their aspirations?**

**Education is unaffordable for young people from marginalised backgrounds**

- We strongly recommend expanded and sustainable funding for the School Breakfast Clubs Program, which is vital for young people who don’t have access to sufficient breakfast meals.\(^{118}\)

- We strongly recommend a statewide funding pool for students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, where they can access no strings attached funds for school uniforms; camps, activities and excursions; textbooks, stationary and other school related expenses.

- We want to continue to see strong advocacy from the Victorian State Government through campaigns such as ‘Fairer funding for our schools.’\(^{119}\)

- We want to see the Victorian State Government fight to protect arts, humanities and social science degrees by advocating to the Federal Government to withdraw the proposed massive fee increase and removal of public funding from arts, humanities, social sciences, business, and law courses and degrees.\(^{120}\)
Ensuring free introductory certifications such as the Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA), First Aid Training, Mental Health First Aid training, barista, retail and food safety and handling courses, provides young people with more accessible pathways into employment and further education opportunities.

**THEME 2 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to secure sustainable and equal employment opportunities?**

There aren’t enough employment pathways for disadvantaged young people

- In addition to the strong Workforce Recovery Plan\(^\text{168}\) set out by the Victorian State Government, we support the continuation and expansion of the Community Traineeship Pilot Program\(^\text{169}\) and the Youth Employment Program.\(^\text{170}\)

**THEME 5 – What is your experience of equality, safety and fairness living in Victoria as a young person?**

Rural and regional young people don’t have access to what they need

- An expansion of the Myki smart card ticketing system into rural and regional areas in Victoria that don’t currently have it, including more places for people to top money up on their cards.

- Support the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria’s ‘COVID-19 Recovery Plan for Young People’, which includes a suite of strong recommendations that will support young rural and regional Victorians.\(^\text{46}\)
Recommendation 9 – Build accessibility in from the start, not as an afterthought

“We need to shift our perspective away from this idea that young people just need more encouragement or inspiration. It’s the inherent barriers in systems that are stopping us from getting access.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Without accessibility built in from the start, young people are coming up against constant barriers and discrimination in schools, services and workplaces. It’s often not thought about until a young person shows up and then it is left up to us to ask for what we need. We need to be able to bring our whole selves into spaces.

**THEME 1 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to pursue education and training that meets their needs and aligns with their aspirations?**

**Education isn’t accessible or inclusive for all of us**

- We urge the Victorian State Government to support the Victorian Council for Social Services ‘Stronger Schools Campaign’ and partnering education action plan, to make our public education system stronger, fairer and more inclusive for every Victorian child.
• Not everything should fall onto teachers shoulders. Specialist support must be integrated into classrooms and available to support young people with their learning and wellbeing such as School Focused Youth Service.\textsuperscript{131}

• We encourage greater funding, support and promotion of the Berry Street Education Model, which incorporates evidence-based trauma-aware teaching, positive education, and wellbeing practices in support of students with complex, unmet learning needs.\textsuperscript{viii}

• We recommend an expansion of the Victorian School Building Authority’s Inclusive Schools Fund and other Schools Funding and Grants Programs specifically for public schools.\textsuperscript{133}

• We urge the Victorian State Government to commit to the recommendations outlined in the Victorian Ombudsman’s 2016 Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions, to improve our education system and its support for all children and young people.\textsuperscript{125}

**Our education system isn’t taking mental health and illness seriously**

• That Mental Health First Aid becomes a compulsory unit for all Victorian primary, secondary and tertiary schools, so that we can learn the tools we need to support each other as a community to build cultures of inclusion and belonging.\textsuperscript{137}

• Not everything should fall onto teachers’ shoulders. Specialist support must be integrated into classrooms and available to support young people with their learning and wellbeing such as mental health practitioners in secondary schools.\textsuperscript{138}

• That Mossfolk\textsuperscript{x} receive targeted funding to run primary and secondary school workshops across Victoria that focus on providing accessible peer-led mental health workshops, events and resources for young people by young people with mental-illness.\textsuperscript{139}

**Standardised testing isn’t equitable for all young people**

• That the Victorian State Government continues to advocate for an overhaul to standardised testing in Australia,\textsuperscript{149} based on findings from the independent review of NAPLAN.\textsuperscript{150}
THEME 2 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to secure sustainable and equal employment opportunities?

Workplace discrimination against young people

- We strongly encourage the Victorian State Government to continue to advocate for the Federal Government to restore penalty rates in the relevant awards to their previous levels and legislate to ensure the Fair Work Commission cannot vary an award and reduce take-home pay in future.\(^\text{177}\)

- We support the recommendations outlined in the Young Workers Centre’s December 2020 ‘Youth Strategy Submission’.\(^\text{178}\)

- We support the Victorian Public Sector Commission’s ‘Getting to work: Victorian public sector disability employment action plan 2018-2025’, in particular people with disability having fairer employment experiences.\(^\text{179}\)

- We encourage job sharing arrangements, which can improve access if one person with disability isn’t able to do the job but two people with disability can. We need to normalise and support flexible working arrangements such as these.

- We recommend an investment in organisation-wide cultural transformation that measures the effectiveness of any diversity and inclusion training or program offerings.
Recommendation 10 – Partner with us to create equitable and safer systems

“If you talk to most young people who deal with disadvantage, I don’t think they’d say they have equality, safety or fairness. We live in what’s seen to be a progressive state, but that means we need to place the bar higher, not accept where things are.” – Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant

Children and young people are often not involved or spoken to because of potential and assumed risk but by not including and speaking to us, it can be more of a risk to our safety. We need to be part of building our own spaces. Our perspectives, experiences, worldviews and priorities are distinct and must be deeply considered.

THEME 2 – What can we do to effectively enable young people to secure sustainable and equal employment opportunities?

The casualisation of our workforce

- We support the Victorian State Government’s Secure Work Pilot Scheme and hope that the pilot successfully transitions beyond ‘priority industries’ to the entire casualised workforce.173
• We urge the Victorian State Government to support The Foundation for Young Australians’ policy propositions for the ‘Good Work Standard’ for young people in flexible work arrangements.  

171

• We urge the Victorian State Government to support the ‘Raise the Rate’ campaign recommendations, which includes an increase to Commonwealth Rent Assistance of 50%.  

208

THEME 3 – How can we best support young people to connect with culture, community and opportunities?

Our identities are being overlooked by service systems

• Youth service organisations across Victoria integrate and follow the Indigenous Status Standard – Standard Indigenous Question (SIQ) as part of client data collection.  

211

• Youth service organisations across Victoria integrate and follow the Centre for Multicultural Youth’s practice recommendations from their ‘Inclusive Organisations Good Practice Guide’ as part of staff induction and training and professional development.  

212

• Allocate funding to specialist youth service organisations across Victoria to undergo The Rainbow Tick accreditation, in partnership with young people from the LGBTQIA+ community who are paid in their capacity as Lived Experience Advisors. We’d also like to emphasise that Rainbow Tick accreditation is only the beginning of a journey. Being committed to diversity and inclusion is an ongoing process, which requires ensuring your service is evolving in response to community needs, in partnership with community members.

Checkbox diversity is affecting our access to meaningful participation

• When recruiting for lived experience and youth participation roles, employers must analyse how class privilege influences the hiring process. This includes whether asking for young people’s home addresses and which universities they have studied at is necessary.

• When recruiting for youth roles and co-design projects, the accessibility of expressions of interest applications must be reviewed. Online forms need to be inclusive of diverse groups of young people, which means ensuring applications are:
• written in simple language
• not pages and pages long
• take experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage into account and how these may influence and reflect in young people’s responses and overall employment experience.

• Our recommendations under the sub theme, ‘The missing lens of social class in the workplace’ are also relevant to this section (pages 133–134).

We aren’t meaningfully partnering with young First Nations People or being taught about history and culture by First Nations People

• The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority commits to including education about Australia’s true history, including the Frontier Wars and effects of colonisation and racism on First Nation Australians in The Victorian Curriculum F-10.

• The Victorian State Government continues leading the country with its work on Treaty in Victoria, ensuring that the process is led by Aboriginal Victorians at every stage and that their communities are being listened to and centred in all decision-making.

• The Victorian State Government continues its investment and support in the Koorie Education initiative, to ensure greater numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are employed within the Victorian education system and school operations.

• The Victorian State Government advocates for reinstating funding to the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples entering and remaining in professional teaching positions across Australian schools.

• Establish an authentic pilot mentoring program to engage prospective young Aboriginal Victorian teachers from as early as year 11 and year 12.

• Guarantee ongoing funding for the Koorie Youth Council to ensure continued support of and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Victoria.
• Expand and fund the National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition to run workshops in Victorian schools and support their ‘Learn Our Truth’ campaign.

THEME 5 – What is your experience of equality, safety and fairness living in Victoria as a young person?

Young people’s experiences of family violence remain mostly invisibilised

• Children and young people must be seen as primary victims in the eyes of the family violence service system and the courts and considered as their own people, separate to primary parent victims – not as an extension of their mother or primary parent.

• Lived expertise must be a valued source of expertise within the family violence service system. Children and young people must be meaningfully partnered with in all aspects of policy development, service design and practice in the family violence service system. We need to move beyond giving voice and towards offering meaningful opportunities to influence policy and legislation change.

• We need to collect more statistics and data to show the full picture of how many children and young people are experiencing family violence.

• To our knowledge, there are very few child and young people specific family violence services within Victoria. Children and young people need spaces and services that are co-designed with them. These services must be able to address issues that include abuse, violence and neglect and that include a highly trained Peer Workforce to support young people who are seeking help.

• Police should be able to seek verbal consent from children and young people without their guardian or parent present to ensure their voices are heard as part of family violence. This would – of course – need to be done respectfully, with accountability centred throughout the process and with a significant auditing and evaluation process built-in to ensure children and young people are not being harmed.

• We strongly recommend that police receive specialised trauma-informed training as to how to respectfully engage with and respond to children and young people who are experiencing all forms of violence.

• The MARAM must evolve beyond its current form and include a meaningful co-design process in partnership with children and young people, that:
o seeks to capture the complexity of violence against children and young people
o ensures that a range of risk factors are acknowledged
o ensures that in-depth safety planning is carried out with each person
o takes sibling perpetrators within families into account.

• Organisations must be supported to better support young people. Although co-design and co-production are considered best practice, we have a long way to go to ensure these approaches become standard practice. This requires further investment in targeted opportunities for quality development and training and ensuring best practice frameworks and guidelines are created specifically in the family violence context in partnership with children and young people.

Out-of-home care isn’t working for the majority of us

• Young people in residential care need the option to be taught more life skills so they are better equipped to enter into young adulthood once exiting care.

• Greater investment is needed for specialised, trauma-informed support services, both direct and indirect, to improve the mental health of young people in out-of-home care.

• Greater investment in specialised and supported Youth Foyers for young people exiting care.

• There needs to be dedicated caseworkers and ongoing supported accommodation for every young person with an experience of care up to at least 25 years old.

• Other options to out-of-home care need to be explored and invested in, in partnership with young people with a lived experience – such as the Teaching Family Model.

• Dedicated, long-term peer support workers employing young people who have exited care to support their peers to navigate service systems.

THEME 6 – What ideas do you have for how we can work together to build a more equal and safe society for all young people?

Take our submission seriously

• In future, it would be good to imagine more meaningful engagement opportunities with young people beyond submitting artworks, videos and written submissions to
processes like this one. Although we appreciate the opportunity to have our say, we want to be up closer to this process. This might look like employing a group of young people to meet with other young people to listen to what they have to say and come back together to help co-produce the strategy in partnership with the Office for Youth.

**We need systems change and systems leadership**

- Governments take a systems thinking approach when tackling issues affecting young people. We recommend The Two Loop Theory of Organisational Change as a good tool.\(\text{xliv}\)

- In partnership with young people, co-produce a systems thinking scholarship program specifically for young people with a lived experience of socioeconomic disadvantage, in order to support future generations of systems leadership in Victoria.

**Victoria must listen to Aboriginal young people and their communities**

- We want to see the Victorian State Government show leadership and apologise to the Djab Wurrung community for cutting down their sacred trees and enter into dialogue with local communities to explore alternative plans for the VicRoads project.

- That the government gives Aboriginal children services that work by following the solutions outlined in the Koorie Youth Council’s ‘Ngaga-dji’ report.\(^{290}\)

- That creative projects led by Aboriginal children and young people around Victoria continue to be funded and their recommendations actively read, heard and acted on.
Bringing it all together

"When wealth is passed off as merit, bad lack is seen as bad character. This is how ideologues justify punishing the sick and the poor. But poverty is neither a crime nor a character flaw. Stigmatise those who let people die, not those who struggle to live.” – Sarah Kendzior

We believe that allowing young people to continually struggle is a political choice and that the lack of systems transformation is due to a lack of mainstream political will.

Socioeconomic disadvantage is the result of deep, systemic injustice deeply impacting on and playing out in young people’s lives. Responses that are imagined with us are vital if we really want things to change.

Going through hardship and trauma at a young age often forces us to grow up quicker than we’re ready for. Through our lived experiences, we can see just how much change is needed and how harmful systems and services can be for children and young people. After all, we know where the cracks are because we fell through them.

We want to change the way lived experience is recognised and create a shift in valuing ‘non-typical’ knowledge and expertise. This involves challenging people’s assumptions and the ways in which they see young people who experience socioeconomic disadvantage.

Change means sitting with being uncomfortable, as this is so often where transformation begins. All of our work is so focused on the end-goal that we often forget how the process of moving towards that change is just as important. Real change isn’t always inspirational, and this assumption often blocks us from advancement into real reform.

To create real change requires us to expand our thinking, which is often an uncomfortable but important process. It demands that we open our minds and imagine something different, to seek out and build more innovative pathways.

If we are to become good ancestors to children and young people, we must become who we are waiting for, now. We must act boldly, now. We must dream bigger, now – while we have this once in a lifetime window of opportunity.
Appendices and personal narratives

We’re big believers in using creative ways to express ourselves and share insights. Using lots of words is not always the most accessible way for people to get their ideas across.

Here you’ll find personal narratives and artworks we’ve created for our visions for a fairer, more sustainable Victoria for young people.

You’ll also find links to important resources we are submitting as supporting documentation as part of our submission.

Appendix A – artwork by Chadai Chamoun

This art piece was commissioned by Y-Change and illustrates one of the core recommendations that arose from our conversations together as part of this submission response – to have specialist Youth Central Hubs all around Victoria for young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, where they can drop in and get their needs met 24/7. The Hubs would be created in partnership with young Victorians who would use them.
“This piece about how police are always present to serve the rich and the powers that be when working class communities decide to stand up against injustice.

They say they are here to protect and serve the community, but they are not serving the community when they are enforcing climate destruction, extractivism, suppressing anti-racist actions, condoning and justifying violence against women, sex workers, queer, disabled, indigenous and black folks. This does not serve us as young people; this is destroying our futures.

In the last year, the police have been given assault rifles to deal with ‘unruly crowds’. What is an unruly crowd if not a group of activists fighting for justice?

How can I trust the police force when they are clad with weaponry, killing indigenous people, never held accountable, historically violent, rooted in white supremacy, not just here but all over the world? They do not protect or serve me. They are enforcing the destruction of my future.”
Appendix C – artwork by youth advocate, Tash Anderson

“This piece represents how I feel about my past, what I feel is important and what I hope for future children and young people. It speaks to the inequality and discrimination that children and young people face, particularly behind closed doors and in our homes. It’s about the injustice children and young have suffered that has resulted in their death (yellow chrysanthemums represent neglected love and/or sorrow). Personally, it’s about the loss of life of children and young people and the lack of accurate data and public access about it.

The water represents our understanding of the issues young people face and the idea that we’re only seeing a fraction of it. Despite this, many of us come out the other side but not unharmed (the paper boats). There’s words on the wall under some candles – ‘transparency, truth, trust.’ I felt like the best way to represent the need for youth voices to be heard and acted on was through a TV. Mt. Dandenong is in the background along with some mountain ash and ferns. This is a representation of the better part of my life growing up in the area – and – it also represents the importance of nature and the need to take action to protect our wildlife for future young people.

The wall is broken and this represents that young have the strength to create their own path. As young people, we shouldn’t be underestimated. We know what will help us thrive, not just survive as so many of us have had to endure system failings.

The rain cloud and rising/setting sun are about making it through hard times and represent the past, but also looking towards the future. There will always be hard times, but the right supports can make all the difference.”
Appendix D – Lauren Oliver’s 2016 Churchill Fellowship Report, ‘To improve our ability to nurture the participation, knowledge and potential of vulnerable young people’.

Lauren Oliver is the original founder of Y-Change. We have referenced her abovementioned report throughout our submission and are also submitting it as a separate appendix to the Victorian Youth Strategy as a key source of practice wisdom.


We are submitting the original evaluation of our Y-Change pilot as part of our submission to the Victorian Youth Strategy as a supporting document to our Y-Change model.

The Y-Change evaluation report can be found here: https://education.unimelb.edu.au/research/projects/the-y-change-project
Appendix F – TASH the film

Y-Change Lived Experience Consultant and young filmmaker, Tash Anderson, wrote, directed, illustrated and narrated her animated film – TASH – in partnership with Family Safety Victoria during her time as the Inaugural Youth Representative on the Victim Survivors’ Advisory Council.

The film tells the story of Tash growing up experiencing family violence and living in out-of-home care. It has screened to sold out cinemas at Australian and International film festivals and was nominated for Australia’s most prestigious film award for short animation – the Yoram Gross Animation Award at the 2019 Sydney Film Festival. It also screened at the United Nations Association Film Festival.

The Victorian online premiere of TASH was live screened on Thursday 10 September, 2020 followed by a panel Q&A with special guest panellists, fellow young filmmaker and family violence advocate, Annika McCaffrey and the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, Gabrielle Williams MP. Around 1,700 people registered for the event. The event was presented by Family Safety Victoria in partnership with Berry Street.

TASH was also recently featured as part of the Victorian State Government’s Family Violence Reform Rolling Action Plan 2020–23, in support of the lived experience of children and young people as victim survivors. xlviii

The film is available to watch and share on Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/336007744

Appendix G – Helplines

We know that young people might have limited access to phone lines due to a lack of privacy or feeling unsafe if they are living with people who might overhear their conversations. Here’s some recommended helplines that also have text or online chat options:

- **1800 Respect**

  1800RESPECT is the national sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service. It’s confidential and available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

- **BetterHelp – Online Counselling**
  [www.betterhelp.com/](http://www.betterhelp.com/)

  Tap into the world’s largest network of licensed, accredited, and experienced counsellors who can help you with a range of issues including depression, anxiety, relationships, trauma, grief, and more. You get the same professionalism and quality you would expect from an in-office counsellor, but with the ability to communicate when and how you want.

- **eheadspace**

  eheadspace provides free online support and counselling to young people 12-25 and their families and friends. If you’re based in Australia and going through a tough time, eheadspace can help.

- **Kids Helpline**

  Kids Helpline is Australia’s only free, private and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25.
• Lifeline

  Lifeline is a national charity providing all Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention services. Their Crisis Support Chat is available between 3pm and midnight, every day around Australia.

• QLife
  www.qlife.org.au/

  QLife provides Australia-wide anonymous, LGBTI peer support and referral for people wanting to talk about a range of issues including sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships. Their webchat is available between 3pm and midnight, every day around Australia.

• Switchboard
  www.switchboard.org.au/

  Switchboard Victoria provides peer-driven support services for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, intersex, queer and asexual (LGBTIQA+) people, their families, allies and communities.
References


StreetSmart Projects. (2018, May 04). LGBTI youth are more likely to experience homelessness. Street Smart Australia. Retrieved from https://streetsmartaustralia.org/lgbti-youth-are-more-likely-to-experience-homelessness/


Williams, C.P. (2019, December 11). This School Didn’t Teach to the Test – And Scored Better. The Century Foundation. Retrieved from https://tcf.org/content/commentary/school-didnt-teach-test-scored-better/?session=1&session=1&session=1


175 Qadar, S. (2019, April 02). Name discrimination can make finding a job harder, but is charging to a pseudonym the answer? ABC Everyday. Retrieved from www.abc.net.au/everyday/should-you-change-your-name-to-get-a-job/10882358


179


181


