

NORTH WEST SAFE YOUTH PROJECT

Institute for Sustainable Industries and
Liveable Cities, VU Research, Victoria
University

Early Crime Intervention Program Report

22/04/2024

Acknowledgement of Country



Victoria University acknowledges, recognises and respects the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung of the Kulin who are the traditional owners of University land in Victoria, the Gadigal and Guring-gai of the Eora Nation who are the traditional owners of University land in Sydney, and the Yulara/YUgarapul people and Turrbal people living in Meanjin (Brisbane).

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Executive Summary

The aim of this report is to evaluate and research the impact and benefits of the North West Safe Youth Project (NWSYP), an early intervention program that addresses offending behaviour while building strengths, skills, resilience and promote inclusion for young people. Federally funded, the program focuses on crime and anti-social behaviour. The Safer Communities Fund, Australian Government Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources awarded funding at a community level across Brimbank, Melton, Wyndham and Hume Local Government Areas (LGAs). The programme responded to community concerns and increased crime rates, up 46% from 2019-2021 (Crime Statistics Agency). Youth crime had also increased and there are concerns about offenders' age and the severity of activity. A number of factors increased the risk of marginalisation, anti-social behaviour and criminal activity for young people - household financial stress, family violence, child protection, mental health, unemployment, housing instability and trauma (Malvaso et al., 2021).

The project takes an outreach and case management approach working with marginalised youth aged 12-24 already, or at risk of, engagement with the criminal justice system. The program includes a comprehensive/holistic assessment for each young person and a strengths-based plan for their individual needs and goals. Case Managers worked with each young person for 6 - 9 months, to facilitate their navigation and connection, linking them into education, work ready skills development, wrap around support and community participation.

This research evaluated the outcomes and efficacy of the project, and investigated the research question, 'How does an early intervention program, designed as a strengths-based, individual assessment approach, address the individual needs and goals of young people and have meaningful impact on crime and anti-social behaviour on community safety. This project aims to investigate and measure the following outcomes from the project:

1. Breaking cycles of crime
2. Improved social and economic outcomes for the young person
3. Safer communities

Findings

The most notable outcome for the NWSYP was a decrease in offending and other anti-social behaviour from young people who engaged.

Referrals to external supports was another key outcome, necessitated by the depth and complexity of the needs of young people, including mental health, housing and relationships before they could engaged in education or employment.

Over 40 per cent of young people increased their engagement in education or work ready programs.

Long term case management had positive outcomes for young people and the community.

Background and context

Research on youth justice intervention programs is 'not plentiful and tends to refer to the success of interventions in terms of measurable outcomes, such as reduced reoffending rates', rather than assessing the outcomes of the young people (Shafi, 2019), communities and addressing cycles of crime. Crime and/or anti-social behaviour is a significant and growing issue across Australia but is also an issue at a place-based, community level.

Community and societal concerns around youth crime and anti-social behaviour are of significant concern across Melbourne and Victoria. Social, political and media discourse and media reporting have raised the profile of youth crime with many calls for punitive measures to be increased (MacDonald, 2017). Yet, there are many complex factors that impact on young people's pathways into crime and anti-social behaviour (Malvaso et al., 2021). Understanding those and implementing early intervention and holistic programs that address behaviour and develop life skills, resilience and inclusion while reengaging young people in education or job ready skills aims to disrupt pathways into crime. The ultimate aim is to reduce crime rates and build safer communities for all.

As the North West Safe Youth Project (NWSYP) is based in Melbourne's west, the focus of this project is on four local government areas, Brimbank, Melton, Wyndham and Hume. The alleged offender incidents for young people, aged 12-24 years, across the four LGAs saw a 46% increase between 2019- 2021. The NWSYP introduced a new approach with an early intervention program that aimed to address anti-social behaviour, develop life skills and build connections, resilience and inclusion for young people.

The project is a partnership, led by The Youth Junction Inc. (TYJ), with Melton City Council (MCC), and other support services. Young people were identified for the project through referrals from local courts, police and lawyers. The school inside Victorian youth justice precincts, Parkville College was also able to refer young people who were in transition from Youth Justice settings. Referrals from other programs and self-referral were also accepted to ensure the program had a broad reach across the four local government areas. Long term outcomes of the project included, breaking cycles of crime, improved social and economic outcomes for the young person and safer communities.

The partner organisations have considerable experience and expertise in crime prevention, vocational pathways, case management and wraparound support which were variously delivered across the program. VU Polytechnic Skills and Job Centre undertook education/ training/ employment planning, mentor support and program access and additional foundation skill development. Family engagement and community relationship strengthening was delivered by supports such as Charis Mentoring and Samoan Community Leadership Network (Pasifika), AFFRO Young African Men's Program and Police Citizens Youth Centre. Young people had the opportunity to be celebrated and strengthen community connectedness through activities that bolster respect and resilience within the community. Activities that bridge the gap between emergency services, such as Victoria Police or local

businesses aimed to support two-way connectedness and mutual respect. Participants were facilitated to participate in tailored vocational skill development such as pre-accredited, accredited, skillsets/non accredited, traineeship/apprenticeship, experiential learning and employment opportunities. While younger participants were supported to reengage with school.

To address the absence of research into this area, this project will both evaluate and investigate the increased engagement of participants in education or work-ready programs, community activities and engagement with other person-centred supports. The breadth of data proposed in this application will enable a rich analysis of impact for both young participants and the local communities.

Aims of the report

The NWSYP project aimed to reinforce engagement through assertive outreach with young people. The program was informed by the understanding that the underlying causes of young people's offending must be addressed in a holistic manner, with re-socialisation and education prioritised to support their development (Edwards, 2017). The aim of this report is to assess the outcomes, efficacy and impact of an early intervention program. The project was designed to address the significant and growing issue of crime and anti-social behaviour, on young people and community safety in four Local Government Areas (LGAs).

Case Managers were employed by TYJ and Melton LGA, the lead organisation, to work with young people for 6-9 months. Referrals to the program were made through Sunshine, Werribee and Broadmeadows Courts in the Brimbank, Melton, Wyndham and Hume LGAs. Overall, the program aimed to work with 320 marginalised youth aged 12-24 who were engaged, or at risk of engagement, with the criminal justice system. At the time of report writing the program had reached 292 young people aged 13-27. The program had three key aims:

1. Breaking cycles of crime – for young people
2. Improved social and economic outcomes for the young person
3. Safer communities- in the four LGAs

Motivation for North West Safe Youth Project

The NWSYP project was informed by extensive experience and understanding of the needs of young people involved in crime in Melbourne's western suburbs. Management of TYJ provided valuable insight into their commitment to crime prevention and young people in the west of Melbourne.

The system loves talking about crime prevention, and if you are going to have crime prevention, you are going to have a lot better outcomes working in a program that's community-based and walks alongside a young person, rather than something like a community corrections order. ...

We took a model and had a look at it and thought, 'well from a young person's perspective what's going to futureproof them?' It's not just about case management, we offer our case management model for three months and 'goodbye and good luck'. It's supporting them to make next steps into career and employment, and things, as well. It needs to be more holistic than that.

You work with them for an extended period of time – and that's the other thing from the pandemic, we learnt that the longer you walk alongside them the more likely you are to have a sustainable impact on the way they operate.

We wrote up North West Safe to include those things, to include a longer period of case management. The model is based on frequent case management, so it's not, 'well you've got six conversations with a case manager over X period of time and then, 'that's it, you're out'. It is usually in the first stages led strongly by the case manager in terms of saying to them, I'm going to be contacting you once a week, or twice a week. I need to hear how you, talk to me about [how] you've gone.

That then ends up being driven by the young person because of the support that's being provided to them. So it's frequency, it's when they need it, if they're going to court, 'We'll sit in court with you' and it's not uncommon for a case manager to be sitting in court all day with somebody. And it's being available to talk to them.

The program has a small amount of brokerage, but it's not about the brokerage it's about the relationship and hopefully you're building capacity of the young person to be able to face life's challenges. You also help them to have a little bit of critical thinking.

It is crime prevention funding but it's really proactive and it understands that crime prevention is not just talking to people about how not to commit crimes, it's about creating lives that are full without crime, that are sweet, they have good options and choices. We want young people to have all the choices that we have (YJI Management, Interview May 2023).

Methodology

This project aims to investigate and measure the following outcomes at the broader level:

1. Breaking cycles of crime
2. Improved social and economic outcomes for the young person
3. Safer communities

The evaluation and research was undertaken independently of TYJ but they provided access to the project data. The Victoria University research team analysed the data at an aggregate level, including factors and demographics that achieved different outcomes or impact. Much of the analysis was undertaken, with ethics permission from VUHREC, by reviewing the initial pre- and post- Assessment data in de-identified format. As part of TYJ participation the young person gave consent for the VU researchers to view their pre- and post-assessments forms. The researchers did not view the young person's criminal record, but a consent waiver was sought by the VU researchers as allowed under S95a of the Privacy Act for a Private Sector Organisation. While details of criminal activity were provided to the researchers, the focus was on the impact of the NWSYP and analysis of the criminal activity was not undertaken. The research was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee VUHREC22-109.

Where possible interviews were conducted with Case Managers. Interviews with young people were sought but only one took up the opportunity to share their personal experience. Interview data was de-identified and criminal activity non-specific and used to supplement the quantitative data. The small number of interviews with young people make it difficult to provide richer insights into the young people's experience, although Liam provides us with some insight into the personal and everyday impact. Publicly available criminal statistics, council and media reporting were assessed for community impact. There are legal, social and psychological risks in asking children and young people about criminal activity. The risk to participants in this project was minimised as the young people worked with their case workers to give consent for their data to be provided to the VU research team.

Interviews were also conducted with the Case Managers working on the NWSYP and local community safety.

A desk top analysis of publicly available documents was undertaken to assess community impact. This included local and state media reporting, crime statistics from <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/>, and sentencing Advisory Council, <https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/>, were assessed alongside reporting from the Sunshine, Werribee and Broadmeadows Courts.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using a mixed methods approach that utilised both quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure a credible, meaningful, and measurable assessment of the project (Sandelowski et al., 2012). 292 young people have been referred and accepted into the North West Safe Youth Project.

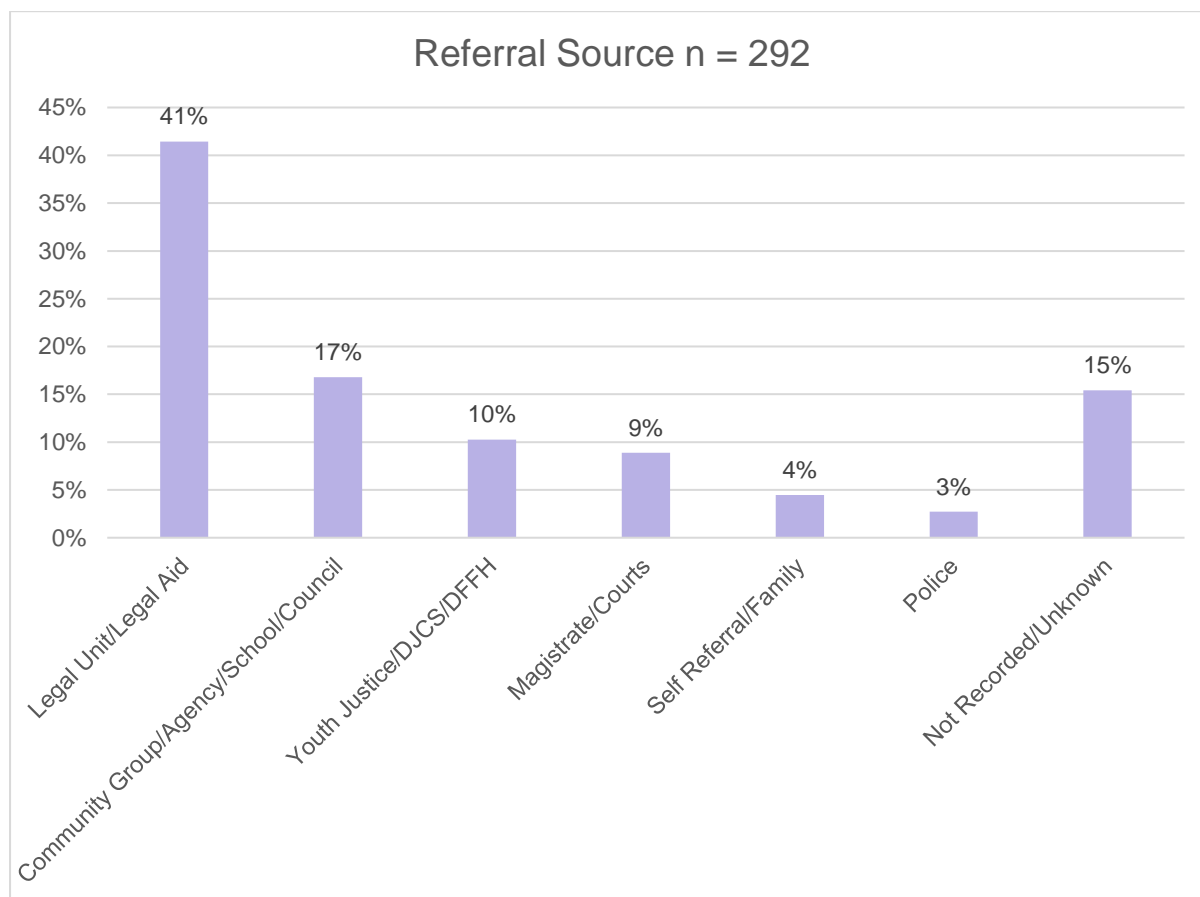


Figure 1. Referral source

The majority of referrals to the NWSYP for young people were made by legal units or legal aid, community groups or an agency. Some 26 young people or nine percent have been referred through the courts and we know from interviews with TYJ staff that they have built strong relationships with the local Children's Courts.

I've had a couple (of young people) who've finalised and then come back into the program. I've had a lot of adjournments and pushbacks. Especially from the Sunshine Magistrate's Court, getting a lot of referrals though. They seem pretty keen on it (NWSYP). I think there's a recognition that we do good work (Case Worker, October 2022).

In this report we are presenting the findings from two data sets. The first, 195 young people, provides the demographics of 195 of the young people involved in the project. A further subset, 123 of the 195 participants, provided more detail for these young people that enabled a richer analysis of the outcomes and impact of the NWSYP. There were a further 97 young people referred and accepted into the program but did not have the capacity to engage at the time or were in the pre-assessment phase. Young people were contacted on numerous occasions, up to eight times, to encourage their participation. They were welcomed back to the program at a later point if they were in a position to engage.

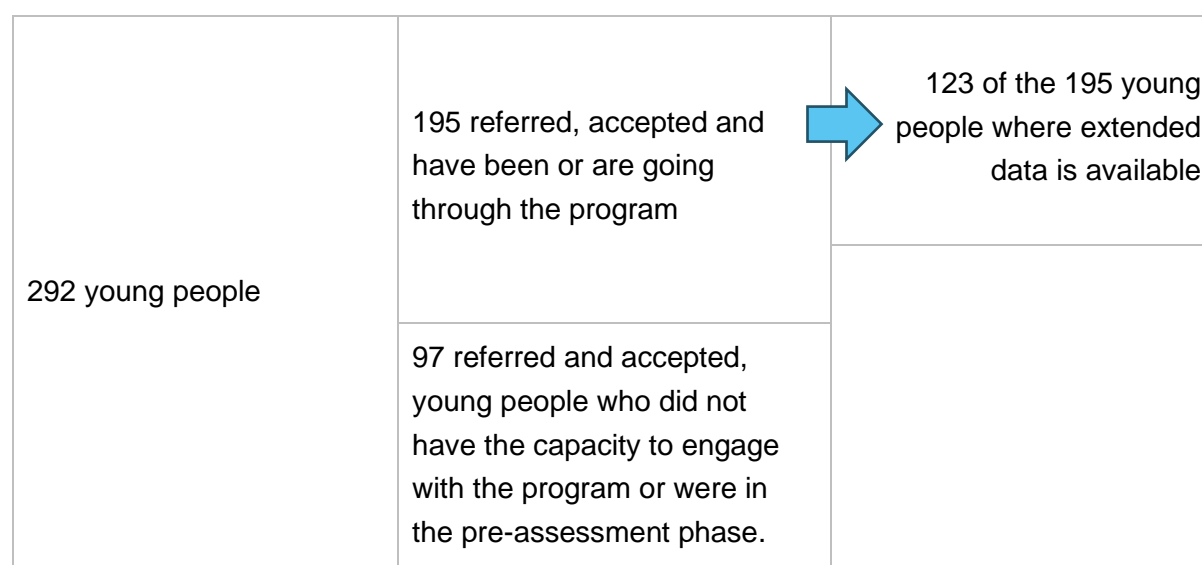


Table 1. 292 young people referred and accepted into the NWSYP

A number of statistical analyses were conducted. This included simple descriptive statistics to measure participants' level of engagement with education, skills development, wrap around supports and community participation to measure outcome percentages as required in reporting to the funding body. Furthermore, the pre- and post- assessment forms were analysed using a hybrid standard, multiple regression analysis approach (Stockemeyer, 2019) which seeks to identify what variables are significant in the young participants' engagement, e.g. age, criminal activity; to consider whether the variable is substantive and the impacts of the level of engagement. Correlations between variables and demographic characteristics were conducted. Sandelowski et al. (2012) Table of Comparison of defining attributes of fundamental synthesis logics enabled a synthesis of the overall data by aggregation and configuration.

The interview data collected was analysed in NVivo software, using standard coding and thematic analysis methods. In this process, a thematic analysis was undertaken to identify patterns or themes. The desktop analysis incorporated both quantitative and qualitative approaches as some data was statistically based, crime stats, court reports, while others were text based, media reporting.

Demographics¹

The NWSYP engaged young people from four LGAs in Melbourne's West, Brimbank, Hume, Melton and Wyndham. We can see in Figure 2, reporting on the engagement of young people in the NWSYP from each of the four LGAs. Melton had the greatest representation of young people on the project with Hume having the lowest representation.

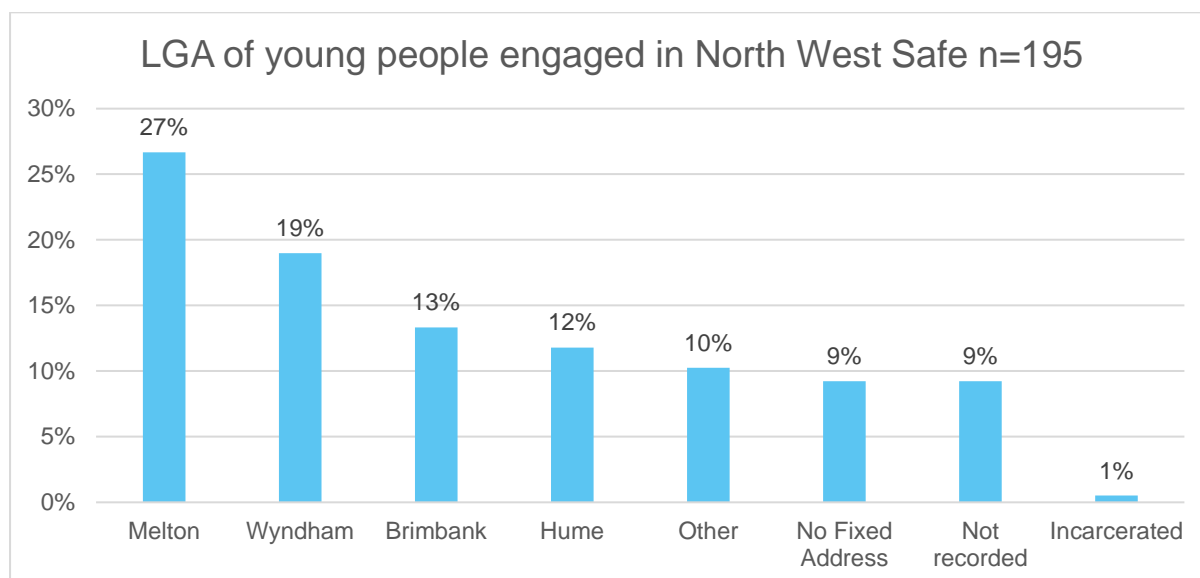


Figure 2: Young people engaged in NWSYP by LGA

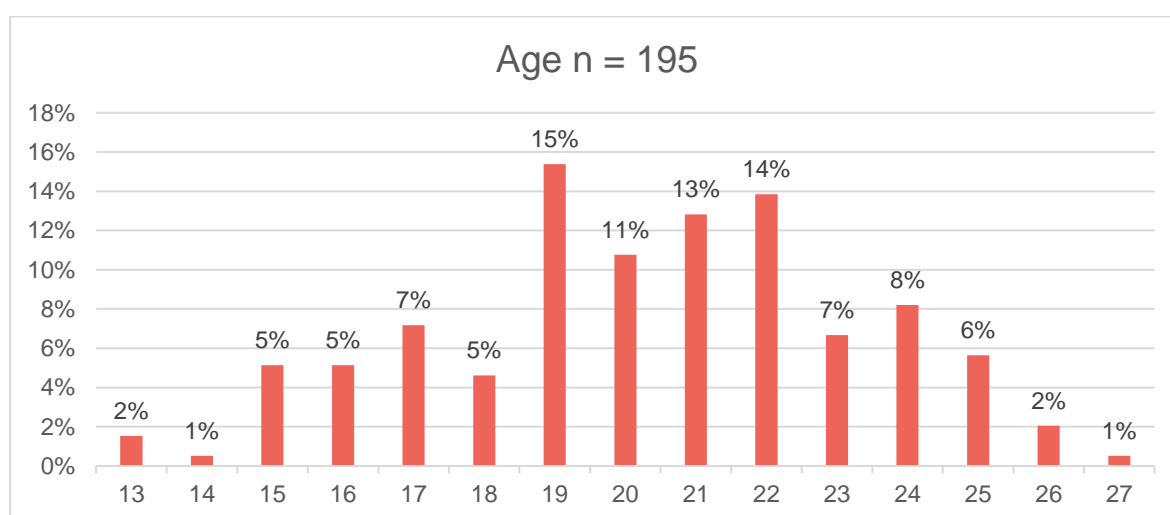


Figure 3. Age of participants engaged in NWSYP

As shown in the Figure 3, more than half of the participants (54%) in the project were aged between 19 and 22 years. While numbers were small, three per cent of young people engaged in the NWSYP were 13- and 14-year-olds.

¹ Demographic data presents findings from 195 young people involved with the NWSYP.

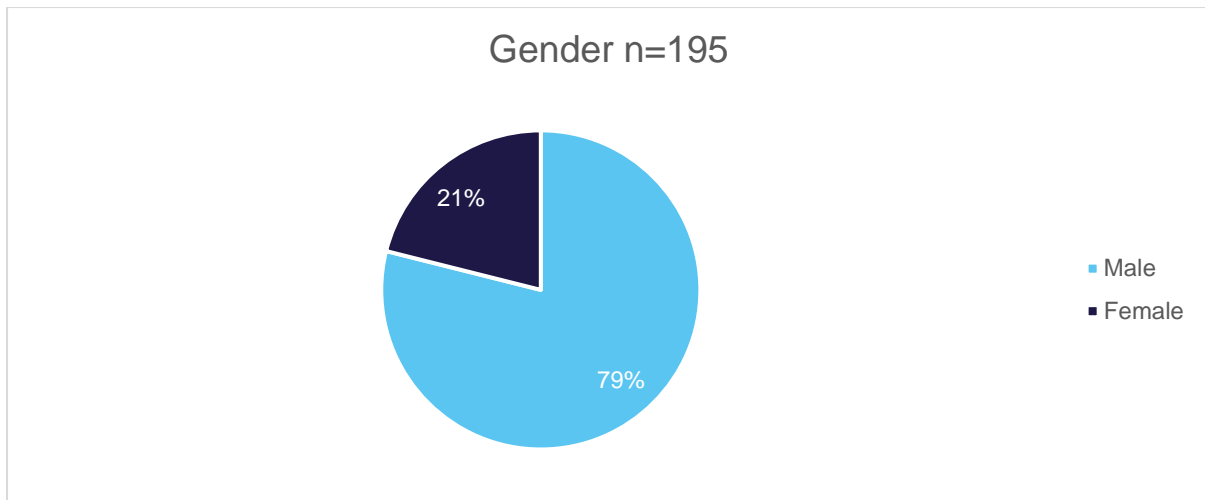


Figure 4. Gender of participants engaged in NWSYP

Overwhelming, participants in the NWSYP were male at 79%, but there was still a considerable representation of female participants. The binary of gender reported in the project is noted, as it would anticipate that some young people would identify as gender diverse². It is unclear from the data though if identity was a self-reported factor.

Without wanting to stigmatise the young people on the NWSYP, there are notable gaps in the education levels of many young people engaged in the program.

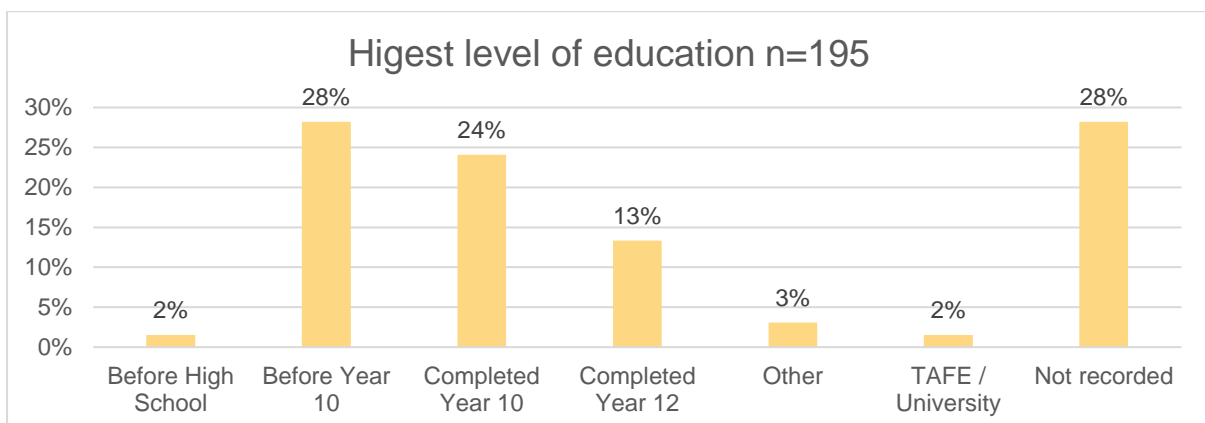


Figure 5. Highest level of education of participants engaged in NWSYP

As many as 30% of the young people engaged in NWSYP have less than a year 10 level of education, which equates to being approximately 15 years of age and in the midst of identity development. Only 8% of the young people are 15 years old or under and over half are listed as students. A further 24% completed Year 10 and 13% finished their full secondary years, leaving after completing Year 12 and the final stages of secondary education.

² <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/analysis-non-binary-sex-responses>

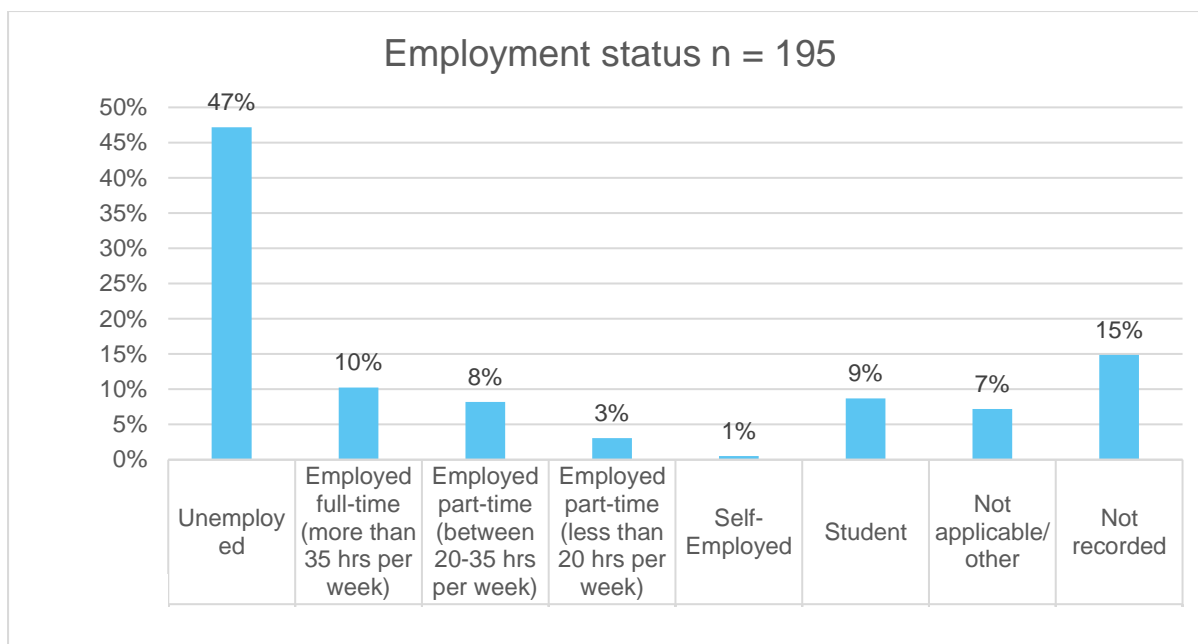


Figure 6. Employment status of participants engaged in NWSYP

As many as 47% of young people were unemployed. While 10 per cent were employed on a full time equivalent, 11 per cent were employed part-time. A further 9 percent were students. The data indicates that some of the younger participants, as young as 13, were recorded as being unemployed. While they may be outside our education systems their age determines that they would be ineligible to take on paid employment. Their employment status would be more appropriately recorded as being not applicable in the analysis of this factor.

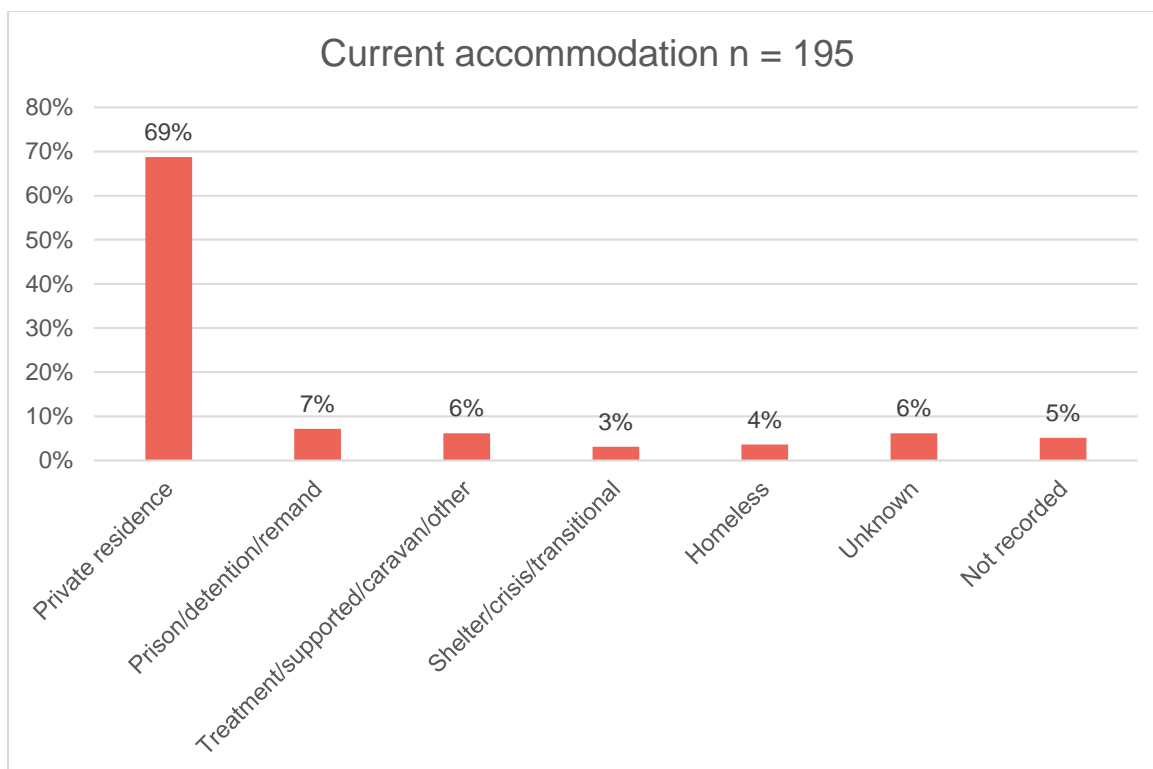


Figure 7. Current accommodation of participants engaged in NWSYP

The numbers of young people in the NWSYC living in private residences is an interesting finding as homelessness is reported as a considerable issue for young people engaged in the criminal justice system (Jesuit Social Services, 2024). Around half of the young people living in a private residence are sharing with friends, a relative, a spouse or another arrangement, or are living alone, rather than with their parents.

Results

The NWSYP has three key aims, and findings from this research have enabled an investigation of how effectively these have been achieved over 2022-2024, alongside providing evidence of the impact of the project:

1. Breaking cycles of crimes
2. Improved social and economic outcomes for the young person
3. Safer communities

As outlined above, a number of data collection methods were undertaken to investigate the project. In the first instance, short to medium term outcomes for the young participants on the program were measured against project deliverables for the overarching project. These are presented in Table 2. Interviews were undertaken with NWSYP Case Officers and staff, a young person who agreed to be interviewed to share their perspective of the project and its impact. A media analysis, undertaken in early March 2024, also contributed to the analysis of the NWSYP project.

While there are some shortcomings in the targeted deliverables it is envisaged that more young participants will have achieved these targets, but staff turnover and data migration to a new reporting system may have resulted in an under reporting of these outcomes. An overall discussion about the effectiveness and impact of NWSYP follows the findings presented in this section. It is envisaged that more young people on the NWSYP have achieved these goals.

Short-medium term outcomes for young participants n=123	Program exit
Decreased engagement in offending and other antisocial behaviour (goal was 85% non-reoffending for young people on NWSYP)	60%
Increased engagement of participants in education or work ready programs (goal was 75% of young people on NWSYP)	46%
Increased engagement of youth at high risk in community activities (goal was 75% on NWSYP)	20%

Table 2: Short term outcomes from NWSYP

Table 2: Measurable program outputs n=123	Program exit
Acceptance into program (95%)	
Completion of psychosocial assessments/intake processes (95%)	
Participation into ongoing case management (80%)	
Strength of engagement with case management (80%)	
Completion of program (70%)	15% (from 195 data set) 20% (from 123 subset) ³
External services received by client (95%)	50%

Table 3: Measurable outcomes from NWSYP

analysis of the data subset, 123 young participants, provides greater insight into the outcomes for young people who engaged with NWSYP:

Demographic variables	Response	Frequency	Percentage of 123 subset of participants
CALD	Yes	51	41%
	No	43	35%
	Not reported	29	24%
Aboriginal/Torres Strait	Yes	4	3%
	No	96	78%
	Not reported	23	19%

Table 4: Referral pathways and identity variables

In Table 3 we can see that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders remain overrepresented in Victorian youth justice, findings from this research indicate that young people with a CALD background were more likely to engage in the NWSYP, representing just over 40 percent of the young people engaged in program.

³ There were more young people with no reportable data included in this data subset

Targeted support variables	Response	Frequency	Percentage of reported data
Mental health support	Yes	35	28%
	No	76	62%
	Not reported	12	10%
Physical health support	Yes	24	20%
	No	87	70%
	Not reported	12	10%
Housing support	Yes	25	20%
	No	86	70%
	Not reported	12	10%
AOD support	Yes	35	28%
	No	76	62%
	Not reported	12	10%
P.A.R.T.Y⁴ support	Yes	13	10%
	No	98	80%
	Not Reported	12	10%
Centrelink supports	Yes	32	26%
	No	79	64%
	Not reported	12	10%
Material Support	Yes	68	55%
	No	53	35%
	Not reported	12	10%

Table 5: Targeted support for young people on NWSYP

⁴ The P.A.R.T.Y program is run by TYJ and stands for Prevent Alcohol and Risk Related Trauma in Youth. The program is designed for 18–25-year-olds to experience the reality of traumatic injuries.

Providing targeted support for young people through NWSYP was a key component of the project. The support varied from housing to mental and physical health, and also Centrelink or Alcohol and other Drug support. Mental health support had the greatest uptake by the young participants with approximately one quarter requiring support throughout the project. The findings indicate that older participants on the NWSYP were more likely to be referred to external services.

In addition to structural supports, material support was also provided to over half of the young participants. As we heard from one young participant, see Liam's vignette on page 25, the monetary support was the most beneficial aspect of the NWSYP.

Age	Count n=123			
	Referred to external services			Total
	Not reported	No	Yes	
13	0	1	1	2
14	0	0	1	1
15	1	2	0	3
16	1	1	1	3
17	2	0	5	7
18	0	3	2	5
19	2	8	8	18
20	1	7	5	13
21	3	5	7	15
22	0	7	16	23
23	1	4	9	14
24	0	3	4	7
25	0	6	1	7
26	0	1	2	3
Not reported	2	0	0	2
Total	13	48	62	123

Table 6: Young participants referred to external services by age

Educational and employment support	Response	Frequency	Percentage of reported data
Education Support	Yes	28	23%
	No	83	67%
	Not reported	12	10%
Employment Support	Yes	43	35%
	No	68	55%
	Not reported	12	10%
WDP (Work and Development permit scheme)	Yes	22	18%
	No	89	72%
	Not reported	12	10%

Table 7: Education and employment support

Engaging young people in education or work ready programs was a short to medium goal of the project. While the projected target was 75% of participants, in this subset of 123 young people the outcome shows that more young people engaged with employment support than other areas of support.

This finding aligns with the predominance of 19–21-year-olds engaging with NWSYP (54%) who may perceive an employment pathway is more relevant to their life stage than stepping back into education. It is hard to determine what motivated the young people in this choice, but we know that many young people engaged with youth justice have disrupted and complex educational experiences.

With only 24 percent of the young participants completing the equivalent of Year 10 and only 13 per cent completing Year 12 they may not have developed an understanding of the full value of education to their future employment and life choices.

Increased engagement in Educational and employment support		Frequency (n=123)	Percentage of reported data
Increased engagement in education or work ready programs	Yes	56	46%
	No	62	50%
	Not reported	5	4%
Increased engagement in community activities	Yes	24	20%
	No	60	48%
	Not reported	39	32%

Table 8: Increased engagement in educational and employment support

Up to 46% of the young participants showed an increased engagement in education or work ready programs while engaged in the NWSYP. In addition to engaging with educational or employment support an increased engagement in community activities was evident for around 20 percent of the young people.

Decreased/increased behaviours	Response	Frequency (n=123)	Percentage of reported data
Improved protective factors on program	Yes	58	47%
	No	53	43%
	Not reported	12	10%
Decrease in risk taking behaviours on program	Yes	54	44%
	No	57	46%
	Not reported	12	10%
Increase in prosocial activities	Yes	50	40%
	No	61	50%
	Not reported	12	10%
Reduction in AOD	Yes	43	35%
	No	68	55%
	Not reported	12	10%
Referred to external services	Yes	62	50%

	No	49	40%
	Not reported	12	10%
Reoffended on program	Yes	37	30%
	No	74	60%
	Not reported	12	10%

Table 9: Increased/decreased behaviours

While a number of the measurable outcomes of NWSYP were not achieved there were notable improvements and impact on individual behaviours. This included 47 percent reporting improved protective factors, 50 percent being referred to external services and 44 percent reporting decreased in risk taking behaviours. We can see below, page 24, of the impact on Liam, a young person engaged in NWSYP.

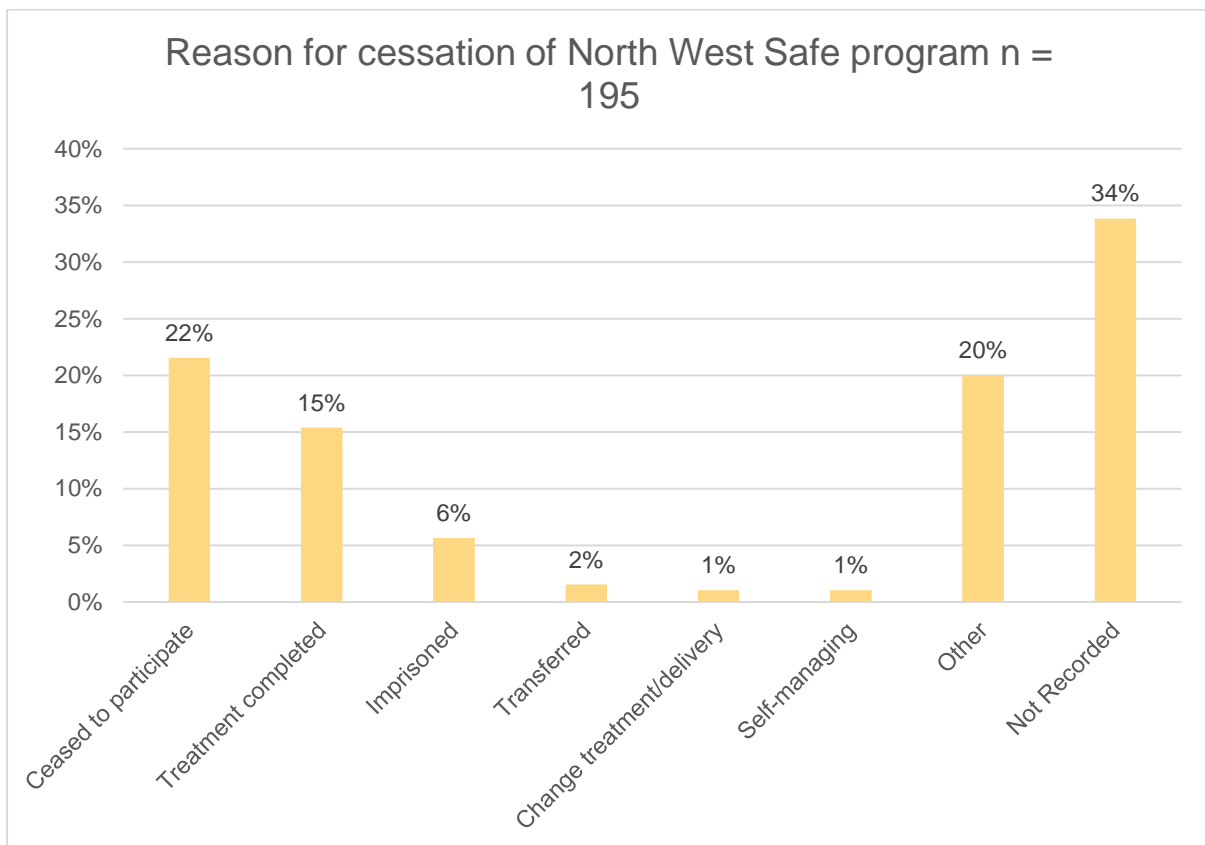


Figure 8: Reason for cessation of NWSYP

In the larger data set, n=195, 15 percent of participants completed the program and then exited. A further 22 percent ceased to participate either without notice or involuntarily, against advice or by mutual agreement, a further 6 percent were imprisoned. In the smaller data subset, n=123, 20 percent completed the NWSYP, 31 percent disengaged, and 8 percent were remanded. Cessation data has not been recorded for 34% of cases. However, 63 young people, or 32 percent are still engaged in the program and are receiving ongoing support.

Increased engagement in Educational and employment support	Response	Frequency (n=123)	Percentage of reported data
Reason for closure	Disengaged	38	31%
	Remanded	10	8%
	Referred to alternate program	5	4%
	Completed NWSYP	24	20%
	Not reported	46	37%

Table 10: Reason for closure of young participants files

Interviews

Having analysed the quantitative data available for the participants on the NWSYP, we introduce evidence from the Case Managers to establish an overview of the opportunities and challenges of the program. We start first with a case study of one young man, Liam⁵, and his experiences on NWSYP.

Case study of Liam

Liam, 22-year-old, is currently engaged in NWSYP and having regular appointments

Engaged in NWSYC through family members that had been with the police and then the police recommended I join the Youth Junction as a way to improve myself. It was also part of what the lady (at Court) said.

Not something I ever thought I would do but after it was given as an option, I considered it.

I am still engaged so I'm still having regular appointments.

I reckon it helps the youth to get a better understanding of themselves 'cause a lot of us are very lost without help, especially sometimes if we're not family-driven, it's hard to go to your family and ask for advice and that's where Youth Junction comes in.

Right now, I want to be looked at as a workaholic, someone that takes pride in themselves. Also, I try to be healthy, so I want to be seen as a healthy person too. I work in a warehouse. I am studying real estate.

Before Youth Junction I was unmotivated, barely worked. Even though I had bills coming up I didn't even work so I was just unmotivated, didn't feel like doing anything.

I rarely missed a meeting ... I think it is very important to attend your meetings (if you want to improve).

(My Case Manager) was someone I could come to with my problems and she always had solutions. It's crazy that she always has solutions.

I was a really troubled kid before everything. Looking to the future might be in the mines, put up with it for two years and make enough money to buy a house.

The NWSYP motivates you when you get offtrack.

⁵ All participants in this report have been allocated pseudonyms

The most valuable things I got out of NWSYP was the \$100 voucher from Coles when I didn't have any money and other would be housing.

It was bit of both so my counsellor or whatever they – my youth worker, she helped me with my resume 'cause I didn't know what to put in my resume, helped me with my CV and then from there I went looking at agencies and they got me a job from there.

Case Managers experience

Community safety

A key aim of the funding body⁶ is to have a positive impact on community safety.

I think the community is a lot more open, but obviously you do still see that same stigma around young people, youth crime – it still occurs every day. But I think it's a lot better than what it used to be (Youth worker, October 2022).

Even with a positive approach to the project and benefits for young people there are concerns that the scale, 320 young people, will not have an impact on community safety.

I think it would be too small to really make it visible in the community difference. You'd have to upscale, three, four, five, six times. There's a lot of people we are not reaching (Youth worker, November 2022).

Complex life experiences

A program like NWSYP is necessary for young people who have often experienced traumatic and complex life experiences:

For so many of them it's this mistrust of other people, mistrust of the system. They've either had broken family dynamics, come up through foster care systems is a common thing for some of them (Youth worker, November 2022).

The aim of NWSYP is to address these issues with the young participants, and the benefits of a community approach is evident:

⁶ NWSYP was funded by the Department of Home Affairs, Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources, Safer Communities Fund Round Six.

One of the plugs about a community-based program is that there's no way you're going to be treated like a criminal if you're on a community based activity. You're going to get proactive support (Manager, May 2023).

Strengthening relationships

While relationships have not always been positive for these young people, NWSYP works with them to take responsibility for their own engagements:

This is a two-way street for all, and genuinely, usually have experienced some unfair, if not outright awful experiences from other people. Understanding that going forward, they do have to be responsible for themselves and their reactions. For any future Relationships that they want to have (Youth worker, November 2022).

Greatest need

As we saw in Table 5 young people in the NSWYP are able to draw on a breadth of support from a variety of providers. The strength of TYJ relationships with external agencies has assisted Case Managers to provide the most appropriate support for each young person. There are some levels of support that have been more evident amongst the young cohort:

Definitely mental health is a massive one. A lot of young people need mental health support. A lot of them have trauma that needs to be dealt with. And drug and alcohol. Drug and alcohol and mental health are top, even above housing really. I can pretty much say that from what I've noticed 80% suffer with mental health and 50%, if not more, I'm just going off the top of my head, if not more, probably 60% to 70% are using drugs and alcohol. A lot of them do talk about these things that they're doing being things that they wouldn't do had they not been on drugs or alcohol.

They're such long waitlists. So, they're often waiting on the waitlists sometimes longer, especially for mental health, than what the program actually runs for. So that's, I've found, a really, really big challenge (Youth worker, October 2022).

The extended period with a youth worker is a strength of the program, with young people engaging for 6-9 months and working closely with their youth worker. This has enabled the relationship to develop and respond to the changing needs of each young person across their 6-9 months on NWSYP.

Yeah [the 6-9 months] definitely does [help/work]. Once I do find we are addressing those main concerns that they presented to me with, whether

that be housing – because a lot of them do come in crisis. So obviously that frequent contact is needed. Once things do settle down, and once maybe approaching the three to four month mark I do drop down to once a week. Yeah just so they can also gain some sort of independence, especially reaching the halfway mark of the program (Youth worker, October 2022).

Court response

While not all young people are referred through the Children's Court and Legal Services, there have been positive outcomes and feedback from Lawyers:

Yeah, we're finding some really great success stories. We're finding really, really positive comments from the magistrates and the courts. We had one last week that the magistrate actually said that due to the progress that the young person has shown in North West Safe is the reason that the young person has got the outcome at court. We previously had one where the young person got a diversion, and the lawyer was like – but prior to it, the lawyer was like, "There's no point asking for a diversion, the charges are too extreme". But because of the progress the young person had made, the magistrate decided on that. So we're finding great outcomes when it does come to them at the court and great feedback from the magistrates, which is good (Manager, December 2022).

Crime statistics

The following data is attributed to the Crime Statistics Agency of Victoria (CSA) and is taken from the 'LGA Alleged Offenders Year Ending September 2023' data table 03⁷. Three age groups were included in the charts to cover the ages grouping of 12-27 of the North West Safe program. This means that children 10-11 are included as well as young people 28-29. The CSA state that:

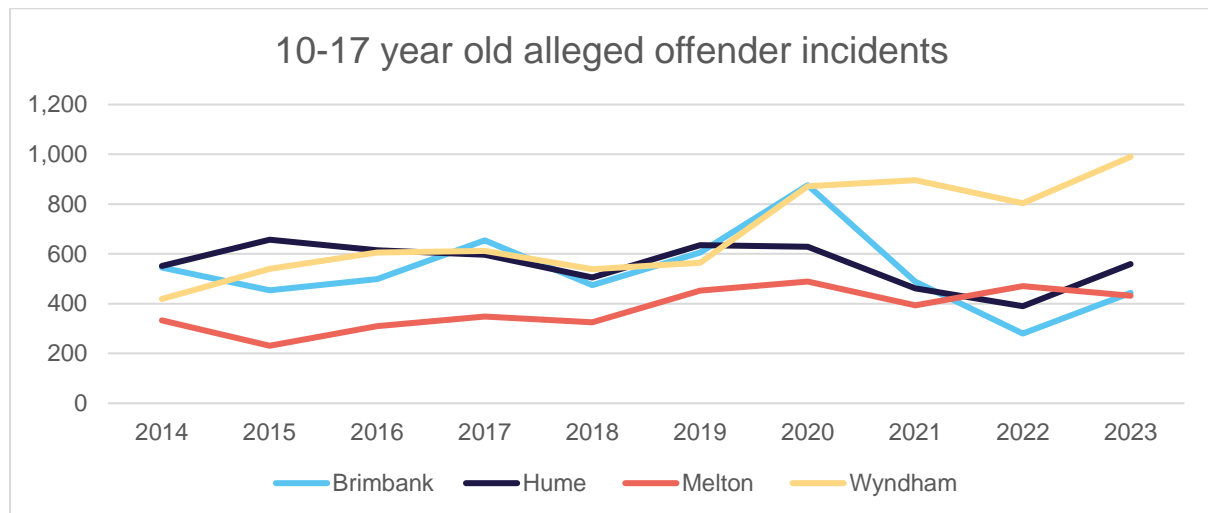


Figure 9. 10–17-year-old alleged offender incidents in Brimbank, Hume, Melton and Wyndham 2014 to 2023

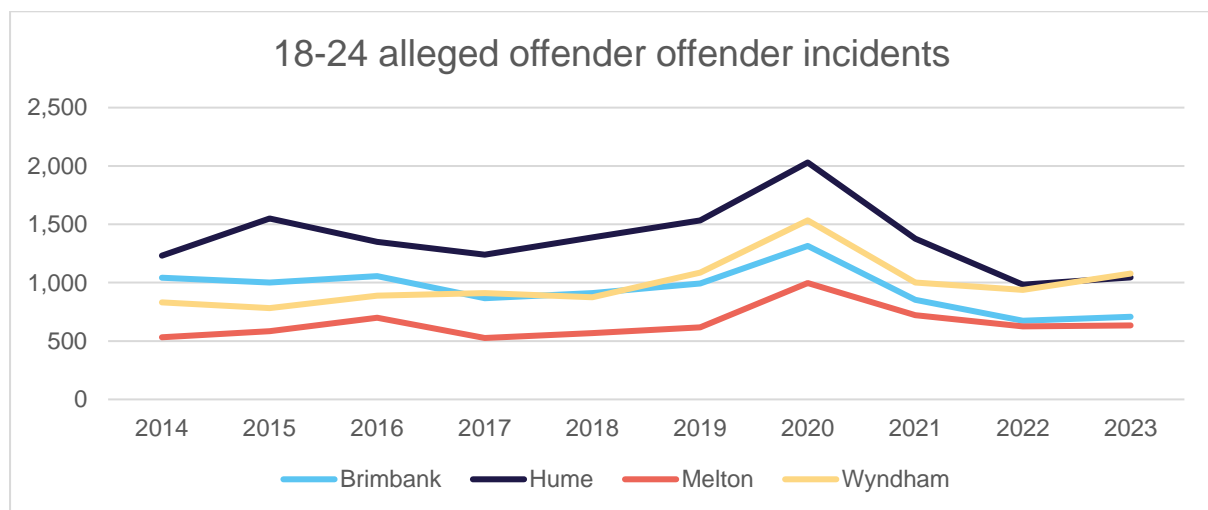


Figure 10. 18–24-year-old alleged offender incidents in Brimbank, Hume, Melton and Wyndham 2014 to 2023

⁷ Recorded crime statistics are based on data extracted by Victoria police on the 18th day after the reference period, and are subject to movement between releases (CSA, 2023).

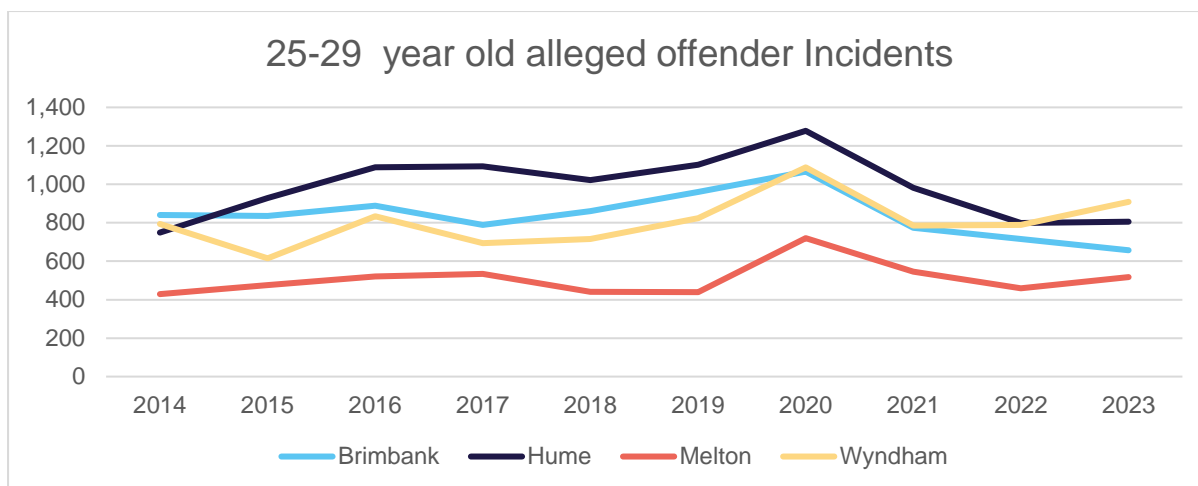


Figure 11: 15–29-year-old alleged offender incidents in Brimbank, Hume, Melton and Wyndham 2014 to 2023

Media analysis

A media analysis for the project period was conducted using Gale Onefile: News. The search was confined to Australia and the terms youth AND crime, along with the four LGAs of Brimbank, Melton, Hume or Wyndham and two suburbs from each of the LGAs⁸, of which the highest number participants in North West Safe program lived. The suburb Melton was removed as it was also the name of one of the LGAs⁹.

The search produced 35 news results and on further inspection 11 were excluded, leaving 24 articles for analysis. 2 Videos were excluded as they are from Wyndham in Western Australia. The number of publications per source are listed in Figure 12.

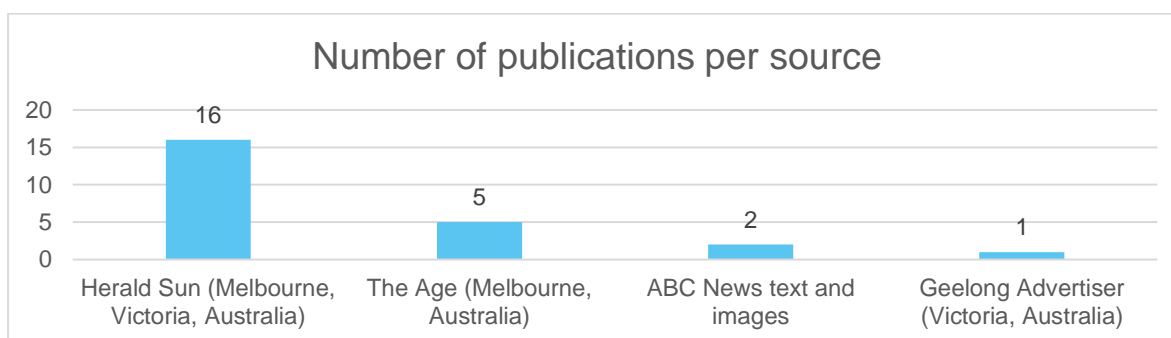


Figure 12: Number of media publications per source

⁸ Top two suburbs selected from each of the LGAs based on the suburbs listed on <https://www.vic.gov.au/know-your-council>.

⁹ Search Terms:

Publication Country or Territory: Australia AND Basic Search: Youth AND Crime AND Basic Search: Brimbank OR Melton OR Hume OR Wyndham OR Werribee OR St Albans OR Tarneit OR Sunbury OR Brookfield OR Meadow Heights OR Deer Park

Dates selected: after 7 August 2022

Of the media reports 12 were reporting in response to an incident. The headline for these articles are shown in Table 11 by source and are listed from most recent. The News Limited's Herald Sun and Geelong Advertiser, along with the ABC reported on specific incidents.

Machete-wielding thugs arrested after 'scary' shopping centre brawl.	Herald Sun
Young killer who can't remember stabbing stranger was on bail.	Herald Sun
Young thugs storm Werribee supermarket with machetes.	Herald Sun
Man chased, stabbed to death near Wyndham Vale home.	Herald Sun
Hoppers Crossing mum's desperate move after daughter's alleged assault by teens.	Herald Sun
Three males charged with murder over stabbing death of teenager at St Albans.	ABC News
Teen boy in custody after fatal Sunshine stabbing.	Herald Sun
Teenager taken into custody over fatal Sunshine stabbing as victim identified as Pasawm Lyhym.	ABC News
I tried to run': Horror as teen stabbed to death in Sunshine.	Herald Sun
Autistic student's sickening bashing caught on video.	Herald Sun
Victoria Police put youth gangs on notice.	Herald Sun
Geelong link to teenager wanted over brutal suburban stabbing.	Geelong Advertiser

Table 11. Headlines by source for articles that were reporting in response to an incident

The other 12 articles undertook a deeper analysis of an identified issues and were often longer. The headlines for these articles are shown in Table 12 and are listed from most recent. The Age of the Nine Entertainment Company and the Herald Sun both published their analysis of a problem.

The lost boys: Melbourne gangs linked to 11 homicides.	Herald Sun
Vic govt ditches election pledge to track young crims.	Herald Sun
Young teens behind spike in emergency worker attacks.	Herald Sun
Scared residents take safety into their own hands with patrols.	Herald Sun
Agencies need help to tackle school violence.	The Age
Going behind the lines to tackle rise in youth crime.	The Age
A community takes lead in tackling youth violence.	The Age
High toll of knife 'madness'.	The Age

street brawls...The Embedded Youth Outreach Program was an idea years in the making...Its intention is to tackle the reasons driving young people to commit crimes by getting them to open up about their struggles - drug and alcohol abuse, family violence or mental health issues - and referring them to support services..."We cannot arrest our way out of this. It's that simple," said Sergeant Tem Hawkes, who oversees the program at Werribee police station. "The whole arrest, charge, bail, remand, court system, justice system, youth detention can't be just the answer."...

Alborough, who is often on the front line with police, said some repeat offenders, who had initially refused help, were ringing youth workers a year later ready to turn their lives around. "Just in recent weeks we've had three of those," she said. "They come back, which is amazing. And not through having been in police custody."
(The Age, 6 May 2023, p. 18)

Discussion

The research and evaluation of NWSYP was undertaken across the project, from 2022 – 2024. The primary focus of the assessment was to investigate the research question:

'How does an early intervention program, designed as a strengths-based, individual assessment approach, address the individual needs and goals of young people and have meaningful impact on crime and anti-social behaviour on community safety.

And to consider the following three aims:

1. Breaking cycles of crime
2. Improved social and economic outcomes for the young person
3. Safer communities

In addition to measurable outcomes around a decrease in offending and antisocial behaviour, increased engagement for young participants in work, community, support, strength of engagement with case managers and the NWSYP. These proved difficult to obtain for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the depth of complexity of the young people engaging in NWSYP was underestimated. Young people engaging in the program required considerable support particularly around mental health, housing and relationships. At the same time TYJ had a period of considerable staff turn-over.

In Table 1, reporting on the demographics of 195 young people, it appears that the most successful outcome has been on decreased engagement in offending and other anti-social behaviour. The smaller data subset of 123 young people provides richer insight into the outcomes and impact of the program. For the most part young people were referred to NWSYP and a strong relationship had been developed between legal representatives and NWSYP.

Referrals to external supports was a key outcome of NWSYP. A range of support was available, including mental and physical health, and AOD. However, material support – vouchers and other material items – was taken up the most frequently.

With many of the young people requiring most support to address health and housing the uptake of education and employment support was less than anticipated. Although, Case Managers reported that 46 percent (n=123) of young people demonstrated an increased engagement in education or work ready programs. increased their prosocial behaviours. A total of 50% (n=123) were referred to external services.

In terms of behaviours, Case Managers reported that 47% (n=123) improved their protective factors on the program, 44 percent reduced their risk taking behaviours, and 41 percent.

One quarter of young people completed the program, with around 30% ceasing to engage. Less than 10 percent were imprisoned or remanded while engaged with NWSYP.

Introducing the interview data, crime statistics and media analysis has enabled richer insight into the impact of NWSYP and a window into the broader reporting of youth crime. Societal perspective and reporting of youth crime continues to stigmatise young people engaged in criminal activity rather than considering the benefits of programs such as NWSYP.

It is evident that there were challenges across the 2 years of the NWSYP that made it difficult to achieve the measurable outcomes. However, if we return to the research question it is possible to see that the program has had a positive impact for young people and helped them to break their cycles of crime. Similarly, we can see improvement in young people's social and economic outcomes with over 40 per cent increasing their engagement in education or work ready programs.

The goal of making communities safer is a longer-term outcome with many factors outside the control of young people and one program in the four communities of Hume, Brimbank, Melton and Wyndham. It is difficult to measure the impact at the two-year mark but the benefits of NWSYP for young people engaged in youth crime and as a referral source for organisations working with them, are evident. It is hoped that demonstrating the benefits of walking alongside young people in community focused, longer-term case management has positive outcomes for communities and young people who require support to disengage from crime.

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