

Learnings from the YSAS Youth Support Service (YSS)

YSAS

Promoting Positive Development
and Preventing Crime

YOUTH
SUPPORT +
ADVOCACY
SERVICE

Providing services that matter
for young people and families



Alisha Fagan

“My inspiration for this piece was what I feel YSAS stands for. The eye is drawn to the centre as young people are drawn to a gathering place. The currents lead to the meeting place in the middle which is YSAS. There young people can come together, find support, encouragement, friendship and ultimately themselves. The four ocean currents are filled with creatures representing different young people and families on their many journeys of life. The turtles are parents and their child. The parents are guiding their child through obstacles. On each side are meeting places filled with family, friends and connections. I chose bright colours because I feel that they represent the radiance of youth and include all the diversity of the youth who come to YSAS. We are all one when we come together at a meeting place. In my experience with Bunjilwarra, I have felt included, respected and supported and I wanted to convey this in my art. Bunjilwarra is a place of healing and recovery. It is here that I have found the time and mindfulness to rediscover my creativity as an Aboriginal woman. I will be forever grateful to Bunjilwarra as it has allowed me to find myself and change my life in a positive way. I hope my art brings brightness to the viewer’s day and leaves them with a sense of happiness.”

YSAS acknowledges Victorian Aboriginal people as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners of the lands and waterways that sustain our lives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were the first to establish sovereign Nations in this country, and that sovereignty has never been ceded.

We are enriched by the continuing cultural practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their vast experience in caring for the social and emotional wellbeing of their community. We pay respect to their Elders past, present and future.

We are committed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination. We are open to listening and learning from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) about how best to support them in fighting for justice and creating better futures for First Nations communities.

We accept the truth of this country's colonial past and recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to experience systemic racism in Australia today. We remember that the authorities in Australia used force to steal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, inflicting an overwhelming trauma that current and future generations must find ways to live with.

When we confront this shameful truth and listen to the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we can start to comprehend how devastating it is for them to witness the over-representation of their children and young people in the Out of Home Care and justice systems across the country. Even with the hardships endured and the sacrifices involved, we are inspired by the ongoing strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in sustaining the world's oldest living cultures.

We thank our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, partners and friends for helping us learn how best to walk alongside and support First Nations peoples.



YSAS YOUTH
SUPPORT +
ADVOCACY
SERVICE



Authors and Contributors to this Report

Bianca Johnston - YSAS Research and Evaluation Lead

Andrew Bruun - YSAS CEO

Jade Rintala - La Trobe University

Vishwas Hegde - YSAS Manager, Data Management and Analytics

Shane Weir - YSAS Senior Manager Research and Learning

Nathan Akoka - YSAS Research and Practice Consultant

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Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science

Swinburne University

John Street, Hawthorn, Victoria, 3122

+61 3 9214 3887

cfbs@swin.edu.au

For all matters relating to this report please contact:

YSAS – Youth Support and Advocacy Service

Level 14, 242 Exhibition Street

Melbourne, VIC 3000

reception@ysas.org.au

<http://www.ysas.org.au>

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Introduction

This report describes the Youth Support Service, a Victorian community-based early intervention program focused on diverting young people identified as being 'at risk' from becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

Early intervention initiatives in the field of crime prevention make sense¹. There are tangible economic and social benefits associated with creating positive developmental pathways for young people who without intervention would be on a life course trajectory that involves crime².

Diversion, crime prevention and early intervention mitigate and reduce the societal harm associated with criminal activity and also ensure that children and young people do not experience harms that emerge from justice system contact³. While formal diversion may hold a strong focus on preventing recidivism⁴, crime prevention and early intervention are understood as:

- Responding to young people's complex needs in ways which seek to divert their trajectories away from offending behaviour⁵.
- Divert young people from formal justice system contact and trajectories by ensuring minimum necessary intervention with statutory youth justice services⁶.

A focus on early intervention is contained within Victoria's Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020 – 2030, the guiding document for youth justice in Victoria. The recently updated Victorian Crime Prevention Strategy⁷ alongside a range of other Victorian Government strategies⁸ also focus on crime prevention, diversion and early intervention. These community-based initiatives create a positive impact of health and social outcomes for young people and their families, improve public safety and community cohesion and at the same time minimise necessary justice system intervention⁹.

1. Li, J., McIntosh, C., (2018) Cost-Benefit Analysis of Developmental Prevention The Oxford Handbook of Developmental Life Course Criminology DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190201371.001.0001 p.728

2. Li & McIntosh, 2018

3. Commonwealth of Australia (2025) Australia's Youth Justice and Incarceration System Interim Report. Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee Australia's youth justice and incarceration system

4. Richards, K., (2014) Blurred Lines: Reconsidering the Concept of 'Diversion' in Youth Justice Systems in Australia. Youth Justice 14(2) 122-139 DOI: 10.1177/1473225414526799

5. Richards, 2014

6. Case, S., Haines K., (2021) Abolishing Youth Justice Systems: Children First, Offenders Nowhere Youth Justice 21(1) 3-17 DOI: 10.1177/1473225419898754

7. Victorian Government (2022) Our Promise, Your Future: Victoria's Youth Strategy 2022-2027

8. Examples of connected strategies include Wirkara Kulpa Strategy 2022-2032, Victoria's Youth Strategy 2022-2027, Victoria's Crime Prevention Strategy and Roadmap to Reform pathways to support children and families.

9. Haines K, Case S.(2015) Progressive diversion. In: Positive Youth Justice: Children First, Offenders Second. Bristol University Press; 2015:177-218

Sources of evidence used to compile this report

Literature review

Literature review of key criminological, philosophical, legal, practice and ethical considerations, as well as evidence, research and policy in the areas of youth crime prevention, diversion and early intervention.

Database extraction and statistical analysis

Swinburne University's Centre for Forensic Behavioral Sciences (CFBS) was commissioned by YSAS to complete an analysis of YSS client management system data to provide an overall picture of the program and its client cohort. Data is included from an 18-month period between December 2023 and May 2025, detailing client journeys from referral through to service separation.

2025 YSAS Youth Census data

The 2025 YSAS Youth Census collates data on the needs and characteristics of 168 young people accessing YSAS's crime prevention services on May 5th, 2025. The census was conducted in partnership between YSAS and La Trobe University and aims to provide a point in time "snapshot" of the needs and characteristics of young people accessing YSAS Crime Prevention and Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) Services.

Comprehensive review of 46 YSS case files

A comprehensive review of 46 YSS case files where service was provided between the period of January 2024 to June 2025. Information reviewed included case notes, referral forms, assessment forms, care plans, outcome forms and attached documents. Data was coded both inductively and deductively.

Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 11 participants including 6 young people and 2 parents/caregivers who currently or previously received YSS services in 2024-2025. A further 3 interviews were undertaken with YSS workers. The semi-structured qualitative interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and de-identified with participants choosing their preferred pseudonym/alias:

- Hecate, 17yo young woman
- Emma, 17yo young woman
- Abdul, 16yo young man
- Alysia, 14yo young woman
- Aurora Rose, 13yo young woman
- Peter, 12yo young man
- Rita, parent/caregiver – Female identifying
- Jess, parent/caregiver – Female identifying
- YSS SE Senior Practitioner
- YSS NW Senior Practitioner
- YSS SE Worker

Case Studies

This report presents case studies of young people's experiences of receiving YSAS YSS support. These case studies have been prepared for recent YSAS YSS review and shared with permission by young people and their families.



Key Findings

There is strong demand for YSS

There is high demand for YSAS YSS Services in the Metropolitan Melbourne and Latrobe Valley regions of Victoria. In an 18-month reporting period, a total of 1594 referrals were received from Victoria Police, Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP), the Children's Court Youth Diversion Service (CCYD) Service and the Youth Referral and Independent Persons' Program (YRIPP). Other referral sources were from a wide range of service providers across the sector, including Anglicare, Child Protection, The Orange Door, NDIS, Berry Street, Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, and other YSAS provider programs.

YSS is effective in reaching and engaging 'at risk' young people early

Of the 1594 referrals received, YSAS YSS practitioners were able to engage 861 young people as clients through assertive follow-up. 57.8% were aged 16-17 and 31.3% were under 15 years of age.

Early intervention involves working with young people and families to identify and build on strengths that might otherwise be diminished through further involvement in criminal activity and other antisocial influences. Of the young people reached and engaged early by YSAS YSS:

- Over half (55%) only had minor police contact and a further 13% in police cautions or charges for minor offences.
- The majority (over 95%) were living at home with family or friends. YSAS YSS workers were able to intervene early to address issues that could have led to family conflict and disconnection,

homelessness and housing instability.

- Substance use was impacting only 4% of clients and only 11% had connection with antisocial peers. These are known drivers of further involvement in criminal activity.
- 70% were still engaged in education or participating in employment. YSS workers were well positioned to address this criminogenic need by strengthening their participation in school and work and other prosocial activities.

YSS connects with culturally and linguistically diverse young people

Culturally and linguistically diverse young people constituted 38% of all YSAS crime prevention service users. Culturally and linguistically diverse young people were often between the ages of 16-17 years old and more likely to identify as young men.

YSS is a responsive service for young people with significant criminogenic needs

Findings from the 2025 YSAS Youth Census reveal that the YSAS YSS was able to engage and stay connected with young people to assist them with a range of challenges that if left unaddressed would put them at further risk of involvement in criminal activity and social drift:

- 14% reported experiencing a current conflict with family and 20.2% reported experiencing family violence during their lives (for young women it was 27.6%)¹⁰. Further, the use of adolescent violence in the home was reported for 11.3%
- Over a quarter (26.2%) had experiences of trauma, violence abuse and harm.
- One in ten had mental health concerns at referral - most commonly anxiety disorders, followed by depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- One in five lacked pro-social interests and engagement in recreational activities.
- One third were disengaged from employment, education and training.
- Almost one in five had attention deficit hyperactive disorder.

Young people who engage in YSAS YSS achieve their goals

Of the 735 episodes of care delivered during the reporting period, 96% were completed with goals

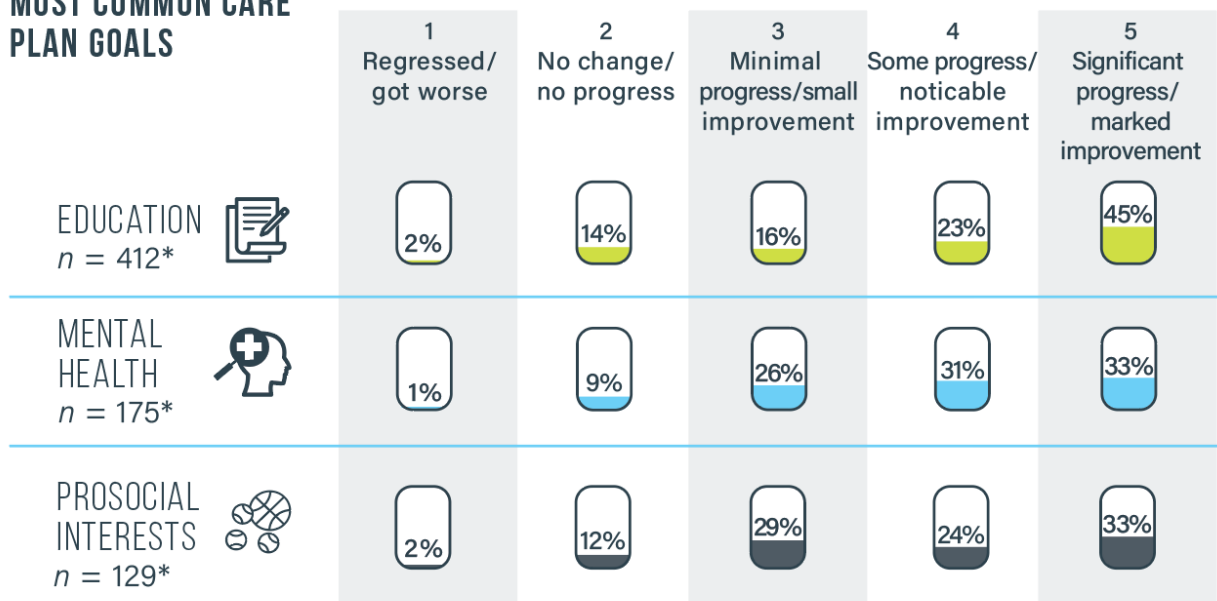
either fully or partially achieved. The most common reason for not completing episodes of care was that the young person moved out of the area.

YSS has a significant impact in promoting positive development and preventing crime

Participation in the YSAS YSS has a significant impact in the lives of young people and their families. Young people have demonstrated that they can meet criminogenic needs and address a range of challenges to achieve positive developmental outcomes and divert from a life course involving crime.

The diagram below presents a visual snapshot of final progress ratings for the three most common areas targeted as client goals in YSS care plans. For each of these three domains, final progress ratings indicated noticeable or significant improvement in more than 50% of cases.

SNAPSHOT OF FINAL PROGRESS RATINGS FOR THE THREE MOST COMMON CARE PLAN GOALS



*This count reflects the number of instances the domain of need was recorded within an episode of care during the reporting period. Note that multiple episodes of care for the same young person may each include one or more domains of need, which can be the same or different across episodes of care.

About the YSAS Youth Support Service

The Youth Support Service (YSS) is a Victorian community based early intervention program focused on diverting young people identified as being 'at risk' from becoming involved in the criminal justice system. The YSS was established in 2011 and is funded by the Victorian Government's Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS).

YSS is delivered by ten community service organisations in Metropolitan Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Shepparton, Mildura, and the Latrobe Valley. YSAS operates YSS across Metropolitan Melbourne and the Latrobe Valley.

YSS Objectives

The Youth Support Service is established to:

- Provide targeted, short-term intervention to address the needs of young people who are at risk of entering the youth justice system.
- Provide timely support for young people at early stages of involvement with the youth justice system, diverting these young people away from progressing into the system.
- Increase community safety by reducing young peoples' offending.

YSS Outcomes:

The outcomes sought for young people who engage with the YSS are:

- Stronger connection to family, community, and culture
- Improved attendance at school, work, or study
- Reduction in negative impacts of substance use, mental health and/or physical health issues
- Increased positive peer relationships
- Engagement in pro-social recreational activities
- Stabilisation of living circumstances and finances (where relevant)
- Reduction in contact with police and/or the justice system

Eligibility for YSS

Young people in the target group for YSS are aged 10 to 17 years (inclusive) and have had recent contact with Victoria Police. As the YSS is early intervention it is not designed for young people on a deferral of sentence, supervised bail or on a current or past Youth Justice Order¹¹.

11. This refers to post-sentence orders. Previous involvement with youth justice through pre-sentence supervision or intervention does not make a young person ineligible for the program.

The YSAS YSS Practice Approach

YSS practitioners focus first on engaging 'at risk' young people after they are referred by Victoria Police and other sources.

With the help of family, carers and other supporters, YSS practitioners then work toward enabling young people to create a stable foundation from which they can work toward positive developmental outcomes that divert them from unwanted involvement with the criminal justice system. A recent independent review of YSAS YSS¹² by the Swinburne University Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science, highlights the effectiveness of YSAS YSS in diverting young people away from the justice system.

YSS practitioners will first assess need and formulate a care plan with each young person and their family or carers. They'll then offer wrap around support and practical assistance that is inclusive and carefully tailored to meet their unique needs. This includes making warm referrals to other service providers and concurrently working with them according to the young person's preferences and goals. Each YSS within their local community has high levels of engagement with housing services, legal services, schools, vocational services, AOD services, health services and the mental health system.

The theoretical foundations of YSS

YSAS YSS recognises that all young people are unique and require tailored interventions that are responsive to their individual needs. To achieve impacts and outcomes in the delivery of crime

prevention and early intervention, YSAS YSS draws upon the organisation's Resilience Based Practice framework¹³ alongside a range of established, evidence-informed frameworks, models and approaches including:

Risk Needs Responsivity Models (RNR)

The Risk Needs Responsivity Framework is employed by practitioners to identify and address criminogenic needs (criminal history, antisocial behaviour, antisocial attitudes, antisocial peers, problems with school or work, substance misuse, leisure/recreation and family dynamics) and work to establish a positive developmental pathway featuring positive family connections, prosocial attitudes and peer relationships, reliable social support and a commitment to education and/or a vocation. Interventions are then tailored with responsivity to the identified criminogenic need¹⁴.

RNR models are increasingly used across Australia, and are the dominant framework used in Victoria^{15,16}.

Child First Offender Second Models (CFOS)

CFOS approaches are increasingly prominent internationally as a form of progressive and positive youth justice¹⁷ and an alternative to risk-based and punitive approaches¹⁸. CFOS models view diversion and early intervention as positive, inclusionary processes that centre upon children's rights frameworks. CFOS approaches seek to address complex welfare needs as a form of prevention¹⁹ while providing tailored approaches which focus on young people's strengths, aspirations and goals²⁰.

12. Ruffles, J., Fullam, R., Dent, H., Thomson, K., Richardson, K., & Daffern, M. (2024). Youth Support Service: Review and Advice. Prepared for Youth Support and Advocacy Service by the Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne Australia.

13. YSAS, 2024 YSAS-Resilience-based-Practice-Guide.pdf

14. Clancey et al., 2020, Barnes-Lee, 2020

15. Clancey, G., Wang, S., Lin, B., (2020) Youth Justice in Australia: Themes from recent inquiries Australian Institute of Criminology : Trends and Issues ISSN: 1836-2206

16. Barnes-Lee, A. R. (2020). Development of Protective Factors for Reducing Juvenile Reoffending: A Strengths-Based Approach to Risk Assessment. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 47(11), 1371–1389. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820949601>

17. Day, A.M., (2023) "It's a Hard Balance to Find": The Perspectives of Youth Justice Practitioners in England on the place of "Risk" in an Emerging "Child First" world *Youth Justice* 32(1) DOI: 10.1177/14732254221075205

18. Case & Haines, 2021

19. Case & Haines, 2021

20. Day, 2023

Desistance

Whereas recidivism (often meaning reoffending and reconviction) has been traditionally used as a key measure of a program's success and effectiveness²¹, desistance-based approaches²² focus on the how and why young people begin to cease²³, and eventually stop²⁴ offending²⁵. Desistance approaches see the change processes as a journey²⁶ that involves shifts in behaviour, cognitive processes and identity - where one no longer associates their identity with offending, ceases offending and sustains this cessation²⁷. Youth-focused desistance approaches using strength-based perspectives and strong transformative relationships between workers and youth offenders have been noted as achieving effective longitudinal outcomes with young people who had complex needs and offending histories and were involved in offences including knife crime, drug possession, violent offences and theft²⁸.

Developmental Ecological approaches

Ecological approaches to youth justice recognize that young people are in ongoing connected family, social, institutional and relational systems²⁹. Systems in the young person's life can be complex and may contribute to the presence of risk factors, harm and other forms of adverse experiences. However, these systems can also act as protective

factors, positive influences and supports³⁰ that contribute to instigating and maintaining desistance pathways³¹. Providing support and interventions to the systems in young people's lives, including enduring relationships such as families and caregivers, has been connected to a range of positive effects for both the young person and the family system³².

Youth-focused outreach approaches

YSAS YSS individual and family support involves the use of early intervention activities that incorporate both youth work approaches³³ and outreach services³⁴. Youth focused outreach approaches are known to increase the capacity for youth services to engage otherwise 'hard to reach' youth in sustained interventions that can also incorporate their families, communities and systems³⁵. Youth-focused outreach approaches are also recognised as effective in supporting young people who experience a wide range of complex needs³⁶ and barriers to engagement such as marginalisation, disadvantages, stigma and/or limited access to the resources necessary to attend legal or justice commitments, site-based programs or other services³⁷. These approaches have been demonstrated as having great value in promoting accessibility, sustained service engagement, reducing dropout and service underutilisation³⁸.

21. Goldson, B., & Cunneen, C. (2020). Youth justice and penalty in comparative context (1st.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351242134>

22. Hampson, K., (2018) Desistance Approaches in Youth Justice – The Next Passing Fad or a Sea-Change for the Positive? Youth Justice 18(1)<https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225417741224> . p.18

23. Weaver B., & McNeill, F., (2010) Travelling hopefully: desistance theory and probation practice in Bradford, J., Cowe, F., Deering, J., (2010) What else works? Creative work with offenders. Willan <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781843927686>

24. McMahon G., & Jump, D., (2018) Starting to Stop: Young Offenders Desistance from Crime Youth Justice 18(1) [s://doi.org/10.1177/1473225417741223](https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225417741223)

25. Best, D., Hamilton, S., Hall, L., Bartels, L., (2021) Justice Capital: A model for reconciling structural and agentic determinants of desistance Probation Journal 68(2) 206-223 s DOI: 10.1177/02645505211005018. The authors discuss how this process is loosely similar to addiction recovery models.

26. Hamby, S., Taylor, E., Jones, L., Mitchell, K. J., Turner, H. A., & Newlin, C. (2018). From Poly-Victimization to Poly-Strengths: Understanding the Web of Violence Can Transform Research on Youth Violence and Illuminate the Path to Prevention and Resilience. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 33(5), 719–739. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260517744847>

27. Summarized from the following sources: Boxall, 2023, Weaver & McNeill, 2010, McMahon & Jump, 2018, Hampson, 2018, Best, Hamilton, Hall & Bartels, 2021

28. Nugent, B., (2014) Reaching the 'Hardest to Reach' Youth Justice 15(3) 271-285 v DOI: 10.1177/1473225414560276

29. Datchi CC (2022) Best clinical practices for treating families in juvenile and criminal justice systems, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC.

30. Datchi, 2022

31. Barry, M., (2010) Youth transitions: from offending to desistance Journal of Youth Studies 13:1 121-136 DOI: 10.1080/13676260903233721

32. Granski, M., Javdani, S., Anderson, V., Caires, R., (2020) A Meta-Analysis of Program Characteristics for Youth with Disruptive Behaviour Problems: The Moderating Role of Program Format and Youth Gender American Journal of Community Psychology 65:201-222 DOI: 10.1002/ajcp.12377

33. Nugent, 2014

34. Berezin MN, Rose RE and Javdani S (2024) 'Evidence-Based Criminal Justice Practices: Current Status and Strategies for Successful Youth Outreach and Enrichment Programming', in Routledge Handbook of Evidence-Based Criminal Justice Practices, Routledge, doi:10.4324/9781003219286-12.

35. Nugent, 2014

36. Nugent, 2014

37. Berezin, Rose & Javdani, 2024

38. Berezin, Rose & Javdani, 2024

The Needs and Characteristics of young people accessing the YSAS YSS

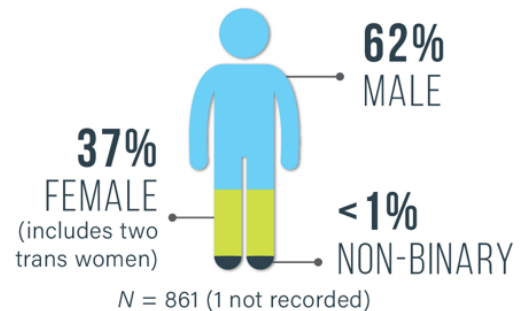
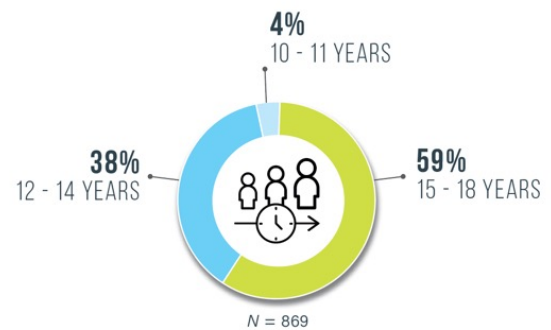
The needs and characteristics of young people accessing YSAS YSS services are broadly reflective of justice system involved young people in Victoria³⁹.

Demographics

The Swinburne University review of YSAS YSS client data revealed that 861 young people accessed the YSAS YSS from December 2023 to May 2025.

Almost two-thirds of these clients were male (62%) and the majority were aged 15 to 18 years (59%). Of the 41% of clients aged between 10 to 14 years, 32 (almost 4%) were aged 10 or 11 years of age.

Age & Gender



39. In Victoria, justice involved young people are identified as holding a range of needs and vulnerabilities. Examples of such needs and vulnerabilities include mental health concerns, cognitive/neuro-disabilities, prior experiences of trauma, socio-economic disadvantage, child protection involvement, substance use issues and family violence experiences

Summarized through sources including:

Baidawi, S., (2020) Crossover Children: Examining Initial Criminal Justice system contact among child-protection youth. Australian Social Work 73:3 280-295 DOI: 10.1080/0312407X.2019.1686765

Armytage, P., & Ogloff, J., (2017) Youth Justice Review and Strategy, Meeting Needs and reducing offending Department of Justice and Community Safety Youth Justice Review and Strategy meeting needs and reducing offending | Department of Justice and Community Safety Victoria

Department of Justice and Community Safety (2022) Review of the Children and Justice Legislation Amendment (Youth Justice Reform) Act 2017 Review of the Children and Justice Legislation Amendment (Youth Justice Reform) Act 2017 | Department of Justice and Community Safety Victoria

Yoorrook Justice Commission, Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems (2023) Yoorrook-for-justice-report.pdf (yoorrookforjustice.org.au)

First Nations Young People

Young people of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds constituted 7% (n = 57) of YSAS YSS clients (for 15% of YSS clients, First Nations status was recorded as unknown).

**7% ABORIGINAL AND/OR
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER**



N = 861 (15% not yet known)

Young People from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds

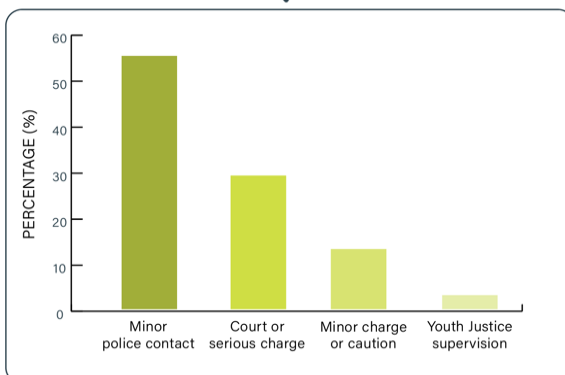
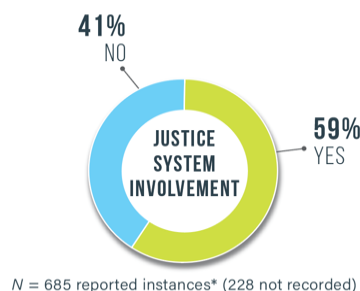
The Swinburne University review of YSAS YSS client data indicates that in relation to country of birth, 86% of YSAS YSS clients were born in Australia, and almost all were English speakers (99%). The 2025 YSAS Youth Census data provides more detail identifying that 38% of YSAS crime prevention service users were culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD). Of these young people:

- 57.8% were aged between 16-17yo
- 31.3% were under 15yo
- 10.9% were 18 and over
- 73.4% were young men

Justice system involvement

Given that the YSS has a crime prevention focus, it is unsurprising that on being referred to the YSAS YSS, almost three in five (59%) of clients had some form of contact with police or Youth Justice. Of those instances where some form of

justice-involvement was recorded, just over half (55%) involved minor police contact, with a further 13% involving police cautions or charges for minor offences. Just under one in three justice-related contacts involved charges for a serious offence or court attendance, and less than 5% involved YSS clients subject to a Youth Justice order.



*Note that some YSS clients may have had multiple contacts with police or youth justice during the reporting period.

"The severity of crimes can be up to some quite serious stuff, so home invasions and armed robberies, lots of possession of knives and that sort of thing. So things that sort of young people might see as a bit of a thrill or a thing of belonging, which it is, to things that can have some real, you know, life changing consequences for these young people who can't quite grasp that concept of what's going to happen in the future."

Senior Practitioner, YSAS YSS

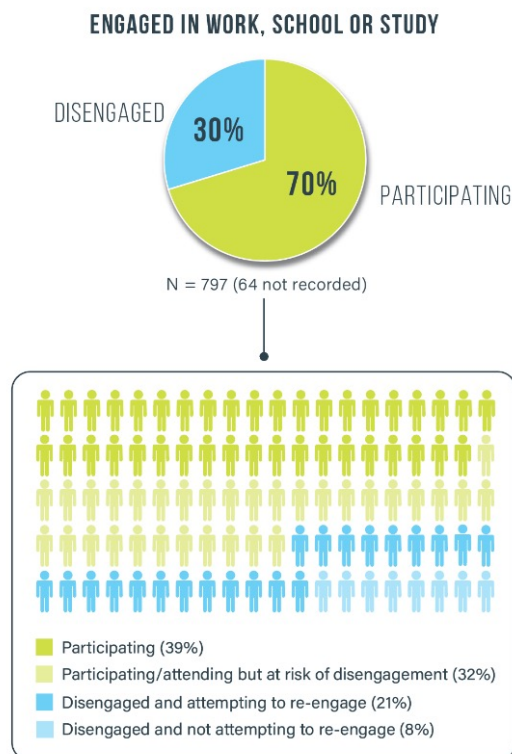
The 2025 YSAS Youth Census provided further insight. Of the 168 young people reported on, 50.6% (n=85) young people were reported as being involved with criminal activity on service entry and 41.1% (n=69) were reported as having no involvement.

Of the 50.6% of young people who were identified as being involved in criminal activity at service

commencement:

- It was most common for 16-17 year olds (54.1% n=46) followed by those aged under 15 years old (32.9% n=28) and a small proportion aged 18 years old or over (12.9% n=11).
- Most were young men, who constituted 76.5% (n=65) compared to young women at 23.5% (n=20).

Disengagement from school, educational institutions and employment



Across the 18-month period under examination the most identified criminogenic need that required addressing related to education, employment, or training. Just over 70% of YSS clients were engaged in work, school or study but almost half of this group were at risk of disengagement. Almost 30% of YSS clients had disengaged from work, school or study and approximately 70% of these young people were attempting to re-engage.

Overall, around three in five YSS clients (61%) were disengaged or at risk of becoming disengaged from work, school or study.

"Like honestly, the service has completely turned my life around. I hadn't been to school in, I would say two to three years, like properly been to school in two to three years. Working with [YSAS YSS Worker] made me completely change. I wanted to go to school, I wanted to go to meetings to enrol, I wanted to learn new things."

Hecate, 17yo young woman.

On May 5th, 2025, the YSAS Youth Census identified that for all 168 young people reported on, 63.7% (n=107) were identified as having education related issues on entry to the service.

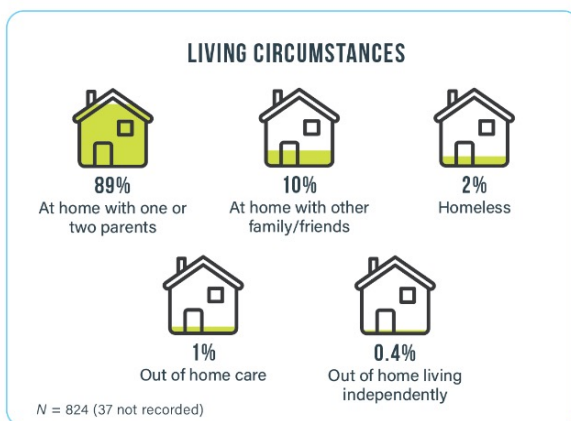
The 2025 YSAS Youth Census identified the types of educational issues experienced by all young people (n=168) as:

- Disruptive behaviour (n=41) 24.4%

- Learning difficulties (n=37) 22%
- School suspension (n=33) 19.6%
- Expelled from school (n=20) 11.9%
- Attention deficit hyperactive disorder (n=32) 19%
- Autism spectrum diagnosis (n=23) 13.7%
- Other mental health challenges (n=10) 6%

Family and living circumstances

The vast majority (over 95%) of YSAS YSS clients were living at home with family or friends at the time of their engagement with the YSS program, with 87% living with a parent. Eighteen clients (2%) were homeless and nine (1%) were in out-of-home residential care.



Family relationship issues were a need identified in 14% (n=1340) of intake assessments across all episodes of care in the YSAS YSS reporting period. The 2025 Youth Census provides deeper insight with 41.1% (n=69) of all young people reported as experiencing conflict with their family on entry to the service. This was most common for young people aged 16-17 years old (n=34) and those under the age of 15 years old (n=30) followed by those aged 18 years old or over (n=5).

"I just never really trusted people on like that kind of line of work... I really trusted [Worker] because she assured me that I could talk to her and whenever she like, if she did have to tell anyone, she would make sure we did it together and like, She just made me, she helped me talk to my mum about stuff that I was too scared to actually talk to my mum about."

Aurora Rose (13yo)

Prosocial interests and leisure activities

A lack of pro-social interests and leisure activities was also a common reason for referral to YSAS YSS and identified in 20% of completed assessments.

Mental health and self-harm

A review of YSAS YSS assessments completed during the 18-month period of investigation indicated that one in 10 referrals to the YSAS YSS related to mental health issues. The 2025 YSAS Youth Census provides further context with YSAS crime prevention workers being asked to report on whether the young person in their care had a known mental health diagnosis. Young people with known mental health diagnosis constituted 19% (n=32) of crime prevention clients. Of the diagnosed mental health issues experienced by young people accessing crime prevention services, anxiety disorders were most common followed by depression and post traumatic stress disorder. Other common diagnoses included borderline

personality disorder, autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactive disorder.

The 2025 YSAS Youth Census also provides some indication to the prevalence of self-harm amongst young people accessing YSAS's Crime Prevention programs. Young people who were reported as self-harming constituted 16.7% (n=28) of all young people accessing crime prevention programs. 7.1% (n=12) of young people had disclosed attempting suicide, out of which half had required medical attention (n=6).



Substance use

Substance use was the least commonly identified criminogenic need of young people referred to YSAS YSS and was marked as present in less than 10% of completed assessments during the study period. The low rates of substance use amongst this cohort were also reflected in the 2025 YSAS Youth Census, which identified that of the 168 young people accessing YSAS's Crime Prevention programs, 62.5% (n=105) of young people were

identified as not using substances. Of the 63 young people whose substance use was reported, most often it was rated at a low severity (15.5% n=26) followed by moderate severity (13.7% n=23), high severity (7.1% n=12) and only a small proportion of young people used substances had severe substance use (1.2% n=2). The most common drug of concern was cannabis (67.6% n=25) followed by alcohol (13.5% n=5), methamphetamines (8.1% n=3) and other stimulants such as ecstasy/MDMA (5.4% n=2).

Abuse, trauma, harm and family violence

The 2025 YSAS Youth Census provides an indication of the prevalence of trauma, abuse, violence and harm exposure. Amongst the 168 young people reported accessing YSAS's Crime Prevention programs:

- Over one in four young people 26.2% (n=44) had experienced emotional abuse
- 17.7% (n=28) were reported as having experienced physical abuse
- 13.7% (n=23) were reported as experiencing neglect
- Just under 1 in 10 (9.5%, n=16) were reported as being victim/survivors of accidental capitalisation abuse

- 13.7% (n=23) reported as being victim/survivors of violent crime

The 2025 YSAS Youth Census identified that experiencing family violence was also common for young people accessing YSAS's Crime Prevention programs, with 20.2% (n=34), or roughly 1 in 5 young people who accessed crime prevention programs being victim/survivors of family violence.

Of the total young men reported on in the YSAS 2025 Youth Census, 15.9% had experienced family violence. The percentage of young women reported to be victim/survivors of family violence was much higher at 27.6%. The 2025 YSAS Youth Census also reported on young people's use of violence in the home (AVITH), finding that 11.3% (n=19) or roughly one in ten young people reported on in the census were known to have used AVITH.

Child Protection involvement

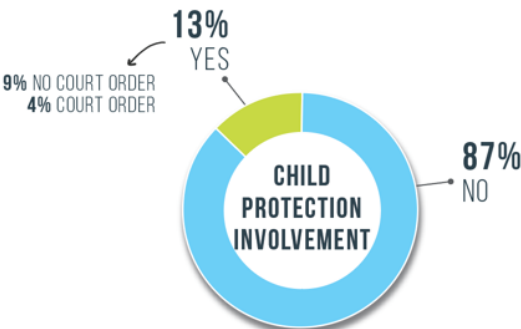
87% of YSS clients were not involved with Child Protection services during the course of their

engagement with the YSAS YSS program. Of those instances where Child Protection involvement was recorded, 4% concerned a YSS client being subject to a Child Protection Order, with a further 9% having some form of involvement but no court order.







Strengths

Early intervention involves working with young people and families to identify and build on strengths that might otherwise be diminished through further involvement in criminal activity and other antisocial influences.

Swinburne University also examined young people’s criminogenic needs from a strengths perspective. While concerns associated with education, employment, or training were the most identified criminogenic need, it was also the most identified criminogenic strength area. Involvement in prosocial and leisure activities, and positive family and relationships were the next most common criminogenic strength areas. Limited involvement with substance use and antisocial peers is also a strength as both can be drivers of further involvement in criminal activity.



N = 885 recorded instances (28 not recorded)
*Note that some YSS clients may have had multiple contacts with Child Protection services during the reporting period.

	CRIMINOGENIC NEEDS IDENTIFIED <i>N</i> = 1340*	STRENGTHS IDENTIFIED - CRIMINOGENIC <i>N</i> = 1133*
 Education / employment / training	33%	34%
 Pro-social interests / leisure / recreational activities	20%	20%
 Family / relationships	14%	21%
 Thinking that supports offending	13%	11%
 Negative or antisocial peers	12%	10%
 Substance use	8%	4%

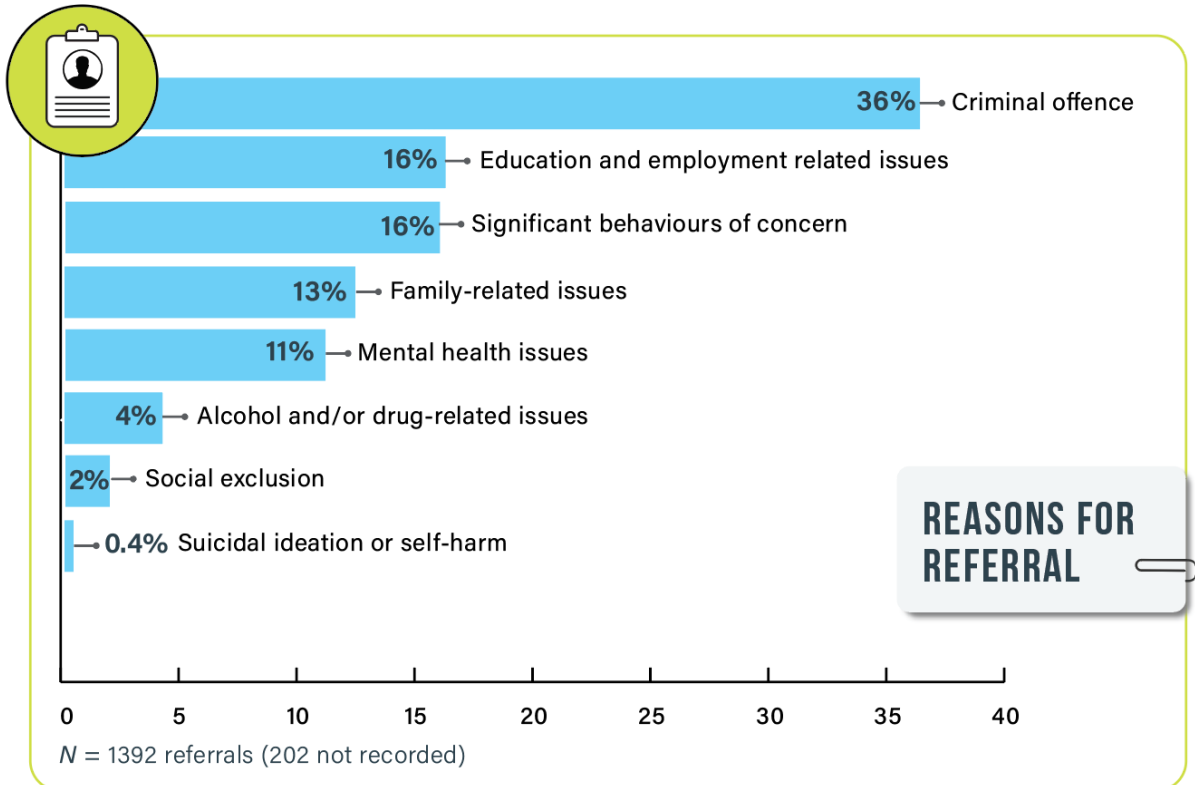
*These counts reflect the total number of criminogenic needs/strengths identified during intake assessment across all episodes of care during the reporting period. Note that the same client may be represented more than once if the criminogenic need was identified in different domains or at different times.

Early identification and proactive intake

Although there are many reasons for referral to YSAS YSS, the program's objectives as an early intervention, diversionary and crime prevention program are strongly reflected in reasons for referral during the reporting period. In summary:

- More than one in three referrals to the program concerned an alleged or proven criminal offence.

- Approximately one in six referrals, related to education and employment-related issues, and 'significant behaviours of concern'.
- Family-related issues (including 2.4% involving family violence used by the young person) accounted for 13% of referrals.
- Around one in ten referrals related to young people requiring support with mental health issues.

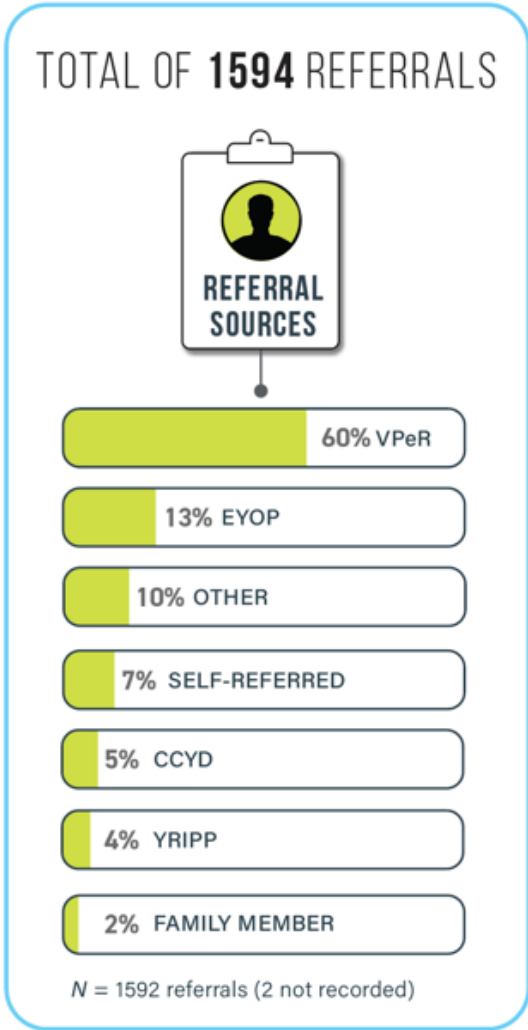


Referral

During the 18-month reporting period, between of December 2023 to May 2025, YSAS YSS received 1594 referrals from a wide range of sources that align with the objectives of the program.

Victoria Police programs constitute the largest referral source, accounting for almost three-quarters of referrals; three in every five referrals are received from the Victoria Police e-Referral program (VPeR), with a further 13% of referrals received from the Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP)⁴⁰. Other primary referral sources include the Children’s Court Youth Diversion Service (CCYD) Service and the Youth Referral and Independent Persons’ Program (YRIPP). Almost 10% of referrals were self-referrals or referrals by family members. Other referral sources were from a wide range of service providers across the sector, including Anglicare, Child Protection, The Orange Door, NDIS, Berry Street, Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, and internal YSAS provider programs. Less than 5% of referrals were for existing or past clients being referred for a further episode of care.

The most effective referrals from other services with the highest likelihood of being converted into episodes of care came from warm referrals made by EYOP youth workers directly after a young person or their family had been in contact with the police. The warm referral maximises the possibility of meaningful engagement. These and the referrals coming from the Children’s Court Youth Diversion Service (CCYD) were also the best targeted, identifying young people most in need and likely to benefit from early intervention.



40. For recent review of EYOP, please see Luebbbers, S., Pichler, A.S., Fullam, R., Ogloff, J.R.P., (2019) Embedded Youth Outreach Program Evaluation, Final Report. Swinburne University of Technology Prepared for Victoria Police. Embedded Youth Outreach Program (police.vic.gov.au)

About the Embedded Youth Outreach Program

The Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP) provides a youth outreach service as part of a police response to young people at high risk of antisocial or criminal behaviour and/or victimisation.

This approach allows for targeted and supported pathways for young people – from police contact to engagement with service providers who can address the underlying criminogenic factors that drive contact with police.

EYOP engages with young people who are:

- in custody or have a history of offending
- disengaged from school, peers and family
- involved in high-risk behaviours
- victims of crime

Engagement with the EYOP unit starts at first police contact with an at-risk young person. The EYOP aims to engage with these at-risk young people and their families to assess their needs, before further offences or serious crimes take place.

The program provides young people with support and referrals to services like YSS that are tailored to their individual needs.

Proactive engagement with young people at risk

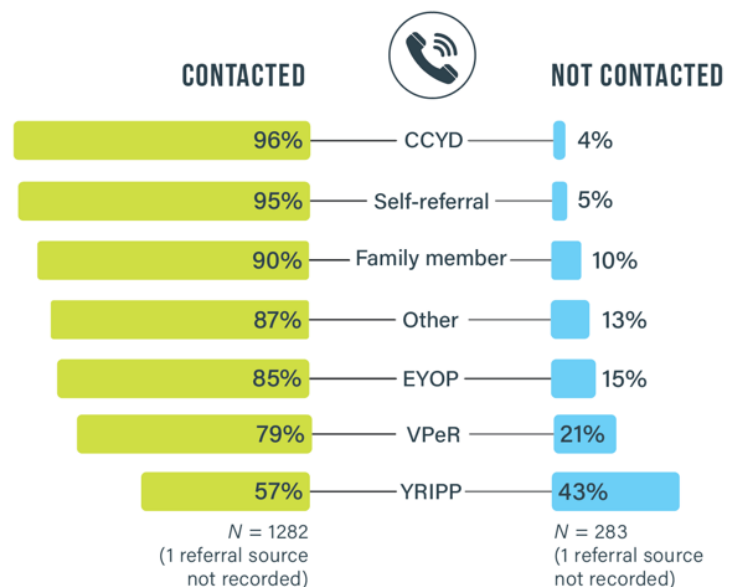
When referrals are received, YSAS YSS workers contact the referral source to confirm receipt of referral, assess the referral for eligibility and seek further relevant information if needed.

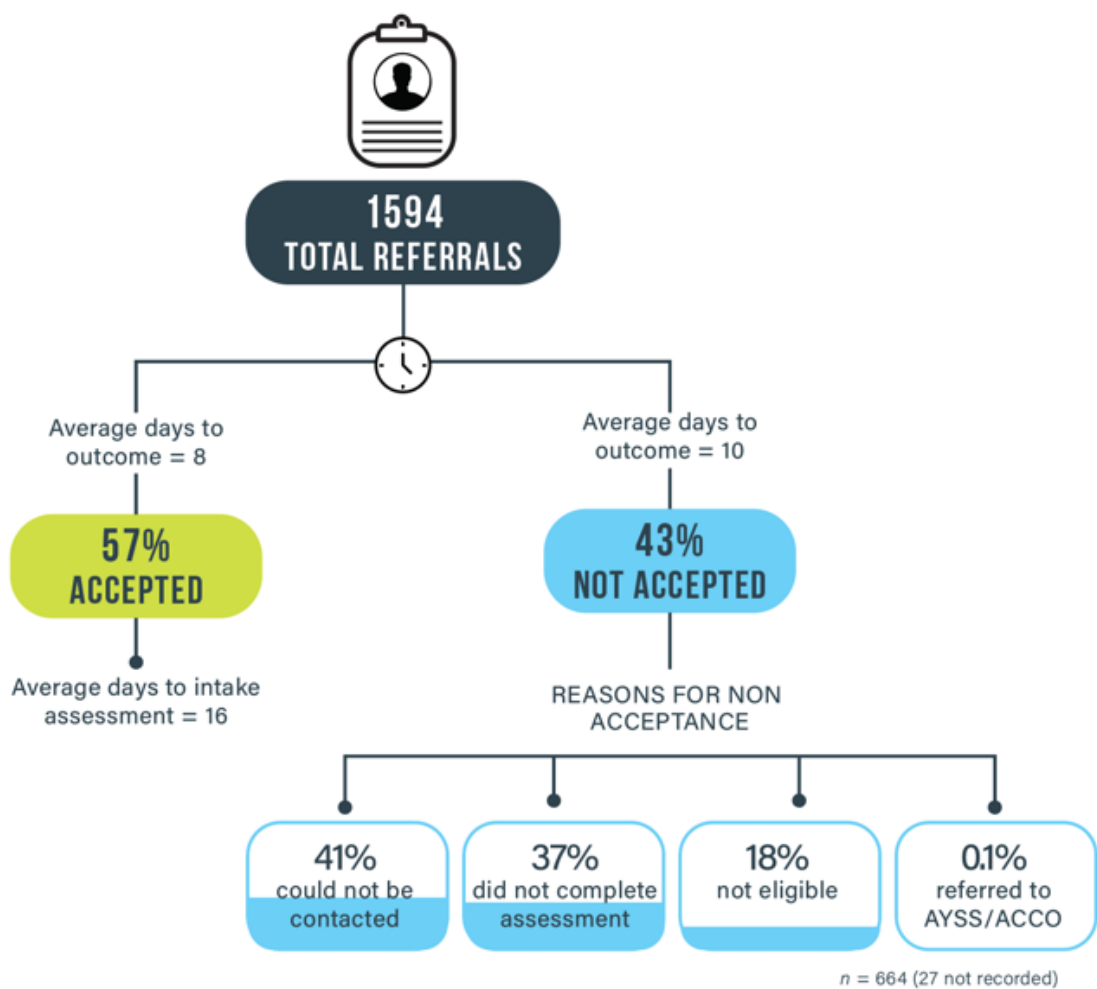
After service eligibility is confirmed, YSAS YSS workers are proactive in contacting the young person and their family, explaining the support provided by YSAS YSS, and explaining that consent for participation is voluntary. YSAS YSS workers are

experts at engaging with young people and building motivation for participation.

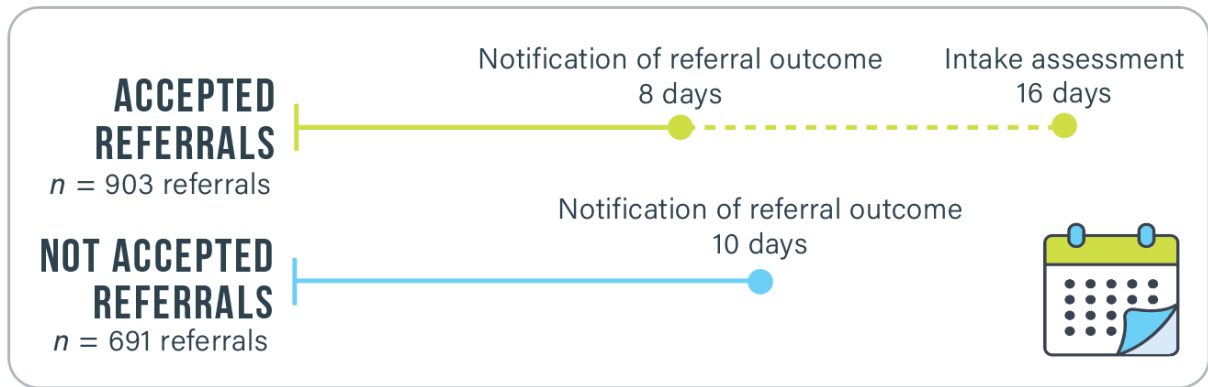
Overall, YSAS YSS workers were successful in converting 57% of all referrals into YSS episodes of care. The reasons that YSAS YSS Services were declined included:

- The inability to contact the young person to establish eligibility for the program (43%)
- The young person not completing the intake assessment (38%)
- Ineligibility for the program occurred for only one in five referrals





The average time between YSAS YSS receiving the referral and notifying the referrer of the outcome was eight days for young people deemed eligible for YSAS YSS and 10 days for young people not accepted for the program. Of referrals that were accepted, the average time from receipt of the referral to the intake assessment was 16 days.



"I think the first thing that comes to mind is the focus on early intervention. Like, we're working at a quite pivotal time in young people's lives where we can assist them with changing behaviours before they become a bit more entrenched. And I think that's quite important with the age range that we work in like 10 to 17. So in the last few years, we've found in the program that we're getting those really younger, young people, 10, 11, 12, come through the program who have started offending. And I think that's quite an important time in their life for us to come in and help out and support with anything.

And the second thing that comes to mind is the sort of relationship-based practice that we do. So, a lot of it is building rapport with the young person, and that's what I sort of focus on at the start of engagement. Trying not to go too deep into what's been going on in terms of offending and stuff but trying to get to know the young person and make sure that they feel comfortable with me and they know a little bit about me as well, and that always helps.

And then the next sort of point, I think, is not just addressing the offending behaviour, but there's always stuff that's sort of in the background that's contributing to it, whether that be stuff going on at school, or stuff going on with the family, that can lead the young person into offending. And why is this we get the opportunity to work on those other issues behind the offending as well. That can always positively impact

the sort of reduction in offending of those criminogenic needs.

Oh, and another good thing about our, or special thing about our program, is that we're often like the connectors between different programs. Yeah, so depending on the young person, like if a young person has been through the system before they're quite savvy and they know about different programs. But sometimes when we engage with those particularly younger young people, themselves and their families don't really know what services are out there and part of our role in YSS is to be that sort of connector or bridging service for them. And that can also help sort of reduce the barriers for young people in navigating the system."

YSAS YSS Worker

YSAS YSS assessment and care planning

YSAS YSS uses the term “episode of care” to indicate a period of involvement with the service. At the beginning of an episode of care, YSAS YSS workers and young people develop a care plan together that incorporates their goals and describes the nature of their engagement with the YSAS YSS.

YSAS YSS care plans cover the following domains including:

- Housing and finances
- Justice and court
- Education and employment
- Prosocial interests and activities
- Cultural connections and needs
- Independent living skills
- Wellbeing – substance use, physical and mental health
- Family and peer relationships

The care plan is based on a comprehensive assessment that determines:

- The young person’s preferences for support
- The young person’s goals
- Unmet needs and how they are connected to the presenting problem
- Resources currently available and resource needs
- Barriers to resource access / meeting goals
- Actions that need to be taken

The assessment enables YSAS YSS workers to arrive at a solid understanding of why the young person in their care is engaging, or at risk of engaging, in offending or risky behaviours. Workers also identify the reasons young people might continue to be at risk and what it might take for them to be at risk no longer. This includes being fully aware of each young person’s strengths and the protective and prosocial influences in their life that they can build on.

The young person and where involved, their family, constantly review and recalibrate their care plan as they develop or are met with new challenges.



Key Practices

Using flexible, person-centred, responsive and integrated approaches, YSAS YSS delivers services that enable young people, and their families/ caregivers to stabilise and implement positive changes in their lives that are sustainable. The key characteristics of the YSAS YSS approach to early intervention, diversion and crime prevention include the use of:

1. Wrap around support for young people and families/caregivers
2. Addressing needs and promoting desistance
3. Linking and integrating other supports in young people's lives

Wrap around support for young people and families/caregivers

Outreach is the vehicle for providing young people and their family/caregivers with support in a way that is flexible and responsive to their needs. YSAS YSS practitioners are proactive in engaging and maintaining meaningful connections with young people and their family/caregivers. This can occur individually with young people as well as in joint sessions with their family/caregivers and at times with only their family/caregivers.

Individual and family/caregiver support also involves therapeutic support and practical assistance in completing tasks directly associated with the young person's goals, such as supporting young people's completion of court-directed diversion tasks, advocacy, referral and communication with other services.

"Well, for starters, he was really great support for [my son] to begin with, just offering him that friendly, non-judgmental support that he was really needing at that time, which he couldn't get from his parents. And then [the YSAS YSS worker] just become almost like a support for myself, [my son's] dad and stepdad as well. So it was sort of, he was pretty much there for all of us and, you know, not just helping [my son] with what he was going through, but yeah, was helping all of us with navigating our way through this, you know, challenging time for us as parents."

Jess (parent)

"And then so after school, when he picks me up, he's like, any problems I have, like, I have issues getting my tax file number, like he'll come help me to the post office and try to sort that out. And if I have issues with my Centrelink, he'll come help me sort that out."

Abdul - 16yo young man

Addressing needs and promoting desistance

In the context of providing young people with practical support, YSAS YSS practitioners have

many opportunities to have discussions with young people that can shape their attitudes, motivations and identity. The themes covered in these discussions include:

Indicator	Description
Goals, strengths and motivation	Explores young people's personal interests, identities, trajectories, hopes, choices and values. Workers use prosocial goals as a form of motivation and offer tangible strategies and offer legal and pro-social alternatives. Workers use collaborative, mutual and responsive communication to facilitate these discussions and activities in ways that do not push or coerce and provide encouragement and motivation to try new or alternative approaches.
Psychoeducation and needs-responsive approaches	Draw on the evidence-based resources available for specific issues. The range of themes in these discussions can be diverse and include communication styles, managing relationships, mental health support, harm reduction, psychological and physical wellbeing, sexual health, sexuality, parenting dynamics, peer dynamics, sleep and somatic issues, self-care and reducing externalising behaviour.
Planning, trialing, implementing and reviewing changes	Centres around planning for and enacting changes and involves practical skill building. Workers offer support in developing, enacting, trialing and reviewing changes and strategies in a range of areas providing positive reinforcement and support when trying new things and offered assistance and alternatives.
Direct conversations regarding offending issues and desistance	Conversations directly associated with criminogenic issues and/or victimisation experiences. Undertaken with sensitivity, these approaches involve young people's histories of harm, trauma and/or offending. These conversations can explore a range of themes such as accountability and responsibility, values, trajectories, issues such as mental health, anti-social behaviour, justice system contact, bullying, grief, peer influences, emotional regulation and impulsivity, boredom, subcultural influences, drug and alcohol use, conflict in family and social dynamics and school disengagement.

Linking and integrating other supports in young people's lives

YSAS YSS are embedded within communities and cultivate relationships with local service providers that can assist young people to stabilise and achieve developmental goals.

YSAS YSS practitioners map strengths, needs, systems and networks in young people's lives during the initial assessment period and again throughout the episode of care. YSAS YSS practitioners facilitate service introductions, referrals and advocacy to ensure young people and their families are connected in a meaningful way with the ongoing supports that they need. The practical assistance provided includes:

- Introducing young people and/or their families to relevant support services and treatment providers that can help them achieve their goals
- Making warm referrals to services young people and/or their families
- Transporting young people and/or their families to appointments, service introductions, meetings, commitments and service locations
- Supporting young people and/or their families to make the most of what other services and supports offer
- Advocating for young people's access to other services and resources that are important for their wellbeing needs and care plans
- Maintaining regular contact with other service providers and institutions regarding young people's needs and progress
- Facilitating and coordinating meetings and developing care plans, as well as service specific plans (such as school plans etc.)
- Assisting young people in obtaining relevant documentation (such as identification documents) needed for engagement with other services
- Assistance in completing program entry forms and enrolment forms
- Supporting young people in completing tasks and activities that are relevant to their needs at other services (for example, completing Children's Court Youth Diversion Plans, transportation to Police Ropes courses)



"Yeah, 100% she [YSAS YSS Worker] fully helps me. Everything with linking me in with school was all her. She took me to my old school to get me signed out. She took me to TAFE to see what they could do for me. And then she's the person who signed me up and got me enrolled into the school I'm currently at. And with Orange Door and like CASAs [Centre against Sexual Assault]. Yeah, she's been on top of all of that for me."

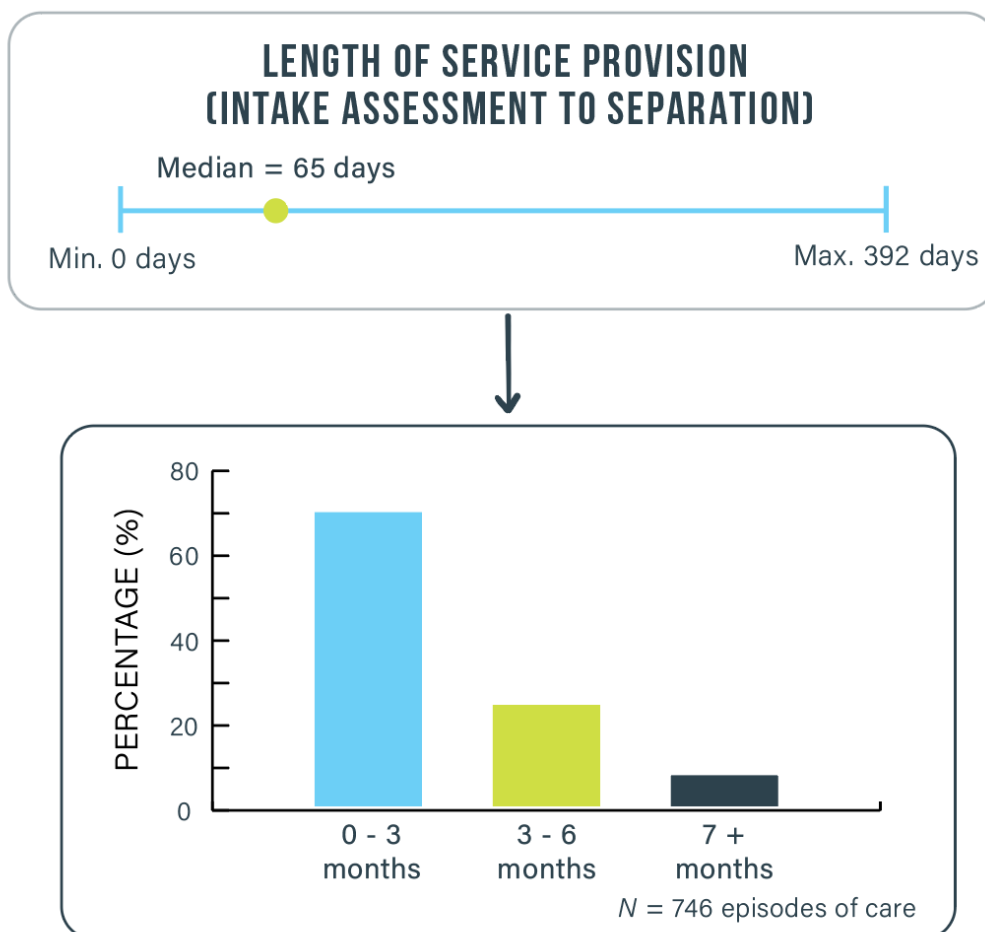
Hecate - 17yo young woman

Service performance and outcomes

Utilisation

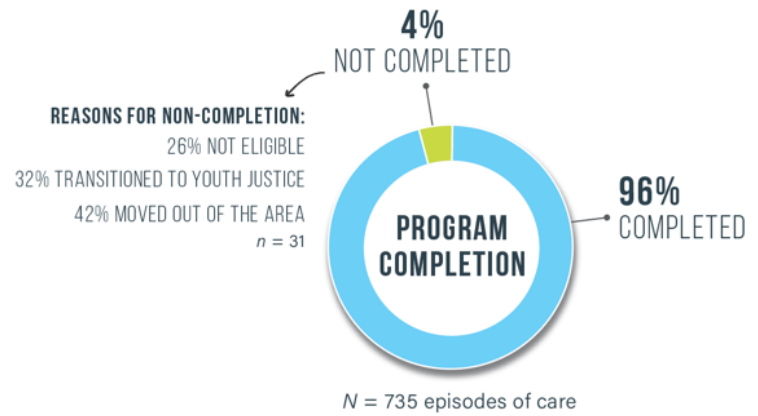
Across the 18-month period from December 2023 to May 2025, 735 episodes of care were closed by YSAS YSS. The median length of service provision (from intake assessment to separation from the

YSAS YSS program) was 65 days. More than two-thirds of the 735 episodes of care were closed within three months, with almost 25% closed within six months. Less than 10% of service episodes extended beyond seven months.



Number of episodes of care completed

Of the 735 closed episodes of care more than 96% were categorised as 'Completed' meaning that client goals were either partially or fully achieved. Regarding the small number of episodes of care that were 'not completed', the most common reason for non-completion was the young person moving out of area, with some others transitioning to Youth Justice supervision or being found to be ineligible for the YSAS YSS program.



Outcomes for young people

A large proportion of young people made strong gains by the end of their episode of care with YSS⁴¹.

Final Progress Rating					
	1	2	3	4	5
	Regressed/ got worse	No change/ no progress	Minimal progress/ small improvement	Some progress / noticeable improvement	Significant progress/ marked improvement
CRIMINOGENIC NEEDS					
Education	2%	14%	16%	23%	45%
Prosocial Interests	2%	12%	29%	24%	33%
Family	2%	12%	28%	33%	26%
Thinking & Attitude	3%	5%	11%	30%	51%
Peers	4%	4%	11%	41%	41%
Substance Use	0%	8%	28%	28%	36%
RESPONSIVITY NEEDS					
Mental Health	1%	9%	26%	31%	33%
Legal Issues	7%	10%	13%	18%	53%
Support Networks	2%	5%	30%	22%	42%
Finances	4%	21%	17%	8%	50%
Housing	7%	11%	11%	36%	36%
Physical Health	0%	14%	43%	14%	29%
Cultural Connection	0%	14%	29%	7%	50%
Other	0%	0%	39%	9%	52%
TOTAL	2%	11%	21%	25%	41%

"She's [YSAS YSS worker] loving, she's kind. She was able to get on [my son's] level and he felt safe. And for a child that doesn't leave the house, doesn't approach authority figures very well, such as the examples I've given you. It speaks volumes."

Rita (parent)

"If I was doing this by myself, it's taken me years to do it by myself, and [YSAS YSS worker] was able to come in and help me in six months."

Hecate, 17yo young woman.

41. Some of these results head up to 101% due to percentages being rounded up. These results should be interpreted with some caution as they reflect outcomes on completion of an episode of care rather than progress over time; initial progress ratings are recorded but were not accessible for reporting.

Case studies

Tanisha, 15, Glenroy

Tanisha's mum captured her family's situation best when she said, "Back then we had hit rock bottom. But there was rock bottom, and then there was the basement of rock bottom. And that felt like where we were at".

Tanisha is 15 years and 9 months old, almost exactly to the day. She has modest plans for her 16th birthday party, including a little gettogether with her friends. But there is extra cause for celebration this year, as Tanisha has reached another significant milestone: an entire year clean from smoking marijuana.

It's been a long journey. Things weren't great when Tanisha first met Don Concha, her YSAS Youth Support Service at age 13. As Tanisha puts it herself, she was "really running amok".

"I was really careless. And I was just doing all the wrong things and hanging around with all the wrong people and putting myself in situations that could put me in an even worse place," Tanisha says. "I was also smoking a lot of marijuana, which was pretty much my entire life at the time."

All those "wrong things" eventually brought Tanisha into contact with the police. The interactions were minimal at first, but the intensity increased – Tanisha's mum can produce a shopping list of assault charges and offences that Tanisha was "racking up" at the time. After a violent incident at her high school, Tanisha was placed on a good behaviour bond. It will expire on her 20th birthday.

That schoolyard incident was what connected Tanisha with Don, an early intervention specialist based at YSAS Sunshine within the Youth Support Service. Tanisha says she "felt really comfortable with Don" almost right away.

"I could tell him about anything," she remembers, noting how he would calmly navigate situations that other counsellors would usually make "a big deal out of".

"He actually listened and understood me," she says. "And that's kind of what made me more open to talking to him about things. He helped me [to change] a lot."

The Youth Support Service establishes connections with young people at the early stages of their involvement with the police.

The goal is to intervene early enough to deter further criminal activity. For Tanisha, these interventions came in the form of guidance and practical assistance; YSS linked her with vital services and community supports that helped her chart a new, more positive pathway for her future.

But Don didn't just help Tanisha; he also supported her mum and little sister. Back when Tanisha was "going through what she was going through," Tanisha's mum was battling her own demons. "And Don was there for me, too."

He didn't have to be there for me. But he linked in with all my services and pretty much got the ball rolling with my whole care team."

"He liaised with my AOD workers, Tanisha's counsellors, housing support, school for the kids – everything. He did he didn't have to, but he did." Tanisha's mum has been clean now for three years, and has started working in community services, providing help to those struggling in similar circumstances.

It's clear that Tanisha, her mother and her sister are a resilient family. They have much to be proud of. But it's when Tanisha looks ahead to the future that she really perks up. "It's going to be all about my career," she says when asked to imagine life at 20, when her good behaviour bond winds up.

"I'm going to be on top of my job and doing youth work," she says. "Like Don, working with young kids. Because I can't really see any kid the way I was getting by without a youth worker. It's not as easy to do by themselves. It's better to have someone there. I want to be that person that Don was for me."

Michael, 19, Richmond

Michael never liked asking for help. But at 16, he realised he had no choice. After being arrested and charged with robbery and assault, Michael was scheduled to appear before the Children's Court. But his deep sense of shame prevented him from showing up.

"In the back of my head I thought, Well what if the judges don't like me? Don't like my story?" Michael remembers thinking. "But Jordie broke the barrier".

A young man of South Sudanese descent with a background as a refugee, Michael lives in a public housing estate in Richmond. After that arrest at 16, Michael was referred to the Youth Support Service, and later connected with the Yarra City Council Youth Hub, where he met Jordie, his YSAS YSS worker.

Jordie introduced Michael to a local community legal service, who provided him with a lawyer. Together, Jordie and the lawyer worked to secure the best outcome in court. As a result, Michael's charges led not to prison, but to a Children's Court Youth Diversion – an option that allows young people to accept responsibility for their behaviour and attend activities designed to stop them reoffending.

Getting to this point took an enormous amount of effort. But Jordie was committed to doing what she needed to do to build a trusting relationship with Michael and his family. Michael says their shared cultural backgrounds helped as well, as he felt that Jordie was able to understand him in a way that others associated with the criminal justice system couldn't.

Today, Michael couldn't be further from the path he was on at 16. A City of Yarra 2023 Young Person of the Year nominee, he runs his own social enterprise barber service in the public housing towers in Collingwood. Michael has always contained that potential. But without that first connection to his local Richmond Youth Hub and subsequent diversion plans, he says he would not have gone on to do great things.

"I didn't really ever have role models," he says. "There was no one older than me to be like, Oh yeah, I want to be like them." Reflecting on what he's learnt over the last three years, he says the most significant thing is patience. "If I can't get it now, I can get it later."

Perseverance is another. When the public housing estates were locked down during COVID, Michael found himself caring for his younger siblings

while his mother was stuck overseas. Despite the demands placed on him, he still found the time to teach himself how to cut hair from YouTube.

After the lockdowns ended, he sought more advice from a local Smith Steet barber. Today, Michael rents a chair from that same barbershop a few days a week, then gives back to his community with free haircuts on the lawns of the Collingwood flats on Tuesdays and Fridays.

It's something that makes Jordie from YSAS incredibly proud. "The fact that he's provided something not only for himself, but for all these other young boys that come in here," is what amazes her the most. "He doesn't want to talk about himself... but he does amazing things for his community".

Michael has transformed into the mentor and role model he never had as a young teenager, a beacon of positive representation for the young Black men in his community.

"In the back of my head I thought, Well, what if the judges don't like me? Don't like my story?"



Paulo, 20, Keilor Downs

Paulo, a prefabrication concrete construction specialist, is the father of an 18-month-old baby girl, with another on the way. Sitting in his “very first rental property under my own name,” he looks and sounds older than his 20 years. But a lot can happen in a short amount of time.

Paulo had already been living out of home for a year by the time he was 16. But as he describes it, he was “basically just roaming around” and sleeping wherever he could find shelter for the night: in a park, a public toilet, under a train station awning or with a girl.

“Honestly, I thought I was just going to be stuck on the streets. And I was just hanging out with people doing bad stuff.”

Those people were in some of Melbourne’s most notorious gangs. In some ways, the streets offered an attractive life: Paulo, who had left home at 16, would spend his time with a community of people who had been through similar situations, and sell illegal substances to earn money. But when he came into repeat contact with the police, he was eventually connected with Taylah, a case worker with Youth Support Service. And that’s when Paulo’s life started to change for the better.

Taylah helped identify all the things that Paulo’s life was lacking, and got to work filling in the gaps. Each day, the pair would start with a list of things that needed to be checked off, from getting a birth certificate so Paulo could obtain a driver’s license, to registering for JobSeeker payments to helping him pursue a career as a concreter’s apprentice.

Taylah also connected Paulo with the local community legal centre, WEstjustice, which played a big part in cutting crime out from his life.

“They didn’t even know me,” Paulo says of YSS. “But they were doing a lot, and that’s what made me wake up, made me get out [of the gang]. And next thing you know, I was just living life peacefully and getting a kid on the way.”

A practical person, Paulo’s life now revolves around his 12-weeks pregnant partner and his beautiful baby girl. But he’s also thinking about the future – not just of his family, but of the other kids in Melbourne’s west. Like Taylah, he wants to do what he can to address the rising gang problems in his community.



“I’m going to be on top of my job and doing youth work,” she says. “Like Don, working with young kids. Because I can’t really see any kid the way I was getting by without a youth worker. It’s not as easy to do by themselves. It’s better to have someone there. I want to be that person that Don was for me.”



Conclusion

There is a high demand for YSAS YSS services across the metropolitan Melbourne and Latrobe valley regions.

The application of youth-focused outreach approaches enables the YSAS YSS worker's to engage young people in their families in ways which are responsive and adaptable to a diverse range of presenting needs and contexts. As shared in this report, the YSAS YSS is an effective early intervention and crime prevention service which has significant impact and provides tangible outcomes in the lives of Victorian young people and their families.

