



**Report of the**

**South Sudanese**

**Australian Youth Justice**

**Expert Working Group**

**December 2025**



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## Acknowledgement of Country

The South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group (Expert Working Group) respectfully acknowledges and celebrates the Traditional Owners of the lands throughout Victoria and pays its respects to their Elders, children and young people of past, current and future generations.

Throughout our work, we have learned much from the leadership and experience of First Nations peoples and services in Victoria. We are grateful for the insight and lessons shared.



## Message from the Chair

Over the past three years, our community has collaborated closely with the Victorian Government and key partners to identify the drivers of over-representation and shed light on why so many South Sudanese Australian children and young people become entangled in the youth justice system. As Chair of the Expert Working Group, I have witnessed the extraordinary strength of our community and the generosity with which people have shared their stories. I offer this foreword as both a tribute and a call to action.

### **Strength, pride and resilience**

Despite enduring war, displacement, and resettlement, our community remains diverse and vibrant, with a rich culture and heritage. South Sudanese Australians have achieved outstanding success in education, academia, sport and politics, demonstrating resilience and creativity in the face of adversity. The collective strength we draw from family and faith is a source of pride: a communal culture that fosters a sense of belonging, interdependence, and shared responsibility. Elders and community leaders advocate tirelessly, extended families nurture and protect young people, and respect for others, along with a deep commitment to education, provide a compass for our children. These values, born of our experiences of forced migration and resettlement, underpin our resilience and must be recognised and honoured.

### **Recognising community effort**

This report stands on the shoulders of hundreds of South Sudanese and other African community members. Over the course of three years, young people, parents, caregivers, Elders, faith leaders and community organisations have spoken openly about their painful experiences and offered ideas for change. The Expert Working Group engaged deeply with the community through case file reviews, table talks, custody consultations, youth forums and community consultations. At every step, people have demonstrated courage and sustained effort, drawing on their lived experiences and cultural knowledge to design effective solutions. I am humbled by their generosity and proud of how far we have come together.

### **Gratitude to our partners**

The Expert Working Group was led by me as Chair and by the Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People as Deputy Chair, initially by Liana Buchanan and later by Acting Principal Commissioner Meena Singh. Our work was sponsored by the Youth Justice Commissioner, Andrea Davidson, and supported by the Commission for Children and Young People and the Department of Justice and Community Safety. Meanwhile, an adult South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Advisory Group, chaired by Reverend Deacon George Piech Meat, provided wisdom and guidance. My deep gratitude goes to all members of these advisory groups and to the staff who worked tirelessly behind the scenes, including the many people who have assisted with the preparation of this report. The leadership of the advisory groups has kept our young people and the broader community at the centre of this process.



## **Honouring diversity and shared responsibility**

This report reflects the collective voices of our community, but it is ultimately the Expert Working Group's report, and I take responsibility for it. It has been both an honour and a heavy responsibility. Not everyone will agree with every finding or recommendation. That diversity of view is natural and respected. What unites us is that the report draws deeply on the lived experience, insight and cultural knowledge of hundreds of people across the community. It represents an honest, collective effort to chart a way forward for our young people, their families and the wider Victorian community. The work ahead requires a whole-of-system and whole-of-government effort, as well as a whole-of-community approach; no single reform can succeed in isolation. Progress depends on coordinated action across government, community and service systems. Addressing this crisis is not solely a South Sudanese issue; it is a shared social responsibility.

## **Grief, crisis and a call for care**

Alongside the hard work and hopeful moments, we have endured profound grief. The community has experienced many losses and has suffered through violence and suicide. Families and community leaders continue to carry the heavy toll of pain and crisis. The data in this report reveal just how dire the situation is: in 2023–24, South Sudanese Australian children and young people were about 95 times as likely to be in custody and 49 times as likely to be under Youth Justice community supervision as their non-South Sudanese Australian peers. These figures demand urgent, coordinated action from the Victorian Government and the wider community. This crisis requires coordinated action across the community, government and service systems. It calls for compassion, urgency and care from all Victorians.

## **The community has contributed profoundly, and an ongoing government partnership will be essential**

Our community has done the work that the government asked of us. We have engaged constructively, provided solutions and shown leadership. Through the Expert Working Group's process, understanding has deepened, relationships have strengthened and community-led service responses have been nurtured. Community organisations have delivered programs across various areas, including the creative arts, family activities, health, education, mental health and drug rehabilitation, supported by grants administered through this process. Yet, the grants program alone cannot solve the problem of over-representation or fully address the service needs of our community. Continued government support will be vital to ensure these early efforts take root and flourish, delivering enduring benefits for young people and the South Sudanese Australian community. The community now expects the government to match their commitment with sustained partnership, investment and accountability.

## **Communication with the community in the implementation**

Throughout this process, one of the clearest lessons has been the importance of timely, transparent and coordinated communication between government and the community. Because many South Sudanese and other minority communities continue to navigate trauma, language barriers, and limited familiarity with complex service systems, unexpected or rapid public announcements can be confusing and, at times, heighten anxiety. My



experience as Chair of the Expert Working Group has shown that when communication is not aligned or not provided early, community members often fill the gaps with fear and uncertainty, even when the government's intentions are positive. This reinforces how crucial it is that government communication, particularly during the implementation phase of this report, builds on the trust, relationships and shared understanding established through the Expert Working Group. Clear communication is not only respectful; it is essential for ensuring that community members feel informed, safe and included in decisions that affect them.

### **Hope and determination**

Despite the challenges and grief, I remain hopeful. Through partnership, cultural pride and shared accountability, lasting change is possible. The recommendations in this report outline practical steps to strengthen families, empower young people, address systemic racism, improve policing and ensure fair and effective justice responses. They are rooted in community leadership and cultural knowledge. Our community's determination to continue leading solutions that keep young people safe, connected and thriving is unwavering. I invite all who read this report to join us. Together, we can build a future where every young person, regardless of their background, has every opportunity to thrive in Victoria/Australia, a land of abundant opportunities and fair go.

**Dr Santino Atem Deng, PhD**  
**Chair, Expert Working Group**



## Message from the Deputy Chair

The Commission for Children and Young People has had the privilege of seeking, centring and amplifying the views and voices of young people in this important project. This involved supporting a range of initiatives that platform the expertise and perspectives of South Sudanese Australian young people, including those currently in custody.

In doing so, we were lucky enough to learn from hundreds of young people across Greater Melbourne. Over 300 young people participated in five community-based youth forums held in Dandenong, Melton, Richmond, Springvale and Wyndham Vale, which were run in partnership with various African Australian youth-led organisations. Attendees were generous in sharing their experiences of school, work and family life as African Australian young people. We heard their unique perspectives on common challenges, such as peer pressure, mental health or use of drugs and alcohol and some of the cultural factors that can affect them. Young people were brimming with practical and creative ideas on ways to foster inclusion, increase cultural safety, improve services and support families.

We also supported the establishment of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Advisory Group ('YAG'), which gave advice to the Expert Working Group and guided our broader youth engagement activities. Over the life of the project, the YAG has had around 20 members aged between 15 and 25 who have lived experience of the youth justice system, most of whom had a South Sudanese background. YAG members have played an invaluable role. They have provided recommendations, participated in important meetings with decision-makers and in community consultations, and shared their stories and perspectives in the media. We are incredibly grateful for their contribution to this project and to the Commission and are delighted that many YAG members will continue to inform our work into the future, as employees or alongside our Youth Council.

The YAG was instrumental in helping to encourage the trust and participation of young people currently in detention. YAG members laid the groundwork and guided our approach to one-on-one consultations with over 15 African Australian young people in the Parkville and Cherry Creek youth detention centres. These consultations offered a unique window into a group of young people who are too often demonised in harmful media narratives. What we heard from them tells a far more nuanced and complex story, revealing lives that are often marked by poverty, hardship, racism, exclusion and struggle. Many expressed a real and genuine desire for a life where they can learn, work, contribute and connect with others. These powerful discussions created space for young people to reveal themselves as individuals with their own histories and hopes for the future.

All projects that affect children and young people stand to benefit from their input and expertise. But it was particularly important in this project, as different generations within the South Sudanese Australian community can have quite distinct perspectives and experiences. For example, some young people born in Australia felt only the echoes of war and displacement their parents lived through, but faced their own challenges fitting in and reconciling an identity that is strung between two worlds. Their experiences were different from those of other young people, who arrived more recently in Australia as migrants or refugees themselves. Across all our work, we sought to reflect all the many and varied forces that shape what it is like to be a South Sudanese Australian young person in Victoria.

What we heard loud and clear is that young people want things to change. They want an honest reckoning with the way racism and discrimination are harming them individually and collectively. They want to feel safe, understood and valued in the community, whether they are at school, work, playing sport, doing their hobbies or simply going about their daily lives.



They want the broader community to believe in them, nurture their potential and celebrate their successes. Belonging, connection, safety and support are what catch young people before they ever have the chance to fall into trouble.

However, where young people do lose their way, they want support to get back on track. Young people with experience of the youth justice system want an education, skills and training that will help them get meaningful work. They want access to programs that improve their overall health, tap into their creativity and encourage pride in their identity. Young people who turned things around consistently said the catalyst for positive change came from a place of care and connection: whether through faith-based programs, community-led cultural initiatives, creating art and music, learning from mentors and having the opportunity to build healthy relationships with peers.

As a First Nations woman and a first-generation migrant, many of the stories that young people from South Sudanese and African Australian backgrounds reflected the same challenges that face Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and see them become involved in the youth justice system. Racism, exclusion, and intergenerational trauma – these all feature in the lives of these two groups of children and young people. The learnings from the systemic inquiry *Let us learn*, and the responses to its findings and recommendations can provide a way forward that can also support South Sudanese children and young people, as well as children and young people from other communities of colour who are over-represented in the youth justice system.

The Victorian Government has been given clear and achievable actions that it can deliver to improve the lives of South Sudanese Australian young people and their families. After a deep period of listening and consultation, now is the time for action.

**Meena Singh**  
**Deputy Chair, Expert Working Group**  
**Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People**



## Executive summary

The Expert Working Group was established by the Victorian Government to investigate and address the alarming over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in Victoria's youth justice system. This executive summary distils the Expert Working Group's three-year effort into a concise narrative explaining why the work was undertaken, what was learned, and what must be done to ensure young South Sudanese Australians can thrive. It summarises the report's key findings and recommendations for government, communities and service systems.

South Sudanese Australian children and young people are vastly over-represented at every point of the youth justice system. In 2023–24, the average daily custodial rate for 10- to 24-year-olds with South Sudanese heritage was 591.1 per 100,000, compared with 6.2 per 100,000 for all other children and young people. South Sudanese children and young people were about 95 times as likely to be in custody and 49 times as likely to be under community supervision. These figures reflect a combination of systemic, social and historical factors.

Many South Sudanese families have endured forced displacement, conflict and trauma; resettlement in Australia has involved language barriers, economic pressure, racism and discrimination. Intergenerational disruption, lack of culturally responsive services, negative peer influences and obstacles to citizenship further compound risk. At the same time, the community's collectivist culture, strong faith networks and emerging youth leadership constitute powerful protective factors.

Addressing over-representation requires a whole-of-system response that strengthens families and communities while reforming mainstream services and the justice system.

## Scope and methodology

The Expert Working Group undertook extensive research and engagement to ground its work in evidence and lived experience. Activities included:

- **Youth Justice Case File Review** – analysis of case files for all 202 African-Australian children and young people under youth justice supervision between September 2022 and April 2023.
- **Table Talks with young people** – candid discussions with South Sudanese Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision to identify what they need to transition out of the system. Following this, an individual action plan was developed for each participant, with follow up and monitoring occurring through Youth Justice case management.
- **Custody consultations** – over 15 one-on-one meetings with young people in custody to understand their experiences and reform ideas.
- **Youth forums** – five forums involving over 300 young people (aged 12–25) convened with youth-led organisations in Melton, Dandenong, Richmond, Springvale and Wyndham Vale.
- **Community consultations** – A number of discussions with mothers' and women's groups and broader community consultations with local organisations and service providers, adults and young people covering a range of topics, including policing and education.



- **Community grants program** – \$1.3 million allocated across three rounds to build the capacity of community-led organisations in areas such as family and parenting support, creative arts, education, mental health and alcohol and drug rehabilitation.

These consultations and analyses, along with data from the Department of Justice and Community Safety, and agency and community partners, gave the Expert Working Group a comprehensive understanding of the drivers of over-representation and the strengths within the community.

## Key findings

**1. Disproportionate justice involvement** – South Sudanese Australian children and young people are drastically over-represented in custody and supervision relative to their population share. This over-representation has decreased slightly in custody but increased in community supervision in recent years.

**2. Structural and historical drivers** – Forced displacement, trauma, intergenerational disruption, racism, economic hardship and barriers to citizenship are key structural drivers of over-representation. These are compounded by systemic bias and discrimination in policing, schools and other service systems.

**3. Service gaps and cultural misalignment** – Mainstream education, health and family support services often lack cultural understanding and fail to engage South Sudanese Australian families effectively. This results in missed opportunities for early intervention and diversion.

**4. Peer and identity factors** – Young people who feel disconnected from both their South Sudanese and Australian identities can be vulnerable to negative peer groups and high-harm associations. Social media and organised crime can exploit this vulnerability.

**5. Protective strengths** – The South Sudanese Australian community's collectivist ethos, faith networks, emerging youth leadership and strong educational aspirations are potent protective factors. Leveraging these strengths through community-led initiatives is essential for lasting change.

**6. Need for community-government partnership** – Addressing over-representation will require a coordinated approach that combines community leadership with systemic reform. Strengthening both community-based protective factors and the responsiveness of the local community-led and mainstream systems is the only sustainable path forward.

## Key recommendations

The report makes 59 recommendations across three domains. Key priorities include:

### 1. Strong foundations: strengthen protective factors and reduce risks

- **Establish community hubs** – pilot a multi-purpose hub in a high-demand area, such as the Wyndham local government area, as a base for community services, cultural activities, parenting support, mental health, alcohol and other drug services, and coordination of youth programs.
- **Empower parents and families** – improve the cultural responsiveness of mainstream family services; fund community-led parenting programs; expand



maternal and child health and early childhood education supports; and empower South Sudanese Australian women through leadership and peer-support networks.

- **Harness education's power** – broaden student choice and academic pathways; provide learning support and culturally grounded psycho-education; create culturally relevant curricula; expand co-curricular and out-of-school programs; embed school community liaison officers; support parental engagement; and monitor and address racism and informal exclusions in schools.
- **Support wellbeing in community** – invest in culturally safe mental health and alcohol and other drug services; improve access to stable housing; build digital literacy and online safety; expand apprenticeship and employment pathways; support African Australian youth-led programs; and provide dispute-resolution training to restore relationships.
- **Address high-harm peer associations** – develop community education on social media risks; strengthen efforts against youth exploitation by organised crime; co-design intensive community-based programs to disengage young people from high-harm peer groups; and create opportunities for cultural reconnection and identity building.

## 2. Turning points: fair and effective justice responses

- **Rebuild trust in policing** – implement restorative justice processes between police and the South Sudanese community; support youth engagement activities; appoint South Sudanese Australian community liaison officers and dedicated police leadership roles; mandate cultural awareness training; embed cultural advice in policies; implement anti-racism actions; and improve data transparency and independent oversight of police complaints.
- **Expand diversion** – increase the use of police diversion into culturally appropriate services and reduce barriers to the Children's Court Youth Diversion Program.
- **Transform Youth Justice** – build a culturally responsive workforce; ensure access to culturally specific programs and community custody visits; improve behaviour management, education, training and structured days in custody; ensure regular contact with case managers; enhance transition preparation; support young people to obtain Working with Children Checks; expand peer mentoring; and strengthen approaches to conflict and gang involvement in the community.

## 3. Shared responsibility and future directions

- **Tackle racism and foster belonging** – counter harmful stereotypes in media; support African-Australian media and storytelling; educate communities about equal-opportunity rights and obligations; measure African-Australian representation across public services; and strengthen pathways to citizenship.
- **Promote inclusive governance and accountability** – establish a framework for inclusive policy development and implementation, ensuring community-government partnership; create a community implementation committee to monitor progress and report back to the community; and provide oversight of systemic reforms.

These recommendations are deliberately sequenced to build capacity, deliver early wins and lay the groundwork for longer-term reforms. Each requires collaborative implementation across government departments, community organisations and service systems.



## Benefits and impact

Implementing the Expert Working Group's recommendations will dramatically reduce the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian young people in the youth justice system, restore community trust in institutions and enhance public safety. By investing in family and community strengths, improving cultural responsiveness across services, addressing racism, and ensuring fair justice responses, Victoria will help young people avoid contact with the justice system, support those who do become involved to rehabilitate and thrive, and strengthen the social fabric for all. The long-term benefits include improved educational and employment outcomes, greater community cohesion, and a more efficient and effective justice system.

Ultimately, the Expert Working Group's efforts mark an essential step towards justice and fairness. The recommendations offer a practical, culturally relevant approach to supporting young people, strengthening families, and improving community safety. Achieving these goals will require leadership, bravery, and ongoing collaboration among government, community, and service sectors. With shared commitment, we can create a Victoria where every young person, regardless of background, has the chance to belong, contribute, and succeed.



## List of recommendations

### The foundation stone: A community hub

#### Recommendation 1. A community hub

That the Victorian Government engage (by the end of 2026) a consortium of African Australian community-led organisations to design, establish and deliver a South Sudanese Australian and other African/multicultural communities Community Hub. The Hub should:

- (a) deliver culturally responsive, community-led support to African Australian families and young people, including the delivery of direct services
- (b) perform a coordinating and referral role to connect community members with broader social, education, health (including mental health, Maternal and Child Health, and early parenting), justice, legal assistance, employment and housing services
- (c) operate from a single, accessible and welcoming physical location
- (d) include a designated space for young people within the facility.

The initiative should commence as a trial in a high-demand location, such as the Wyndham local government area, with a view to evaluating outcomes and scaling up the model for implementation in other priority areas across Victoria over time. The hub model should link to and not duplicate the work being done by Community Support Groups.

### Empowering parents and families

#### Recommendation 2. Mainstream family services

That the Victorian Government:

- (a) designate (by the end of 2026) relevant Child and Family Services Alliances that will be required to develop local strategies that lead to improved culturally responsive services for South Sudanese Australian people as a priority population within their catchment
- (b) in consultation with South Sudanese Australian community members and services, develop (by July 2027) an evidence-based practice element or module supporting the family services workforce to engage with and support South Sudanese Australian families, and consider where including cultural elements in existing evidence-based practice modules could strengthen the applicability of the modules for South Sudanese families
- (c) support partnerships between South Sudanese and African-led organisations and mainstream family services in key locations, to build capacity and facilitate knowledge sharing between both community-led organisations and mainstream services
- (d) review (by July 2029) levels of South Sudanese Australian engagement with family services and community feedback on the cultural responsiveness of family services to assess progress made and identify any additional steps required to improve the effectiveness of mainstream family services for South Sudanese Australian community members.

#### Recommendation 3. Parenting support from African Australian community-led organisations

That the Victorian Government increase the capacity of African Australian community-led organisations (and/or consortia of community-led organisations) to partner with mainstream



services and to directly provide parenting and family support to South Sudanese Australian parents and families – including at the proposed community hub (see Recommendation 1).

Such programs could include carer circles, family mentoring, intergenerational dialogue programs and tailored mothers' and fathers' programs that help address intergenerational conflict, domestic tension and violence, different gender norms and expectations around parenting.

At a minimum, community-led parenting programs should be introduced or expanded within the next 12 months in each of the following areas:

- (a) Wyndham
- (b) Brimbank
- (c) Melton
- (d) Greater Dandenong.

#### **Recommendation 4. Maternal and Child Health services**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Health, promote awareness of and engagement with the role of the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services within by the South Sudanese Australian community, including, for example, through partnerships between MCH services and with South Sudanese Australian community organisations.

Initial actions should be taken by the end of 2026, with further exploration of whether levels of South Sudanese Australian community access to MCH services can be monitored and reviewed by the end of 2029.

#### **Recommendation 5. Early Childhood Education and Care**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Education, explore opportunities to reduce barriers to early childhood education and care participation and increase school readiness for South Sudanese Australian community members, drawing on lessons from the Links to Early Learning program in New South Wales.

The Victorian Government should report back to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on its exploration and next steps by July 2027. It should then, in partnership with South Sudanese Australian community members and early childhood education and care services, review progress made in reducing identified barriers, outline any further actions required and report further to the community implementation committee by July 2030.

#### **Recommendation 6. Empower South Sudanese Australian mothers**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, explore opportunities with South Sudanese Australian women to support their empowerment through work, study and other options.

The Victorian Government should report back to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on its exploration and next steps by July 2027.



## **Harnessing the power of education**

### **Recommendation 7. Student choice and academic achievement**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Education, develop (by the end of 2027) additional accessible resources to assist South Sudanese Australian students and families to make informed decisions about education and training pathways.

### **Recommendation 8. Learning support**

That the Victorian Government review the accessibility and effectiveness of its small group and learning support programs for South Sudanese Australian students aged 10 to 14 years, and explore opportunities to develop education support programs for this cohort to be delivered at the proposed community hub (see Recommendation 1).

These programs should integrate academic support, leadership development and personal growth opportunities, and be delivered in partnership with peer and professional mentors from African Australian or other relevant backgrounds.

Parental engagement and education components should be embedded within these programs to strengthen family involvement and understanding of the Victorian school system.

The Government should report to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on its review, exploration and next steps by July 2027.

### **Recommendation 9. Culturally grounded psychoeducation programs**

That the Victorian Government deliver funding and implement (by July 2027) effective, culturally grounded psychoeducation programs in schools for South Sudanese Australian students that promote emotional regulation, resilience, leadership and help-seeking behaviour, framed around aspiration, success and wellbeing.

### **Recommendation 10. Culturally relevant learning programs**

That the Victorian Government expand access to culturally relevant education programs that celebrate African culture, history and identity, such as extending the successful Umoja initiative beyond custodial settings into mainstream schools and community contexts. A program should be started or expanded into at least 6 mainstream schools by the end of 2028.

### **Recommendation 11. Co-curricular activities and Outside School Hours Care**

That the Victorian Government build on existing initiatives to:

(a) facilitate access of low-income South Sudanese Australian students to extracurricular and sporting activities, including practical supports such as transport assistance and school-based family activities

(b) call on the Commonwealth Government to ensure that low-income South Sudanese Australian students are supported to access before- and after-school care.

An expanded Victorian Government support program should be in place by the end of 2026.

### **Recommendation 12. School Community Liaison Officers**

That the Victorian Government establish additional and refocused School Community Liaison Officer (SCLO) roles, particularly in areas with high South Sudanese Australian populations, by the end of 2026.



These roles should be recalibrated to focus on strengthening relationships among schools, families, and communities, and supporting on parents to build agency. SCLOs should also play a central role in improving cultural understanding within schools, helping to ensure that families are seen as valued partners in education.

### **Recommendation 13. Support parental engagement in education**

That the Victorian Government establish a suite of measures to increase the engagement of South Sudanese Australian parents and families in their children's education, including:

- (a) establishing (by the end of 2029) at least one 'one school' model in the Melton Brimbank corridor, drawing on the lessons from the Our Place model
- (b) providing local workshops and information sessions (by the end of 2027) to help families understand the school system, expectations, and parental rights and responsibilities
- (c) resourcing parent peer support groups (by the end of 2027) to assist families in navigating schools and education pathways.

### **Recommendation 14. Address racism in schools**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Education, implement measures (by July 2027) to improve cultural safety and reduce experiences of racism affecting South Sudanese Australian students, including mandatory anti-racism training for all Victorian school staff and a clear, accessible complaints process for students and parents who experience racism.

The Victorian Government should monitor complaint trends, engage with and provide targeted support to schools showing patterns of concern, with annual reporting to the government on actions taken.

Reporting and analysis should be scheduled for discussion with the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by July 2028.

### **Recommendation 15. Monitor and address informal suspensions and exclusions**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Education, build on the Department's existing complaints process to establish a mechanism to enable students, parents or carers to report concerns about informal suspensions and exclusions of South Sudanese Australian students from schools. This mechanism should enable complainants to clearly indicate that their complaint relates to an informal suspension or exclusion (for example, by ticking a box) so that relevant data can be collected about these practices.

The Department of Education should promote this mechanism among South Sudanese Australian students and families, and ensure that it is accessible and culturally safe.

The mechanism should commence operation no later than July 2026 and aim to:

- reduce the use of exclusionary practices
- identify systemic issues affecting South Sudanese Australian students
- ensure fairness, transparency and consistency in disciplinary processes.

Reporting and analysis of data collected through this mechanism should be provided to and discussed with the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by the end of 2028.



### **Recommendation 16. Catholic and independent schools**

That the Victorian Catholic Education Authority and independent schools each consider (by the end of 2026) developing an action plan for their respective sector/individual school to support South Sudanese Australian students within their schools, drawing where relevant on the recommendations for the Department of Education (see Recommendations 7–15).

### **Supporting South Sudanese Australian wellbeing in the community**

#### **Recommendation 17. Mental health and alcohol and other drug services**

That the Victorian Government:

(a) strengthen the cultural responsiveness and accessibility of mainstream mental health and alcohol and other drug (AOD) services for South Sudanese Australians, with actions taken to do this reported to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by the end of 2027. Levels of South Sudanese Australian engagement with, and community feedback on the cultural responsiveness of, these services should be reviewed within 5 years.

(b) build the capacity of South Sudanese and other African Australian community-led organisations (and/or consortia of community-led organisations) to deliver culturally responsive services to support mental health and trauma-recovery, and to address harmful alcohol and other drug use amongst South Sudanese Australians. At a minimum, community-led programs should be introduced or expanded by July 2027 in each of the following areas: (i) Wyndham; (ii) Brimbank; (iii) Melton; and (iv) Greater Dandenong, with consideration to be given about expansion to other surrounding areas where there is demand over time.

#### **Recommendation 18. Housing and homelessness services**

That the Victorian Government strengthen the cultural responsiveness and accessibility of housing and homelessness services for South Sudanese Australians, with actions reported to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by July 2027.

Levels of South Sudanese Australian engagement with, and community feedback on the cultural responsiveness of, these services should be reviewed by July 2029.

#### **Recommendation 19. Digital literacy and online safety**

That the Victorian Government promote digital literacy and online safety programs for South Sudanese Australian young people and parents, addressing misinformation and cyber-bullying, and linking to campaigns on the risks of gang and organised crime recruitment via social media (see Recommendation 23).

#### **Recommendation 20. Apprenticeship and employment support**

That the Victorian Government invest in culturally appropriate employment services to help address barriers to employment and support South Sudanese Australian young people into jobs. Activities should include:

- (a) creating and promoting apprenticeship opportunities
- (b) supporting community enterprise and small business development
- (c) building job pipelines through partnerships with local councils, government agencies and industry, to reduce long-term youth unemployment.



The Government should report to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on progress, actions taken and outcomes achieved, including youth employment participation and retention rates, by July 2027 and again by July 2030.

#### **Recommendation 21. African Australian youth-led programs**

That the Victorian Government resource fund African Australian youth-led programs to deliver activities that effectively engage and support the wellbeing of South Sudanese Australian young people, and build young people's leadership capabilities.

#### **Recommendation 22. Dispute resolution skills and support**

That the Victorian Government expand the availability of peacemaking programs in communities and schools to help resolve conflict, repair harm, and rebuild relationships, with a priority on engaging South Sudanese Australian communities and drawing on lessons from the Peacemaking Service run through the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in the City of Yarra. A program should be introduced in western Melbourne by July 2027 and a second area by July 2028.

#### **Intervening in high-harm peer associations**

##### **Recommendation 23. The role of social media in high-harm peer associations**

That the Victorian Government:

(a) fund research (to be undertaken by July 2027) to be undertaken with South Sudanese Australian young people to better understand the role of social media and internet sub-cultures and their impact on high-harm offending, as well as develop evidence-based practice and intervention tools to target and reduce associated risks

(b) design and deliver a campaign on the influence of social media and the ways it can be used to exploit young people, for example, exposing them to negative peer influence, high-harm behaviour and/or potential organised criminal activity. The campaign should be developed by the end of 2026 and be reviewed within 2 years, taking into account emerging evidence. The campaign should include practical guidance on identifying warning signs and safe pathways to report concerns, exploring opportunities to partner with Victoria Police, the Australian eSafety Commissioner and relevant community organisations.

##### **Recommendation 24. Community understanding of efforts to intervene in youth exploitation by organised crime**

That Victoria Police share (by the end of 2026) insights with the South Sudanese Australian community about efforts to disrupt organised crime networks, with a focus on adult recruiters, financiers and coordinators, explaining how police are targeting the systemic exploitation of young people, and how community reports and information can contribute to holding adult offenders accountable.

##### **Recommendation 25. An intensive program to intervene in high-harm peer associations**

That the Victorian Government develop and implement (by the end of 2027) an intensive, community-based intervention program for young people involved in high-harm peer associations. The program should draw on lessons from international models such as Project Restore (New York), and incorporate lived-experience mentors, restorative justice practices and wraparound family and community supports. The program should be evaluated within 5 years of its commencement.



**Recommendation 26. Opportunities to strengthen cultural identity through reconnection with heritage and country of origin**

That the Victorian Government resource South Sudanese community members to explore opportunities, including in partnership with philanthropic organisations, for a cultural immersion initiative enabling young South Sudanese Australians to travel to and connect with their country of origin and cultural values. The voluntary initiative should aim to strengthen identity and belonging, build resilience and help disrupt cycles of recidivism and retaliation. The Government should report back to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on the scoping work and proposed next steps by July 2027.

**Policing: Improving the relationship with the South Sudanese Australian community and addressing systemic bias**

**Recommendation 27. Restorative justice process between the police and the South Sudanese Australian community**

That Victoria Police engage (by July 2027) in a restorative justice process with the South Sudanese Australian community to lay the foundation for sustained, trust-based policing relationships.

Levels of South Sudanese Australian community trust in police should be reviewed by July 2029.

**Recommendation 28. Police support of youth engagement activities**

That Victoria Police support and participate in engagement activities with South Sudanese Australian young people, such as sporting or cultural programs, to strengthen relationships and trust, demonstrate a commitment to fairness and inclusion, enhance the flow of information and cooperation, and improve the capacity of police to protect and serve all members of the community. These engagement activities should remain separate from law enforcement activities, including intelligence gathering.

Police should identify and act on this in 2 priority locations by the end of 2026, and in 2 additional priority locations by July 2027. Victoria Police should also report on engagement activities undertaken in its annual report.

**Recommendation 29. South Sudanese Australian Community Liaison Officers in Victoria Police**

That the Victorian Government fund Victoria Police to, by the end of 2026, establish and maintain dedicated African Australian or South Sudanese Australian Community Liaison Officer roles at key police stations, to act as trusted contact points for community members, provide cultural advice, support early problem-solving and facilitate constructive engagement between police and the community.

Victoria Police should report on the establishment and maintenance of these roles in its annual report.

**Recommendation 30. Victoria Police leadership positions responsible for relationships with the South Sudanese Australian community**

That Victoria Police, by July 2026, designate sworn officer leadership positions at key stations with explicit responsibility for police relationships with the South Sudanese community, providing a contact point for leadership discussion, and ensuring that authority and accountability for this function sit within the police command structure – not with individual officers' goodwill or personal interest.



The police should identify key stations and positions by the end of 2026. Victoria Police should also report on the designation of these positions in its annual report.

**Recommendation 31. Cultural awareness training for police**

That the Victorian Government commission training to be delivered by South Sudanese Australian community members to police in local areas to build understanding of the local community. At a minimum, training should be delivered to 3 priority stations by the end of 2026, with training delivered to a further 7 stations by July 2027.

**Recommendation 32. Documenting cultural advice in police policies and procedures**

That Victoria Police work with South Sudanese Australian community members (by July 2027) to document cultural advice in police policies and procedures. Examples include the approach to family death notifications and the cultural relevance of young people not making eye contact during interviews.

**Recommendation 33. Police implementation of actions under Victoria's Anti-Racism Strategy**

That Victoria Police report annually to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on steps taken to implement initiatives to reduce racism and discrimination in policing set out in Victoria's Anti-Racism Strategy 2024–2029.

**Recommendation 34. Data on police engagement with South Sudanese Australians**

That Victoria Police collect data about police engagement with South Sudanese Australians at key points, such as when a person is charged or brought back to a police station. In doing so, Victoria Police should ensure police data is informed by questions about a person's ethnicity/ethnic background, not only their place of birth (which may be Australia or a third country).

Victoria Police should work in partnership with the South Sudanese Australian community to design this data collection process, which should include an explanation of the reasons for collecting the data. Improved data collection should commence by the end of 2026.

**Recommendation 35. South Sudanese Australian community's access to data about police contact**

That the Crime Statistics Agency work in partnership with the South Sudanese Australian community to develop (by the end of 2026) a transparent and responsible approach for providing community access to data on police contact with South Sudanese Australians.

**Recommendation 36. Independent persons at police interviews**

That the Victorian Government support the Centre for Multicultural Youth to expand the recruitment and training of South Sudanese Australian community members to the Youth Referral and Independent Person Program to attend police interviews when a parent or guardian is not available.

That the Centre for Multicultural Youth report the number of South Sudanese Australian community members on the list of volunteers to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by the end of 2026 and again by the end of 2029.

**Recommendation 37. Improving trust in police complaints processes**

That Victoria Police and the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission take action to strengthen community trust in the police complaints process. Actions should include:



- (a) providing a complainant with support to make a complaint, including through a designated and trained African Australian Communities Liaison Officer
- (b) ensuring the availability of resources in relevant languages that explain the police complaints process
- (c) establishing a complaint tracking system so complainants can monitor the progress of their complaint
- (d) ensuring that updates are provided to complainants and outcomes are clearly communicated and explained in writing, including how the complainant's human rights have been considered.

Actions taken should be reported to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by July 2027, and feedback should be sought from the South Sudanese Australian community on the effectiveness of these measures in practice by July 2029.

### **Recommendation 38. Analysing police complaints for systemic issues**

That the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission report on trends in police complaint data involving South Sudanese Australian complainants to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) at least annually, and commencing by the end of 2026, so that:

- (a) systemic issues can be identified and addressed
- (b) formal complaints information can be compared to other sources of data, including feedback from community members.

### **Recommendation 39. Independent police complaints – children and young people**

That the Victorian Government (by July 2028) strengthen the role of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) to independently investigate all complaints of police misconduct against children and young people. IBAC should work with South Sudanese Australian young people in developing the process and information materials.

Improving access to effective interventions following police contact (diversion)

### **Recommendation 40. Police diversion into culturally appropriate service responses**

- (a) That the Victorian Government expand and enhance (by the end of 2026) the Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP) and the Youth Crime Prevention and Early Intervention Program (YCPEIP) for South Sudanese Australian children and young people, and commence recording participation in these programs by South Sudanese Australian children and young people.
- (b) That Victoria Police establish (by July 2027) a youth cautioning program for South Sudanese Australian children and young people aged 12 to 17 years who come into contact with police.

### **Recommendation 41. Reduce barriers to Children's Court Youth Diversion**

- (a) That the Victorian Government (by July 2028) standardise judicial decision-making on youth diversion and repeal the requirement for the prosecution to consent to diversion before it can be ordered by the Court. The legislation should instead allow for the prosecution to make submissions on whether it considers that diversion should be ordered in a particular case.



(b) That, until the requirement for prosecutor consent is repealed, Victoria Police annually provide the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) with data on when police prosecutors consent and refuse to consent to Children's Court Youth Diversion for a South Sudanese Australian young person to promote transparency and provide opportunities for further analysis of the equity of decision-making as required.

## **Youth Justice: Improving outcomes for young people under supervision**

### **Recommendation 42. Building a culturally responsive workforce**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, improve and support the representation of African Australian and lived-experience staff in Youth Justice by:

- (a) continuing initiatives to recruit African Australian staff in frontline custody and community roles, and developing initiatives to further increase representation of people from African backgrounds in clinical, senior leadership and executive roles in Youth Justice, such as targeted recruitment and tailored professional development support
- (b) prioritising the collection and reporting of data on the cultural background of staff to inform efforts to increase the representation of staff from key communities working in Youth Justice at all levels
- (c) developing a policy position and associated processes to support the recruitment, retention, supervision and management of community members with lived experience of the justice system in Youth Justice
- (d) increasing the number of Community Engagement Officer roles for the African Australian community from one each in the North-West and South-East Metropolitan regions to at least 2 per region
- (e) embedding a cultural wellbeing service for African Australian staff to provide dedicated cultural support, debriefing and professional development, either through or alongside the department's existing EAP service.

### **Recommendation 43. Culturally specific programs and services**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety:

- (a) improve access to culturally specific programs and services for South Sudanese Australian young people under community supervision
- (b) embed an expanded Community Custody Visits Program as an ongoing cultural program in Youth Justice custody and resource it to operate sustainably
- (c) extend the delivery of the Community Custody Visits Program into the adult prison system to provide equivalent cultural support for all African Australian young adults in custody
- (d) introduce a cultural group-based wellbeing program focused on mental health and substance use for South Sudanese and other African Australian young people in custody.

### **Recommendation 44. Custodial behaviour management**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, improve behaviour management in custody through:

- (a) re-examining Youth Justice custodial staffing structures and behaviour management approaches to strengthen staff capability to provide consistent expectations, communication



and responses. These approaches will enable young people to be engaged in positive, structured daily routines.

(b) expansion of restorative practices in the custodial operating model, drawing on external restorative practice expertise to support continued delivery of high-quality evidence-based practice.

#### **Recommendation 45. Education and training in custody**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Education and the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, improve education and training access and attendance in custody through:

(a) addressing the Parkville College staffing gaps to ensure consistent education provision

(b) leveraging the Umoja cultural education program to support education delivery for African Australian young people by:

(i) increasing the frequency of Umoja classes from once a week

(ii) considering how the Umoja program can be further developed to support the delivery of the school curriculum and key learning competencies

(ii) scheduling Umoja classes first thing in the morning to encourage young people to be up and ready for class at the start of the day

(c) working with the Department of Justice and Community Safety to improve access to post-secondary education and training that reflects young people's interests and aspirations by:

(i) developing partnerships with Victorian universities to enable young people to undertake a broader range of tertiary courses, facilitated by greater access to equipment, technology and custodial/educator support

(ii) exploring options to expand the range of short-course and VET certificates young people can access with a focus on supporting completion of qualifications while in custody.

#### **Recommendation 46. Ensuring a structured day in custody**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, improve delivery and oversight of the structured day through:

(a) developing practice guidance for staff that establishes expectations for delivering on the objectives of the 'meaningful and structured activity' custody operating principle

(b) implementing appropriate direction and oversight to ensure custodial staff are consistently facilitating young people's participation in daily scheduled activities, including getting young people up and ready in the morning

(c) developing data and analytic capability to monitor delivery of structured activity at the individual and system level

(d) reporting on the hours and types of structured activity young people participate in, and the hours of lockdowns they experience.

#### **Recommendation 47. Contact with case managers in custody**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, ensure case managers have regular contact with all young people in custody according to



mandated levels of service as part of effectively overseeing case plans and providing support and encouragement to the young person.

#### **Recommendation 48. Improving transition preparation**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Department of Education, improve transition preparation for South Sudanese Australian young people in custody through:

- (a) ensuring that gaps in young people's identification documents are identified on entry to custody and addressed immediately, and that young people are made aware of the spent convictions scheme (relevant practice guidance should be updated to reflect this requirement)
- (b) establishing formal, expedited arrangements with the Victorian Department of Government Services, Services Australia and Department of Home Affairs to facilitate obtaining relevant documents for young people in custody in a timely manner
- (c) making greater use of temporary leave as part of well-planned preparation for release, including for young people on remand, to undertake education, training and employment.

#### **Recommendation 49. Working with Children Checks**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Social Services Regulator, provide guidance and support for young people to obtain Working with Children Checks by:

- (a) formalising a process for supporting young people supervised by Youth Justice to apply for Working with Children Checks through developing practice guidance for staff, ensuring senior leadership support and establishing process arrangements with the Working with Children Check unit
- (b) establishing a clear pathway for applicants with criminal histories who do not pose a risk to child safety to be given the best opportunity to be granted a Working with Children Check through the Social Services Regulator's internal review process.

#### **Recommendation 50. Flexible support to connect with education, training and employment in the community**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, the Department of Education and the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, provide more intensive, flexible support to connect young people with education, training and employment in the community after release by considering how aspects of an alternative education model can be established within an existing youth-focused African community organisation in the West and South-East of Melbourne or a community hub model. This approach should be co-developed between the government, community organisations and South Sudanese Australian young people with lived experience of custody.

#### **Recommendation 51. Lived-experience peer mentoring**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, establish a suite of lived-experience peer mentoring programs for the youth justice system that includes:

- (a) mentoring for African Australian young people that starts in custody to support their transition back to the community
- (b) training, professional development, supervision and wellbeing support for mentors.



### **Recommendation 52. Addressing conflict and gang involvement in the community**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, strengthen the youth justice system's ability to safely and effectively supervise young people who are gang-involved through:

- (a) developing practice guidance, specialised training and intervention approaches to support Youth Justice staff to work with gang-involved young people under supervision and their families
- (b) developing resources and training to build the capability of MAP partner agencies to effectively coordinate and oversee responses for gang-involved young people and their families
- (c) establishing a comprehensive multiagency panel approach to coordinate government agency and community service system responses for gang-involved children and young people and their families who are at risk of serious harm, whether or not they are supervised by Youth Justice.

### **Tackling racism and supporting belonging in the Victorian community**

#### **Recommendation 53. Prevent harmful and racist stereotypes in media discourse**

That the Victorian Government explore opportunities, such as with the Commonwealth Government or philanthropic organisations, to commission research into media reporting about South Sudanese Australian community members over a defined period and report on any non-compliance with industry codes and standards, racism or bias with respect to stories that relate to people from multicultural and multifait communities. The Victorian Government should report back to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on its exploration and proposed next steps by July 2027.

#### **Recommendation 54. African Australian media and storytelling**

That the Victorian Government establish a fund (by the end of 2026) to support the development of African Australian community-led and youth-led media (including radio, podcast, print, short film/documentary) with the aim of showcasing the culture, resilience and talents of the community and its positive contribution to Victoria and Australia.

#### **Recommendation 55. Equal opportunity rights and obligations**

That the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission:

- (a) partner (by July 2027) with others in priority local government areas (those with a high South Sudanese Australian population) to help employers understand how they can support economic participation and prevent racial discrimination in their employment practices
- (b) deliver (by July 2027) tailored community education to help South Sudanese Australian people understand their rights under the Equal Opportunity Act 2010, Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001, and the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006.

#### **Recommendation 56. Establish a framework for measuring and improving African Australian representation across publicly funded services**

The Victorian Government should establish a consistent, statewide framework – co-designed with African Australian community leaders and the Victorian Public Sector Commission – to measure, report on and strengthen African Australian representation across all state-government funded services, including health, education, justice and community services by July 2027.



### **Recommendation 57. Strengthening paths to citizenship**

That the Victorian Government expand (by July 2027) the legal assistance available to help eligible South Sudanese Australians to make a citizenship application, recognising that Australian citizenship is a key foundation for promoting belonging, inclusion and access to opportunity.

### **Taking the next steps together**

#### **Recommendation 58. Opportunities for inclusive approaches**

That, while noting the need for tailored and effective approaches, all lead agencies and organisations responsible for implementing recommendations consider, where appropriate and relevant:

- (a) the applicability of programs and activities to other African and culturally and linguistically diverse communities to promote inclusion and maximise wellbeing in the Victorian community
- (b) opportunities to engage with and/or share learnings with the Victorian African Communities Committee.

#### **Recommendation 59. Oversight and accountability**

That the Victorian Government, to ensure the effective implementation of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group's recommendations, and maintain transparency and accountability over time:

- (a) establish (by July 2026) a dedicated implementation lead at the executive level to coordinate and drive delivery of the recommendations across relevant agencies and partners – this position should be designated for a South Sudanese Australian community member
- (b) establish (by July 2026) a South Sudanese Australian community implementation committee to meet with the government at least 3 times a year over the next 5 years to track progress and provide advice on design and implementation, building on the work of the Expert Working Group and supporting advisory groups
- (c) report annually on implementation to the Victorian Secretaries Board and the responsible Minister/s, ensuring cross-departmental oversight and accountability
- (d) provide annual public updates on the work to support transparency and build community confidence in the implementation process
- (e) develop a monitoring and evaluation framework to guide implementation, measure outcomes, and inform continuous improvement.



## Introduction

The Victorian Government established the Expert Working Group in 2022 to examine and respond to the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in the youth justice system.

This report presents the findings and recommendations of the Expert Working Group.

Part A of the report, 'Background and context', provides an overview of:

- the work of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group
- the South Sudanese Australian community in Victoria
- the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in the youth justice system.

Part B of the report, 'Strong foundations: Strengthening protective factors and reducing risks of young South Sudanese Australians', sets out findings and recommendations to support South Sudanese Australian children and young people to grow and develop in the Victorian community. It speaks about:

- the establishment of a community hub, bringing together the strength of the South Sudanese Australian community
- how parents and carers can be empowered so that families are strong, supported and connected
- harnessing the power of education, which gives children and young people the best opportunities in life
- how community-led services can enhance collective strength and effective action, with coordinated and culturally responsive support from government and mainstream services
- the need for more intensive, community-based interventions for young people involved in high-harm peer groups – a growing challenge across the broader Victorian community that also significantly affects South Sudanese Australian young people.

Part C of the report, 'Turning points: Fair and effective justice responses for South Sudanese Australian young people', sets out findings and recommendations to improve outcomes when South Sudanese Australian children and young people engage with the justice system. These are critical opportunities and turning points. It makes recommendations to improve:

- the relationship between the police and South Sudanese Australian community members, and to address systemic racism and bias in Victoria Police
- access to effective support and interventions when South Sudanese Australian children and young people come into contact with the justice system



- outcomes for South Sudanese Australian young people who are supervised by Youth Justice in custody and in the community.

Finally, Part D of the report, 'A shared responsibility and a shared future—the role of the broader community', sets out findings and recommendations about the role of the broader community and the need to tackle racism and support belonging in Victoria for shared commitment and accountability for this work going forward.

The Expert Working Group's 59 recommendations are designed to create lasting positive change for South Sudanese Australian children and young people: by addressing systemic and structural factors, investing in community leadership and embedding culturally safe, evidence-informed approaches across the youth justice and broader service systems.

The delivery of this report to the Victorian Government marks the completion of the Expert Working Group's formal task, but not the end of the work. It represents the close of the first stage in a long-term, collective effort to address the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in Victoria's youth justice system.

The Expert Working Group's overwhelming conclusion is that meaningful change requires a whole-of-system and whole-of-community effort. No single reform can succeed in isolation; progress depends on coordinated action across government, community and service systems that together form a stronger, more responsive whole. Meaningful change also requires investment from the government. The work now passes from the Expert Working Group to the wider community, to government and to partners across sectors – to carry forward what has been begun, to sustain the momentum and to build a fairer and safer future for all young people.



## Part A. Background and context

This part of the report provides an overview of:

- the work of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group
- the South Sudanese Australian community in Victoria
- the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in the youth justice system.



# 1. The South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group

## 1.1 The establishment of the Expert Working Group

The Victorian Government established the Expert Working Group to make recommendations to address the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in the youth justice system.<sup>1</sup>

This followed the 2017 Youth Justice Review undertaken by Penny Armytage and Professor James Ogloff, which highlighted the failure of the Victorian youth justice system to respond effectively to culturally and linguistically diverse groups, including South Sudanese Australian young people, who were over-represented in the system.<sup>2</sup>

Under the *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030*, the Victorian Government undertook to consider opportunities to identify and address the issues contributing to the over-representation of (South) Sudanese young people in the youth justice system.<sup>3</sup>

The Expert Working Group was tasked with:

- identifying actions to support South Sudanese Australian young people to transition out of the youth justice system
- strengthening the South Sudanese Australian community sector
- identifying the drivers of over-representation
- recommending systemic improvements to the Victorian Government.

The terms of reference for the Expert Working Group are set out in Appendix 1.

## 1.2 Leadership of the Expert Working Group

The Expert Working Group was led by Dr Santino Deng, a senior South Sudanese Australian community leader and academic, as Chair, and the Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People as Deputy Chair – initially Liana Buchanan, and then Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, Meena Singh.

The Expert Working Group was sponsored by the Youth Justice Commissioner, Andrea Davidson. Its work was also supported by:

- a Youth Advisory Group hosted by the Commission for Children and Young People. It included South Sudanese Australian young people with lived experience of the youth justice system

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<sup>1</sup> Victorian Government, [Diversification: keeping young people out of youth justice to lead successful lives](#), Victorian Government, 2022, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>2</sup> P Armytage and J Ogloff, [Youth justice review and strategy: meeting needs and reducing offending](#), Victorian Government, 2017, Executive summary, pp 9–10, 12–28; Part 1, pp 176–178, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Victorian Government, [Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030](#), Victorian Government, 2020, p 45, accessed 13 November 2025.



- an adult South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Advisory Group, chaired by Reverend Deacon George Pietch Meat, including community leaders, subject-matter experts and representatives of community organisations
- staff from the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS) and the Commission for Children and Young People.

A senior executive inter-agency committee promoted accountability across government and enabled the provision of relevant information to and from the Expert Working Group.

The terms of reference for the Advisory Groups are set out in Appendix 2.

### 1.3 How the Expert Working Group went about its task

Since its establishment, the Expert Working Group has engaged deeply and extensively with hundreds of people in the South Sudanese Australian community – with young people, families, parents, carers, community leaders and Elders, and community organisations, to ensure that the community's voice is at the centre of our work. Solutions that are designed with and led by the community will be the most effective in addressing the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in the youth justice system.

#### Consultations

The Expert Working Group has undertaken the following activities:

- **A Youth Justice Case File Review:** a review of the case files of all African Australian children and young people who were under Youth Justice supervision between September 2022 and April 2023 (202 individuals) to understand their experiences and identify trends.
- **Table Talks:** in which South Sudanese Australian young people currently involved with Youth Justice had the opportunity to speak to the Chair of the Expert Working Group and the Youth Justice Commissioner, to share their experiences of the youth justice system. Young people were invited to identify what they needed to support their transition out of Youth Justice and ultimately stay out of the justice system. Following this, an individual action plan was developed for each participant, with follow up and monitoring occurring through Youth Justice case management.
- **Custody consultations:** between October 2024 and March 2025, the Deputy Chair of the Expert Working Group met with over 15 South Sudanese, Australian and other African Australian young people in custody to learn about their experiences and hear their ideas for reform of the youth justice system.
- **Youth forums:** The Commission for Children and Young People convened 5 youth forums in 2023 and 2024 in partnership with the Expert Working Group from the DJCS team and various African Australian youth-led organisations. These forums



were held in Melton, Dandenong, Richmond, Springvale and Wyndham Vale. Over 300 young people participated in the forums.<sup>4</sup>

- **Community consultations:** with families, parents and carers of young people involved in the youth justice system, community Elders and leaders, service providers, community organisations, and religious and local networks. In particular, the Expert Working Group held several consultations with mothers and women's groups as well as broader community consultations with local organisations and service providers, adults and young people, including 2 consultations on policing issues in Dandenong and Melton, and 2 community consultations focused on the education system, also in Dandenong and Melton.

## Community grants program

The Expert Working Group has also undertaken substantial work to build the capacity of the South Sudanese Australian community to deliver responses to address the over-representation of young people in the youth justice system, including through a competitive grants program to the South Sudanese Australian community sector.

Since 2023, DJCS has invested \$1.3 million through three grant rounds to support community initiatives. The first round awarded \$500,000, and the second and third rounds each awarded \$400,000. This investment has sought to build the capacity of community-led organisations to support South Sudanese Australian children and young people at risk of entering the youth justice system, or already in contact with it. The grants enabled organisations to deliver impactful programs across diverse areas, including creative arts, intergenerational family activities, health and wellbeing, education and tutoring, mental health support, and alcohol and drug rehabilitation services.

Grants program alone cannot solve the problem of over-representation or fully address the service needs of the South Sudanese Australian community. Instead, the community grants program aimed to help nurture and grow the range of effective, community-led services for young people and build capacity in the community sector. This was an initial injection of funding, with a view to generating more sustained effort and improved outcomes for South Sudanese Australian young people and their families.

The successful grant recipients are shown in Figure 1.1 and are discussed further in the *Rapid Assessment: South Sudanese Australian Youth Expert Working Group – Grants Program* report at Appendix 3.

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<sup>4</sup> The first 3 forums are described in Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP), [2023–24 youth forum report 1: a snapshot of consultations with young people as part of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group](#), CCYP, 2024, accessed 13 November 2025.



**Figure 1.1. Recipients of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group community grants**

| Round 1                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Round 2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Round 3                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• African Youth Initiative</li> <li>• Nas Reframe Community (now Nas Recovery Centre)</li> <li>• NextGen Unite</li> <li>• Stand Out Basketball</li> <li>• Sudanese Mothers Coalition</li> <li>• South Sudanese Minds</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Australian African Foundation for Retention and Opportunity</li> <li>• African Youth Alliance</li> <li>• Africause</li> <li>• Multicultural Youth Support Services</li> <li>• Mzuri Dance</li> <li>• South Sudanese-Australian Academic Society</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nas Recovery Centre</li> <li>• ASPYA Foundation (formerly the African Youth Initiative)</li> <li>• South Sudanese Christian Welfare Association</li> <li>• NextGen Unite</li> <li>• Junubi Stars Basketball Club</li> <li>• Stand Out Youth Empowerment</li> <li>• Oyiti Foundation for Multicultural Youth</li> <li>• Sudanese Mothers Coalition</li> </ul> |

The South Sudanese Australian community has invested deeply in this work, demonstrating leadership and commitment. Understanding has deepened, relationships have strengthened, and community- and youth-led service responses have been nurtured to grow. Continued support from the government will be vital to ensure these early efforts take root and flourish, delivering enduring benefits for young people and the South Sudanese Australian community.

### 1.4 Supporting the community through loss

While the Expert Working Group worked with the South Sudanese Australian community to examine systemic issues and longer-term solutions, the community continued to experience significant loss. This means that the Expert Working Group undertook its task in a context that was continuing to develop, including in response to individual incidents.

For example, in response to a tragic event in Cobblebank in September 2025, a whole-of-government Emergency Management Team was established. This group convened daily with senior officials from across government to provide a coordinated immediate response to the affected families and community. Agencies continued to work closely together and with local organisations to ensure the victims’ families and broader community had appropriate support, including addressing safety and security concerns, and providing access to educational and mental health support, grief counselling and community healing sessions. The government also provided funding to two local organisations to provide mental health and trauma healing supports to the broader Victorian South Sudanese community.

There was also significant community consultation between senior government officials, including the Premier, Deputy Premier and Attorney General, and a range of community members and the families of the two boys. This process created a direct platform for the community to speak with the government and have their grief heard and acknowledged. It also provided an opportunity to address challenges and barriers that the community are facing.

The coordinated response demonstrated the value of strong relationships developed through the Expert Working Group.



## 2. The South Sudanese Australian community in Victoria

The South Sudanese Australian community is diverse, strong and vibrant, with a rich culture and heritage. Many South Sudanese Australians have achieved significant success in education, academia, sports and politics – demonstrating resilience, determination and creativity in the face of challenge and adversity.

This chapter provides a brief overview of the South Sudanese community in Victoria. This information is based on what the Expert Working Group heard and the available data. We acknowledge that the community is diverse, with different experiences and backgrounds. This content is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive. However, it is important that our work as an Expert Working Group is grounded in an understanding of the community's context.

The South Sudanese Australian community's experiences of forced displacement, migration and resettlement have shaped family dynamics, intergenerational relationships and connections to culture and identity. Recognising these factors provides essential insight into the social and structural challenges that influence young people's experiences, as well as the community's strengths, resilience and leadership. Building on this understanding, it is important to ensure that policy and service responses are culturally informed, community-led, and capable of addressing the root causes of over-representation rather than its symptoms.

### 2.1 Demographic information

#### Box 2.1. A note on demographic information

There is a significant likelihood that government and service data underestimates the total number of South Sudanese Australian community members in Victoria. Data that identifies people by country of birth can miss counting people from the South Sudanese Australian community who were born in Australia, or in a third country (many families spent long periods in refugee resettlement camps elsewhere in Africa before arriving in Australia).

The South Sudanese community in Victoria is the largest in Australia.

According to 2021 Australian Census data, there are 13,532 individuals with South Sudanese heritage in Victoria.<sup>5</sup> This figure encompasses persons who identify as having Acholi, Bari, Dinka, Chollo, Madi, and Nuer ancestry from South Sudan, as well as Darfurian and Nubian ancestry from Sudan (North), regardless of their place of birth. Only 23% (3,121) of Victorians with South Sudanese heritage were born in South Sudan.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Victorian Government, [South Sudanese community profile](#), Victorian Government website, 2024, accessed 16 September 2025. This profile is based on the best available data from the 2021 Australian Census, which defines ancestry as the cultural or ethnic group a person most identifies with. The Victorian Government notes the limitations and challenges in assigning ancestry or ethnicity to a specific 'community' and acknowledges the ethnic and linguistic complexity of the South Sudanese community.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [People in Victoria who were born in South Sudan](#), 2021 Census Country of birth QuickStats, ABS website, 2021, accessed 15 September 2025; Victorian Government, [South Sudanese community profile](#), Victorian Government website, 2024, accessed 16 September 2025.



Some community members expressed views to the Expert Working Group that the South Sudanese Australian population in Victoria may be closer to 20,000 to 30,000 people.

Most of the South Sudanese Australian community is young, with the largest cohorts aged from zero to 14 years (40.2%) and 15 to 24 years (22.4%).

People with South Sudanese ancestry make up approximately 0.2% of the Victorian population overall and around 0.4% of Victorians aged 10 to 24 years.<sup>7</sup> The gender breakdown for the South Sudanese community is 52.2% female and 47.8% male.<sup>8</sup>

Victoria's South Sudanese population lives predominantly in Melbourne's south-western and north-western suburbs (Table 2.1).<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2.1. Local government areas with the largest South Sudanese communities**

| Local government area | Number of people with South Sudanese ancestry |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Wyndham               | 2,654                                         |
| Melton                | 2,174                                         |
| Casey                 | 1,805                                         |
| Brimbank              | 1,145                                         |
| Greater Dandenong     | 782                                           |
| Cardinia              | 746                                           |
| Yarra                 | 328                                           |
| Whittlesea            | 263                                           |
| Greater Geelong       | 254                                           |
| Maribyrnong           | 252                                           |

Among Victorians born in South Sudan:

- most identify as Catholic (39.4%), Anglican (22.3%) or Christian (11.7%)<sup>10</sup>
- the main languages spoken are Arabic, Dinka, English, Nuer, Tigrinya and Amharic (South Sudanese Australians are often multilingual)<sup>11</sup>
- most (79%) have strong English language proficiency.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> 40.2% of South Sudanese Victorians are aged 14 or younger and 22.4% are aged 15 to 24 years: Victorian Government, [South Sudanese community profile](#), Victorian Government website, 2024, accessed 16 September 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Victorian Government, [South Sudanese community profile](#), Victorian Government website, 2024, accessed 16 September 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Victorian Government, [South Sudanese community profile](#), Victorian Government website, 2024, accessed 16 September 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [People in Victoria who were born in South Sudan](#), 2021 Census Country of birth QuickStats, ABS website, 2021, accessed 15 September 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Victorian Government, [South Sudanese community profile](#), Victorian Government website, 2024, accessed 16 September 2025. There are over 60 indigenous languages spoken in South Sudan: Cultural Atlas, [South Sudanese culture](#), Cultural Atlas website, 2025, accessed 17 September 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [People in Victoria who were born in South Sudan](#), 2021 Census Country of birth QuickStats, ABS website, 2021, accessed 15 September 2025; Victorian Government, [South Sudanese community profile](#), Victorian Government website, 2024, accessed 16 September 2025.



## 2.2 Strengths of the South Sudanese Australian community

In responding to experiences of war, displacement, forced migration and resettlement in Australia (discussed below), the South Sudanese Australian community has drawn on many strengths. These include:<sup>13</sup>

- **A powerful communal and collectivist culture** – this culture enables the community to create a strong sense of belonging, interdependence and shared responsibility among members; to view challenges as a collective issue rather than an individual problem; to emphasise that community members are not alone in their struggles; to come together during good and bad times to share experiences; to advocate through collective groups such as coalitions of women's groups, and to support each other to overcome challenges. These strategies are critical to supporting the mental and physical health of community members.
- **Resilience, adaptability and flexibility** – adverse and traumatic experiences have enabled many in the South Sudanese Australian community to develop coping and survival skills which have helped them to adapt to a new society and culture and overcome resettlement challenges.
- **Strong community leadership and Eldership** – South Sudanese Australian leaders and Elders in church and community groups advocate on behalf of their communities, support community members to overcome isolation, and create links between their communities and mainstream Australian institutions.
- **The importance of extended family** – in South Sudanese culture, the household structure is traditionally large and multi-generational, comprising not only the immediate family, but also grandparents, nieces, nephews, cousins and in-laws. The extended family plays a pivotal role in socialisation. Young people are encouraged to develop close relationships with cousins and siblings, fostering a network of mutual care, safety and protection. This collectivist orientation ensures that responsibilities such as childcare and elder care are shared among family members, strengthening family bonds and promoting a communal sense of identity.
- **Respect as a critical element of culture, language and identity** – this includes respect for oneself and respect for others, especially parents and Elders.
- **A strong emphasis on the value of education** – as refugees, many South Sudanese Australian parents experienced limited or disrupted education and consequently have strong expectations for their children's education as a means to a better future.

<sup>13</sup> SA Deng, *Fitting the jigsaw: South Sudanese and parenting practices in Australia* (Doctoral thesis), Victoria University, 2016, accessed 17 September 2025;

S Kaphle et al., 'Living at the fence – navigating complexities while settling in new country: lived experiences of South Sudanese refugees in Australia', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 2024, 45(4):689–705, doi:10.1080/07256868.2024.2307947; WBD Abur, *Settlement strategies for the South Sudanese community in Melbourne: an analysis of employment and sport participation* (unpublished PhD thesis), Victoria University, 2018, accessed 17 September 2025.



## 2.3 Migration experiences

The forced migration of people from South Sudan to Australia began in the 1990s in response to decades of armed conflict between North Sudan and South Sudan.<sup>14</sup> Most South Sudanese (previously recorded as Sudanese) arrived in Australia between 2001 and 2006, which was the peak period for humanitarian arrivals following the Second Sudanese Civil War, with smaller numbers arriving in the late 1990s.<sup>15</sup>

South Sudan became independent from Sudan on 9 July 2011 after more than 50 years of political struggle, making it the newest country in the world. However, due to ongoing civil unrest and violence, South Sudanese migration to Australia has continued since independence.

South Sudanese people's migration experiences are diverse. Many South Sudanese people arrived in Australia after spending several years in refugee camps in Kenya and Uganda. Others made their journey through Egypt and settled in Cairo before arriving in Australia.

While many have experienced armed conflict and violence firsthand, this is not the case for all South Sudanese Australians. Experiences of violence may also diverge depending on when an individual left South Sudan, as each armed conflict has been different in nature.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this diversity of experience, many South Sudanese people have been exposed to traumatic events, including torture, sexual abuse, the death of family members, threats of violence, food shortages, destruction of homes and villages, and separation from loved ones.<sup>17</sup> This has, in many cases, resulted in the intergenerational transmission of trauma, where unresolved pain, grief and loss are passed down from one generation to the next, adversely affecting identity, parenting and community cohesion.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.4 Resettlement challenges

Settlement or resettlement in a new country is a multifaceted and complex process in which newly arrived migrants seek to:

- integrate into a new society while maintaining their cultural identity
- in many cases, learn a new language
- understand a new legal system and navigate new government systems
- adapt to the values and norms prevailing in the host country
- participate fully in the host country's economic, social and political life, for example, through education and employment

<sup>14</sup> W Abur and R Spaaij, 'Settlement and employment experiences of South Sudanese people from refugee backgrounds in Melbourne, Australia', *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 2016, 37(2):107–128, p 107, doi:10.22160/22035184/aras-2016-37-2/107-128.

<sup>15</sup> Refugee Council of Australia, *South Sudanese refugees in Australia*, 2023, accessed 12 December 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Cultural Atlas, *South Sudanese culture*, Cultural Atlas website, 2025, accessed 17 September 2025.

<sup>17</sup> NG Khawaja and K Milner, 'Acculturation stress in South Sudanese refugees: impact on marital relationships', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2012, 36(5):624–636, doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.03.007.

<sup>18</sup> SA Deng, *Fitting the jigsaw: South Sudanese and parenting practices in Australia* (Doctoral thesis), Victoria University, 2016, accessed 17 September 2025.



- develop a sense of belonging and feelings of safety and security
- process any grief or loss associated with leaving their country of origin.<sup>19</sup>

The resettlement journey is rarely linear or straightforward.

Many South Sudanese migrants have faced obstacles and challenges associated with resettlement in Australia. These include:

- a lack of information on and support to navigate Australian services, systems and laws
- inadequate settlement support services
- housing insecurity
- financial pressures
- a lack of employment opportunities, resulting in unemployment and underemployment
- a lack of cultural safety in health and other services
- administrative barriers to obtaining citizenship
- experiences of racism and discrimination in workplaces, schools and services, on public transport and in the community
- isolation, confusion, frustration, disempowerment, marginalisation and other negative feelings caused by acculturation – the process of cultural and psychological change resulting from contact between groups, where newly arrived people negotiate their new environment and acquire the cultural characteristics of their host country.<sup>20</sup>

Some of these challenges are particularly acute in the current Australian context. For example, many South Sudanese families have settled in Australia due to a shortage of affordable housing and rising cost-of-living pressures on large parts of the community.

In addition, resettlement challenges have been exacerbated by negative portrayals of African Australians in Australian mainstream media and political discourse, leading to significant negative stereotyping. For example, racialised political and media campaigns were evident in the ‘African gangs’ narrative during and after the Moomba ‘riots’ in Federation Square in Melbourne in 2016. Such narratives have been fuelled by inflammatory and sensationalist media reporting and are believed to have led to increased discrimination towards Victorians of African appearance.<sup>21</sup> This type of reporting on ethnicity is not something that is typically discussed in media coverage for alleged crimes involving other ethnicities.

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<sup>19</sup> SA Deng, *Fitting the jigsaw: South Sudanese and parenting practices in Australia* (Doctoral thesis), Victoria University, 2016, accessed 17 September 2025; W Abur and R Spaaij, ‘Settlement and employment experiences of South Sudanese people from refugee backgrounds in Melbourne, Australia’, *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 2016, 37(2):107–128, doi:10.22160/22035184/aras-2016-37-2/107-128.

<sup>20</sup> NG Khawaja and K Milner, ‘Acculturation stress in South Sudanese refugees: impact on marital relationships’, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2012, 36(5):624–636, doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.03.007; SA Deng, *Fitting the jigsaw: South Sudanese and parenting practices in Australia* (Doctoral thesis), Victoria University, 2016, pp 44–45, accessed 17 September 2025.

<sup>21</sup> KJ Benier et al., *‘Don’t drag me into this’: growing up South Sudanese in Victoria after the 2016 Moomba ‘riot’*, Centre for Multicultural Youth, 2018, accessed 13 November 2025.



Many South Sudanese Australian young people were born in Australia and have not directly experienced resettlement. However, they may have been significantly affected by their parents' experiences of resettlement through intergenerational trauma. They have also experienced their own unique challenges. For example:

- **racism and discrimination** can profoundly affect the wellbeing of South Sudanese Australian children and young people and their participation in society, often leading to feelings of alienation and resulting in disengagement from education
- **feelings of being unfairly targeted by police** due to physical appearance or presence in a group in a public place significantly erode South Sudanese Australian young people's trust in police and in the fairness of the criminal legal system
- **family instability**, which may be exacerbated by acculturation stress, intergenerational conflict and disagreements over parenting approaches, can leave South Sudanese Australian children and young people without critical support systems
- **unresolved trauma** can cause emotional distress and anger, and lead to behavioural problems among young people who may not have access to culturally safe and appropriate mental health services.

These factors and their contribution to the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in the Victorian youth justice system are discussed in more detail in the rest of this report.



### 3. The over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in the youth justice system

This chapter provides a brief overview of the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in the Victorian youth justice system.

#### 3.1 The Victorian youth justice system

The youth justice system is a set of processes and practices for responding to and managing children and young people who have committed, or allegedly committed, a criminal offence. In Victoria, it deals primarily with children and young people aged 12 to 17 years at the time of the offence.

Within this system:

- **Victoria Police** is often the first agency to come into contact with a child or young person who is alleged to have committed an offence – the police have a role in preventing and responding to youth offending.
- **The Children's Court** is empowered to deal with the majority of criminal charges against children aged 12 to 17 years (previously 10 to 17 years).<sup>22</sup> The most serious charges against children are dealt with in the County or Supreme courts. Charges against young adults are heard in the Magistrates', County or Supreme courts, depending on the offence.<sup>23</sup>
- **Youth Justice**, within the Department of Justice and Community Safety, is responsible for supporting and managing children and young people on court orders to be supervised in the community (on bail, sentencing or parole orders) and those in youth justice custody (on sentence or remand).

#### 3.2 South Sudanese Australian children and young people in the youth justice system

South Sudanese Australian children and young people are over-represented in the youth justice system.

##### Box 3.1. What does 'over-representation' mean?

An over-representation of a minority group in youth justice statistics does not mean that members of that group commit the most crimes overall. Instead, it reflects that, on a population basis, a higher proportion of young people from that group are involved in the justice system compared to their share of the total population. For smaller communities, like the South Sudanese Australian community in Victoria, even a modest number of

<sup>22</sup> *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic), section 356; *Youth Justice Act 2024* (Vic), sections 156–158.

<sup>23</sup> Note: at the time of finalising this report, the Victorian Parliament had passed the *Justice Legislation Amendment (Community Safety) Act 2025*, requiring children aged 14 years and older charged with certain specified offences to have their matters heard in an adult court rather than the Children's Court.



offences can produce disproportionately high rates when expressed per capita. Over-representation can also reflect broader social and structural factors, such as disadvantage, systemic bias or differential contact with police, rather than higher levels of offending. It is therefore essential to interpret these figures with care and context, focusing on the underlying causes rather than reinforcing stereotypes or stigma.

## Youth Justice supervision

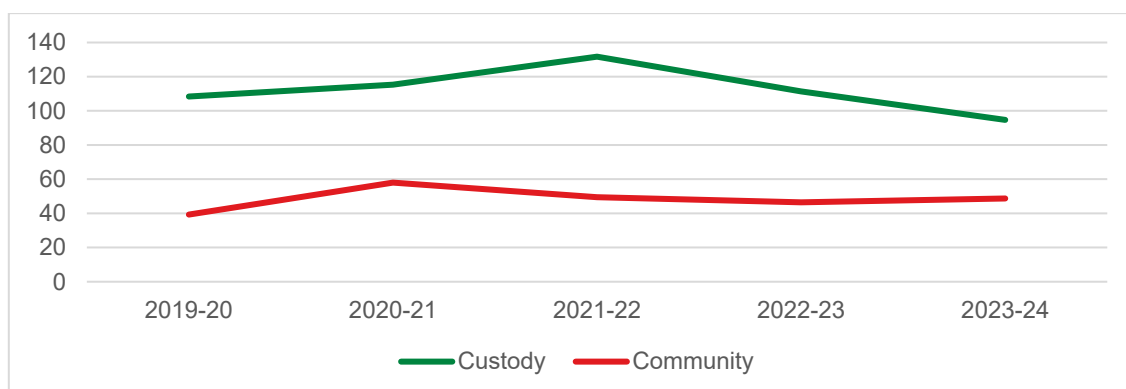
According to Youth Justice data, in 2024–25, South Sudanese Australian children and young people aged 10 to 24 years comprised 22% of the average daily number of children and young people in custody and 11% of the average daily number of children and young people under community supervision, while comprising only 0.5% of the Victorian population in this age group.<sup>24</sup>

In 2023–24, the average daily rate of South Sudanese Australian children and young people aged 10 to 24 years in youth justice custody was 591.1 per 100,000, compared with 6.2 per 100,000 for non-South Sudanese Australian children and young people. This means that South Sudanese Australian children and young people were about 95 times as likely as other children and young people to be in custody.<sup>25</sup>

The over-representation ratio in Youth Justice community supervision is lower, however, still high – in 2023–24, South Sudanese Australian children and young people were about 49 times as likely as non-South Sudanese Australian children and young people to be under Youth Justice community supervision.<sup>26</sup>

In the five years to 2023–24, the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in youth justice custody decreased overall, while their over-representation in community supervision increased (Figure 3.1).

**Figure 3.1. Over-representation rate ratios for South Sudanese Australian children and young people aged 10 to 24 years under Youth Justice supervision, 2019–20 to 2023–24**



<sup>24</sup> CRIS database as at November 2025 and ABS Census 2021; Estimated Resident Population as at 2024; Regional Population Projections as at 2023. South Sudanese Australian children and young people includes children and young people with either first of second ethnicity of 'Sudanese Peoples' or with their mother's country of birth as Sudan or South Sudan.

<sup>25</sup> Youth Justice overrepresentation data, 2023–24.

<sup>26</sup> Based on an average daily rate of South Sudanese Australian children and young people aged 10 to 24 years under community supervision of 1,610.1 per 100,000, compared with 33 per 100,000 for other children and young people.



### **Box 3.2. The profile of African Australian young people in Youth Justice**

The Youth Justice Case File Review (discussed in Chapter 1) found that:<sup>27</sup>

- around 74% of children and young people had South Sudanese or Sudanese heritage, 47% were born in Australia, 15% did not speak English as a first language and 8% were not Australian citizens (although citizenship status was unknown for 28%)<sup>28</sup>
- 29% of children and young people were aged 10 to 14 years at their first contact with police – this age group had more complex needs, experienced higher rates of remand and were more likely to reoffend than older young people<sup>29</sup>
- across all age groups, the most common outcome (46%) of initial contact with police was being remanded to a youth justice custodial facility, and among those initially remanded, nearly 39% eventually received a non-custodial sentence and did not serve additional time in custody
- one third of children and young people had experienced 4 or more unique episodes of remand
- while the nature of offending varied, a small proportion of children and young people had been charged with very serious offences, including recklessly causing serious injury in circumstances of gross violence, aggravated carjacking and murder.

The Case File Review also found that:<sup>30</sup>

- the most common criminogenic needs among the group were negative peer relations (65%), school disengagement (50% of young people who were not in custody had no current educational engagement), substance use (53%) and a lack of pro-social recreation
- 43% of children and young people had experienced trauma, and 25% had witnessed family violence
- girls and young women comprised only 11% of the group but presented with acute needs, having experienced disproportionately high levels of trauma, family violence and mental ill-health
- 34% of children and young people had a sibling with a history of offending
- 15% of children and young people reported having experienced racism within the youth justice system.

<sup>27</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

<sup>28</sup> Other countries of birth for children and young people in the Case File Review include South Sudan (9%), Egypt (8%), Kenya (8%), Sudan (7%) and Ethiopia (5%).



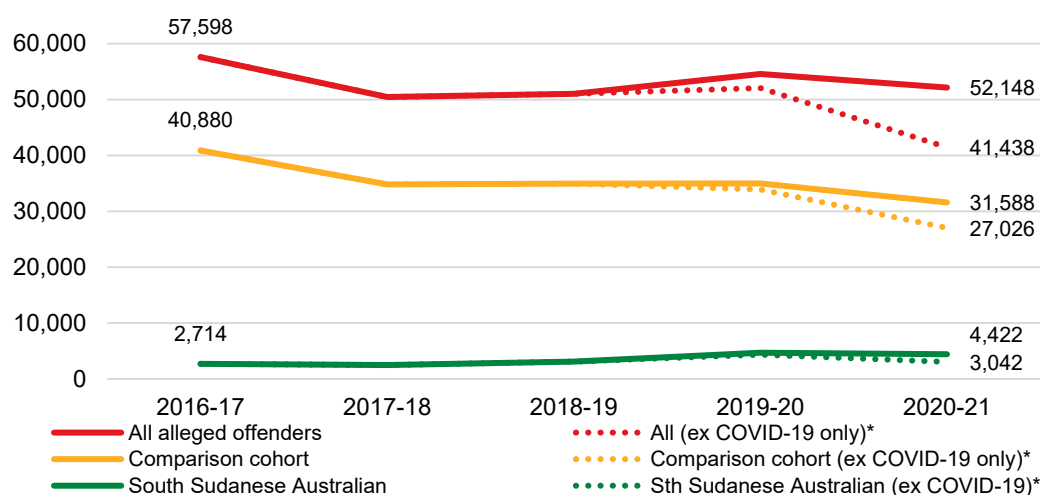
## Police-recorded incidents, charge rates and court outcomes

The Expert Working Group commissioned the Evidence and Insights Unit within the Department of Justice and Community Safety to undertake research on South Sudanese Australian children and young people's contact with the criminal justice system (the E&I study) to deepen its understanding of what is happening in practice.

The E&I study examined police and Youth Justice data to compare the trajectories of South Sudanese Australian 10 to 24-year-olds through the criminal justice system with those of other children and young people (referred to as the 'comparison cohort') over a 5-year period (2016–17 to 2020–21).<sup>31</sup>

The E&I study found that, while overall alleged youth offending declined between 2016–17 and 2020–21, the number of alleged criminal incidents recorded against South Sudanese Australian children and young people increased by 63% over the 5-year period (Figure 3.2).<sup>32</sup>

**Figure 3.2. Alleged offender incidents involving 10 to 24-year-olds, 2016–17 to 2020–21**



\* The dotted lines show the number of alleged offender incidents for each cohort, excluding incidents that only involved breach of public health order offences such as mask fines.

<sup>29</sup> This finding is consistent with research indicating that the younger a child is at their first sentence, the more likely they are to reoffend generally, reoffend violently and continue offending into the adult criminal jurisdiction: Sentencing Advisory Council (SAC), *Reoffending by children and young people in Victoria*, SAC, 2016, p 52, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>30</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

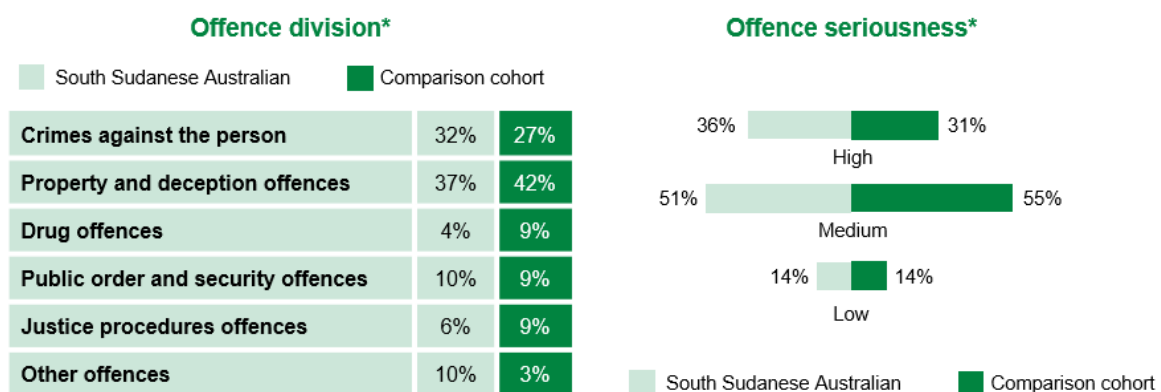
<sup>31</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished. The South Sudanese Australian group included young people whose Crime Statistics Agency country of birth was 'Sudan' or 'South Sudan', those whose nationality was ever recorded by Victoria Police as 'Sudanese' and those whom Youth Justice had ever recorded as 'Sudanese' or 'South Sudanese'. The comparison cohort comprised Australian-born, non-South Sudanese, non-Aboriginal children and young people. Aboriginal children and young people were excluded from the comparison cohort because of their known over-representation in the criminal justice system (p 15).

<sup>32</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, pp 21–22. This increase was exacerbated by high rates of incidents involving COVID-19 breach of public health restriction offences such as improper or no mask wearing.



Across all incidents, South Sudanese Australian children and young people had a slightly higher proportion of offences categorised as ‘high’ seriousness (36% compared with 31% for the comparison cohort) (Figure 3.3). However, very serious offending (Category A or Category B serious youth offences) was rare among both groups.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 3.3. Alleged offender incident characteristics data for South Sudanese Australian young people in Victoria against the comparison cohort of the broader community<sup>34</sup>**



The E&I study found that:

- South Sudanese Australian children and young people had **over twice as many** alleged criminal incidents recorded on average as the comparison cohort (8.9 compared to 3.5). While 71% of the comparison cohort had 1–2 incidents recorded, only 38% of South Sudanese Australian children and young people fell in that range.
- South Sudanese Australian children aged 10 to 17 years were **almost twice as likely** to be charged by police for their **first** alleged criminal incident as the comparison cohort (44% compared with 23%).
- For all alleged criminal incidents involving 10 to 17-year-olds (except those that only involved a COVID-19 breach of public health order offence, such as mask fines), South Sudanese Australian children were **more likely to be charged** than the comparison cohort (79% compared with 62%) (Figure 3.4).
- South Sudanese Australian children and young people’s criminal incidents were **more likely to progress** through the criminal justice system than those of the comparison cohort – this was most evident among 10 to 17-year-olds (Figure 3.4).<sup>35</sup>

Statistical analysis showed that for 10- to 17-year-olds, the disparity in the likelihood of being charged for a first alleged criminal incident was only partly explained by observable factors such as age, location or alleged group offending. The E&I study attributed 81% of the

<sup>33</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, p 25.

<sup>34</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished.

<sup>35</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, pp 5, 8, 24.



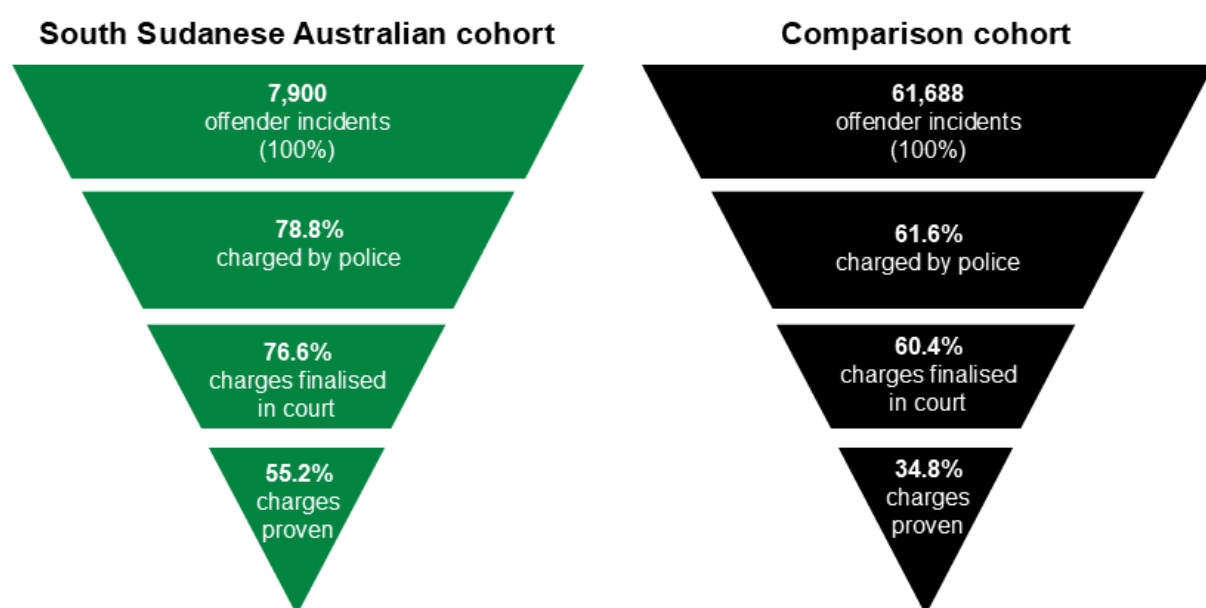
disparity to ‘unexplained’ differences – i.e. factors not captured in the analysis, data gaps, or potential bias or discrimination.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, the disparity in the charge rates for all alleged criminal incidents involving 10- to 17-year-olds (other than COVID-19 breach only incidents) was only partially explained by observable factors such as prior offending or group offending. The E&I study attributed 25% of this disparity to unexplained differences.<sup>37</sup>

The E&I study concluded that the type and seriousness of the offence allegedly committed had very little statistical impact associated with a young person’s likelihood of being charged, countering media narratives that differences are primarily due to South Sudanese Australian children and young people committing more violent offences.

Instead, South Sudanese Australian children and young people’s higher rates of prior offending or being charged by police in the past statistically increased their likelihood of being arrested in the future, indicating a ‘compounding effect’ on South Sudanese Australians’ contact with the criminal justice system.<sup>38</sup> The E&I study also concluded that being charged early increased the likelihood of being charged later, which further compounded South Sudanese Australians’ contact with the system.<sup>39</sup>

**Figure 3.4. Attrition rates for 10 to 17-year-old alleged offender incidents, excluding COVID-19 breach only incidents**



<sup>36</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, p 43.

<sup>37</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, p 38.

<sup>38</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, pp 46–47.

<sup>39</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, p 8.



The E&I study also found that South Sudanese Australian children and young people were 66% more likely to receive a custodial sentence overall (see Figures 3.5 and 3.6).<sup>40</sup>

**Figure 3.5. Proven court outcomes, 10 to 17-year-olds**

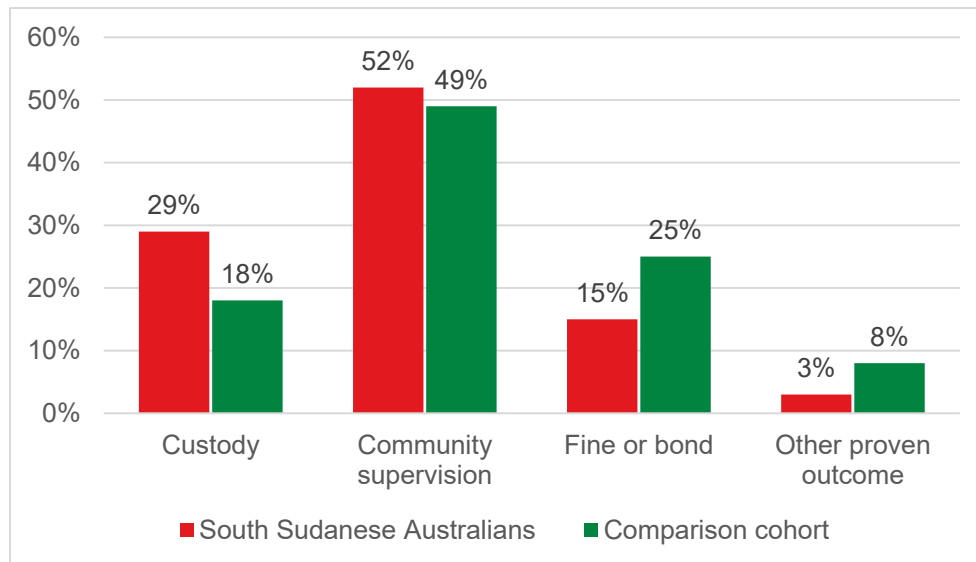
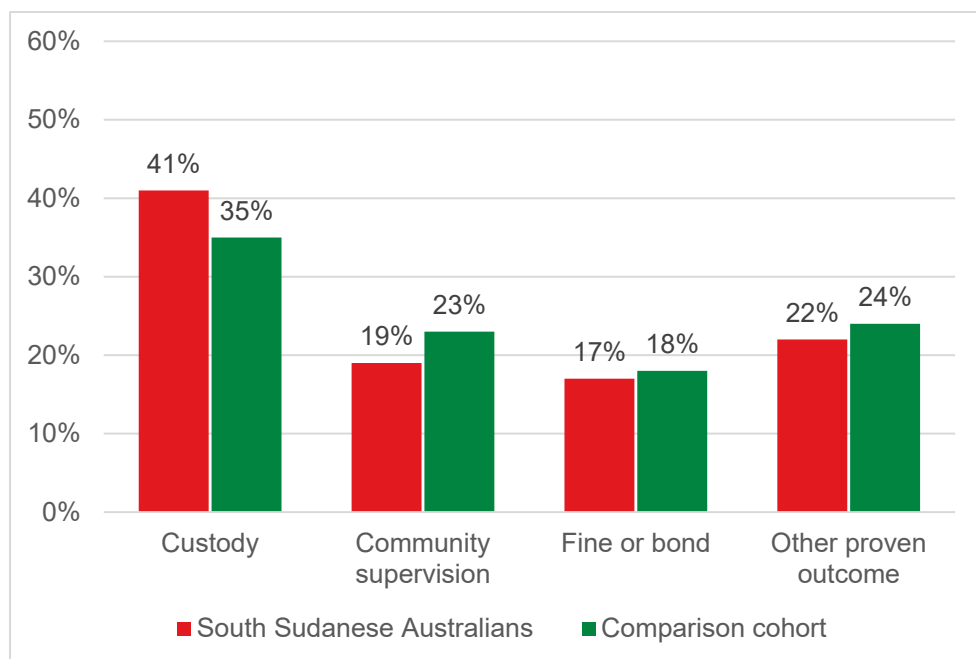


**Figure 3.6. Proven court outcomes, 18 to 24-year-olds**



Proven court outcomes include outcomes where children and young people have pleaded guilty to a charge.

<sup>40</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, pp 8–9, 29–32.



### 3.3 The drivers of over-representation in the youth justice system

Understanding why some young people become involved in the youth justice system requires attention to both risk factors that increase vulnerability and protective factors that support resilience, connection and positive development.

Successfully addressing youth offending requires recognising that children and young people often have different motivations and decision-making processes than adults. For example, problematic behaviour in very young children is generally driven by intrinsic needs (e.g. manifestation of distress and disadvantage) rather than extrinsic needs (such as financial gain). Children and young people do not weigh up the risks and consequences of an action in the same way that an adult would before rationally making a decision to act, making punitive approaches largely ineffective in preventing youth offending. Much Government policy recognises this distinction, however the Expert Working Group notes with concern the reforms contained in the *Justice Legislation Amendment (Community Safety) Act 2025*, which at the time of finalising this report had recently passed through Victorian Parliament and would see children and young people who commit certain offences treated as adults.<sup>41</sup>

Children also have rights under human rights law to special consideration reflective of their age, physical and psychological difference.<sup>42</sup>

In Victoria, punishment has historically not been the goal of the youth justice system. The system has been founded on the principle that children and young people are developmentally distinct from adults and have a unique capacity for rehabilitation and positive change. Its focus has been on accountability, restoration and support for personal development, not retribution, so that young people can take responsibility for their actions and build safer, more stable futures within their communities.<sup>43</sup>

In the *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030*, the Victorian Government recognised that '[p]revention, diversion, and early intervention are the most effective and fiscally responsible ways of reducing youth crime'.<sup>44</sup>

The *Youth Justice Strategic Plan* set out 4 major reform directions (Box 3.3).<sup>45</sup>

#### **Box 3.3. The Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030**

The reform directions of the Youth Justice Strategic Plan are:

1. Improving diversion and supporting early intervention and crime prevention.

<sup>41</sup> Hon Jacinta Allan MP, Premier of Victoria, [Adult time for violent crime](#), Media release, 12 November 2025, accessed 1 December 2025.

<sup>42</sup> United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment 24: Children's rights in the child justice system* ('General Comment 24'), UN Doc CRC/C/GC/24 (18 September 2019); *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic), section 17.

<sup>43</sup> See for example, *Youth Justice Act 2024* (Vic), Part 1.3 Guiding youth justice principles.

<sup>44</sup> Victorian Government, [Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030](#), Victorian Government, 2020, Principle 2, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>45</sup> Victorian Government, [Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030](#), Victorian Government, 2020, p 17, accessed 13 November 2025.



2. Reducing reoffending and promoting community safety by supporting children and young people to turn their lives around.
3. Strengthening partnerships with families, services and professionals who support children and young people's rehabilitation.
4. Investing in a skilled, stable and safe youth justice system.

Victoria's *Crime Prevention Strategy* complements the diversionary approach of Youth Justice, setting a clear approach for government to partner with communities and key organisations to deliver innovative solutions that address the underlying causes of crime, improve safety for all Victorians and prevent contact with the justice system, particularly for young people.<sup>46</sup>

## Protective and risk factors for all young people

Protective factors are experiences, behaviours, characteristics and contexts that help buffer young people from risks and support desistance from offending. They include:<sup>47</sup>

- stable and supportive family relationships
- positive engagement with education, employment or training
- strong cultural identity and community connection
- pro-social peers and mentors who model positive behaviour
- access to safe housing and mental health supports
- opportunities for meaningful participation in community, sport, faith or cultural life.

The presence of even one strong protective factor, such as a trusted adult relationship or stable schooling, can make a significant difference to a young person's trajectory.

Risk factors are individual, family, social and structural circumstances that can shape a young person's development and environment and increase the risk of offending. Common risk factors include:<sup>48</sup>

- exposure to trauma, including family violence, neglect or abuse
- disengagement from education, particularly chronic absenteeism or school exclusion
- unstable housing or homelessness
- substance use and mental health challenges, often untreated or compounded by stigma
- peer influences, especially association with peers engaged in anti-social behaviour

<sup>46</sup> Victorian Government, [Crime prevention strategy](#), Victorian Government, 2021, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>47</sup> D Jolliffe et al., 'Protective factors for violence: results from the Pittsburgh Youth Study', *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 2016, 45: 32–40, doi:10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2016.02.007; P Armytage and J Ogloff, [Youth justice review and strategy: meeting needs and reducing offending](#), Victorian Government, 2017, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>48</sup> P Armytage and J Ogloff, [Youth justice review and strategy: meeting needs and reducing offending](#), Victorian Government, 2017, accessed 13 November 2025.



- socio-economic disadvantage and poverty, limiting access to opportunities and support
- discrimination or marginalisation, which can erode self-worth and belonging.

It is not surprising that this list overlaps significantly with the experience of the South Sudanese Australian community described in Chapter 2.

## Drivers of over-representation among South Sudanese Australian young people

While these general factors apply across all groups, the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in Victoria's youth justice system reflects an additional set of structural, cultural and historical drivers that compound disadvantage and limit access to protective supports.

Many South Sudanese Australian families have experienced forced displacement, conflict and trauma prior to resettlement. These experiences often intersect with the stresses of migration, such as language barriers, financial hardship, cultural adaptation and discrimination, which create complex social conditions that can increase vulnerability.

Key drivers identified through the Expert Working Group's consultations and research include:

- **Intergenerational disruption:** Migration has altered traditional parenting structures and community authority. Parents may feel disempowered in a new social and legal environment. At the same time, young people, many of whom were born in Australia, adapt more quickly to Australian cultural norms, leading to tension and disconnection.
- **Economic pressure and limited employment opportunities:** High levels of underemployment, insecure work and housing stress create instability and reduce access to protective activities such as education, sport or recreation.
- **Racism and discrimination:** Experiences of racial profiling, stereotyping and negative media portrayal have eroded trust in institutions and contributed to alienation and disengagement.
- **Peer and identity factors:** Young people who feel excluded from both their cultural and broader Australian identities may seek belonging in peer groups that reinforce anti-social norms or risk-taking behaviour.
- **Inadequate cultural responsiveness in services:** Mainstream support systems – education, child protection, health and justice – often lack the cultural understanding and flexibility needed to engage effectively with South Sudanese families, resulting in missed opportunities for early intervention.
- **Barriers to citizenship and participation:** For families without citizenship or permanent residency, uncertainty about legal status and access to services can increase stress and insecurity, limit opportunity and deepen social isolation.



These drivers do not reflect the inherent characteristics of the South Sudanese Australian community. Instead, they are the result of social and systemic conditions that amplify risk and constrain protective factors.

## Protective factors within the South Sudanese Australian community

At the same time, the South Sudanese Australian community holds powerful protective strengths that can be built upon to prevent offending and support rehabilitation. These include:

- A **collectivist culture** that emphasises shared responsibility, mutual care and respect for Elders.
- **Strong cultural and faith-based networks** that promote belonging, moral guidance and resilience.
- **Emerging youth leadership** and community-led organisations providing culturally grounded programs in mentoring, sport, employment and recovery.
- **Family and community aspirations for education and achievement** are often rooted in the value placed on learning as a pathway to stability and success.

Supporting these protective factors through targeted investment, community-led initiatives and culturally responsive systems is central to reducing over-representation.

In sum, over-representation of South Sudanese Australian young people in the youth justice system cannot be understood in isolation from the broader context of settlement, social inequality and systemic bias. The South Sudanese Australian community is only one of many minority racialised and marginalised communities to experience justice system over-representation, whether in Australia or internationally.

It is also important to emphasise that, while the degree of over-representation is high, the overall numbers of South Sudanese Australian children and young people engaging in offending and entering the youth justice system are small.

The path forward lies in strengthening both community-based protective factors and the responsiveness of mainstream systems – to ensure that every young person, regardless of background, has the opportunity to belong, contribute and thrive. Setting out this path is the focus of the recommendations in this report.



## Part B. Strong foundations: Strengthening protective factors and reducing risks for young South Sudanese Australians

This part of the report sets out findings and recommendations to support South Sudanese Australian children and young people in growing and developing within the Victorian community. It speaks about:

- the establishment of a community hub, bringing together the strength of the South Sudanese Australian community
- how parents and carers can be empowered so that families are strong, supported and connected
- harnessing the power of education, which gives children and young people the best opportunities in life
- how community-led services can enhance collective strength and effective action, with coordinated and culturally responsive support from government and mainstream services
- the need for more intensive, community-based interventions for young people involved in high-harm peer groups – a growing challenge across the broader Victorian community that also significantly affects South Sudanese Australian young people.



## 4. The foundation stone: A community hub

*Real change will only come through trusted, community-led solutions rooted in culture, kinship and place.<sup>49</sup>*

This chapter calls for the establishment of a South Sudanese Australian community hub – an essential first step and foundation stone for many of the reforms recommended in this report. While the report addresses complex and systemic issues, lasting change must be grounded in place, connection and community leadership. The creation of a hub deliberately comes first: it is the galvanising point from which collective energy, direction and action can flow.

### 4.1 What we heard

Through its consultations, the Expert Working Group consistently heard from South Sudanese Australian leaders, parents, young people and service providers that one of the greatest barriers to collective healing and progress is the lack of a dedicated space for the community to gather, connect to supports, plan and lead.

*South Sudanese [community] in Wyndham City and surrounding Councils, or in areas with a high number of families ... do not have a single hub or centre, which made it harder to render support to those who need social and mental health support. It also made partnerships among the community and other organisations extremely difficult to reach out to those who are isolated in the community with a lack of understanding of how to access support services, including language and cultural barriers. Lacking a centre or community space limits partnership and collaboration among organisations.<sup>50</sup>*

For a community whose story has been shaped by conflict, displacement, migration and resettlement, the absence of a shared place is especially significant. The South Sudanese Australian community includes many cultural, linguistic, and faith groups with diverse migration experiences. While this diversity is a strength, it has also meant that the community's structures of connection and decision-making have had to be rebuilt from the ground up in Australia.

### 4.2 Findings and recommendations

The proposal for a community hub builds directly on the collectivist culture of care and interdependence that underpins South Sudanese Australian life. As outlined earlier in this report, the community's traditions of mutual support, shared responsibility and respect for Elders have long been protective factors for young people. These same values underpin many of the community-led programs that have emerged over recent years.

#### The role of a multi-purpose community hub

A community hub would therefore serve as both a physical and symbolic centre of gravity – a place where connections can be rebuilt and sustained, where leaders can come together, and where the community's collective vision can take shape. It would be a visible sign of

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<sup>49</sup> Community member, Community consultations, 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Parent, Community consultation, 2023.



continuity, belonging and strength in a context marked by years of mobility and fragmentation.

A community hub would also strengthen the interface between community-led organisations and government services, enabling coordination, visibility and shared planning.

Across the western and south-eastern metropolitan regions, South Sudanese and broader African Australian organisations are providing culturally grounded services in youth engagement, family support, mentoring and recovery. Programs supported through the Expert Working Group's community grants, such as those led by Nas Recovery Centre, the ASPYA Foundation and Next Gen Unite, demonstrate both capability and innovation. However, these efforts are dispersed across many locations and often operate with limited resources and short-term funding.

A community hub would offer opportunities to bring this work together, anchoring the strengths that already exist in the community and creating the infrastructure needed for them to grow.

A community hub could perform several interrelated functions:

- **Leadership and coordination:** Bringing together South Sudanese Australian community leaders, Elders, youth representatives and service partners to plan and deliver collective initiatives.
- **Space for young people:** Providing a designated space within the facility for South Sudanese Australian young people to gather and connect – something young people told the Expert Working Group they would highly value.
- **Community-led service delivery:** Providing space for culturally responsive programs in parenting, youth engagement, education, employment, mental health and restorative practice.
- **Information and navigation:** Helping families to connect with mainstream services – schools, health, housing, legal assistance, justice and employment – through trusted community intermediaries.<sup>51</sup>
- **Cultural connection and healing:** Offering a welcoming space for cultural events, intergenerational dialogue and community gatherings that reinforce identity and belonging.
- **A base for future initiatives:** Serving as a foundation for the implementation of other recommendations in this report – particularly those focused on parenting support, youth leadership, employment pathways and coordination of community-led services.

The benefits of government investment in community spaces can be seen in the example of the Banksia Gardens Neighbourhood House outlined in Box 4.1 below.

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<sup>51</sup> In particular, the Expert Working Group notes that civil legal assistance for mothers and families – for example, to maintain housing, seek citizenship, obtain NDIS supports or ensure appropriate social security payments – can help to prevent young people's contact with the criminal justice system. Information provided by Victoria Legal Aid, November 2025.



#### **Box 4.1. Example – Banksia Gardens Neighbourhood House**

Banksia Gardens Neighbourhood House, located on the edge of the Banksia Gardens Housing Estate, is located in the heart of Broadmeadows and offers a space for community members to learn new skills, share ideas and experience new activities.

It has a strong commitment to community development and action research principles, with programs focused on early childhood, education and training, young people, environmental sustainability, and community participation and advocacy.

The centre hosts a range of social, recreational and educational programs for people of all ages, abilities and cultural backgrounds.

Programs run by the lead agency, Banksia Gardens Association Incorporated, include early childhood, education and training, gender equity, young people, environmental sustainability and community participation and advocacy. Programs for young people include school engagement, after-school programs (ranging across social, sporting and academic fields), VCE support, holiday programs, youth-led support groups and a youth-focused climate and environmental group. Banksia Gardens Association Incorporated also runs a social enterprise café to provide a space for young people to gain work experience.

Classes and events also include adult education and training.

Factors that support the work of the centre include:

- **Strong relationship with community:** Located in the Neighbourhood House at the edge of the Banksia Gardens housing estate, the project is well-connected to the community through its location, the range of services it offers and the involvement of community members in the governance of the service.
- **The service provides a range of programs:** Banksia Gardens Association Incorporated runs multiple programs via a diverse range of funding streams, allowing overhead costs to be shared and a range of supports to be utilised to support people in their community.
- **Bilingual workers:** Workers from the community (in particular, Somali and Pasifika) support the cultural capacity and encourage connections to the centre.
- **Strong relationships with schools:** Long-term professional relationships and a range of touchpoints help the centre to maintain close working relationships with local high schools.
- **Use of brokerage:** Banksia Gardens Association Incorporated uses brokerage for anything that might be a barrier to achieving pro-social goals, such as food, clothing, identification documents and computers, as well as crisis support and outings to build rapport.
- **Radical inclusion:** Banksia Gardens Association Incorporated takes a 'radical inclusion' approach to working with children and young people, working to resolve things through dialogue and adapting ways of working to engage and support individual participants. They work hard not to exclude young people because of their behaviour.



## **Complementary to other community services**

The hub would not duplicate existing services. For example, Community Support Groups (CSGs) have a unique and distinct focus and role.

CSGs are community-led, place-based initiatives designed to strengthen youth engagement, build social cohesion, and support families and communities to build protective factors against youth disengagement and its consequences. They deliver a range of activities, including weekly homework clubs, job-readiness initiatives, sports and recreation activities, youth mentoring sessions, religious guidance, and leadership and community engagement opportunities.

They focus on preventing and responding to youth disengagement through culturally responsive early intervention activities, in collaboration with local agencies and services. This includes advocating for the community and adopting a holistic approach that supports families to improve outcomes for young people.

Six CSGs funded through the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing operate in:

- Melton Brimbank
- Dandenong Casey Cardinia
- Wyndham
- North Melbourne, Kensington and Werribee
- Heidelberg West.

An additional CSG funded through the Department of Justice and Community Safety operates in Hume (Broadmeadows).

CSGs deliver early intervention and prevention initiatives to strengthen youth and community engagement, and provide individualised support and referral pathways for young people aged 12 to 25 who are at risk of disengagement.

The focus of a CSG is to link young people to an integrated range of programs and activities, including education, training, employment pathways, health and human services, sport and recreation, and other community activities.

While the CSGs primarily focus on delivering early intervention and prevention initiatives, they report being often engaged to assist with responsive and diversionary activities due to their trusted role in communities.

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing advised the Expert Working Group that, due to demand, CSG staff are at capacity based on current resourcing.

The proposed community hub for the South Sudanese Australian community would have a broader focus, acting as a convening point that strengthens collaboration, amplifies community leadership and ensures that support is grounded in the specific lived experience and cultural knowledge of the South Sudanese Australian community.



## Starting with one hub

Ideally, multiple community hubs would be established across Victoria in areas with large South Sudanese Australian populations. However, in developing its recommendations, the Expert Working Group has taken a practical and staged approach – recognising both the importance of building community capacity over time and the current fiscal constraints facing the Victorian Government. The recommendations, therefore, focus on the next achievable step: establishing a community hub in a high-demand location, such as the City of Wyndham, to pilot and evaluate before scaling to other priority areas across Victoria.

### Box 4.2. Why Wyndham?

The City of Wyndham local government area is in the south-west of Melbourne and covers the following localities: Cocoroc, Eynesbury, Hoppers Crossing, Laverton, Laverton North, Laverton RAAF, Little River, Mambourin, Mount Cottrell, Point Cook, Quandong, Tarneit, Truganina, Werribee, Werribee South, Williams Landing and Wyndham Vale.

Wyndham has the largest concentration of South Sudanese Australians in Victoria. It is a rapidly growing region facing high housing demand, limited community infrastructure and rising service needs. These pressures are acute for newly settled and larger families, many that face economic hardship and limited access to culturally appropriate supports.

Community members have identified Wyndham as a high-priority location for investment in collective infrastructure. A hub located in Wyndham would provide a focal point for community activity in the western region while also serving as a pilot model to inform the development of similar hubs over time in other areas with large South Sudanese Australian populations.

### Recommendation 1. A community hub

That the Victorian Government engage (by the end of 2026) a consortium of African Australian community-led organisations to design, establish and deliver a South Sudanese Australian and other African/multicultural communities Community Hub. The Hub should:

- (a) deliver culturally responsive, community-led support to African Australian families and young people, including the delivery of direct services
- (b) perform a coordinating and referral role to connect community members with broader social, education, health (including mental health, Maternal and Child Health, and early parenting), justice, legal assistance, employment and housing services
- (c) operate from a single, accessible and welcoming physical location
- (d) include a designated space for young people within the facility.

The initiative should commence as a trial in a high-demand location, such as the Wyndham local government area, with a view to evaluating outcomes and scaling up the model for implementation in other priority areas across Victoria over time. The hub model should link to, rather than duplicate, the work being done by Community Support Groups.



## 5. Empowering parents and families

Strong family connections are a protective factor that can help to mitigate against children and young people's contact with the youth justice system.<sup>52</sup> Strong family connections support positive identity formation and social development for children and young people.

*There is no community without family. All this [solutions to address over-representation] starts and ends with family.<sup>53</sup>*

As outlined in Chapter 2, strong family connections are an inherent strength of the collectivist culture of South Sudanese communities. However, numerous factors place pressure on South Sudanese Australian parents and carers raising children in Victoria.

This discussion in no way seeks to blame South Sudanese Australian parents and families for their children's contact with the criminal justice system – rather, it draws attention to the specific challenges faced by many families, and the ways in which systems have failed to support parents and families in responding to these challenges.

This chapter makes recommendations to support parents and families.

### 5.1 What we heard

As highlighted below, the Expert Working Group heard that parenting and intergenerational pressures stem from the intersection of migration, trauma, cultural change, economic challenges and discrimination. These points are summarised below.

#### Generational gap

- **Different cultures:** Parents are often trying to uphold traditional South Sudanese norms while children quickly adopt new values and ways of life.

*I feel lost sometimes. My children speak English, watch Australian TV, and they don't understand our traditions anymore.<sup>54</sup>*

*The disconnect between parents and children. The disconnection is causing the young people to find a community outside.<sup>55</sup>*

- **Different life experiences:** Parents and children have very different life experiences. Children and young people may feel their parents don't understand the world they are growing up in.

*Right now, the parents are uneducated in life. They need to understand how we feel. But we need to understand them. Some young people don't understand the struggles of their parents.<sup>56</sup>*

<sup>52</sup> P Armytage and J Ogloff, *Youth justice review and strategy: meeting needs and reducing offending*, Victorian Government, 2017, Part 1, p 164, accessed 13 November 2025; D Jolliffe et al., 'Protective factors for violence: results from the Pittsburgh Youth Study', *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 2016, 45: 32–40, doi:10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2016.02.007.

<sup>53</sup> Community member, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>54</sup> Father, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.



*It's about equipping parents with how to deal with living here in Australia.<sup>57</sup>*

## Loss of community structures

- **Collective parenting model disrupted:** In South Sudan, extended family and community play a large role in raising children. In Australia, nuclear family living and social isolation mean parents often must manage alone.

*The way we lived back home is much different. Disputes between marriages, children misbehaving, family issues etc, are dealt with by community Elders. There are many steps taken before the court is involved. I wish there was something like this in Australia.<sup>58</sup>*

- **Single parenting that challenges traditional gender roles:** Many South Sudanese women lost their husbands in the conflict and have been parenting as single mothers in both refugee camps and when they resettle in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 15.2% of South Sudanese families in Victoria are one-parent families. When the parents were born in South Sudan, this increased to 48.8%.<sup>59</sup> In the Youth Justice Case File Review, 92% of African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision reported having a mother living in Victoria, whereas only 61% of young people reported having a father living in Victoria.<sup>60</sup>

*I'm really big on family. When there is an absence of a father or a role model, that absence can have a huge impact on everyone. It's hard for him to find that support. He doesn't have that right now so he finds it easier to go back to those friends as they understand.<sup>61</sup>*

*I always grew up in western suburbs and wondered about the reasons why there was so much crime. And I've noticed it might be because there is no structure in the family home. A lot of us grew up in single mother homes and there is no structure to the family – nobody's watching us closely as we grow up.<sup>62</sup>*

- **Challenges to traditional gender roles:** Traditional South Sudanese gender roles are well-defined, with clear expectations for men and women. In many families, the husband or father is the breadwinner or head of the family and has authority over his children and wife.<sup>63</sup> However, as South Sudanese families settle in Victoria, these gender-based responsibilities and power dynamics may evolve, with women taking on a more active role in the public sphere and contributing to the household's financial wellbeing. This shift in gender roles can create a mismatch of expectations;

<sup>57</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Community member, Community consultation, 2023.

<sup>59</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [People in Victoria who were born in South Sudan](#), 2021 Census Country of birth QuickStats, ABS website, 2021, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>60</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

<sup>61</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>63</sup> SA Deng, [Fitting the jigsaw: South Sudanese and parenting practices in Australia](#) (unpublished Doctoral thesis), Victoria University, 2016, accessed 13 November 2025.



South Sudanese men may struggle to reconcile their traditional roles with the realities of their new cultural context, which can create tensions within the family.<sup>64</sup>

*In South Sudan. I was at home with the children. Here, I have to work, and it's difficult. My husband and I argue because he doesn't understand why things need to change.*<sup>65</sup>

## Trauma

- **Pre- and post-migration trauma:** Parents may carry trauma from war, loss of family members or time in refugee camps. Evidence suggests that the challenges for first generation refugees can exist years after resettlement. War-related post-traumatic stress extends beyond the individual and can affect entire families. Long-term impacts of the refugee experience include intergenerational trauma, which can translate into difficulties with physical and mental health for multiple generations in a family.<sup>66</sup> The process of acculturation can also be a source of significant stress, leading to feelings of uncertainty, frustration and disconnection.<sup>67</sup>
- **Stigma and service availability:** Stigma around mental health and a lack of culturally appropriate services can prevent parents from seeking mental health support, affecting family functioning.

## Racism and discrimination

- **Community stigma:** Negative media portrayals of young African people can heighten parental anxiety and pressure to protect children from stereotyping.
- **Experiences of racism:** Parents must support children who face racism while managing their own experiences.

## Language barriers

- **English proficiency:** Many South Sudanese children and young people, raised in Australia, have a strong grasp of English and a deeper understanding of Australian cultural norms compared to their parents. South Sudan has 64 tribes – each with its own language or dialect.<sup>68</sup> Parents often have limited proficiency in English despite their fluency in multiple other languages (such as Arabic, Dinka and Nuer).<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> NG Khawaja and K Milner, 'Acculturation stress in South Sudanese refugees: impact on marital relationships', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2012, 36(5):624–636, doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.03.007; C Fisher, 'Changed and changing gender and family roles and domestic violence in African refugee background communities post-settlement in Perth, Australia', *Violence Against Women*, 2013, 19(7):833–847, doi:10.1177/1077801213497535.

<sup>65</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>66</sup> CC Sangalang and C Vang, 'Intergenerational trauma in refugee families: a systematic review', *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 2017, 19:745–754, doi:10.1007/s10903-016-0499-7.

<sup>67</sup> K Milner and NG Khawaja, 'Sudanese refugees in Australia: the impact of acculturation stress', *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, 2010, 4(1):19–29, doi:10.1375/prp.4.1.19.

<sup>68</sup> Indigenous languages in South Sudan are Acholi, Aja, Anuak, Avokaya, Bai, Baka, Bari, Belanda Bor, Belanda Viri, Beli, Bongo, Didinga, Dongotono, Feroje, Gbaya, Homa, Imotong, Indri, Juba Arabic, Jumjum, Jur Modo, Kacipo-Bale Suri, Kakwa, Keliko, Komo, Laarim, Lango, Logir, Lokoya, Lopit, Luwo, Ma'di, Mabaan, Mandari, Mangayat, Mittu, Mo'da, Morokodo, Moru, Mündü, Murle, Ndogo, Njalgulgule, Northeastern Dinka, Northwestern Dinka, Nuer, Nyamusa-Molo, Okolie, Olu'bo, Opo, Otuho, Päre, Reel, Shilluk, South Central Dinka, Southeastern Dinka, Southwestern Dinka, Sudanese Arabic, Tenneset, Thuri, Togoyo, Toposa, Uduk, Zande: Ethnologue, [South Sudan](https://www.ethnologue.com/language/sud), Ethnologue website, SIL Global, 2025, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>69</sup> L Macaulay and J Deppeler, 'Perspectives on negative media representations of Sudanese and South Sudanese youths in Australia', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 2020, 41(2):213–230, doi:10.1080/07256868.2020.1724908.



According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, only 32% of South Sudanese parents in Victoria reported being able to speak English fluently, compared to 78% of their children.<sup>70</sup> This language barrier between parents and children can hinder effective communication and understanding within the family, leading to frustration and a sense of disconnection.

*It's hard to talk to my parents about school because they don't speak English well. They don't understand what I'm going through.<sup>71</sup>*

## Economic pressures

- **Financial strain:** The Youth Justice Case File Review found that 37% of African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision or their families reported experiencing financial stress when settling into Australia, while 28% reported difficulties in finding adequate housing.<sup>72</sup> Financial strain and family breakdown are risk factors that may influence a young person's likelihood of interacting with Youth Justice.<sup>73</sup>
- **Employment barriers:** Limited recognition of qualifications, language barriers and racism can lead to underemployment and financial stress. Parents' unemployment can also strain relationships with children.
- **Housing insecurity:** Overcrowding and unstable housing can make parenting more stressful and contribute to family conflict.

*The financial side of things was always a struggle. I remember we moved houses consistently.<sup>74</sup>*

- **Cost of living:** Parents having to work multiple jobs to afford housing and other necessities means less time for parenting.

*After a hard game of basketball, you want to get something to eat but you have no money so it's going to lead you to steal.<sup>75</sup>*

## Different legal and social expectations

- **Discipline and child protection laws:** Parents may face confusion or fear around what is allowed (such as physical discipline) and alternative approaches to parenting. Some parents struggle to adapt their authoritarian parenting approaches within Australian society's more individualistic and rights-based framework.

*Discipline/obedience is a significant part of our culture. Back home, young people are expected to listen to their parents/Elders. However, in the Australian society, young*

<sup>70</sup> Macaulay, L. (2020, September 20). Australian Sudanese and South Sudanese Youths' Perspectives on the Youth/Parent Relationship and Its Influence on the Transition to Adulthood. SAGE Publishing, 29(2), 137-156.

<sup>71</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

<sup>73</sup> G Clancey, S Wang and B Lin, *Youth justice in Australia: themes from recent inquiries*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice (No. 605), 2020, p 6, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>74</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.



*people are not expected to be obedient to their parents. Because of this, it is difficult for us parents to discipline our children or to find a middle ground.<sup>76</sup>*

- **Mandatory reporting and intervention:** Fear of government services can discourage parents from seeking help early.

## System knowledge and navigation

- **Limited knowledge of system:** Many parents are unfamiliar with school expectations, justice process or support services.

*We as parents feel like we have no control. We want to learn how to live in this culture. We are open to being taught ... We need programs to teach us how to parent in this Australian society.<sup>77</sup>*

- **Fear of criminalisation:** Parents may struggle to manage teenage risk-taking behaviour while fearing that police or schools will treat their children more harshly.

## 5.2 Findings and recommendations

The Expert Working Group has found that the combination of these factors has created particularly acute challenges for South Sudanese Australian parents and carers. Several dynamics make these challenges more difficult to address than for earlier waves of humanitarian migration to Australia. In particular:

- **Prolonged displacement and trauma:** Many South Sudanese families spent extended periods in refugee camps, disrupting family connections, shaping parenting approaches and creating significant mental health and trauma recovery needs.
- **Heightened economic pressures:** Victoria's current economic environment disproportionately affects newly settled families. Lower recognition of overseas qualifications and language barriers limit employment options, and the decline of low-skilled manufacturing jobs in Victoria means there are fewer opportunities for people with limited English proficiency. Housing is also relatively expensive across the community, compounding financial stress.
- **Racism:** South Sudanese Australians are highly visible in a predominantly white-majority society due to their distinct physical appearance. This visibility makes them more frequent targets of interpersonal discrimination and enables media narratives and social media commentary to more easily reinforce negative stereotypes, fuelling public fear and stigma. In contrast, some other migrant groups become less visibly identifiable over generations, which can reduce exposure to overt racism.

Because of these factors, parenting challenges are becoming entrenched, rather than easing over time. Dedicated approaches are needed to shift this experience.

Many parts of this report and its recommendations need to be taken together to address the parenting and intergenerational challenges described above. Improving South Sudanese Australian families' access to family services must be part of this picture. Parenting and

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<sup>76</sup> Community member, Community consultation, 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Community member, Community consultation, 2023.



family-based interventions will help parents understand and navigate Australian systems, parent within the Australian context using positive communication and discipline techniques, and bridge generational gaps.

*We need programs to teach us how to parent in this Australian society.<sup>78</sup>*

The Expert Working Group has found that there is a lack of family services support for South Sudanese Australian parents and families. Where supports do exist, South Sudanese Australian parents and families can face significant barriers to accessing effective services that meet their needs, including language barriers, a lack of cultural awareness from service providers, which undermines trust, and the challenges of navigating multiple service systems with different processes and eligibility requirements.

## **Increasing the cultural responsiveness of mainstream family services**

Family services are publicly funded to work with parents and carers to improve outcomes for children and families.

Family services are designed to support vulnerable young people and their families who are:

- likely to experience greater challenges, where the child or young person's development has been affected by risk factors and/or cumulative harm, and/or
- at risk of concerns escalating and becoming involved with Child Protection if problems are not addressed.

These services can play an important role in supporting families where young people are engaging in behaviours that place them at risk.

To strengthen the work of family services with adolescents, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) has developed 2 evidence-based practice modules to support engagement with young people and their families:

- **Adolescent Self-Regulation** – guides direct practice with young people to help them understand emotions and behaviours, build emotional and cognitive coping skills, and engage in trauma-informed psychoeducation.
- **Guiding and Supporting Adolescent Behaviour** – supports parents, carers and other adults in a young person's life to manage challenging behaviours calmly, increase positive interactions, provide clear expectations and boundaries, and use natural and logical consequences.

In the 2025/26 State Budget, the Victorian Government also committed funding to integrate learnings from the Putting Families First trial into the new Restoring Families program.

The Putting Families First initiative was trialled in Brimbank, Melton and Goulburn, providing an intensive, whole-of-family response to families engaged with the justice system. The 2025/26 budget outcome enables this model to be scaled statewide, expanding access to intensive, integrated family support.

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<sup>78</sup> Community member, Community consultation, 2023.



These are welcome developments. However, the Expert Working Group found that, overall, the family services model remains poorly adapted to the needs of South Sudanese Australian families.

As noted in earlier chapters, the significant challenges and disproportionately negative outcomes experienced by South Sudanese Australian families highlight the urgency of a more dedicated and culturally responsive approach. Too often, the risks to South Sudanese Australian children and young people's wellbeing are not recognised as issues for the family services system to address.

The Expert Working Group heard consistently that South Sudanese Australian parents want to protect their children but often feel unsure about how to respond or where to seek help. Many mothers reported living in fear for the wellbeing of their children.

All family services should be culturally responsive to meet the needs of the communities they serve. The safety and wellbeing of South Sudanese Australian children and young people must be part of the picture for Victoria's family services system.

Existing family services requirements include the following:

**Meeting the needs of children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities**

Organisations will promote the cultural competence of management, staff and carers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse families. They will apply appropriate policies, processes and/or practice guidelines to support this.

Organisations will collect information on clients' cultural identity, including country of birth, language, and communication needs.

Organisations will have protocols in place to establish mutually respectful and collaborative partnerships between culturally and linguistically diverse and mainstream services.<sup>79</sup>

In addition, Child and Family Services Alliances provide a governance structure for family services across Victoria. Alliances include The Orange Door, funded family services, Child Protection, partnership staff from DFFH, and, where capacity exists, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

Child and Family Services Alliances are responsible for:

- planning
- operational management
- service coordination in the sub-regional catchment.

Under the *Program requirements for family services in Victoria* issued by DFFH, alliance partners are required to develop and implement an Alliance plan for their catchment. The planning includes developing local strategies that lead to:<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, [Program requirements for family services in Victoria](#), Victorian Government, 2024, pp 17–18, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>80</sup> Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, [Program requirements for family services in Victoria](#), Victorian Government, 2024, p 31, accessed 13 November 2025.



- a more integrated and coordinated service system
- earlier intervention and prevention
- strengthened referral processes and pathways
- improved culturally competent services for Aboriginal people
- a focus on quality improvement
- improved training and workforce planning.

Priority measures outlined in Alliance plans are monitored and reported on.

However, these requirements have not been sufficient to deliver culturally competent services to the South Sudanese Australian community in practice.

The Expert Working Group recommends more specific measures below to improve the cultural responsiveness of mainstream family services.

### **Recommendation 2. Mainstream family services**

That the Victorian Government:

- (a) designate (by the end of 2026) relevant Child and Family Services Alliances that will be required to develop local strategies that lead to improved culturally responsive services for South Sudanese Australian people as a priority population within their catchment
- (b) in consultation with South Sudanese Australian community members and services, develop (by July 2027) an evidence-based practice element or module supporting the family services workforce to engage with and support South Sudanese Australian families, and consider where including cultural elements in existing evidence-based practice modules could strengthen the applicability of the modules for South Sudanese families
- (c) support partnerships between South Sudanese and African-led organisations and mainstream family services in key locations, to build capacity and facilitate knowledge sharing between both community-led organisations and mainstream services
- (d) review (by July 2029) levels of South Sudanese Australian engagement with family services and community feedback on the cultural responsiveness of family services to assess progress made and identify any additional steps required to improve the effectiveness of mainstream family services for South Sudanese Australian community members.

### **Growing community-led approaches**

Community-led approaches provide an effective mechanism to support parenting as they:

- ensure the approach taken reflects cultural values, parenting traditions and lived experience
- acknowledge strengths and celebrate traditional parenting practices, such as collective child-rearing and respect for Elders, rather than portraying them as 'problems'



- employ community facilitators who can bridge cultural understanding and create a safe space for sharing and learning
- encourage peer support.

#### **Box 5.1. Lessons from the Building Resilient South Sudanese Youth and Families project**

The Building Resilient South Sudanese Youth and Families project, delivered by the South Sudanese Christian Welfare Association Inc. in partnership with the African-Australian Family and Parenting Support Services Inc., is a culturally grounded parenting and family-strengthening initiative funded through the Expert Working Group. The project aims to equip South Sudanese Australian parents and caregivers with culturally informed, positive parenting strategies to improve support for children and young people at risk of contact with, or engaged with, the youth justice system.

The project seeks to strengthen family relationships, enhance intergenerational communication, and increase families' access to mental health, wellbeing and community services through culturally safe group sessions, youth activities, counselling support and facilitated community conversations.

Early reflections from project implementation highlight several elements contributing to its effectiveness:

- **Anchoring the program in South Sudanese cultural values** while helping parents understand expectations in the Australian context, including non-violent behaviour management and open communication with children.
- **Providing culturally safe, family-centred spaces** where parents, caregivers and young people feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues such as anti-social behaviour, peer influence or contact with the justice system.
- **Using trusted community facilitators**, whose visibility and reputation as community helpers build early trust, reduce stigma and encourage participation.
- **Facilitating open group discussions** that allow parents to share lived experiences, problem-solve together and learn from peers is a more effective approach for this community than individualised Western counselling models.
- **Integrating mental health awareness, counselling and wellbeing support**, which helps parents and young people understand the drivers of stress, conflict and risky behaviours.
- **Serving as a connector to other services**, enabling culturally appropriate referrals and improving families' navigation of the health, mental health and community service systems.

The project team observed that South Sudanese parents often feel shame in discussing family or parenting challenges outside their extended family networks. Creating a culturally safe environment, led by community facilitators who understand these dynamics, has been essential in encouraging parents and young people to openly share challenges, build confidence and engage in strategies that reduce risk factors for offending.



### **Recommendation 3. Parenting support from African Australian community-led organisations**

That the Victorian Government increase the capacity of African Australian community-led organisations (and/or consortia of community-led organisations) to partner with mainstream services and to directly provide parenting and family support to South Sudanese Australian parents and families, including at the proposed community hub (see Recommendation 1).

Such programs could include carer circles, family mentoring, intergenerational dialogue programs and tailored mothers' and fathers' programs that help address intergenerational conflict, domestic tension and violence, different gender norms and expectations around parenting.

At a minimum, community-led parenting programs should be introduced or expanded within the next 12 months in each of the following areas:

- (a) Wyndham
- (b) Brimbank
- (c) Melton
- (d) Greater Dandenong.

## **Supporting children and families in the early years**

Early support for children and families is one of the most powerful investments any government can make to reduce risk and strengthen protective factors. For South Sudanese Australian families, like all families, the early years of a child's life provide a critical window to nurture wellbeing, support family stability and build confidence in navigating Australian systems.

### ***Maternal and Child Health Services***

Maternal and Child Health (MCH) is a free health service that provides community-based support to all Victorian families and carers with children from birth to school age. MCH services are a universal entry point for parents and carers – offering health assessments, parenting advice and links to other forms of family and community support. Engagement with these services also provides a vital connection point between families and the broader service system, including early childhood education, family services and mental health supports.

Despite their universal nature, the Expert Working Group heard that awareness of and engagement with MCH services among South Sudanese Australian families can vary. Community consultations revealed that some families are unfamiliar with the service, while others have found that cultural and language barriers make participation difficult. Strengthening connections between MCH services and South Sudanese Australian community organisations will help to build trust, promote understanding and ensure that families receive the benefits of this important system of early support.



#### **Recommendation 4. Maternal and Child Health Services**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Health, promote awareness of and engagement with Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services by the South Sudanese Australian community, including, for example, through partnerships between MCH services and South Sudanese Australian community organisations.

Initial actions should be taken by the end of 2026, with further exploration of whether levels of South Sudanese Australian community access to Maternal and Child Health Services can be monitored and reviewed by the end of 2029.

#### ***Increasing access to early learning***

Access to early childhood education and care is a strong protective factor for children's development and long-term wellbeing. It supports learning, social connection and school readiness – benefits that extend across families and communities.<sup>81</sup> Improving access to early learning has been a significant focus of the Victorian Government's *The Best Start, Best Life* reforms to give every child the best start in life.

However, research indicates that children from multicultural communities in Australia face barriers to early childhood education and care.<sup>82</sup> For South Sudanese Australian families, these can include limited information, language barriers, cultural unfamiliarity, cost and practical challenges such as transport or flexible enrolment options.

Department of Education data indicates that, in 2025, 0.38% of children enrolled in 3-year-old kindergarten, and 0.48% of children enrolled in 4-year-old kindergarten are Sudanese or South Sudanese Australian.<sup>83</sup>

The Expert Working Group heard that targeted support to assist families in navigating the early years system can make a significant difference. The *Links to Early Learning* program in New South Wales offers one such model: an experienced early childhood professional works one-on-one with families who are not yet accessing early learning, helping them understand their options and overcome barriers to participation.

#### **Recommendation 5. Early Childhood Education and Care**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Education, explore opportunities to reduce barriers to early childhood education and care participation and increase school readiness for South Sudanese Australian community members, drawing on lessons from the *Links to Early Learning* program in New South Wales.

<sup>81</sup> See for example, Productivity Commission, [A path to universal early childhood education and care: inquiry report](#), Australian Government, 2024, Volume 2, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>82</sup> See for example, B Lam et al., [Stronger starts, brighter futures II: exploring trends to promote the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia](#), Occasional Paper, Number 5, University of South Australia, 2024, accessed 13 November 2025; NSW Productivity Commission, [Childcare choices: what parents want](#), NSW Government, 2023, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>83</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, December 2025 (Source: 2025 data extracted from the KIMS system on 13 November 2025). A student is classed as Sudanese or South Sudanese if they or one of their parents were born in Sudan or South Sudan. Country of birth is self-identified, so may not represent all children belonging to the cohort.



The Victorian Government should report back to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on its exploration and next steps by July 2027. It should then, in partnership with South Sudanese Australian community members and early childhood education and care services, review progress made in reducing identified barriers, outline any further actions required and report further to the community implementation committee by July 2030.

## **Empowering South Sudanese Australian mothers**

As noted above, South Sudanese culture is traditionally patriarchal. The Expert Working Group heard that within the Australian context, this can leave many women feeling that they lack voice or agency. Some mothers spoke of men controlling household decisions, while others described experiences of abandonment when men left to start new families.

Yet many mothers are the backbone of their families and communities – raising children, often alone, and supporting others. Opportunities to empower mothers in the South Sudanese Australian community, including economically, should be explored.

One practical opportunity raised during the Expert Working Group's consultations was to enable women who are already caring for children in the community to turn that experience into income by supporting them to gain formal qualifications and participate in the federally funded Family Day Care system.

Many South Sudanese Australian women are carrying significant unpaid care responsibilities, not only for their own children but also for the children of relatives and neighbours. This community care is a strength and a source of resilience. However, without recognition or pathways to economic empowerment, it can also leave women isolated and financially dependent.

Empowering women not only strengthens individual families but also builds the collective capacity of the South Sudanese Australian community – helping to create the protective, connected environments that give children the best chance to thrive.

### **Recommendation 6. Empower South Sudanese Australian mothers**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, explore opportunities with South Sudanese Australian women to support their empowerment through work, study and other options.

The Victorian Government should report back to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on its exploration and next steps by July 2027.



## 6. Harnessing the power of education

Education is fundamental to children and young people's opportunity to grow and thrive.

Engagement in education is a strong protective factor for young people against involvement in the youth justice system. Conversely, disengaging from school increases the risk of offending behaviour. Negative school environments, experiences of bullying, problematic interpersonal relationships and poor school performance are all risk factors for youth crime.<sup>84</sup>

*No school, no work, where will the children and kids go?*<sup>85</sup>

This chapter considers how the education system can be strengthened to enable South Sudanese Australian children and young people to remain engaged in education and reach their full potential.

### 6.1 South Sudanese Australian young people in education

#### Victorian government schools

There are 4,775 Sudanese/South Sudanese Australian students in Victorian government schools, accounting for 0.68% of the total student population.<sup>86</sup> Most Sudanese/South Sudanese Australian students attend schools in western Melbourne (29%), Brimbank Melton (27%) or southern Melbourne (21%).

Data from the Department of Education indicates that Sudanese/South Sudanese Australian students in Victorian government schools:

- are suspended at a substantially higher rate than other students (Figure 6.1)
- in 2023, they were suspended for an average of 4.5 days, compared to a statewide average of 3.2 days (noting that this disparity has reduced since then) (Figure 6.2)
- are more likely to be expelled than other students (Figure 6.3)
- report experiences of racism at substantially higher rates than other students (Table 6.1)
- have lower completion rates for VCE and VCE VM (Vocational Major) than other students (Table 6.2).

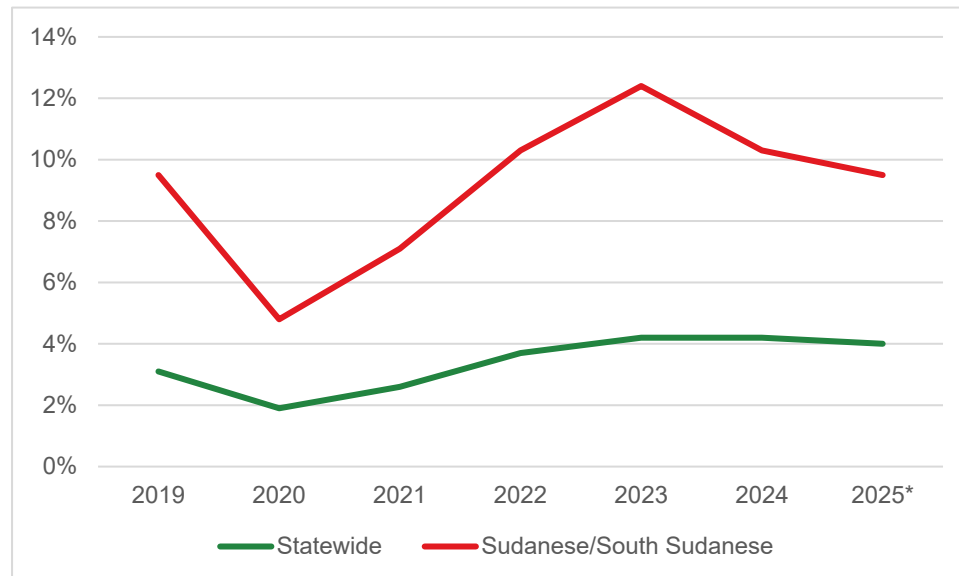
<sup>84</sup> G Ayano et al., 'Risk and protective factors of youth crime: an umbrella review of systematic reviews and meta-analyses', *Clinical Psychology Review*, 2024, 113:102479, doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2024.102479.

<sup>85</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>86</sup> Based on enrolment data at 7 November 2025, provided to the Expert Working Group by the Department of Education, December 2025. A student's heritage is defined as being the birth country of either the student or either of the adults, which means a student is classed as Sudanese or South Sudanese if either they or one of their parents were born in Sudan or South Sudan. There may be some double-counting of students as a result of dual enrolments.

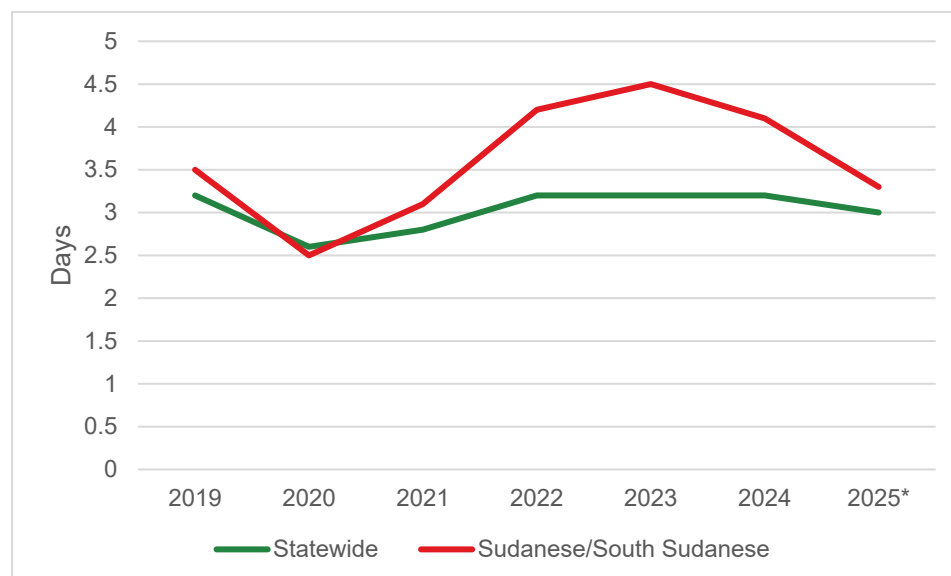


**Figure 6.1. Proportion of students suspended in Victorian government schools, by cohort, 2019–2025<sup>87</sup>**



\* 2025 data is up to 7 November 2025. Figures for other calendar years are for the full year.

**Figure 6.2. Average number of days suspended in Victorian government schools, by cohort, 2019–2025<sup>88</sup>**



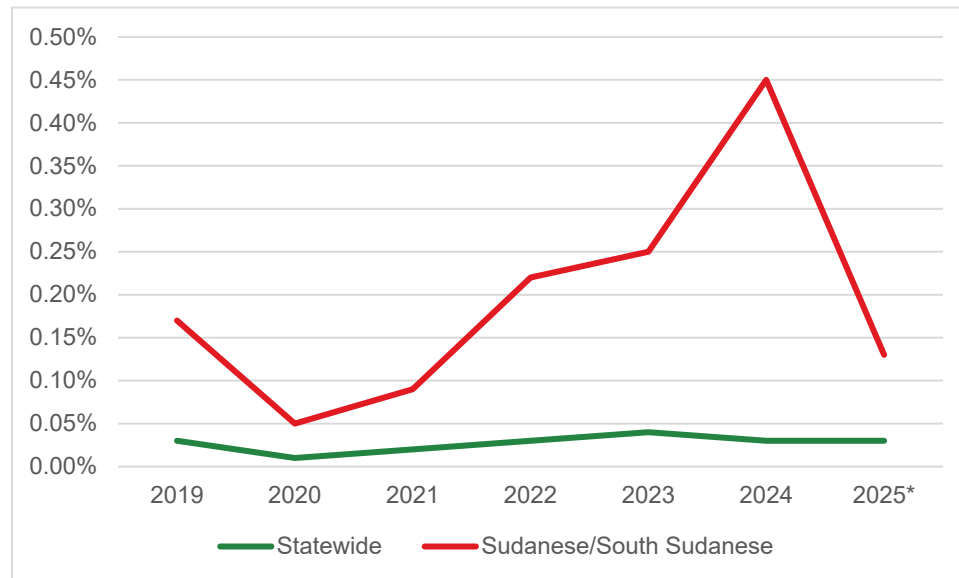
\* 2025 data is up to 7 November 2025. Figures for other calendar years are for the full year.

<sup>87</sup> These figures represent the proportion of students that have been suspended at least once within a given year. Information provided by the Department of Education, December 2025 (Source: CASES21).

<sup>88</sup> These figures represent the average number of suspension days accrued per year by students with at least one suspension. Information provided by the Department of Education, December 2025 (Source: CASES21).



**Figure 6.3. Proportion of students expelled from Victorian government schools, by cohort, 2019–2025<sup>89</sup>**



\* 2025 data is up to 7 November 2025. Figures for other calendar years are for the full year.

**Table 6.1. Proportion of students in Victorian government schools experiencing racism, by cohort, 2023–2025 (Attitudes to School Survey)<sup>90</sup>**

| Question                                                               | Cohort                  | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|------|------|------|
| I have experienced racism at this school in the past 12 months         | Sudanese/South Sudanese | 46%  | 48%  | 48%  |
|                                                                        | All students            | 17%  | 20%  | 20%  |
| I have experienced racism at this school this term                     | Sudanese/South Sudanese | 43%  | 47%  | 42%  |
|                                                                        | All students            | 15%  | 17%  | 16%  |
| I know what to do or who to tell if I experience racism at this school | Sudanese/South Sudanese | 62%  | 63%  | 65%  |
|                                                                        | All students            | 65%  | 67%  | 69%  |

**Table 6.2. Proportion of students in Victorian government schools completing VCE and VCE VM, by cohort, 2023–2025<sup>91</sup>**

|                   | Cohort                  | 2023  | 2024  |
|-------------------|-------------------------|-------|-------|
| VCE completion    | Sudanese/South Sudanese | 94.7% | 93.0% |
|                   | All students            | 97.4% | 97.6% |
| VCE VM completion | Sudanese/South Sudanese | 78.4% | 90.7% |
|                   | All students            | 91.4% | 92.8% |

<sup>89</sup> These figures represent the proportion of students who have been expelled at least once within a given year. Information provided by the Department of Education, December 2025 (Source: Youth Participation Unit, Operations and Governance Division).

<sup>90</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, December 2025 (Source: Attitudes to School Survey, 2023, 2024 and 2025).

<sup>91</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, December 2025 (Source: VCAA).



## Catholic schools

Many South Sudanese Australian children and young people attend Catholic schools. The Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS) identified 1,604 students of South Sudanese heritage attending Catholic schools in Melbourne in 2023, of whom 739 (46%) attended Catholic schools in western Melbourne. These figures are likely substantial underestimates because they do not include students from the South Sudanese Australian community who were born in Australia and speak English at home. This data also does not include regional Catholic schools.

Data provided by MACS from 40 Melbourne Catholic schools indicates that, in 2023:

- of a total of 1,408 suspensions, 64 (4.5%) involved South Sudanese Australian students<sup>92</sup>
- South Sudanese Australian students were on average suspended for 2.4 days, compared to 1.6 days for other students.

## Case File Review

The Youth Justice Case File Review found that 36% of African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision between September 2022 and April 2023 had been suspended from school at least once.<sup>93</sup>

## 6.2 What we heard

The Expert Working Group heard about the positive experiences of some young South Sudanese Australians with education. However, far more often, we heard about negative school experiences of schools underestimating their academic potential; barriers to parents' involvement with school; bullying, racism and a lack of cultural safety; and informal suspensions and expulsions from school. These are described below.

Such experiences leave many South Sudanese Australian young people feeling unsupported and excluded from their school community, placing them at greater risk of disengagement and contact with the criminal justice system.

### Underestimating academic potential

South Sudanese Australian young people told the Expert Working Group that schools frequently underestimated their academic potential, with some teachers automatically assuming South Sudanese Australian students had language barriers or learning difficulties, when this was not necessarily the case.

*In my life, I've only had two teachers that have told me that I can do well academically and that I can do well in life.<sup>94</sup>*

<sup>92</sup> This figure is also an underestimate as some of the data was unusable because schools had input incorrect student identification numbers.

<sup>93</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

<sup>94</sup> Young person, Youth Forum, 2023.



*Teachers who say 'you can't do it' when I said I want to be a lawyer.  
They said 'why don't you go to TAFE'.<sup>95</sup>*

*In the EAL (English as an Additional Language) program they automatically assume that you  
can't speak because of the colour of your skin and race but they don't even consider that  
you have grown up here and have spoken it throughout your life.<sup>96</sup>*

Parents also described their frustration about low expectations of South Sudanese Australian students, sometimes beginning as early as kindergarten.

*I got told by the school, 'Why is it so important for your child to finish school?'.<sup>97</sup>*

*Now we see kids starting kindergarten behind – not knowing  
the numbers and letters. And they are already a year behind.<sup>98</sup>*

Many young people and parents told the Expert Working Group of instances where students had been unduly discouraged from completing VCE. Discriminatory attitudes towards South Sudanese Australian students and stereotyping may be contributing to this.<sup>99</sup>

*There is an active pushing of young people towards VCAL. Parents push back  
on the young person, saying, 'You should listen to the school'. Career counsellors  
persuade kids into things they don't want to do.<sup>100</sup>*

*I don't want to do VCAL. I want to be like everybody else.<sup>101</sup>*

## **Barriers to parental involvement with schools**

The Expert Working Group also heard that many parents find it challenging to navigate the Australian school system, often due to language barriers, and don't understand what the system expects of them. These factors increase the likelihood that their children will become disengaged from school.

*A good school is one that is embedded in the community, not just operating  
9am to 3pm and oblivious to what happens outside the school doors,  
what happens on the weekend, what happens for families.<sup>102</sup>*

*Mum spoke a little English but not enough to understand what  
teachers were communicating about my schooling.<sup>103</sup>*

*If our parents had a better understanding of the educational system, I think I would have  
known more about it and not dropped out because I felt like I hated school.<sup>104</sup>*

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<sup>95</sup> Young person, Youth Forum, 2024.

<sup>96</sup> Young person, Youth Forum, 2023.

<sup>97</sup> Community member, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>98</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>99</sup> JB Ngendakurio, [Report: racism in Australian schools: impacts and possible solutions](#), Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland, 2024, pp 21–23, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>100</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>101</sup> Young person, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>102</sup> Young person, Youth Forum, 2024.

<sup>103</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>104</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.



We heard from parents that they want to engage with schools but have found that schools are often not well equipped to provide accessible guidance and practical advice. Parents also described not knowing their children were struggling at school until it was too late.

*As parents, we don't have the manual on how to raise our children the Australian way ... when schools can't handle [problem students] then they bring in the parents. But they don't know how to speak to the parents.<sup>105</sup>*

These challenges are exacerbated by the confusion some families experience in understanding the differences between the government and Catholic school systems.

The Expert Working Group also heard that, while School Community Liaison Officers (SCLOs) can play an important role in schools, these roles are not necessarily focused on the areas of greatest impact, and there are not enough SCLOs to effectively support South Sudanese Australian students and engagement with their families.<sup>106</sup> We also heard that this role can be challenging for members of the African Australian community, who may experience significant cultural load and struggle under the weight of community expectations in the face of power imbalances within schools, while receiving insufficient training and relatively low remuneration.

## **Bullying, racism and a lack of cultural safety**

Many South Sudanese Australian young people told the Expert Working Group they had experienced racism, bullying and a lack of cultural safety in school, which made them feel socially isolated and ultimately resulted in them disengaging from school.

*They [African Australian students] don't get the same grace as other kids get. African kids get one chance and that's it and then it is, 'be careful of that student'.<sup>107</sup>*

*Gang things had a huge influence on me and my siblings at school. We used to do fire drills and students would call out 'APEX' and they would all look at me.<sup>108</sup>*

*They separated my brother and his friend at school – they said they looked intimidating. What does that do to our identity?<sup>109</sup>*

*My teachers used to ask me if I was a part of APEX. They never let us hang out in groups.<sup>110</sup>*

*I would run into the issue of being labelled an angry black girl because I was asking the teacher questions. I would avoid talking because she would call me out.<sup>111</sup>*

*In one of my first history classes, I was the only non-white person in the classroom. The teacher spoke about the apartheid and gave an example and said if we were in high school during that time period we wouldn't be able to sit in the room with you. Referring to me.<sup>112</sup>*

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<sup>105</sup> Community member, Community consultation, 2023.

<sup>106</sup> School Community Liaison Officers are sometimes referred to as 'Cultural Liaison Officers' or 'CLOs'.

<sup>107</sup> Young person, Youth Forum, 2024.

<sup>108</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>109</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>110</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>111</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>112</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.



*School was mostly white. There was about three African kids and one of the other black kids – they did the same to him. Nothing direct, but you could always feel the energy.<sup>113</sup>*

In community consultations, one parent referred to the discriminatory use of suspensions and expulsions:

*[Racism] is not only direct, it is also indirect. Our children are not punished the same way as other children. They are given suspensions and expulsions. How are they supposed to learn when suspensions and expulsions lead to exclusion from education?<sup>114</sup>*

The Expert Working Group heard that racism was often not appropriately dealt with by schools and that there was a need for a robust complaints and reporting process.

*... some of the reasons South Sudanese Australian kids get into trouble is often getting into trouble with no one sticking up for them ... one of the recommendations [should be] having a report system that does something for these kids. People often don't report because nothing is done about it.<sup>115</sup>*

## Informal suspensions and expulsions

The Expert Working Group heard about the use of informal suspensions and expulsions, where South Sudanese Australian young people are encouraged to stay away from school, told they are unable to attend any of their classes for a period of time, or encouraged to attend a different school or seek an alternative option such as TAFE (see, for example, Anya's case study in Box 6.1).

### Box 6.1. Case study: Anya

Anya was a Year 11 student with a strong academic background who had never had any issues with her academic performance. She was keen to complete her VCE and attend university to study law.

Anya's school asked her to leave because she was consistently late to class. Despite Anya expressing a clear desire to remain at the school and doing well in her exams, the school maintained that Anya needed to leave and attend another school in a different suburb or one in the CBD.

Anya became depressed and cried often about the situation. Anya's mother attended a meeting at the school to discuss Anya's options and asked why the school had not involved her earlier. The school said they thought Anya could handle the situation herself and had organised school counselling for her.

Anya left the school.

Young people told the Expert Working Group that they are being treated differently from their peers, and that informal suspensions and expulsions send the message that they are not welcome in their school community.

<sup>113</sup> Young person, custody consultations, 2024.

<sup>114</sup> Community member, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Advisory Group member, 2024.



As they are not consistent with school policies, informal suspensions and expulsions are not recorded or captured by formal data collection undertaken by the Department of Education or the Catholic education system.

## 6.3 Findings and recommendations

The Expert Working Group found that too many South Sudanese Australian students had negative experiences at school, leading them to feel unsafe, unsupported, unwelcome, isolated and alienated, and placing them at risk of disengagement and exclusion.

The Expert Working Group's recommendations in this chapter aimed to reverse this trend and harness the power of education to provide South Sudanese Australian students with a sense of belonging and purpose, and enable them to thrive.

Many of our recommendations are consistent with many of the recommendations of the Commission for Children and Young People in its *Let us learn* inquiry report on the educational experiences of children and young people in out of home care.<sup>116</sup> Several recommendations also reflect work being undertaken for First Nations students in Victoria, as reflected in the *Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026* (see Box 6.2).<sup>117</sup>

### Box 6.2. Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026

The *Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026* sets out the Victorian Government's vision for Koorie education outcomes, which is for Victoria to be a state where First Nations culture, knowledge and experience are celebrated and where every Koorie person feels strong in their cultural identity, achieves their potential and succeeds in life.

Key actions identified by the plan include:

- increasing opportunities for Koorie people to participate in decision-making that affects them by actively engaging families and carers to better support children's participation
- supporting schools to better support their Koorie students through a range of initiatives focused on school attendance, literacy and numeracy, and academic achievement
- providing additional training for service leaders with a focus on establishing a clear vision of inclusive practice, leading by example and holding high expectations of themselves, staff and Koorie learners.<sup>118</sup>

## Supporting student engagement and achievement

Positive school engagement and attainment are important protective factors against involvement with the criminal justice system. Students who feel encouraged and supported

<sup>116</sup> Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP), *Let us learn: systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care*, CCYP, 2023, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>117</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026*, State of Victoria, 2016, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>118</sup> Department of Education and Training, *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026*, State of Victoria, 2016, accessed 13 November 2025.



at school – whose abilities and achievements are recognised, and who are given choices to pursue learning that reflects their interests and individual strengths – are more likely to remain at school and complete their studies than those who feel unsupported and discouraged. Weak bonds to school and poor educational achievement increase the risk of criminal behaviour.<sup>119</sup>

### ***Student choice and academic achievement***

The Department of Education has undertaken a range of initiatives to support students from multicultural backgrounds to choose appropriate study pathways, including translating into Arabic the materials required to help students to participate in 'My Career Insights' (which provides access to an online career education tool), and making online information about Year 11 and 12 study options available in 20 languages.<sup>120</sup>

However, the South Sudanese Australian community has asked for stronger support structures in schools to ensure South Sudanese Australian students can choose appropriate pathways. This will, in turn, increase the likelihood of their positive engagement with education.

#### **Recommendation 7. Student choice and academic achievement**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Education, will develop (by the end of 2027) additional accessible resources to assist South Sudanese Australian students and families to make informed decisions about education and training pathways.

### ***Learning support***

As outlined above, South Sudanese Australian students have lower completion rates in VCE, VCAL/VM, and VP than other students. This may, in part, be due to a lack of targeted learning support accessible to South Sudanese Australian students at risk of disengaging from education.

The Department of Education delivers small group learning for primary students in Years 4, 5 and 6 who are identified as needing additional support based on NAPLAN results and for Year 10 students identified as needing literacy and numeracy support. The department also funds homework clubs for African Australian students and school holiday programs targeted at students of African and Pasifika heritage.

The department's Navigator program provides intensive case management and outreach for severely disengaged students to support re-engagement in education. Augmented Navigator focuses on culturally and linguistically diverse young people and those in contact with the youth justice system, particularly those from African and Pasifika backgrounds, and operates in south-east and western Melbourne.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>119</sup> G Ayano et al., 'Risk and protective factors of youth crime: an umbrella review of systematic reviews and meta-analyses', *Clinical Psychology Review*, 2024, 113:102479, doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2024.102479.

<sup>120</sup> Department of Education, [My career insights](#), Department of Education Website, 2023, accessed 3 November 2025; Department of Education, [Your world. Your VCE. Information in your language](#), Department of Education website, 2024, accessed 3 November 2025.

<sup>121</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, December 2025.



In addition, the Centre for Multicultural Youth's *Learning Beyond the Bell* initiative supports numerous learning support programs aimed at helping students from multicultural and refugee backgrounds. These include homework clubs, family learning clubs and peer-to-peer learning approaches.<sup>122</sup>

Learning support programs can be highly effective in helping students feel a sense of belonging and improve educational attainment. However, based on the Expert Working Group's community consultations, it is unclear whether South Sudanese Australian students are accessing or benefiting from existing programs.

### **Recommendation 8. Learning support**

That the Victorian Government review the accessibility and effectiveness of its small group and learning support programs for South Sudanese Australian students aged 10 to 14 years, and explore opportunities to develop education support programs for this cohort to be delivered at the proposed community hub (see Recommendation 1).

These programs should integrate academic support, leadership development and personal growth opportunities, and be delivered in partnership with peer and professional mentors from African Australian or other relevant backgrounds.

Parental engagement and education components should be embedded within these programs to strengthen family involvement and understanding of the Victorian school system.

The Government should report to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on its review, exploration and next steps by July 2027.

### **Culturally grounded psychoeducation programs**

Research indicates that young people from humanitarian or refugee backgrounds experience higher levels of psychological stress compared to the general youth population in Australia (see discussion in Chapter 7). This highlights the importance of ensuring that South Sudanese Australian students have access to a range of appropriate psychoeducation programs in schools.

The Department of Education offers a range of evidence-based psychosocial therapeutic programs to support young people's mental wellbeing through its 'Schools Mental Health Menu'.<sup>123</sup> These include:

- mental health practitioners, who provide one-on-one counselling and mental health promotion sessions
- the Brief Interventions in Youth Mental Health Toolkit delivered by Orygen, which builds the capacity of mental health professionals in schools

<sup>122</sup> Centre for Multicultural Youth, [Learning support programs](#), Centre for Multicultural Youth website, 2025, accessed 4 November 2025.

<sup>123</sup> Department of Education, [Schools Mental Health Menu](#), Department of Education website, 2025, accessed 3 November 2025.



- the Aspire to Lead program delivered by the Centre for Multicultural Youth, which aims to develop school and student-led solutions to enhance wellbeing and reduce exclusion in schools, with a particular focus on culturally and linguistically diverse, and asylum seeker and refugee students.

As described in Chapter 7, the Expert Working Group heard that there was a notable lack of culturally safe and accessible mental health services for the South Sudanese Australian community. We also heard that the individualistic approach to counselling and mental health supports in mainstream offerings can pose a barrier to access for some South Sudanese Australian community members who come from a culture of collective healing and support.

Schools provide a critical opportunity to provide mental health intervention and support for students who may be struggling. However, such supports must be culturally safe and appropriate for South Sudanese Australian students.

#### **Recommendation 9. Culturally grounded psychoeducation programs**

That the Victorian Government fund and implement (by July 2027) effective, culturally grounded psychoeducation programs in schools for South Sudanese Australian students that promote emotional regulation, resilience, leadership and help-seeking behaviour, framed around aspiration, success and wellbeing.

#### ***Culturally relevant learning programs***

Culturally relevant learning programs, such as the *Umoja* African diaspora cultural education program delivered by Parkville College (described in Chapter 11), can strengthen cultural identity, engagement and belonging, and contribute to improved educational outcomes for South Sudanese Australian students.

Such programs can also contribute to a sense of cultural safety, something that many South Sudanese Australian young people told the Expert Working Group was lacking in schools.

#### **Recommendation 10. Culturally relevant learning programs**

That the Victorian Government expand access to culturally relevant education programs that celebrate African culture, history and identity, such as extending the successful *Umoja* initiative beyond custodial settings into mainstream schools and community contexts. A program should be started or expanded into at least 6 mainstream schools by the end of 2028.

#### ***Extra-curricular activities and Outside School Hours Care***

The Expert Working Group heard that South Sudanese Australian children and young people may have limited access to extra-curricular activities which support development and educational engagement. Some South Sudanese Australian families require financial and non-financial, practical support, such as transport, to enable their children and young people to participate in extra-curricular activities.

The Expert Working Group notes that the Department of Education provides existing support for access to extra-curricular activities through its Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, and



to free school holiday programs through its Place Based Partnerships initiative, which targets students of African and Pasifika heritage.

The Expert Working Group also acknowledges that access to before- and after-school care for low-income families is a matter for the Commonwealth Government via the Child Care Subsidy.

### **Recommendation 11. Co-curricular activities and Outside School Hours Care**

That the Victorian Government build on existing initiatives to:

(a) facilitate access of low-income South Sudanese Australian students to extracurricular and sporting activities, including practical supports such as transport assistance and school-based family activities

(b) call on the Commonwealth Government to ensure that low-income South Sudanese Australian students are supported to access before- and after-school care.

An expanded Victorian Government support program should be in place by the end of 2026.

## **Supporting family engagement in education**

Research indicates that parental support and involvement in their children's education fosters a strong school connection and is key to positive school engagement and academic performance.<sup>124</sup> Family engagement in education can also protect young people against negative school experiences and feelings of alienation and marginalisation.

As outlined above, the Expert Working Group heard that there were several barriers to South Sudanese Australian parents' involvement in schools, including language and cultural barriers, inaccessibility of the school system and a lack of engagement by schools with South Sudanese Australian families.

School Community Liaison Officers (SCLOs) in Victorian government schools act as an important bridge between schools, parents and students to support students' learning outcomes. SCLOs operate in many schools across Melbourne, including schools with a high proportion of students with African heritage.<sup>125</sup>

The Expert Working Group found that there is an opportunity to provide more resources, training and remuneration to SCLOs, to support them in engaging more effectively with South Sudanese Australian families. The Expert Working Group recommends establishing additional SCLO roles in areas with high South Sudanese Australian populations to strengthen relationships between schools and South Sudanese Australian families and communities.

<sup>124</sup> L Emerson et al., [\*Parental engagement in learning and schooling: lessons from research. A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau\*](#), Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, 2012, accessed 5 December 2025; S Pilcher, K Torii and M J Andow, [\*Evidence scan of educational interventions for children and young people disengaged from education \(for Social Ventures Australia\)\*](#), Mitchell Institute, 2018, accessed 5 December 2025.

<sup>125</sup> Department of Education, [\*Improving education outcomes for young African Victorian students\*](#), Department of Education website, 2025, accessed 3 November 2025.



In addition, the ‘Our Place’ approach (see Box 6.3) provides an effective model for engaging and involving families in schools, which the Expert Working Group considers highly beneficial for the South Sudanese Australian community.

#### **Box 6.3. The Our Place model**

The Our Place approach provides education, health and wellbeing services from a single location. It was developed by the Colman Education Foundation, which established the Our Place approach at Doveton College in 2012.

Key features of the Our Place approach include:

- a single point of entry to the early learning centre and the school to support children in their transition from kindergarten to school
- access to health, wellbeing and community services for children and families from a single location, including maternal and child health, GPs, immunisations and parent support groups
- community facilitators to assist families and children to connect to services.

The Department of Education has partnered with the Colman Education Foundation to establish 10 additional Our Place sites across Victoria. The Our Place model is currently being evaluated.<sup>126</sup>

#### **Recommendation 12. School Community Liaison Officers**

That the Victorian Government establish additional and refocused School Community Liaison Officer (SCLO) roles, particularly in areas with high South Sudanese Australian populations, by the end of 2026.

These roles should be recalibrated to focus on strengthening relationships among schools, families, and communities and on supporting parents to build agency. SCLOs should also play a central role in improving cultural understanding within schools, helping to ensure that families are seen as valued partners in education.

#### **Recommendation 13. Support parental engagement in education**

That the Victorian Government establish a suite of measures to increase the engagement of South Sudanese Australian parents and families in their children’s education, including:

- (a) establishing (by the end of 2029) at least one ‘one school’ model in the Melton Brimbank corridor, drawing on the lessons from the Our Place model
- (b) providing local workshops and information sessions (by the end of 2027) to help families understand the school system, expectations, and parental rights and responsibilities

<sup>126</sup> Department of Education, [Our Place](#), Department of Education website, 2023, accessed 4 November 2025.



(c) resourcing parent peer support groups (by the end of 2027) to assist families in navigating schools and education pathways.

## Addressing racism in schools

The Expert Working Group acknowledges the many dedicated schools, teachers and other staff who do excellent work with South Sudanese Australian children and young people to support their learning and engage with their families. However, the Expert Working Group heard about many experiences of racism in schools. These are not unique to the education system – instead, they are an extension of the racism that pervades Australian culture and society more broadly.

Researchers have found that racism is widespread in Australia's education settings.<sup>127</sup> Experiences of racism in schools include differential treatment by teachers, verbal and physical abuse, bullying, harassment, victimisation, exclusion and microaggressions, and these are frequently compounded by denial, silencing and teachers' lack of willingness and competency to act in response to incidents. Experiencing racism at school can be profoundly damaging, affecting a student's identity, self-esteem, mental health, affiliation with and school attendance, and motivation to succeed.<sup>128</sup>

As outlined above, many South Sudanese Australian young people told the Expert Working Group they had experienced racism at school. This is consistent with Department of Education data (discussed at 6.1 above). The Expert Working Group also heard that reporting racism to the school rarely resulted in a satisfactory outcome for the affected student.

The South Sudanese Australian community spoke of the need for a 'zero tolerance' approach to racism in schools and for this to be properly reflected in policies and practices.

The Department of Education has a complaint resolution policy which recognises the department's responsibility to ensure that the processes for resolving complaints are fair and transparent, timely and efficient, and operate in the best interests of the student.<sup>129</sup> In practice, based on the Expert Working Group's community consultations, these processes do not appear to be meeting the needs of the South Sudanese Australian community.

In 2023, the Commission for Children and Young People recommended that the Department of Education develop a clear policy that explicitly addresses racism in Victorian Government

<sup>127</sup> For example, a 2017 study found that in New South Wales and Victorian government schools, over 40% of non-white students reported experiences of racial discrimination at school and 60% of students witnessed other students' experiences of racial discrimination. See Australian National University (ANU), [SOAR – speak out against racism](#), ANU website, undated. In 2023, the Commission for Children and Young People found that Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care continued to experience racism in Victoria's education system. Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP), [Let us learn: systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care](#), CCYP, 2023, p 39, accessed 3 November 2025.

<sup>128</sup> JB Ngendakurio, [Report: racism in Australian schools: impacts and possible solutions](#), Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland, 2024, pp 13–20, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>129</sup> Department of Education, [Complaint resolution: policy](#), Department of Education website, 2025, accessed 4 November 2025.



education settings, as well as youth-friendly resources for Aboriginal children and young people to raise awareness about how to raise concerns about racism.<sup>130</sup>

In June 2025, the Department of Education published an anti-racism policy outlining Victorian government schools' responsibilities to prevent and respond to racism, and to provide safe processes for students and families to report racism.<sup>131</sup> This policy will be accompanied by guidance and resources to support implementation. The Expert Working Group welcomes these developments.

#### **Recommendation 14. Address racism in schools**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Education, implement measures (by July 2027) to improve cultural safety and reduce experiences of racism affecting South Sudanese Australian students, including mandatory anti-racism training for all Victorian school staff and a transparent, accessible complaints process for students and parents who experience racism.

The Victorian Government should monitor complaint trends engage with and provide targeted support to schools showing patterns of concern, with annual reporting to the government on actions taken.

Reporting and analysis should be scheduled for discussion with the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by July 2028.

The Expert Working Group also recommends that action be taken to address the use of informal suspensions and expulsions to exclude South Sudanese Australian students from school.

In its *Let us learn* inquiry, the Commission for Children and Young People found that children and young people in out of home care were often subject to informal suspensions, including where carers were called to collect a child early from school due to their behaviour. The Commission recommended that the Department of Education review schools' reasons for sending students home early to understand the regularity of informal suspensions.<sup>132</sup>

The Department of Education advised the Expert Working Group that it does not collect data on informal suspensions or expulsions, as these are not endorsed practices. The department also advised that it is undertaking a review of its policy on suspensions, which will include consideration of how to ensure that informal suspensions do not occur.

This review is welcome. However, the Expert Working Group considers that more targeted work is required to reduce the use and impact of informal suspensions and expulsions on South Sudanese Australian students.

<sup>130</sup> Recommendation 19. Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP), [Let us learn: systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care](#), CCYP, 2023, p 207, accessed 4 November 2025.

<sup>131</sup> Victorian Government, [Preventing and addressing racism in schools](#), Department of Education website, 2025, accessed 24 November 2025; Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP), [Progress against past inquiries: Let us learn – 2024–25](#), CCYP, 2025, p 12, accessed 4 November 2025.

<sup>132</sup> Finding 21 and Recommendation 27. Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP), [Let us learn: systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care](#), CCYP, 2023, pp 39, 231, accessed 4 November 2025.



### **Recommendation 15. Monitor and address informal suspensions and exclusions**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Education, build on the Department's existing complaints process to establish a mechanism to enable students and parents or carers to report concerns about *informal suspensions* and *exclusions* of South Sudanese Australian students from schools. This mechanism should enable complainants to clearly indicate that their complaint relates to an informal suspension or exclusion (for example, by ticking a box) so that relevant data can be collected about these practices.

The Department of Education should promote this mechanism among South Sudanese Australian students and families and ensure that it is accessible and culturally safe.

The mechanism should commence operation no later than July 2026 and aim to:

- reduce the use of exclusionary practices
- identify systemic issues affecting South Sudanese Australian students
- ensure fairness, transparency and consistency in disciplinary processes.

Reporting and analysis of data collected through this mechanism should be provided to and discussed with the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by the end of 2028.

## **Catholic and independent schools**

The preceding recommendations are aimed at improving the educational experiences of South Sudanese Australian students in Victorian government schools. However, as outlined above, many South Sudanese Australian children and young people attend Catholic schools. Despite some early engagement with the Expert Working Group, ultimately, the Catholic school system's involvement in our work was limited. It will be critical for the Catholic (and independent) school sectors to drive improvements in the areas for reform identified in this chapter.

The MACS vision for Catholic education is to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, hope and optimism to live meaningful lives and to shape and enrich the world around them.<sup>133</sup>

According to the Victorian Catholic Education Authority (VCEA), Catholic schools provide a welcoming, inclusive and safe environment focused on each student's wellbeing, achievement and enjoyment.<sup>134</sup> These values are given expression in the VCEA's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan, outlined in Box 6.4.

<sup>133</sup> Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS), [Our schools](#), MACS website, undated, accessed 4 November 2025.

<sup>134</sup> Victorian Catholic Education Authority (VCEA), [Enrolling in a Catholic school](#), VCEA website, undated, accessed 4 November 2025.



#### Box 6.4. The VCEA's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan

This plan outlines key actions across a range of areas aimed at ensuring that First Nations students in Catholic schools achieve their full learning potential, are empowered to shape their own futures and are supported to embrace their culture and identity.

These areas include:

- **culture and identity** – creating a culturally safe environment that embraces First Nations cultures, and building and modelling high expectations, attitudes and behaviours for First Nations students to strengthen their cultural identity
- **partnerships** – developing authentic and sustainable partnerships with families and local First Nations communities and organisations, and recognising the importance of family and community involvement in all appropriate levels of decision-making
- **attendance** – making a commitment to the educational experience of each student to encourage successful school completion, and working closely with families and communities to support school attendance
- **transitions and pathways** – supporting First Nations students to strive for excellence and achieve successful transitions and pathways, beginning from early years.<sup>135</sup>

#### Recommendation 16. Catholic and independent schools

That the Victorian Catholic Education Authority and independent schools each consider (by the end of 2026) developing an action plan for their respective sector/individual school to support South Sudanese Australian students within their schools, drawing where relevant on the recommendations for the Department of Education (see Recommendations 7–15).

<sup>135</sup> Victorian Catholic Education Authority (VCEA), [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan](#), VCEA, 2023, accessed 31 October 2025.



## 7. Supporting South Sudanese Australian wellbeing in the community

This chapter focuses on what it takes for South Sudanese Australians to thrive in the community. When systems support families to be strong and connected, young people have the best chance to succeed and the risks that can lead to contact with the youth justice system are reduced. The recommendations that follow build on the community's own strengths and outline how government and partners can help strengthen protective factors and address the challenges that place young people at risk.

### 7.1 What we heard

The Expert Working Group heard repeatedly that community connection is what sustains people through challenge, and that recovery, healing and growth are collective processes, not individual ones.

South Sudanese Australians bring extraordinary resilience, creativity and determination to their lives in Victoria. The collectivist values of interdependence and shared responsibility are enduring strengths that can be built upon to create conditions for people to thrive. These strengths sit alongside ongoing challenges: the legacy of displacement and trauma, experiences of racism, economic disadvantage and a service system that too often feels unfamiliar, unwelcoming or inaccessible.

Supporting people in the community means more than providing services – it means building relationships of trust, supporting healing and ensuring that families and young people have access to the resources and opportunities that allow them to participate fully in Victorian life. It means addressing the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality while recognising and nurturing the community's own capacity to lead change.

### 7.2 Findings and recommendations

Supporting South Sudanese Australian people in the community requires more than targeted programs – it calls for partnership, trust and respect. The community has shown what is possible through its own leadership, innovation and resilience. Sustained investment in culturally safe services, housing stability, meaningful employment and youth leadership will build on these foundations and create lasting change.

When South Sudanese Australians are supported to thrive, the benefits extend far beyond one community. Stronger families, safer neighbourhoods and more inclusive institutions make Victoria fairer and more cohesive for everyone. The next phase of work must carry forward this shared commitment, led by community, sustained by government, and focused on a common goal – every young person, every family, and every community able to belong, contribute, and flourish.

### Healing and resilience: culturally responsive mental health and AOD supports

Many South Sudanese Australians have experienced significant trauma arising from conflict, loss, forced displacement and resettlement. Research shows that young people from humanitarian and refugee backgrounds experience higher levels of psychological distress



than their peers in the broader Australian population.<sup>136</sup> Many young South Sudanese Australians who were born in Australia experience intergenerational trauma resulting from their parents' refugee and resettlement experiences.

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System observed that experiences of discrimination – something the Expert Working Group heard a lot about from the South Sudanese Australian community, also significantly increases the risk of mental illness and psychological distress. A meta-analysis of 293 studies found a strong association between racism and poorer mental health. The 2014 Victorian Population Health Survey found that adults who frequently experience racism are almost 5 times more likely to report poor mental health than those who do not.<sup>137</sup>

The Youth Justice Case File Review highlighted the scale of mental health challenges for young African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision.<sup>138</sup>

- 13% had engaged in self-harm or experienced suicidal ideation or attempts
- 48% had expressed wellbeing or safety concerns
- 20% had engaged in harmful or dangerous behaviours
- 21% had experienced personal safety concerns.

Stigma and shame around mental illness also create major barriers to help-seeking in the South Sudanese Australian community.<sup>139</sup> During our community consultations, people frequently described mental health as something that is 'not talked about', or as a problem to be managed privately or through faith rather than professional support. For young people, these cultural norms are compounded by negative experiences with services that are perceived as clinical, individualistic, and disconnected from collective forms of healing.

*The stigma associated with mental health in our community is so strong that many young people don't even consider seeking help.*<sup>140</sup>

*There are no services that really understand our cultural background. We need support that recognises our unique experiences.*<sup>141</sup>

Young people also told the Expert Working Group that mental health services are often inaccessible due to cost.

Victoria Legal Aid reports that the lack of culturally safe mental health services and stigma can act as barriers to South Sudanese Australian children and young people who are in contact with the criminal justice system agreeing to psychological assessments. This can

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<sup>136</sup> Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (Final Report, 2021) volume 3, p 214.

<sup>137</sup> Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (Final Report, 2021) volume 3, p 215.

<sup>138</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

<sup>139</sup> M Brough et al., 'Young refugees talk about wellbeing: a qualitative analysis of refugee youth mental health from three states', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 2003, 38(2):193–208, doi:10.1002/j.1839-4655.2003.tb01142.x. R Radhamony et al., 'Perspectives of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) community members regarding mental health services: a qualitative analysis', *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 2023, 30(4): 850-864, doi:10.1111/jpm.12919.

<sup>140</sup> Young person, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>141</sup> Young person, Community consultation, 2024.



result in poorer justice outcomes, including longer periods on remand, because information that may be relevant to legal decisions is unavailable.

### *Alcohol and other drugs*

Substance misuse also significantly contributes to young people's involvement with Youth Justice. In 2015–16, 46% of the 1,548 young people under Youth Justice orders (across community and custody) had accessed alcohol and drug services, highlighting the correlation between substance misuse and contact with the justice system.<sup>142</sup> A study by Horyniak et al. explored the motivations for drinking, experiences of alcohol-related problems and strategies for managing drinking among marginalised African young people in Melbourne.<sup>143</sup> The study identified three key motivations for heavy alcohol consumption: drinking to cope with trauma, drinking to cope with boredom and frustration, and drinking as a social experience.

Consistent with this academic research, peer pressure and using alcohol to self-medicate and deal with the impact of trauma were identified in community consultations as key drivers of alcohol and drug use among South Sudanese Australian young people. Parents reported that kids were accessing alcohol and drugs through school friends and networks. South Sudanese Australian young people explained that sometimes they drank too much due to peer pressure, while in other instances, drinking was used as a coping mechanism for trauma or mental health problems.<sup>144</sup>

According to the Youth Justice Case File Review data:<sup>145</sup>

- 53% of children and young people under Youth Justice supervision had a reported or assessed AOD problem
- 52% of children and young people under Youth Justice supervision had occasional drug use, while 37% had chronic drug use.

Strategies to reduce alcohol and drug use among young people include organised sports, involvement of parents in young people's leisure time, and strengthening relationships between parents and children.

*From what I've witnessed around me, a lot of young people have died in violent ways because of their grief and not being able to cope with it. I see young people using AOD to cope with deaths of friends and family – not being given a place to grieve or access to grief counsellors.*<sup>146</sup>

Mainstream mental health and alcohol and other drug services have often not been effective in meeting the needs of South Sudanese Australians. Gaps in cultural understanding, limited

<sup>142</sup> P Armytage and J Ogloff, *Youth justice review and strategy: meeting needs and reducing offending*, Victorian Government, 2017, Part 1, p 160, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>143</sup> D Horyniak et al., 'Heavy alcohol consumption among marginalised African refugee young people in Melbourne, Australia: motivations for drinking, experiences of alcohol-related problems and strategies for managing drinking', *Ethnicity & Health*, 2015, 21(3):284–299, doi:10.1080/13557858.2015.1061105.

<sup>144</sup> Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP), *2023–24 youth forum report 1: a snapshot of consultations with young people as part of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group*, CCYP, 2024, p 6, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>145</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

<sup>146</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.



representation of African Australian staff and communication barriers have led to mistrust and lower participation. Services can be experienced as punitive or alienating rather than supportive.

Peer pressure and self-medication to cope with trauma were identified as the main drivers of alcohol and drug use among South Sudanese Australians. Parents and community leaders described the lack of culturally responsive AOD support and limited awareness of how to access services. Building culturally competent and community-based AOD services will reduce harm, build trust and strengthen pathways away from the justice system.

### **Policy context**

In 2020, the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System found that 'Victoria's mental health system has not delivered safe, responsive or inclusive treatment, care and support for many people from diverse communities and social groups.'<sup>147</sup> It noted that:

There are lower than expected numbers of young people from refugee and newly arrived migrant backgrounds presenting to mental health services. Young people born in several regions outside Australia are at high risk of not obtaining the mental health services they need. Overall, people from culturally diverse communities typically present to services when they have higher intensity needs, suggesting there are barriers to early intervention and care.<sup>148</sup>

The Royal Commission found that '[key] themes include lack of safety, responsiveness and inclusiveness and challenges navigating the mental health system'.<sup>149</sup>

The Royal Commission said that 'the Victorian Government must invest in building partnerships with Victoria's diverse communities to identify community priorities and community-led solutions'.<sup>150</sup> It observed:

Inequity of mental health outcomes between social groups is neither inevitable nor intractable. During its deliberations, the Commission heard of several examples of innovative programs and initiatives designed to support the mental health needs of Victoria's diverse communities. Many of these initiatives have been led by community leaders, community-led organisations or individual mental health services. While these initiatives are commendable, the significant and persistent inequities in access and equity of outcomes between diverse populations and the broader population point to the need for a systemic approach to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of diverse communities. As described throughout this report, the 'one-size-fits-all' approach that characterises much of the current mental health system must be replaced with a system that responds respectfully and compassionately to all Victorians. This includes planning, designing and delivering care in partnership with local communities, and providing timely specialist services for those who need them.<sup>151</sup>

It noted that 'short-term and insecure funding is a barrier for community-led organisations to deliver ongoing programs and expand services to meet demand'.<sup>152</sup>

<sup>147</sup> *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* (Final Report, 2021) volume 3, p 208.

<sup>148</sup> *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* (Final Report, 2021) volume 3, p 214.

<sup>149</sup> *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* (Final Report, 2021) volume 3, p 224.

<sup>150</sup> *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* (Final Report, 2021) volume 3, p 210.

<sup>151</sup> *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* (Final Report, 2021) volume 3, p 257.

<sup>152</sup> *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* (Final Report, 2021) volume 3, p 260.



It also said that '[t]he Victorian Government must ... enhance system-wide data collection and analysis and ensure there is transparency in relation to the mental health access and experiences of Victoria's diverse communities compared with the general population'.<sup>153</sup>

The *Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022* now requires mental health and wellbeing service providers to make all reasonable efforts to comply with the cultural safety principle, which states that:<sup>154</sup>

(1) Mental health and wellbeing Services are to be culturally safe and responsive to people of all racial, ethnic, faith-based and cultural backgrounds.

(2) Treatment and care is to be appropriate for, and consistent with, the cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices of a person living with mental illness or psychological distress. ...

Despite the policy reforms undertaken to date, the structural and practice-level barriers highlighted by the Royal Commission continue to be felt, underscoring the need for ongoing, focused reform.

Following the Royal Commission, in August 2025, the Victorian Government released *Wellbeing in Victoria* – an overarching 10-year strategy to promote positive mental health and wellbeing for all Victorians – together with an initial action plan.<sup>155</sup>

In October 2025, the Victorian Government published its *Diverse Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing 10-year Framework*, with the aim of improving the mental health and wellbeing of multicultural, LGBTIQ+ and disability communities in Victoria. The framework's 10-year vision is that 'all Victorians can access a safe and inclusive mental health and wellbeing system that responds to, reflects and embraces diversity'.<sup>156</sup> The framework is supported by the *First Blueprint for Action 2025–2028*, which commits to a range of actions, including supporting the delivery and evaluation of mental health and alcohol and other drug initiatives under the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*.<sup>157</sup>

### **What is needed**

The evidence points to a systemic failure to provide culturally safe, visible and responsive care. While reforms have been announced, culturally grounded mental health and AOD pathways remain scarce. Without early help and culturally anchored healing, distress manifests elsewhere: in families under strain, in schools through disengagement, and in the youth justice system through crisis and behaviour that could have been prevented, and to the detriment of young people's wellbeing that could have been preserved and supported.

<sup>153</sup> Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (Final Report, 2021) volume 3, p 209.

<sup>154</sup> *Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022* (Vic), section 27.

<sup>155</sup> Department of Health, [Wellbeing in Victoria: a strategy to promote good mental health 2025–2035](#), Victorian Government, 2025, accessed 27 November 2025; Department of Health, [Wellbeing action plan 2025/26 – 2026/27](#), Victorian Government, 2025, accessed 27 November 2025.

<sup>156</sup> Department of Health, [Diverse communities mental health and wellbeing 10-year framework](#), Victorian Government, 2025, p 17, accessed 27 November 2025.

<sup>157</sup> Department of Health, [First blueprint for action 2025–2028](#), Victorian Government, 2025, p 10, accessed 27 November 2025.



Healing for the South Sudanese Australian community must be understood as both personal and collective. To rebuild trust, Victoria's mental health and AOD systems must move to a genuine partnership:

- **Visibility matters.** Data collection that stops at 'culturally and linguistically diverse' or 'CALD' conceals inequity. Disaggregated data is needed to identify needs, track outcomes, and improve accountability.
- **Partnership matters.** Sustainable investment in African- and South Sudanese-led organisations is essential to build workforce capability, community trust and cultural safety.
- **Cultural safety matters.** Services must be grounded in humility, listening and respect for collective healing traditions that recognise trauma as both social and spiritual.

A wellbeing system for all Victorians cannot exist while entire communities remain unseen within it.

### *Effective mainstream services*

While the policy aims and legislative requirements for cultural responsiveness are in place, there needs to be greater accountability for what is achieved in practice through mainstream service delivery.

The Expert Working Group acknowledges the role of the recently established Mental Health and Wellbeing Local Services in strengthening cultural responsiveness mainstream, mental health services and partnering with local community-led organisations. These services provide free treatment, care and support for people aged 26 years and over who are experiencing mental health or wellbeing concerns, including people with co-occurring alcohol and drug treatment needs. Mental Health and Wellbeing Local Services are available in Wyndham, Brimbank, Melton and Dandenong (among other areas).<sup>158</sup>

When asked by the Expert Working Group about service user data across the mental health and wellbeing system, the Department of Health said that the data it holds speaks only to 'CALD' status and nothing more specific. So, at the state government level, there is no visibility into whether African Australian people are accessing state-funded mental health and AOD services, let alone whether those services are effective in meeting their needs.

The Royal Commission noted in 2020 that:

Evidence indicates that the current government requirements and reporting processes for access to and quality of treatment, care and support for diverse communities are insufficient to facilitate progress towards delivering responsive care.<sup>159</sup>

This appears to still be the case.

Further, the Royal Commission noted that:

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<sup>158</sup> Department of Health, [Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals](#), Department of Health website, 2025, accessed 28 November 2025.

<sup>159</sup> *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* (Final Report, 2021) volume 3, p 245.



Lack of coronial data in relation to diverse communities is also a barrier to understanding and responding to suicide ... The Coroners Court of Victoria discussed the challenges of identifying suicide rates among culturally diverse communities due to variations in the way information relating to place of birth, languages spoken and cultural belonging is recorded in the Victorian Suicide Register.<sup>160</sup>

Once again, this gap in understanding persists and has been raised by the South Sudanese Australian community during our consultations.

The *Diverse Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing 10-year Framework* recognises the longstanding issues with the collection, reporting and analysis of mental health and wellbeing data for diverse communities in Victoria, and commits to strengthening data collection to better understand the experiences of those communities with mental health services.<sup>161</sup> In addition, one of the framework's focus areas commits to targeted actions to prevent and respond to suicide within diverse communities.<sup>162</sup> These are welcome commitments; however, they are broad in their focus on a range of diverse communities and do not recognise the specific needs of the South Sudanese Australian community.

### **Non-government developed responses**

Non-government organisations have developed over the years to address community needs.

Foundation House is a non-government specialist refugee trauma agency that provides services to people of refugee background, and their families and communities. Services provided by Foundation House include:

- counselling, advocacy, family support, group work, psychoeducation, information and complementary therapies
- working with communities to improve their capacity to access services
- offering professional and organisational development and resources to assist other community service providers enhance the responsiveness of their services to the needs of refugees.<sup>163</sup>

It provides client-based services in Brunswick, Dallas, Dandenong, Ringwood, Sunshine and Werribee. It also provides services in partnership with other agencies in rural and regional Victoria.

Foundation House provides vital support across refugee communities. However, its broad cross-cultural remit means it cannot always provide the depth of cultural knowledge, language or relational approach needed to meet the specific needs of South Sudanese Australians. Its clinical therapeutic framework remains grounded largely in Western psychological models, which can feel individualistic or disconnected from collective, faith-based and relational approaches to healing in the South Sudanese Australian community.

<sup>160</sup> *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* (Final Report, 2021) volume 3, p 248.

<sup>161</sup> Department of Health, [Diverse communities mental health and wellbeing 10-year framework](#), Victorian Government, 2025, pp 10, 22, accessed 27 November 2025.

<sup>162</sup> Department of Health, [Diverse communities mental health and wellbeing 10-year framework](#), Victorian Government, 2025, pp 34–35, accessed 27 November 2025.

<sup>163</sup> Foundation House, The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc, [About us](#), Foundation House website, 2025, accessed 7 November 2025.



Foundation House is a vital part of Victoria's trauma-recovery landscape, but on its own, is not a full answer to the needs of the South Sudanese Australian community.

### *African community-led responses*

Emerging community-led organisations such as the Nas Recovery Centre are demonstrating culturally responsive, trauma-informed approaches that combine clinical support with cultural safety, peer mentoring and family engagement. These models reflect the community's strengths, faith, storytelling, collective responsibility and connection, and build trust where mainstream systems have failed.

#### **Box 7.1. Case example – Nas Recovery Centre: Supporting positive change for a young person in custody**

The Nas Recovery Centre (NRC) provides culturally sensitive, holistic interventions for young people facing addiction and mental health challenges. NRC's work demonstrates how culturally informed, community-led responses can transform lives and reduce youth justice involvement.

This case study demonstrates the impact of the NRC's method on a young person preparing for community reintegration while still in custody. Their approach centred on rapport-building, fostering positive thinking, and setting achievable goals to disrupt entrenched cycles of reoffending.

NRC received a referral from Parkville College for a young person who had experienced repeated incarceration, often spending less than two weeks in the community before returning to custody. Although hesitant at first, the young person described feeling safe within the NRC's program from the outset.

NRC provided consistent weekly Zoom counselling. Their work focused on establishing goals for housing, employment and education; identifying positive influences within the young person's social networks; applying cognitive-behavioural strategies to reframe negative thinking; and building communication and self-advocacy skills to support the young person's healing and resilience. Together, NRC and the young person explored how the young person could distance themselves from unsafe peers, build healthier connections, and use their time in custody as an opportunity for growth.

After two months, the young person's outlook shifted significantly. They began exercising, journaling and reading the Quran, and they emerged as a positive influence among other young people in custody. Ahead of the young person's release, NRC coordinated closely with their lawyer and caseworker to ensure a safe transition, arranging temporary hotel accommodation to prevent them from returning to a high-risk environment.

Following release from custody, the young person moved in with their aunt, secured employment, and continued engaging with the NRC program. Regular communication with their legal and justice workers enabled NRC to share progress updates and address challenges early.

At the young person's next hearing, they received a community correction order – a positive outcome not previously considered likely.



By addressing cultural sensitivities and providing consistent support grounded in lived experiences, the NRC can help reduce recidivism rates and foster a healthier future for young individuals involved in the criminal justice system.

The Expert Working Group also notes the work of Project Sunrise, which provides AOD education and outreach services to African Australian young people and their families across Melbourne. Project Sunrise is a partnership between the African Australian Welfare Bureau Inc., Odyssey House, the Positive Mental Health Program, and Youth Support and Advocacy Services, and receives funding under the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*.<sup>164</sup> Since 2021–22, the project has engaged over 3,289 young people of African heritage and their families through AOD treatment and harm minimisation services, and community outreach activities. Project Sunrise has also delivered cultural competency training and community education sessions to improve the broader health sector's capacity to respond to African Australian young people and their families.<sup>165</sup>

Tailoring services to include culturally appropriate elements is likely to be more effective in addressing substance misuse among young people.<sup>166</sup> In this regard, community-led approaches are showing what works: local programs that combine clinical support with cultural safety, peer mentoring and family engagement. These approaches recognise that healing happens in community and that cultural identity, belonging and self-determination are protective factors in themselves.

The Nas Recovery Centre receives no funding from the Department of Health. It received short-term funding from the Department of Justice and Community Safety, including as part of the Expert Working Group's work to grow the capacity of community-led services. This funding is not a long-term solution.<sup>167</sup> The barriers to community-led organisations delivering ongoing programs and services that the Royal Commission described remain.

More recently, several African community-led organisations have received funding through the Victorian Government's Diverse Communities Grants Program. Phase 1 of the program ran from 2021 to 2023. Grants' recipients in 2023–2025 include the African Australian Welfare Bureau Inc. for services for young African Australians in regional Victoria, and Afri-Aus Care Inc.<sup>168</sup>

### **Box 7.2. Supporting the growth in South Sudanese and African Australian-led services**

South Sudanese and African community-led services in Victoria are still evolving.

Many are small, area-based organisations built on strong community networks and deep cultural knowledge, but they lack the infrastructure, funding stability and workforce support

<sup>164</sup> Odyssey Victoria, [Project Sunrise](#), Odyssey Victoria website, 2025, accessed 25 November 2025.

<sup>165</sup> Information provided by the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

<sup>166</sup> D Horyniak et al., 'Heavy alcohol consumption among marginalised African refugee young people in Melbourne, Australia: motivations for drinking, experiences of alcohol-related problems and strategies for managing drinking', *Ethnicity & Health*, 2015, 21(3):284–299, doi:10.1080/13557858.2015.1061105.

<sup>167</sup> In addition to funding provided through the Expert Working Group's work, the Nas Recovery Centre has also received funding from DJCS for other programs including the Path2Home project.

<sup>168</sup> Department of Health, [Diverse communities grants program](#), Department of Health website, 2024, accessed 27 November 2025.



needed to grow and sustain their work. These organisations play a critical bridging role – offering culturally grounded, trusted and responsive services that mainstream systems often struggle to deliver.

With the right investment and partnerships, there is a real opportunity to nurture these organisations from local roots to having a broader community impact.

Growth from the ground up – starting with local hubs, networks and shared back-office supports – can ensure that community-led services remain connected to their people while building the scale and sustainability required to thrive.

Consortia approaches, where a number of community-led organisations work together to share expertise, governance and administrative systems, offer one pathway for organisations to grow and achieve greater funding stability.

The experience of Aboriginal-led services in Victoria demonstrates that with time, secure funding and respectful partnerships, community-controlled organisations can evolve from small, under-resourced beginnings into enduring institutions that deliver culturally strong, high-quality services at scale.

### **Recommendation 17. Mental health and alcohol and other drug services**

That the Victorian Government:

(a) strengthen the cultural responsiveness and accessibility of mainstream mental health and alcohol and other drug (AOD) services for South Sudanese Australians, with actions taken to do this reported to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by the end of 2027. Levels of South Sudanese Australian engagement with, and community feedback on the cultural responsiveness of, these services should be reviewed within 5 years.

(b) build the capacity of South Sudanese and other African Australian community-led organisations (and/or consortia of community-led organisations) to deliver culturally responsive services to support mental health and trauma-recovery, and to address harmful alcohol and other drug use amongst South Sudanese Australians. At a minimum, community-led programs should be introduced or expanded by July 2027 in each of the following areas: (i) Wyndham; (ii) Brimbank; (iii) Melton; and (iv) Greater Dandenong, with consideration to be given about expansion to other surrounding areas where there is demand over time.

## **Safe and stable housing**

Economic disadvantage and housing stress are major pressures on South Sudanese Australian families.<sup>169</sup>

High rents and limited affordable housing in areas where South Sudanese families have settled, particularly Wyndham, Melton, Casey and Brimbank, make housing insecurity

<sup>169</sup> NG Khawaja and K Milner, 'Acculturation stress in South Sudanese refugees: impact on marital relationships', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2012, 36(5):624–636, doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.03.007.



common. Systemic discrimination compounds these pressures: community members report being denied rental properties, subjected to excessive requirements or facing unresponsive housing services.

*It's hard to find a place to live even when you have a job.  
When people see your name, they don't call you back.<sup>170</sup>*

*Some families have 10 people in one house. There's no privacy, no space.  
The children grow up angry.<sup>171</sup>*

**Table 7.1. Housing data for the South Sudanese Australian community in Victoria<sup>172</sup>**

| Tenure Type*          | Born in South Sudan | %    | Born overseas | %    | Born in Australia | %    | Total   | %    |
|-----------------------|---------------------|------|---------------|------|-------------------|------|---------|------|
| Owned outright        | 47                  | 2.9  | 316,474       | 30.2 | 438,572           | 33.5 | 768,730 | 32.2 |
| Owned with a mortgage | 480                 | 29.8 | 379,110       | 36.1 | 478,175           | 36.6 | 862,658 | 36.1 |
| Rented                | 1,005               | 62.4 | 323,777       | 30.9 | 350,318           | 26.8 | 681,419 | 28.5 |
| Other tenure type     | 18                  | 1.1  | 15,301        | 1.5  | 25,538            | 2.0  | 41,752  | 1.7  |
| Not stated            | 68                  | 4.2  | 14,500        | 1.4  | 15,234            | 1.2  | 35,676  | 1.5  |

\* Occupied private dwellings (excl. visitor only and other non-classifiable households)

Housing instability leads to a range of adverse outcomes, such as poor mental health, disengagement from education and difficulties in forming stable social networks.<sup>173</sup> Housing instability can also lead to disengagement from school and employment, increasing the likelihood of criminal behaviour. These issues can push young people towards street-based activities as a form of social engagement or survival, increasing their vulnerability to criminal behaviour and subsequent involvement with the youth justice system.<sup>174</sup>

The Youth Justice Case File Review found that:<sup>175</sup>

- 36% of African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision had a history of unsafe or unstable living circumstances
- 37% of young people or their families experienced financial stress when settling in Australia
- 28% experienced difficulties finding adequate housing.

Stable housing is not only a practical need but a foundation for wellbeing. It allows families to plan for the future, children to succeed at school, and young people to reconnect with community and opportunity.

<sup>170</sup> Young person, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>171</sup> Community Elder, Community consultation, 2023.

<sup>172</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *People in Victoria who were born in South Sudan*, 2021 Census Country of birth QuickStats, ABS website, 2021, accessed 15 September 2025.

<sup>173</sup> N Brackertz, A Wilkinson and J Davison, *Housing, homelessness and mental health: towards systems change*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2018, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>174</sup> T Moore and M McArthur, 'If only I, they, we had done things differently: young people talk about school difficulties and crime', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2014, 44:249–255, doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.06.015.

<sup>175</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety.



Improving the cultural responsiveness of housing and homelessness services is essential. Service providers must understand community norms, language needs and family structures, and ensure their practices are free from bias or discrimination.

#### **Recommendation 18. Housing and homelessness services**

That the Victorian Government strengthen the cultural responsiveness and accessibility of housing and homelessness services for South Sudanese Australians, with actions reported to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by July 2027.

Levels of South Sudanese Australian engagement with, and community feedback on the cultural responsiveness of, these services should be reviewed by July 2029.

### **Digital connection and online safety**

Digital technology is part of daily life for South Sudanese Australian young people, offering connection, education and opportunity. However, many parents describe a widening ‘digital divide’ – a gap in skills, confidence and understanding between generations. Parents who are unfamiliar with online platforms struggle to monitor or guide their children’s digital lives, creating anxiety about exposure to bullying or other harmful content (the role of social media in high-harm peer associations is discussed in Chapter 8).

Building digital literacy and online safety awareness can strengthen intergenerational understanding and protect young people from harm. Programs that teach both parents and children how to navigate online spaces safely, while preserving young people’s access to information and connection, can help families build trust and communication across the digital gap.

#### **Recommendation 19. Digital literacy and online safety**

That the Victorian Government promote digital literacy and online safety programs for South Sudanese Australian young people and parents, addressing misinformation and cyber-bullying, and linking to campaigns on the risks of gang and organised crime recruitment via social media (see Recommendation 23).

### **Employment, enterprise and opportunity**

Employment is a cornerstone of wellbeing and social inclusion. It provides structure, purpose and the means to participate fully in community life. For South Sudanese Australians, especially young people, employment also carries symbolic weight – it represents belonging, contribution and dignity.

Yet, South Sudanese Victorians face disproportionately high unemployment and underemployment. The 2021 Census showed that only 41.7% of Victorians born in South Sudan were employed full-time, compared with 56.2% of Victorians overall.<sup>176</sup>

<sup>176</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [People in Victoria who were born in South Sudan](#), 2021 Census Country of birth QuickStats, ABS website, 2021, accessed 13 November 2025.



Unemployment for people born in South Sudan stood at 17.6%, more than three times the state average.<sup>177</sup>

Barriers include limited recognition of qualifications, language barriers, racism in hiring practices and the absence of culturally safe employment services.<sup>178</sup> Young people also face intergenerational pressures: parents' expectations often reflect traditional aspirations such as medicine, law or engineering, while young people may wish to pursue creative, vocational or entrepreneurial paths.<sup>179</sup>

Targeted programs that build pathways into apprenticeships, local government and industry partnerships, and small business development can open doors for young South Sudanese Victorians. Community-led organisations are uniquely placed to mentor young people and connect them with culturally appropriate employment supports.

### **Box 7.3. Example – The ASPYA Foundation**

The ASPYA Foundation (formerly the African Youth Initiative) runs basketball and skill-development programs, employment mentoring and creative projects such as *Reclaimed Voices*, a documentary challenging negative media stereotypes. ASPYA has helped more than 100 young people secure employment, with several transitioning from Youth Justice involvement into mentorship roles.

The Expert Working Group notes existing employment initiatives directed at African Australian communities in Victoria, such as the Employment Brokers program, which is funded under the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*. Since 2020–21, this program has funded 8 African-led community organisations to engage Employment Brokers, who provide culturally responsive job readiness support to African Australian job seekers, particularly those who are long-term unemployed.<sup>180</sup>

While such initiatives are positive, the Expert Working Group considers that more targeted employment services are required to support South Sudanese Australian young people into jobs.

As noted in Chapter 11, the Expert Working Group also recommends establishing a clear pathway for young people with criminal histories who do not pose a risk to child safety to be granted a Working with Children Check, as this can be an additional barrier to employment.

### **Recommendation 20. Apprenticeship and employment support**

That the Victorian Government invest in culturally appropriate employment services to help address barriers to employment and support South Sudanese Australian young people into jobs. Activities should include:

<sup>177</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *People in Victoria who were born in South Sudan*, 2021 Census Country of birth QuickStats, ABS website, 2021, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>178</sup> H Udah et al., 'African immigrants to Australia: barriers and challenges to labor market success', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 2019, 54(8):1159–1174, doi:10.1177/0021909619861788.

<sup>179</sup> NG Khawaja and K Milner, 'Acculturation stress in South Sudanese refugees: impact on marital relationships', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2012, 36(5):624–636, doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.03.007.

<sup>180</sup> Information provided by the Department of Premier and Cabinet.



- (a) creating and promoting apprenticeship opportunities
- (b) supporting community enterprise and small business development
- (c) building job pipelines through partnerships with local councils, government agencies and industry, to reduce long-term youth unemployment.

The Government should report to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on progress, actions taken and outcomes achieved, including youth employment participation and retention rates, by July 2027 and again by July 2030.

## Youth leadership and participation

South Sudanese Australian young people consistently described a desire to lead change within their community – to be seen not as a problem but as part of the solution. Many expressed frustration that discussions about them so often occur without them, and that opportunities to influence decision-making remain limited. Strengthening youth-led organisations is therefore not only a matter of program delivery, but a key mechanism for shifting power, building community capability, and enabling young people to drive reforms that affect their lives.

Youth-led organisations occupy a unique role within the service system. They provide early intervention, cultural connection and leadership development in ways that mainstream services cannot replicate, because their authority comes from lived experience, peer credibility and strong relationships with families. When young people design and lead programs, the result is not only increased engagement but a genuine sense of belonging, purpose and agency.

Investing in youth-led programs helps young people build confidence, skills and a sense of belonging.

Youth-led initiatives such as Next Gen Unite and the ASPYA Foundation demonstrate the power of peer-driven engagement. These programs use sport, music and creative expression to build resilience, strengthen identity and create pathways away from offending.

### Box 7.4. Examples – Next Gen Unite and the ASPYA Foundation

Next Gen Unite offers free weekly music sessions, mentoring, sports, and cultural events. Its NGU Cup football tournament attracted over 500 participants, including families and young people, raising mental health awareness and building confidence and friendships. A next-generation draft combine with the AFL provided career pathway guidance to more than 60 aspiring players. Partnerships with AFL and mental health organisations show mainstream support for this youth-led program, and young people reported feeling happier and more connected after games.

Next Gen Unite also uses music and mentorship to support South Sudanese Australian young people, including those involved with the justice system. Its *Justice to Inspiration* program combines creative arts with structured rehabilitation and employment support. More than 80 young people have participated, with many turning their creative talents into professional careers.



The ASPYA Foundation, formerly known as the African Youth Initiative, is a youth-led organisation that provides faith-based discussion groups, a Girl Chat program, mentoring, sports, and drop-in sessions. It produced the Reclaimed Voices documentary to challenge stereotypes and, in 2025, organised a youth forum where over 90 young people openly discussed challenges and solutions. Participants described the youth-led approach as a safe and healing environment because programs are run by peers who share their culture and lived experiences. This peer leadership model helps build trust with authorities and empowers young people to speak about trauma and engage with decision-makers.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate how youth-led programs foster culturally safe environments, develop trust, and enhance well-being through a combination of peer mentoring, sport, the arts and family-oriented support. They also show what is possible when young people are supported to lead: engagement rises, stigma reduces, and communities build their own protective factors.

Importantly, youth-led organisations also act as a bridge between government and the community at a time when mistrust can be a barrier to effective service delivery. Young leaders help translate policy into practice in a way that feels accessible and relevant, and they provide the government with early insights into emerging issues such as high-risk peer associations, changing social dynamics and the pressures facing young people during periods of heightened public scrutiny.

Sustained investment in youth-led organisations therefore strengthens both community cohesion and the broader youth justice and child wellbeing systems. By enabling South Sudanese Australian young people to lead, mentor and advocate, the government helps cultivate a generation of leaders capable of shaping long-term solutions, strengthening community resilience and contributing to a safer, more inclusive Victoria.

#### **Recommendation 21. African Australian youth-led programs**

That the Victorian Government fund African Australian youth-led programs to deliver activities that effectively engage and support the wellbeing of South Sudanese Australian young people, and build young people's leadership capabilities.

### **Restoring relationships and building peace**

Community members repeatedly emphasised the importance of reconciliation, mediation and collective healing. Traditional forms of dispute resolution in South Sudan rely on community Elders and restorative practices to repair harm and restore harmony. Bringing these principles into a Victorian context can help resolve conflicts before they escalate to police or court involvement.

The Neighbourhood Justice Centre's Peacemaking Service in the City of Yarra provides a model for culturally grounded, community-led dispute resolution.

#### **Box 7.5. Example – Peacemaking Service**

The Neighbourhood Justice Centre (NJC) provides a free, voluntary, confidential and impartial Peacemaking Service for City of Yarra residents, groups, and organisations.



The common types of issues the service deals with include:

- conflicts between neighbours (for example about noise, challenging behaviour, verbal abuse, threats or fights)
- inappropriate use of social media
- property damage
- use of communal areas (for example car parks, laundries or gardens)
- conflict between individuals or groups
- family conflict
- conflicts between young people in schools or public places
- Personal Safety Intervention Order applications
- crimes where a person was harmed.

The NJC also provides the following restorative services:

- Conflict coaching where it works one-on-one with an individual who is experiencing conflict with another person/people. The individual is supported to identify options and utilise a set of skills or strategies in managing or resolving the conflict.
- Referrals to appropriate support services such as mental health, legal services, social workers or financial counsellors.
- Shuttle negotiation between the parties in conflict to assist in managing or resolving the situation. This can occur when parties do not want to meet with each other.
- Facilitated meetings (including circles, group conferencing and mediation) which bring people together in a safe, supportive and confidential space to discuss what has been going on and how to make the situation better. These are designed to meet the individual needs of the participants and can include anyone that the participants think can help the discussion and improve the situation, such as family, neighbours and support workers.

The NJC also offers a free Peacemaking Service for schools to help resolve conflict, repair harm, rebuild relationships and re-engage students. The service supports schools with a wide range of complex issues, including:

- behaviours of concern (such as bullying, harassment, violence, unsafe social media use)
- conflict between students, parents and/or staff
- suspensions, exclusions and expulsions
- absenteeism or disengagement
- students returning after prolonged absence.



Expanding access to similar programs in areas with large South Sudanese populations will help rebuild relationships, strengthen community cohesion and reduce reoffending.

**Recommendation 22. Dispute resolution skills and support**

That the Victorian Government expand the availability of peacemaking programs in communities and schools to help resolve conflict, repair harm, and rebuild relationships, with a priority on engaging South Sudanese Australian communities and drawing on lessons from the Peacemaking Service run through the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in the City of Yarra. A program should be introduced in western Melbourne by July 2027 and a second area by July 2028.



## 8. Intervening in high-harm peer associations

This chapter examines the need for more intensive, community-based interventions for young people engaged in high-harm peer groups and offending networks. It highlights the role of lived-experience mentors, restorative practices and cultural reconnection in breaking cycles of violence and exploitation. Drawing on lessons from international models such as Project Restore in New York, it outlines practical recommendations for Victoria to strengthen prevention, accountability and belonging through community partnerships.

### 8.1 Understanding high-harm peer associations

High-harm peer associations refer to informal groups of young people whose collective behaviour results in significant harm – whether through violent offending, organised theft or retaliation cycles. These associations can form fluidly, often around shared identity, neighbourhood or online affiliation, and may not fit traditional definitions of ‘gangs’.

For practitioners and communities, this presents a challenge: group dynamics amplify risk. Offending becomes reinforced through shared status and identity, while disengagement from school, family or employment deepens vulnerability.

Government and community service staff face significant challenges in managing these dynamics, including:

- understanding and assessing group-based risks and influences
- engaging young people whose trust in authority is low
- supporting families who feel powerless to intervene.

Without coordinated, community-based interventions that combine credibility, cultural insight and practical support, these risks continue to compound.

### 8.2 What we heard

The Expert Working Group heard repeatedly from young people, practitioners and police that the nature of youth offending and peer association has changed dramatically in recent years. There is a need to step up the skill and intensity of interventions with young people engaging in high-risk and high-harm behaviours.

Current approaches in Victoria, and indeed across Australia, have not kept pace with the contemporary lived experience of young people, which is shaped by rapid exposure to international cultural norms and expectations via social media, strong peer group identification and entrenched poverty, discrimination and exclusion.

While rapidly evolving gang activity across Victoria is not specific to the South Sudanese Australian community, gaps in effective intervention models have a disproportionate impact on the community. Some South Sudanese Australian young people, like others from marginalised backgrounds, are drawn into high-harm peer associations due to a mix of social isolation, economic pressure and the absence of safe, positive pathways to belonging and recognition.



Young people and community leaders emphasised the central importance of role models and mentors who understand their world.

*They've got to understand what you've been through. They need to be someone who's been in your shoes. You have to be able to relate to someone and be around someone that understands you. No cookie cutter approach.<sup>181</sup>*

The absence of relatable mentors and positive peer role models was described as a key gap in current services. Young people also spoke about how social media normalises and amplifies violence, glamourises criminal lifestyles and fuels retaliation through online taunts and exposure.

Community leaders reinforced the need for holistic, intensive, wraparound programs that respond not just to the individual but to the peer network and family context.

### 8.3 Findings and recommendations

Intervening in high-harm peer associations requires more than enforcement – it demands connection, credibility and culture. Programs that are relational, restorative and rooted in community have shown they can change lives.

By addressing the influence of social media, holding organised crime accountable, investing in lived-experience mentoring models and strengthening cultural identity, the Victorian Government can build a pathway for young people to step away from high-harm behaviours and toward belonging, purpose and hope.

#### The challenge of social media

Social media platforms have become a critical vector for the amplification and escalation of high-harm peer associations. Young people involved in group offending frequently use online platforms to post videos of weapons, stolen vehicles, rival-group taunts, postcode-branding and 'flexing' status symbols.

Social media does not simply reflect group offending – it helps shape peer-group norms, identity reinforcement and retaliation cycles that are central to high-harm associations. Online interaction can escalate into offline violence.

Drill music intersects with these dynamics by providing a cultural and acoustic framework through which young people participating in or identifying with high-harm peer networks experience and express status, territory, retaliation and identity. Some research has argued that drill lyrics and videos often contain direct references to rival sets, portray weapons, boast about attacks, and display online audiences – actions that reinforce peer group identity and escalate conflict.

The value of the intervention lies in recognising that drill music and social-media content can act as markers or amplifiers of peer group risk rather than as sole causes of offending. Thus, it becomes a critical domain for targeted intervention: disrupting online peer-reinforcement, designing social-media literacy and counter-narrative campaigns, and engaging credible

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<sup>181</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.



messengers to intervene in how young people engage with, interpret and act upon digital content.

For parents, practitioners and agencies, the rapid evolution of online culture presents a major blind spot. Few older adults meaningfully engage with the digital spaces where these dynamics unfold, and many underestimate their influence. Parents often lack the digital literacy to monitor or contextualise their children's online activities. At the same time, government and community services can struggle to interpret the significance of online interactions that occur through private chat groups, encrypted messaging, or rapidly changing social-media trends.

This generational disconnect leaves young people navigating an environment of online provocation and peer validation largely on their own. As a result, early warning signs, such as the sharing of violent drill tracks, coded emojis or online taunts, can go unnoticed until conflict spills into the community. Addressing this gap requires not only youth-focused intervention but also capacity-building for parents, mentors and agencies to understand and engage with the digital worlds shaping young people's identities and risks.

### **Recommendation 23. The role of social media in high-harm peer associations**

That the Victorian Government:

(a) fund research (to be undertaken by July 2027) to be conducted with South Sudanese Australian young people to better understand the role of social media and internet sub-cultures and their impact on high-harm offending, as well as develop evidence-based practice and intervention tools to target and reduce associated risks

(b) design and deliver a campaign on the influence of social media and the ways it can be used to exploit young people, for example, exposing them to negative peer influence, high-harm behaviour and/or potential organised criminal activity. The campaign should be developed by the end of 2026 and be reviewed within 2 years, taking into account emerging evidence. The campaign should include practical guidance on identifying warning signs and safe pathways to report concerns, and explore opportunities to partner with Victoria Police, the Australian eSafety Commissioner, and relevant community organisations.

## **Organised crime and the exploitation of young people**

South Sudanese Australian community members also highlighted that the public narrative is often focused on youth offending and the visible actions of young people. They asked, 'What's being done to address the exploitation of young people by organised crime?'. The answer to this question was not clear to them.

Adult organised crime networks are exploiting vulnerable young people as part of their operations, using them to carry out high-risk activities that shield senior figures from direct detection or prosecution.<sup>182</sup> In a 2025 report on the impact of serious and organised crime,

<sup>182</sup> N Maxwell, "Shove that. There's always hope": young people's lived experience of child criminal exploitation', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2024, 1-17, doi:10.1080/13676261.2024.2397025. See also, United Kingdom Home Office, [Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines](#), Home Office website, undated, accessed 13 November 2025; G Robinson, R



the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission referred to ‘the rapidly increasing grooming, recruitment and corruption of young people by organised crime entities’ and observed that such entities ‘recruit and take advantage of vulnerable young people to carry out violent acts – and provide access to weapons and other capabilities’.<sup>183</sup>

Recruiters deliberately target young people who are socially marginalised, disengaged from school, or seeking identity, belonging or financial independence. Young people may be drawn in through the promise of money, status, protection or a sense of brotherhood, without fully understanding the criminal structures they are serving. Once involved, they can be coerced into escalating levels of offending, such as vehicle theft, drug trafficking, money laundering or violence, to repay debts or maintain group loyalty.

This type of grooming and exploitation can mirror the manipulation patterns seen in other forms of coercive control: adults use gifts, intimidation and social-media communication to recruit and retain young people while concealing their own involvement.

The result is a pipeline in which young people bear the visible risk of enforcement and incarceration.

#### **Box 8.1. Example – West Yorkshire Police – Programme Precision<sup>184</sup>**

Programme Precision is an initiative of West Yorkshire Police in the UK. Through the program, West Yorkshire Police seeks to work in partnership with local partners and the public to tackle serious and organised crime in the county.

Its vision is to ‘build a highly effective pan Western Yorkshire partnership which will work together to make West Yorkshire a hostile environment to those who seek to exploit our communities to benefit from all forms of organised crime’.

The program's aims are to:

- ensure a comprehensive understanding of organised crime including who is involved and where it takes place
- gather and share information and intelligence from all partners, including the community, helping to raise awareness of the threat posed by serious and organised crime
- develop appropriate partnership interventions to deter people from becoming involved in serious and organised crime and rehabilitate those caught up in criminality
- make West Yorkshire a hostile environment for those engaged in serious and organised crime

McLean and J Densley, ‘Working county lines: child criminal exploitation and illicit drug dealing in Glasgow and Merseyside’, *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 2018, 63(5):694–711, doi:10.1177/0306624X18806742.

<sup>183</sup> Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *Opening the books: the impact of serious and organised crime on Australia in 2025*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2025, pp 11, 19, accessed 8 November 2025.

<sup>184</sup> West Yorkshire Police, *Programme Precision*, West Yorkshire Police website, 2025, accessed 8 November 2025.



- pursue organised criminal groups through strong and effective partnerships, sharing multi-agency intelligence and resources to maximise impact and disruption resulting in the dismantling of organised criminal groups
- deliver a cohesive partnership 4 'P' strategy (prepare, prevent, pursue and protect) to co-ordinate the partnership response to identify and dismantle organised criminal groups
- through a whole partnership approach, reduce the threat and risk posed by organised criminal groups
- reduce the risk of harm and increase confidence in local communities that all statutory agencies actively pursue organised criminal groups.

Programme Precision materials include:

- a booklet on the criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults aimed at frontline service staff who work with children, young people and potentially vulnerable adults, noting it is also useful for parents and carers
- a leaflet titled 'Not My Child?' aimed at parents/carers of children, to educate them on the signs of child exploitation and the actions that they should take
- a Partnership Intelligence Portal for partners to directly share intelligence with West Yorkshire Police around serious and organised crime.

#### **Recommendation 24. Community understanding of efforts to intervene in youth exploitation by organised crime**

That Victoria Police share (by the end of 2026) insights with the South Sudanese Australian community about efforts to disrupt organised crime networks, with a focus on adult recruiters, financiers and coordinators, explaining how police are targeting the systemic exploitation of young people, and how community reports and information can contribute to holding adult offenders accountable.

### **The positive role of lived-experience mentoring**

Academic research and international evidence highlight that credible messengers – mentors with lived experience of offending, incarceration or community leadership in similar contexts – can be powerful agents of change. Their authenticity enables them to reach young people who may otherwise reject professional authority.

Lived-experience mentoring programs are emerging as a promising practice in Victoria and globally. These programs help young people:

- reflect on their choices and motivations
- develop skills for self-regulation and conflict resolution
- build pro-social connections and employment pathways



- strengthen identity and belonging.

For South Sudanese Australian young people, lived-experience mentors who share cultural backgrounds or similar migration stories can help bridge cultural gaps and demonstrate that success and belonging are possible within the Australian context.

However, this currently is an emerging and under-resourced practice area. There is limited access to professional training, limited coordination across programs and little formal evaluation. The Expert Working Group therefore recommends investment in intensive, community-based programs that incorporate lived-experience mentors, restorative practices, and wraparound family supports, with strong evaluation frameworks.

### **Box 8.2. Example – Project Restore, New York City**

Project Restore was a 12-month gang-violence intervention pilot program in New York City that concluded in January 2024. It worked on the premise that violence prevention is best achieved through addressing barriers to personal growth, including economic insecurity, disconnection from education and employment, a lack of role models and unhealed trauma.

It was implemented by a team that included formerly incarcerated and gang-involved individuals, in collaboration with university and district attorney's office stakeholders.

The program supported 20 young men connected to rival street crews who were impacted by cyclical and retaliatory gun violence.

Participants were provided with the opportunity to transform their lives through increasing their personal and professional skills, addressing deep rooted personal trauma and developing a commitment to community safety and peaceful coexistence.

The program consisted of 44 weeks of program activity, including case management, credible mentorship, restorative justice, life skills development and education/employment. Participants were paid a stipend of \$25 per hour of engagement up to a maximum of 20 hours per week.

Independent evaluation found that Project Restore:<sup>185</sup>

- achieved a 100% program completion rate, with no incidents of gun violence involvement or incarceration among participants
- achieved high engagement levels (over 75%) and significant progress in education, employment and community service, with 35% of eligible participants enrolled in college programs
- was associated with an estimated 28% decrease in shooting incidents and a 23% decrease in felony assaults

<sup>185</sup> G Downey et al., [Project Restore Bed-Stuy Evaluation](#), Columbia University Center for Justice, undated, accessed 13 November 2025; Columbia University Center for Justice, [New report: Project Restore Bed-Stuy improved community safety and reduced shootings](#), Columbia University Center for Justice website, undated, accessed 13 November 2025.



- was associated with the prevention of retaliatory shootings following 5 incidents in which project participants, or their peers were seriously injured or killed.

Project Restore demonstrates how credible mentors and restorative justice approaches can work together within formal justice systems. Its relational, intensive model provides valuable insights for designing Victoria's community-based interventions for young people involved in high-harm peer associations.

### **Recommendation 25. An intensive program to intervene in high-harm peer associations**

That the Victorian Government develop and implement (by the end of 2027) an intensive, community-based intervention program for young people involved in high-harm peer associations. The program should draw on lessons from international models such as Project Restore (New York), and incorporate lived-experience mentors, restorative justice practices and wraparound family and community supports. The program should be evaluated within 5 years of its commencement.

## **Strengthening identity and belonging**

A recurring theme throughout the consultations was the importance of cultural identity in preventing reoffending and countering the pull of high-harm peer groups. Young people described how disconnection from culture, community and heritage created a void that was too easily filled by belonging to negative peer networks.

Reconnection with culture, including language, Elders and opportunities to travel to their country of origin, was seen by some people as a transformative experience that builds pride, grounding and responsibility. Community leaders and families spoke of the healing effect of young people learning their ancestral stories, meeting extended family and reconnecting with their cultural values and sense of lineage. These experiences can help young people develop a stronger sense of self and belonging, making them less vulnerable to the status and identity that high-harm peer groups offer.

However, consultations also highlighted different views on the role of cultural immersion programs. Some practitioners and young people cautioned that, if designed poorly, cultural immersion could be perceived as a punitive or exclusionary response – as if young people were being ‘sent away’ for rehabilitation rather than supported within their own communities. There is also a risk that immersion overseas could further disconnect young people from their lives in Australia, particularly if education continuity and social supports are not carefully managed. For this reason, any future initiative should be voluntary, strengths-based and linked to ongoing mentoring and supports upon return.

On the other hand, evidence from different contexts suggests that well-designed cultural immersion can be deeply restorative. Programs to support young First Nations Australians return to Country and spend time with Elders have demonstrated the potential to strengthen cultural identity, resilience and belonging while reducing recidivism. In these programs, connection to culture is not a reward or punishment but an act of restoration – helping



participants rebuild a sense of purpose, family connection and cultural pride that supports long-term desistance from offending.

The Expert Working Group, therefore, considers that cultural immersion programs should be further explored. They should be designed in partnership with South Sudanese Australian leaders, families and young people to ensure cultural safety, voluntary participation and sustainable follow-up, and evaluated for effectiveness.

**Recommendation 26. Opportunities to strengthen cultural identity through reconnection with heritage and the country of origin**

That the Victorian Government resource South Sudanese community members to explore opportunities, including in partnership with philanthropic organisations, for a cultural immersion initiative enabling young South Sudanese Australians to travel to and connect with their country of origin and cultural values. The voluntary initiative should aim to strengthen identity and belonging, build resilience and help disrupt cycles of recidivism and retaliation. The Government should report back to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on the scoping work and proposed next steps by July 2027.



## Part C. Turning points: Fair and effective justice responses for South Sudanese Australian young people

This part of the report sets out findings and recommendations to improve outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people when they engage with the justice system. These are critical opportunities and turning points. It makes recommendations to improve:

- the relationship between the police and South Sudanese Australian community members, and to address systemic racism and bias in Victoria Police
- access to effective support and interventions when South Sudanese Australian children and young people come into contact with the justice system
- outcomes for South Sudanese Australian young people whom Youth Justice supervises in custody and in the community.



## 9. Policing: Improving the relationship with the South Sudanese Australian community and addressing systemic racism and bias

This chapter makes recommendations to improve the relationship between the police and South Sudanese Australian community members and to address systemic racism and bias in Victoria Police.

### 9.1 Supporting positive relationships between police and the South Sudanese Australian community

The statutory role of Victoria Police is to ‘serve the Victorian community and uphold the law so as to promote a safe, secure and orderly society’.<sup>186</sup> The functions of Victoria Police include: preserving the peace; protecting life and property; preventing the commission of offences; detecting and apprehending offenders; and helping those in need of assistance.<sup>187</sup>

The *Victoria Police Manual* notes:

Because of this mission and Victoria Police’s important role in the community, employees are entrusted with considerable authority and responsibility. In turn, the community expects Victoria Police employees to use this authority professionally, fairly and with the highest level of integrity.<sup>188</sup>

The Victorian Government’s 2018 *African Communities Action Plan* acknowledged that ‘[t]rust needs to be established between communities and police’.<sup>189</sup>

Positive relationships between police and migrant communities, like the South Sudanese Australian community, are essential for building trust, safety and effective policing. When migrant communities feel respected, understood and treated fairly, they are more likely to report crimes, share information and work with authorities to prevent harm.

In Australia, policing strategies such as ‘community partnership policing’ highlight the need for legitimacy in the eyes of all parts of the community. Trust ensures that police are seen not only as enforcers of the law, but as partners in creating safe neighbourhoods.

More broadly, how police exercise their powers can influence social cohesion, and this can shape how young people from migrant communities choose to engage with society.

As noted in Chapter 3, there are many drivers and risk factors for young people’s engagement in criminal behaviour. Perceptions of fairness in Australian society have an influence. In this context, the police are a significant and visible contact point for young people with the Australian justice system – what it stands for and what it delivers.

When young people perceive that they are consistently treated with suspicion, singled out or denied equal protection by police, trust in society’s systems and institutions erodes. This can

<sup>186</sup> *Victoria Police Act 2013* (Vic), section 8.

<sup>187</sup> *Victoria Police Act 2013* (Vic), section 9.

<sup>188</sup> *Victoria Police Manual*, ‘Professional and ethical standards’, p 1.

<sup>189</sup> Victorian Government, *Victorian African Communities Action Plan 2018–2028*, Victorian Government, 2018, p 52, accessed 13 November 2025.



foster feelings of alienation and exclusion, reducing young people's willingness, incentive or indeed, their ability, to 'play by the rules'.

In some cases, such perceptions may push young people towards disengagement or anti-social behaviour, including crime, as they come to see societal rules as serving others but not themselves. For example, if a young person doesn't feel safe or that the police are there to protect them, they may choose to carry a weapon to defend themselves, and/or strengthen their identification with a peer or organised criminal group that they see as offering protection.

On the other hand, when police act with transparency, consistency and cultural awareness, they reinforce the principle that all members of society are equal before the law – a fundamental human right set out in Victorian law.<sup>190</sup>

Fair and respectful treatment reinforces the legitimacy of society's institutions, strengthens young people's commitment to social norms and helps build inclusive communities where everyone has a stake in upholding the law.

## What we heard

The South Sudanese Australian community told the Expert Working Group that they do not feel safe.

*What we see in this country traumatised us more than what we experienced back home.*<sup>191</sup>

They feel that the Victorian community sees them as a threat rather than as part of the community that deserves protection.

*We have large families. Whenever we go to the park together, for the children to play and interact with other kids, other people feel intimidated and scared. This makes us and our kids feel uncomfortable and unwelcome.*<sup>192</sup>

Mothers say they don't know how to protect their children and are terrified for them.

*We didn't come to Australia to watch our children die. We're just waiting for the police to tell us [they died]. That's the only certainty.*<sup>193</sup>

*My question is ... our young people are dying – how can you help?*<sup>194</sup>

Many South Sudanese Australian community members told the Expert Working Group they have low levels of trust in police and don't always feel supported as victims of crime.

*Response time is very delayed when it comes to South Sudanese people requiring help.*<sup>195</sup>

*[Police] are nowhere to be seen in the community when things happen to us.*<sup>196</sup>

<sup>190</sup> Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic), section 8.

<sup>191</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>192</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>193</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>194</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>195</sup> Young person, Community consultation, 2023.

<sup>196</sup> Young person, Community consultation, 2023.



The Expert Working Group also heard that over-policing and instances of mistreatment of South Sudanese Australian children and young people by police affects the entire South Sudanese Australian community. This is discussed further in section 9.2.

The community has told the Expert Working Group that police need to work better with young people.

*There is no trust between police and young people. Young people do not feel safe reaching out to the police for assistance. To prevent this, the police need to show young people that they are here to assist us.<sup>197</sup>*

*The police need to change how they work. It needs to be more restorative.<sup>198</sup>*

They told the Expert Working Group that if they feel safe and they know police will protect their families, they will tell police what they know. This will enable police to act earlier on information in efforts to keep the community safe.

Some community members commented that police often do not know how to engage with affected family members in culturally supportive ways.

*We're having the same conversations we had twenty years ago about South Sudanese Australian young people not making eye contact as a cultural practice rather than a sign of being 'dodgy' ... or how to draw on community support to tell a family about the death of a loved one.<sup>199</sup>*

*The police need to first understand our community and culture to understand ways they can help us.<sup>200</sup>*

The community reported frustration that this cultural advice is repeatedly given and never seems to be retained or passed on at the institutional level. To the community, this signals a lack of care and cultural respect, and police failing to have regard to cultural practices can increase trauma and contribute to poorer experiences in the justice system for South Sudanese Australians.

Some consultation participants also noted limited engagement and poor communication by police with the South Sudanese Australian community.

*A lot of the time we're spoken to like we're naïve or ignorant ... young people are being racially profiled and beat up – it's happening at the same time. Saying that community doesn't understand isn't good enough. We're tired of hearing these things when we're so willing to come to the table to do this [engage with police] for a better outcome.<sup>201</sup>*

Community Elders and leaders stressed the need for the inclusion of the South Sudanese Australian community and families in crime prevention strategies.

*The community is grieving. What's the solution? When do we involve communities? You need to involve the community and the family, and we will give [police] a good solution. If you*

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<sup>197</sup> Young person, Community consultation, 2023.

<sup>198</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>199</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>200</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>201</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.



*keep it a secret all our kids will die here. We need to know what's happening with our kids so we can find a solution.*<sup>202</sup>

People emphasised that when policing strategies are undertaken in partnership with the community, potential negative perceptions of why a particular approach (such as greater police presence or more police searches) is being taken can be more effectively managed.

Some consultation participants also noted that police community outreach was often inconsistent, particularly across regions, with some areas more proactive than others and often relying on the interest and skills of individual officers.

The Expert Working Group heard about examples of effective working relationships between police and South Sudanese community members (see Box 9.1 for one example). These relationships were often successful due to the efforts and skills of the individuals involved.

#### **Box 9.1. Addressing online racism being generated in response to the publication of information by the police**

In 2019, analysis of community engagement on Victoria Police's Facebook page revealed a pattern of racist and hateful comments, particularly in response to posts involving South Sudanese Australian and African Australian individuals – even in cases such as missing persons appeals.

To address this issue, a Senior Sergeant invited people from the proactive Policing Unit to collaborate on a new social media strategy aimed at:

- challenging racism in public forums
- promoting respectful, inclusive dialogue online
- reinforcing Victoria Police's commitment to community safety for all.

Chuol Puot supported the work in his role as Community Engagement Officer at the Department of Justice and Community Safety.

This work has since garnered significant public reach, with related media content receiving 6,200 views. A specific example of this work can be accessed via the Victoria Police's Eyewatch Facebook page.<sup>203</sup>

This work reflected good practice in cross-agency collaboration and cultural sensitivity. Meanwhile, the proactive response to online racism reflected Victoria Police's commitment to inclusive community engagement, both on the ground and in digital spaces. These efforts are essential steps toward building stronger, trust-based relationships between Victoria Police and Victoria's diverse communities.

<sup>202</sup> Community member, Community consultation, 2025.

<sup>203</sup> Victoria Police, Eyewatch – Casey Police Service Area, [Dandenong w. Blur incl missing persons.mp4](#), Facebook, 2019, accessed 13 November 2015.



## Findings and recommendations

The Expert Working Group found that there is considerable scope to improve the relationship between Victoria Police and the South Sudanese Australian community. There are good localised examples of productive relationships (see Box 9.1). It is a community priority to build on this.

As Figure 9.1 below highlights, building positive relationships between police and migrant communities requires a multifaceted and sustained approach.

Figure 9.1. Building a positive culture between the police and the community



Within this multifaceted approach, the most important next steps identified by the Expert Working Group are to:

- repair and reset the relationship between police and the South Sudanese Australian community, and lay the foundation for sustained, trust-based policing relationships, particularly with South Sudanese Australian young people
- establish leadership contact points for the South Sudanese Australian community in police systems and structures
- build police understanding of the South Sudanese Australian community in local areas, and ensure that cultural advice is incorporated into police policies and procedures.

These three points are addressed below.

### ***Resetting the relationship between the South Sudanese Australian community and the police***

As outlined above, the South Sudanese Australian community's experiences with crime and police have led to pervasive feelings of anxiety, fear, frustration, anger and mistrust among members of this community.

The authority of the police uniform and the legislative powers that officers wield mean that just one incident of police racism or a single failure to respond to a call for help can send a message to the whole South Sudanese Australian community that they cannot trust the police to treat them fairly. This can affect everyone in the South Sudanese Australian community, even individual community members who may not have personally experienced negative interactions with police. This can also be understood as group-level trauma, requiring a collective response to enable the community to heal.

Individual complaints about police conduct, which are focused on whether or not an individual officer's misconduct is substantiated according to particular standards of proof, and whether internal disciplinary action is warranted, do not address the lack of community trust in police, perceptions of bias or the perceived lack of care for the safety of South Sudanese Australian community members. A more holistic approach is needed.

The Expert Working Group considers that a restorative justice process involving Victoria Police and the South Sudanese Australian community is essential to acknowledge and recognise the harms caused to the community, and to rebuild trust in the police. This process should be carefully designed in partnership with the South Sudanese Australian community.

While research on reconciliation and restorative justice processes in policing to address community trauma is limited, such processes have been used internationally to improve police-community relationships and promote trust.<sup>204</sup> Successful approaches to reconciliation and healing include acknowledging harm, respecting culture, ensuring safety and embracing a reflective process (see also Box 9.2).<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> A Kyprianides and E Taylor, [\*Trauma, reconciliation and restorative practice in policing: an evidence briefing\*](#), College of Policing, 2024, accessed 8 November 2025.

<sup>205</sup> A Kyprianides and E Taylor, [\*Trauma, reconciliation and restorative practice in policing: an evidence briefing\*](#), College of Policing, 2024, p 37, accessed 8 November 2025.

### **Box 9.2. Example – National Network for Safe Communities (United States)**

The National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC) is an internationally recognised research centre at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City, which provides evidence-based violence reduction strategies to various communities in the United States and elsewhere.<sup>206</sup>

The NNSC has developed a police-community reconciliation framework based on the experiences of transitional justice processes such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Elements of this framework include:

- acknowledgment of harm by law enforcement leaders and other public officials
- listening sessions where police hear directly from harmed communities
- narrative collection to share personal experiences of harm with the broader community
- fact-finding to establish a consensus record of local harm
- commitment to ongoing change of public safety policy, practice and strategy, including steps to address past harms.<sup>207</sup>

The NNSC has also developed an operational model for police departments to undertake reconciliation processes with minority communities. This model includes:

- a series of small group meetings with community leaders
- close, facilitated engagement between lower-level police officers and community members
- a narrative-gathering process to draw out the experiences and perceptions of officers and community members
- law enforcement and community working together to develop a policy and practice body to drive concrete changes in practice and outcomes.<sup>208</sup>

### **Recommendation 27. Restorative justice process between the police and the South Sudanese Australian community**

That Victoria Police engage (by July 2027) in a restorative justice process with the South Sudanese Australian community to lay the foundation for sustained trust-based policing relationships.

Levels of trust in the South Sudanese Australian community toward the police should be reviewed by July 2029.

<sup>206</sup> National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College (NNSC), [Mission](#), NNSC website, undated, accessed 27 November 2025.

<sup>207</sup> National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College (NNSC), [Reconciliation](#), NNSC website, undated, accessed 27 November 2025.

<sup>208</sup> National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice, [Reconciliation process overview](#), John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2016, accessed 27 November 2025.

There is also considerable scope to improve the relationship between police and South Sudanese Australian young people, who told the Expert Working Group they want to know that police see them as human beings.

### **Recommendation 28. Police support of youth engagement activities**

That Victoria Police support and participate in engagement activities with South Sudanese Australian young people, such as sporting or cultural programs, to strengthen relationships and trust, demonstrate a commitment to fairness and inclusion, enhance the flow of information and cooperation, and improve the capacity of police to protect and serve all members of the community. These engagement activities should remain separate from law enforcement activities, including intelligence gathering.

Police should identify and act on this in 2 priority locations by the end of 2026, and in 2 additional priority locations by July 2027. Victoria Police should also report on engagement activities undertaken in its annual report.

### **Contact points within the police for the South Sudanese Australian community**

The effectiveness of policing in diverse communities depends on relationships grounded in trust, cultural understanding and accountability.

Multicultural liaison officers play an important role in promoting inclusion and supporting communication between police and culturally diverse communities. However, these roles are typically responsible for engagement across many communities within a large geographic area. This breadth of focus means they cannot develop the depth of cultural knowledge, language familiarity, or consistent personal presence necessary to build trust with a single community.

The South Sudanese Australian community has distinctive cultural and linguistic diversity, complex intergenerational dynamics and localised community networks – features that require dedicated officers who can develop relationships over time and in context.

Unique historical, cultural and social factors have shaped the relationship between Victoria Police and the South Sudanese Australian community. Experiences of conflict, forced displacement and discrimination, both in countries of origin and in Australia, have created a legacy of mistrust towards authority and policing institutions. Building a genuine partnership, therefore, requires deep cultural understanding, sustained presence and relationship continuity that extends well beyond the scope of a general multicultural engagement function.

In light of the above, the Expert Working Group recommends that the Victorian Government fund Victoria Police to establish and maintain dedicated African Australian or South Sudanese Australian Community Liaison Officer roles at key police stations, to act as trusted contact points for community members, provide cultural advice, support early problem-solving and facilitate constructive engagement between police and the community.

At the same time, it is important to recognise the natural limitations of the community liaison officer role. The Expert Working Group heard that while community liaison officers are supportive and help with individual problem-solving, their roles are generally junior, unsworn and perceived as external to the structures of operational policing. They may lack the authority to influence local decision-making, respond to community concerns or ensure accountability within the police command structure. As a result, the community sees goodwill, but limited power to drive lasting change.

The Expert Working Group heard examples of individual sworn officers building strong and respectful relationships with the South Sudanese Australian community. However, these efforts were often ad hoc and relied heavily on the goodwill, priorities and interpersonal skills of particular officers. To the community, this can feel like the relationship is personal and temporary rather than institutional and enduring. Relying solely on individual relationships and approaches also provides no institutional support or accountability in areas where these relationships are not developed or prioritised.

Accordingly, the Expert Working Group also recommends that Victoria Police designate sworn officer leadership positions at key stations with explicit responsibility for police relationships with the South Sudanese Australian community.

Embedding community relationships within formal leadership responsibilities ensures these functions are not dependent on individual commitment or personality. It signals that Victoria Police values cultural competence, relationship-building and partnership as core leadership capabilities – central to community safety and public confidence in policing.

This approach aligns with leadership expectations across the Victorian public sector, where equity, engagement and inclusion are recognised as essential components of professional accountability. By institutionalising these responsibilities, Victoria Police can demonstrate a structural commitment to partnership, so that, over time, trust is built not only with individual officers but with the organisation itself.

Combining dedicated South Sudanese or African Australian community liaison officer roles with sworn officer leadership positions responsible for community relationships creates an institutional bridge of understanding and authority, embedding cultural insight and accountability within policing itself. It demonstrates that Victoria Police values cultural knowledge, trust-building, and partnership not as peripheral activities but as integral components of effective, legitimate, and community-centred policing.

#### **Recommendation 29. South Sudanese Australian Community Liaison Officers in Victoria Police**

That the Victorian Government fund Victoria Police to, by the end of 2026, establish and maintain dedicated African Australian or South Sudanese Australian Community Liaison Officer roles at key police stations, to act as trusted contact points for community members, provide cultural advice, support early problem-solving and facilitate constructive engagement between police and the community.

Victoria Police should report on the establishment and maintenance of these roles in its annual report.

#### **Recommendation 30. Victoria Police leadership positions responsible for relationships with the South Sudanese Australian community**

That Victoria Police, by July 2026, designate sworn officer leadership positions at key stations with explicit responsibility for police relationships with the South Sudanese community, providing a contact point for leadership discussion, and ensuring that authority and accountability for this function sit within the police command structure – not with individual officers' goodwill or personal interest.

The police should identify key stations and positions by the end of 2026. Victoria Police should also report on the designation of these positions in its annual report.

## ***Building understanding of the South Sudanese Australian community***

Victoria Police's Academy-level training includes coverage of:

- how diversity can impact a police response
- the difference between conscious and unconscious bias
- understanding the diversity of Victoria's multifaith and multicultural communities, understanding different cultures, and understanding the use of interpreters and translators.

Victoria Police has noted that the training does not include reference to particular ethnic groups so as not to discriminate or highlight any particular group.

Concerns about training that could stereotype particular ethnic communities as offenders are different to police building up an understanding of the community they work with in a local area – people who may be offenders, victims of crime or affected family members. This is part of the relationship-building work of community policing in a local area.

The Expert Working Group recommends Victoria Police engage in training (delivered by South Sudanese Australian community members) at a local level to enhance:

- police understanding of the unique background and systemic factors affecting the South Sudanese Australian community and, in particular, South Sudanese Australian children and young people
- knowledge, resources and practice approaches so Victoria Police can fairly and effectively serve the South Sudanese Australian community.

An example of this localised approach is outlined in Box 9.3 below. This type of work should be done regularly across all relevant communities, rather than on an ad hoc basis.

### **Box 9.3. Multicultural Workshop for Victoria Police, Dandenong Police Station**

Staff from Youth Justice and Monash Health ran training for Dandenong Police Station, addressing key challenges faced by refugees and migrants, including visa status and rights, through the Social Determinants of Health model. It also included a case study on effective communication strategies with families, particularly when delivering sensitive information, such as the death of a loved one, while ensuring cultural considerations are respected.

Ninety per cent of training participants agreed or strongly agreed that the information provided would be helpful for their success in having discussions with cultural groups in the future.

Feedback included that participants would have liked more:

- time for questions and for the session to be slightly longer
- opportunity to learn about specific cultural differences
- time for discussion about relevant referral pathways for at risk youth that are culturally specific and target the specific needs of young people.

Significant levels of migration from South Sudan to Australia began in the 1990s. Yet police knowledge about culturally appropriate practice is treated as an ad hoc conversation among individuals. From a community perspective, this means repeating the same advice over and

over again and finding that, often, when there is an incident requiring a police response, it needs to be taught once again rather than enacted.

A common example raised is how news of a death is delivered to families.

The Expert Working Group recommends that Victoria Police work with South Sudanese Australian community members to document cultural advice in key areas of police policies and procedures, so that knowledge is:

- retained institutionally beyond individual interactions and relationships
- acted on – police services are provided in a culturally appropriate way wherever possible and consistently with Victoria Police’s statutory framework.

### **Recommendation 31. Cultural awareness training for police**

That the Victorian Government commission training to be delivered by South Sudanese Australian community members to police in local areas to build understanding of the local community. At a minimum, training should be delivered to 3 priority stations by the end of 2026, with training delivered to a further 7 stations by July 2027.

### **Recommendation 32. Documenting cultural advice in police policies and procedures**

That Victoria Police work with South Sudanese Australian community members (by July 2027) to document cultural advice in police policies and procedures. Examples include the approach to family death notifications and the cultural relevance of young people not making eye contact during interviews.

## **9.2 Improving the ability to detect and address racism and bias in policing**

Systemic racism and bias are well-documented challenges in societies like Australia and are not unique to Victoria Police. Colonial histories have created enduring structural inequities that continue to shape interactions between police and racialised communities.

In Australian jurisdictions, and in similar countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand, empirical research has consistently demonstrated disproportionate levels of surveillance, intervention and criminalisation of First Nations peoples and other minority populations, alongside patterns of under-protection and inequitable access to justice. These dynamics are embedded in institutional policies and practices rather than being attributable solely to individual prejudice.

Addressing these systemic issues requires a sustained, evidence-informed approach focused on structural reform, cultural change and robust accountability mechanisms to ensure equitable policing outcomes.

### **What we heard**

The Expert Working Group consistently heard from young people that they felt they were targeted, harassed, stopped, searched and questioned by police because of their appearance. Young people described being subject to racial profiling. Racial profiling is a

form of discrimination that occurs when police stop, question, search or detain a person because of their race.<sup>209</sup>

### ***Feeling targeted by police because of the colour of their skin***

During our consultations, South Sudanese Australian children and young people described feeling targeted by police not for what they had done, but for how they looked. Many described being regularly stopped, searched or questioned based on their appearance or presence in certain areas. Some said they had been criminalised for congregating in public spaces.

*I was just walking, and they saw me and stopped me with the sniffer dog,  
and they started searching me for drugs. When they found nothing,  
they cuffed me and started questioning me.*<sup>210</sup>

*I was stopped heaps of times and told, 'You fit the description'. [One time] they asked for my ID. I had no idea why, but I gave her my details. The police looked me up to confirm everything was correct. Then I was told I was under arrest because I fit the description of someone. They said a robbery happened down the road ... I was taken to the police station, interviewed and then released with no apology once they realised I didn't do anything. This happened 5 or 6 times.*<sup>211</sup>

*When something happens, police automatically blame Black people.  
[Police] are attacking me because I'm Black.*<sup>212</sup>

*Police stereotype us before they even know us. They hassle us with things like, 'Show us your IDs, let us see your bag'. Their approach must change. They are too aggressive.*<sup>213</sup>

The experiences described by South Sudanese Australian children and young people are consistent with other research pointing to evidence of racial profiling by police of African and other racialised communities in Victoria.<sup>214</sup> The Racial Profiling Data Monitoring Project found that in 2023, people perceived to be African were approximately 6 times more likely to be searched by police than people perceived to be white.<sup>215</sup> However, police were less likely to find a prohibited item when they searched people perceived to be African, compared with searches of people perceived to be white, indicating over-policing and racial profiling of the African community.<sup>216</sup>

### ***Excessive force and other mistreatment***

Some South Sudanese Australian children and young people also told the Expert Working Group that they had experienced excessive force during interactions with police. Incidents described included situations where the young person was handcuffed, unconscious or not resisting. While these incidents were not tested or formally substantiated as part of a

<sup>209</sup> Police Accountability Project, [Racial profiling](#), Police Accountability Project website, 2025, accessed 16 July 2025.

<sup>210</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>211</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>212</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>213</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>214</sup> See for example, T Hopkins, 'Litigating racial profiling: examining the evidence for institutional racial profiling by police against African-Australians in Flemington, Victoria', *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 2020, 26(2):209–226, doi: 10.1080/1323238X.2021.1872132. The term 'racialised' refers to people who are socially constructed as having a 'race', in contrast to white people, who are seen as 'unracialised': T Hopkins and G Popovic, 'Do Australian police engage in racial profiling? A method for identifying racial profiling in the absence of police data', *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 2024, 37(1):19–40, doi:10.1080/10345329.2024.2326709.

<sup>215</sup> Centre Against Racial Profiling, [The racial profiling data monitoring project: key findings](#), website, undated, accessed 16 July 2025. This analysis was based on searches without a warrant based on a suspicion on reasonable grounds that a person is in possession of a contraband item. It excluded searches made where there was a Firearms Protection Order.

<sup>216</sup> Centre Against Racial Profiling, [The racial profiling data monitoring project: key findings](#), website, undated, accessed 16 July 2025.

disciplinary process or a criminal proceeding, many of the experiences described appear to be human rights violations and were highly traumatising for the young people and their families. These are their perspectives.

*Every time you get arrested, you get bashed so bad.*<sup>217</sup>

*They were punching me ... kicking my ribs. There were like 5 police.*<sup>218</sup>

*I remember when I had a seizure, they were [messing] around.  
They would drag me on the floor. Other people were telling me.*<sup>219</sup>

*Group mentality ... when they stop and search you. I've been assaulted ...  
even while handcuffed.*<sup>220</sup>

*I woke up and I was getting bashed. [Police said] 'Stop resisting! Stop resisting!'  
But I just woke up! I told them to stop and they kept saying to stop resisting.*<sup>221</sup>

Some young people referred to sudden escalations during encounters with police, possibly caused by misperceptions of non-compliance or aggression.

*One of my boys was talking crazy to them and they just started stomping him out.  
Stomping on his head. They didn't have body cams. They just wore all black.*<sup>222</sup>

*Sometimes it ... is just young people being happy, having a good time,  
but police racially profile young people, and use their powers to control them  
if they feel like they are being talked back to.*<sup>223</sup>

Young people also shared examples of racial slurs and other verbal abuse during interactions with police.

*They called me a black dog, told me to go back to my country.*<sup>224</sup>

*'Get on the floor black c\*\*\*', 'Crawl like a dog'. If you don't, they start hitting you.*<sup>225</sup>

*One time they took me home. They were just being racist – 'You black dog, go back to your  
country', this and that. They took me home and switched up and were acting nice to my  
parents. I grew more hate towards the police.*<sup>226</sup>

Young people described how these experiences created fear, anxiety and distress, and reinforced a deep mistrust of police among some South Sudanese Australian children and young people and their families.

*Every interaction with police was foul. I hate police.  
I don't trust them. I don't feel safe around them.*<sup>227</sup>

*Police have violated my siblings and being exposed to that kind of  
discrimination just has a huge toll on my family, especially my parents.*<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>218</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>219</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>220</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>221</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>222</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>223</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>224</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>225</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>226</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>227</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

<sup>228</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.

Thirty-nine per cent of children and young people in the Youth Justice Case File Review made complaints to their Youth Justice case manager about their treatment by police. Eleven per cent reported sustaining injuries.<sup>229</sup>

### **Police raids and property damage**

The Expert Working Group also heard South Sudanese Australian children and young people describe having their homes raided by police, resulting in property damage and creating significant distress and financial strain for young people and their families. Some reported feeling targeted, with their homes being raided on more than one occasion.

One young person described such an experience:

*One time I got raided because someone crashed a stolen car next door. I was in the house with my mate. The stolen car that was crashed wasn't anyone's in my house. They suspected it was me because I was on bail.*

*My mum tried to explain to the police that it wasn't even me and I had been home all day, but they weren't having it. My mum was literally unlocking the door and they were yelling at her to open it and just shoved and kicked the door.*

*For this raid, they got the wrong person and they damaged my house. After, [the police] sent a letter saying sorry, but they never fixed anything to repair any of the damages ... They leave the house like that and my family is left to clean it up ... Sometimes they'll break the wall – look inside the wall for money or weapons. It's happened 5 or 6 times already and my mum has to pay for someone to fix it each time.<sup>230</sup>*

Systemic racism and bias in policing is not limited to South Sudanese Australian communities. In 2022, the Victorian Parliament's Legal and Social Issues Committee found that over-policing of Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities by Victoria Police remained an issue, despite its ongoing commitment to address these matters.<sup>231</sup>

In 2023, the Yoorrook Justice Commission found that over-policing of Aboriginal people in Victoria – through racial profiling and the misuse of police discretion – continued to be 'systemic and prevalent'.<sup>232</sup> During the Yoorrook Justice Commission hearings, the former Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police acknowledged the harm to Aboriginal people in Victoria that had been caused by unchecked systemic racism, racist attitudes and discriminatory action by police.<sup>233</sup>

## **Building on what works**

Cross-jurisdictional evidence and practice indicates that the following factors and approaches are most effective when used in combination to address systemic racism and bias in policing:

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<sup>229</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

<sup>230</sup> Young person, Police thematic consultation, 2024.

<sup>231</sup> Finding 15. Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, [\*Inquiry into Victoria's criminal justice system: volume 1\*](#), Parliament of Victoria, 2022, p 197, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>232</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission, [\*Yoorrook for justice: report into Victoria's child protection and criminal justice systems\*](#), Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023, p 253, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>233</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission, [\*Yoorrook for justice: report into Victoria's child protection and criminal justice systems\*](#), Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023, p 277, accessed 13 November 2025.

1. **Procedural justice and legitimacy as operational principles:** Policies and day-to-day practice that prioritise fairness, respect, neutrality and transparency (the core elements of procedural justice).
2. **Institutional commitments and whole-of-organisation policies, including embedding anti-racism across policy, recruitment, promotion and misconduct frameworks:** Policies and training must be paired with structural safeguards (supervision, performance metrics and accountability mechanisms) to change behaviour at scale.
3. **Routine collection, publication and use of disaggregated data:** Reliable, disaggregated data on police functions is a prerequisite for diagnosing disparities and tracking progress. Data makes disparities visible and measurable.
4. **Effective oversight and accountability:** Strong and trusted complaint and oversight mechanisms are essential to restore and sustain public trust in relation to individual incidents and to identify patterns of conduct that may indicate a systemic issue.
5. **Community partnership and local engagement structures:** Engagement structures that give migrant and First Nations communities meaningful voice build police legitimacy and ensure policing priorities and tactics reflect community needs. Sustained dialogue is key to repairing trust.
6. **Diversifying the workforce to reflect the communities it serves:** Diversifying the workforce and removing structural barriers in recruitment and promotion (including eligibility rules, assessment methods and retention supports) helps ensure the police reflect the communities they serve and reduces everyday cultural distance between officers and migrant communities.
7. **Reducing the criminalisation of social problems:** The over-reliance on the criminal law to manage social needs often disproportionately impacts migrant and First Nations communities.
8. **Visible and consistent leadership:** Leadership commitment that is visible, sustained and backed by measurable targets and public reporting signals seriousness and enables the community to hold policing bodies to account. Leadership is important at the head of the organisation and in individual teams. Where leadership is weak or resistant, independent reviews have found that anti-racism reforms stall.
9. **Regular feedback and evaluation:** Addressing systemic racism and bias requires long-term cultural change. There should be mechanisms for regular feedback and periodic evaluation – not just at the point of crisis, but as part of a normalised and systemic approach to driving significant change.

Victoria Police has policies, procedures and initiatives in place to address several of these factors. These are described in Table 9.1 below.

**Table 9.1. Factors that address systemic racism and bias in policing – Victoria Police policies, procedures and initiatives**

| Approach                                                                                                                                 | Victoria Police policies, procedures and initiatives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Procedural justice and legitimacy as operational principles                                                                           | The Victoria Police Act, the Charter and the Victoria Police Code of Conduct require fairness and equity in policing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 2. Institutional commitments and whole-of-organisation policies, including embedding anti-racism across policy and misconduct frameworks | <p>The Victoria Police Code of Conduct promotes operations that are free of discrimination, harassment, bullying and discrimination. It states that '[d]emonstrating respect and promoting diversity and inclusion are of the highest importance to Victoria Police'.</p> <p>The Victoria Police Manual describes racial profiling as 'making policing decisions that are not based on objective or reasonable justification, but on stereotypical assumptions about race, colour, language, ethnicity, ancestry or religion'. It notes that such profiling is 'a form of discrimination' and is unlawful.</p> <p>Police training at the Academy level includes how conscious and unconscious bias can impact on everyday policing decisions.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 3. Routine collection, publication and use of data disaggregated by ethnicity                                                            | Victoria Police does not collect accurate ethnicity data or report publicly on its actions in relation to different ethnic groups. Without the collection and monitoring of data in this area, Victoria Police will not be able to answer community concerns in this space.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 4. Effective oversight and accountability                                                                                                | <p>The Youth Referral and Independent Person Program run by the Centre for Multicultural Youth organises a system of adult volunteers who attend police interviews with young people in police custody when a parent or guardian is not available. This provides a form of oversight of individual police engagement with children and young people.</p> <p>While there are detailed laws and operational systems in place for the handling of police complaints, many South Sudanese Australian community members do not trust these mechanisms.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 5. Community partnership and local engagement structures                                                                                 | <p>Victoria Police has three New and Emerging Community Liaison Officer positions, employed as public servants, who work in the Brimbank Melton, Darebin Merribek and Greater Dandenong areas. These positions are focused on working with community and local service providers to identify systemic issues and provide responses that are based on local solutions. These employees have inter-cultural skills. Similar functions are undertaken by the Community Engagement Adviser positions in Eastern and Northwest Regions.</p> <p>In 2018, Victoria Police established an African Australian Community Taskforce to help identify emerging issues and trends and to utilise community expertise to work with Victoria Police on the development and delivery of initiatives that focus on youth offending, recidivism and anti-social behaviours.<sup>234</sup></p> <p>Victoria Police reported in 2018 that it had supported 33 community leaders representing 18 African organisations in Victoria to work together as part of this taskforce, whose work included developing community consultation and communication mechanisms.<sup>235</sup></p> |

<sup>234</sup> Victoria Police, [Equality is not the same...: phase two annual report card 2017–18](#), Victoria Police, 2018, p 5, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>235</sup> Victoria Police, [Equality is not the same...: phase two annual report card 2017–18](#), Victoria Police, 2018, p 6, accessed 13 November 2025.

| Approach                                                           | Victoria Police policies, procedures and initiatives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6. Diversifying the workforce to reflect the communities it serves | <p>In 2018, Victoria Police launched a Diversity Recruitment Program to increase the representation of African Australians in Victoria Police.<sup>236</sup> In 2020 and 2021, 13 participants of the program graduated from the Victoria Police Academy.<sup>237</sup> The Diversity Recruitment Program was later expanded to include applicants from all culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The program concluded in 2024, with 202 people from more than 53 cultures having completed it.<sup>238</sup></p> <p>At 30 June 2022 16% of Victoria Police employees had a culturally or linguistically diverse background.<sup>239</sup> Victoria Police has several CALD employee networks, including the Victoria Police African Employee Network.</p> <p>In 2023, Victoria Police launched its <i>Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Framework 2023-2030</i>.</p> <p>One of the actions under Victoria Police's <i>CALD Inclusion Action Plan 2023–2024</i> was to develop a 12-month pilot mentoring program with the Victoria Police African Employee Network to increase opportunities for leadership, development and pathways to promotion for CALD employees.<sup>240</sup></p> |
| 7. Reducing the criminalisation of social problems                 | The Victorian Parliament has taken important steps to address the criminalisation of social problems, for example, through the decriminalisation of public drunkenness in 2023.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 8. Visible and consistent leadership                               | <p>The new Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police noted that a priority for Victoria Police is continuing to strengthen its relationships with multicultural and multifaith communities.<sup>241</sup></p> <p>However, leadership commitment could be supported by more measurable targets and public reporting that demonstrates seriousness and enables the community to hold policing bodies to account.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 9. Regular feedback and evaluation                                 | Victoria Police has engaged actively with the Expert Working Group, which has provided a mechanism for feedback and community analysis.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

<sup>236</sup> Victoria Police, [Workforce diversity and inclusion framework 2023–2030](#), Victoria Police, 2023, p 7, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>237</sup> Victoria Police, [CALD inclusion action plan 2023–2024](#), Victoria Police, 2023, p 9, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>238</sup> Victoria Police, [Annual report 2023–24](#), Victoria Police, 2024, p 11, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>239</sup> Victoria Police, [CALD inclusion action plan 2023–2024](#), Victoria Police, 2023, p 8, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>240</sup> Victoria Police, [CALD inclusion action plan 2023–2024](#), Victoria Police, 2023, p 12, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>241</sup> Victoria Police, [Corporate Plan 2025–26](#), Victoria Police, 2025, accessed 13 November 2025, p 1.



## Findings and recommendations

Addressing racism and bias in policing organisations takes a systemic approach. The Expert Working Group has found that Victoria Police has taken steps to enliven many aspects of an effective anti-racism approach. These initiatives and approaches are a work in progress, and further work is required to ensure that they translates into practice at the operational level.

The most important next steps are to:

- measure progress against *Victoria's Anti-Racism Strategy 2024–2029*
- improve the collection of and community access to police data on interactions with South Sudanese Australians
- strengthen oversight and accountability.

These three areas are addressed below.

### **Police implementation of actions under Victoria's Anti-Racism Strategy**

Goal 2 of *Victoria's Anti-Racism Strategy 2024–2029* is that government services and workplaces are safe, accessible and non-discriminatory. To achieve this goal, the Victorian Government has committed to focusing on actions to reduce discrimination in policing, and developing an anti-racism monitoring and evaluation framework to ensure the effectiveness of strategy actions.<sup>242</sup>

A key area for action under the strategy is to 'challenge internal biases and unequal use of discretionary policing to address the impact this has on First Peoples, multicultural and multifaith groups'.<sup>243</sup> A future priority area is to strengthen the capability of law enforcement to respond to racism and to build community awareness and trust in relation to reporting.<sup>244</sup>

#### **Recommendation 33. Police implementation of actions under Victoria's Anti-Racism Strategy**

That Victoria Police report annually to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on steps taken to implement initiatives to reduce racism and discrimination in policing set out in *Victoria's Anti-Racism Strategy 2024–2029*.

### **Data on police interactions with the South Sudanese Australian community**

Victoria Police should collect and publish data on police engagement with members of the South Sudanese Australian community at key points, such as when a person is charged or brought back to a police station.

Information collected about the country of birth is not sufficient to identify members of the South Sudanese Australian community. Because of their humanitarian resettlement journeys, some South Sudanese Australians were born in refugee camps in third countries,

<sup>242</sup> Victorian Government, [Victoria's anti-racism strategy 2024–2029](#), Victorian Government, 2024, p 40, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>243</sup> Victorian Government, [Victoria's anti-racism strategy 2024–2029](#), Victorian Government, 2024, p 41, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>244</sup> Victorian Government, [Victoria's anti-racism strategy 2024–2029](#), Victorian Government, 2024, p 41, accessed 13 November 2025.



such as Kenya and Uganda, before they arrived in Australia. Younger people in the South Sudanese Australian community have also now been born in Australia.

Effective data will only be gathered if people are asked about their ethnic community. The Expert Working Group acknowledges that some South Sudanese Australians who come into contact with police may have valid concerns about sharing information about their racial or cultural heritage. It will be essential for police to clearly communicate the reasons for collecting this data, including increased transparency of police practices. Victoria Police should work with the South Sudanese Australian community to design this process.

The Expert Working Group also recognises the challenges of police data contributing to stigma in the broader community. But this is not a reason to avoid collecting information. Police, government and the South Sudanese Australian community need accurate information about what is actually happening.

The risk of stigma in the broader community is a reason for police and government to work with the South Sudanese Australian community to mitigate risks of police information contributing to stigma in the broader community. An example of this being done at the local level is outlined in Box 9.1 above.

#### **Recommendation 34. Data on police engagement with South Sudanese Australians**

That Victoria Police collect data about police engagement with South Sudanese Australians at key points, such as when a person is charged or brought back to a police station. In doing so, Victoria Police should ensure police data is informed by questions about a person's ethnicity/ethnic background, not only their place of birth (which may be Australia or a third country).

Victoria Police should work in partnership with the South Sudanese Australian community to design this data collection process, which should include an explanation of the reasons for collecting the data. Improved data collection should commence by the end of 2026.

#### **Recommendation 35. South Sudanese Australian community's access to data about police contact**

That the Crime Statistics Agency work in partnership with the South Sudanese Australian community to develop (by the end of 2026) a transparent and responsible approach for providing community access to data on police contact with South Sudanese Australians.

### ***Strengthen trust in police oversight and accountability mechanisms***

#### **Independent Persons**

The Expert Working Group heard reports from community members of police talking to young people or taking statements without a witness, people held in custody without a parent knowing, and children going to court without parents knowing.

As outlined above, the Youth Referral and Independent Person Program (YRIPP) run by the Centre for Multicultural Youth organises a system of adult volunteers who attend police interviews with young people in police custody when a parent or guardian is not available.



This provides a form of oversight of individual police engagement with children and young people. Independent third parties protect children's rights and build community confidence and accountability in police engagement.

In 2024, 7 Independent Persons were identified as South Sudanese, whether from their birth country or cultural identity.

YRIPP, a Community Support Group and Victoria Police are currently working on a pilot project to diversify the volunteer cohort. This pilot project will work with the South Sudanese Australian community in the south-east region and closely with Dandenong Police Station.

The pilot project will run for approximately 6 months and will update all training for Independent Persons. Participants completing this training will be added to the roster. A thorough pilot project evaluation will inform the wider YRIPP program, with the long-term goal of recruiting a more diverse Independent Person pool that includes cultural backgrounds, age, experience and abilities.

The Expert Working Group recommends that the Victorian Government support the Centre for Multicultural Youth to expand the recruitment and training of South Sudanese Australian community members to YRIPP. This will help South Sudanese Australian children and young people who are interviewed by police and build community understanding of the justice system.

### **Recommendation 36. Independent persons at police interviews**

That the Victorian Government support the Centre for Multicultural Youth to expand the recruitment and training of South Sudanese Australian community members to the Youth Referral and Independent Person Program to attend police interviews when a parent or guardian is not available.

That the Centre for Multicultural Youth report the number of South Sudanese Australian community members on the list of volunteers to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by the end of 2026 and again by the end of 2029.

### **Police complaints**

In Victoria, most complaints about police are investigated by Victoria Police.<sup>245</sup>

Many participants in the Expert Working Group's consultations with members of the South Sudanese Australian community expressed serious concerns about the police complaints process. Some said that they had avoided making a complaint about the police because they feared they would not be believed, or that they might face retaliation by the police.

Participants with experience of making a complaint described the system as being confusing and especially difficult to navigate for people with limited English proficiency or unfamiliarity with institutional processes. Several participants recounted the experience of submitting a complaint and receiving no acknowledgment, follow-up or information on outcomes.

<sup>245</sup> Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC), [IBAC's independent oversight of Victoria Police – 2023 \(infographic\)](#), IBAC website, 2024, accessed 27 July 2025.



Some participants expressed the view that the police complaints process was not culturally safe for South Sudanese Australian people. Others observed that, by focusing on individual complaints against police, the current process does not adequately reflect or capture systemic racism experienced by South Sudanese Australian children and young people.

Similar concerns are held by Aboriginal communities in Victoria.<sup>246</sup>

The police complaints system in Victoria has long been the subject of criticism and debate. In 2023, the Yoorrook Justice Commission described a ‘failing and structurally flawed police complaints and oversight system which routinely denies or justifies police misconduct and fails to hold officers or management to account’.<sup>247</sup> It said that Aboriginal people would never have confidence in a system that allows complaints about police to be investigated by police.<sup>248</sup>

As highlighted in Box 9.4 below, independent police oversight reflects international best practice.

#### **Box 9.4. Independent police oversight – the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland**

The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (PONI) is widely considered to reflect international best practice for independent police oversight.

Established in 2000, it replaced a system in which complaints against police were investigated by other police officers with a system of ‘independent, impartial, civilian oversight of policing’ including its own teams of professional investigators.<sup>249</sup>

The PONI investigates complaints about the conduct of officers of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other law enforcement agencies, and where appropriate, makes recommendations about criminal and misconduct matters.<sup>250</sup> It operates independently of the Department of Justice, the Northern Ireland Policing Board and the Police Service and is accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly.<sup>251</sup>

The Yoorrook Justice Commission recommended the establishment of a new independent police oversight authority to (among other matters) investigate and determine all complaints about police other than minor customer service matters, investigate all police contact deaths and serious incidents, and monitor, audit, review and report on the exercise of police powers

<sup>246</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission, [Yoorrook for justice: report into Victoria’s child protection and criminal justice systems](#), Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023, p 270, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>247</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission, [Yoorrook for justice: report into Victoria’s child protection and criminal justice systems](#), Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023, p 270, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>248</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission, [Yoorrook for justice: report into Victoria’s child protection and criminal justice systems](#), Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023, p 277, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>249</sup> Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, [History of the office](#), Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland website, undated, accessed 22 August 2025.

<sup>250</sup> Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, [2025 Annual report & accounts](#), Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, 2025, pp 14–15, accessed 22 August 2025.

<sup>251</sup> Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, [2025 Annual report & accounts](#), Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, 2025, p 14, accessed 22 August 2025.



and interactions with the public.<sup>252</sup> In April 2024, the Victorian Government indicated that this recommendation was ‘under consideration’.<sup>253</sup>

The Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) told the Expert Working Group that it is working to build trust and confidence, and raise awareness in the community about its processes through:

- the work of a Focused Police Complaints Team in undertaking more independent investigations of police personnel misconduct – this is now a permanent multi-disciplinary team that assesses and investigates single incident complaints about police misconduct from people from a community that is at a higher risk of experiencing police misconduct, including people who identify as South Sudanese Australians. From mid-December 2024 to mid-November 2025, the team considered 32 complaints and notifications from young people, leading to 9 investigations.
- exploring opportunities to make IBAC’s processes more complainant-centric and accessible
- engaging with community leaders and organisations to explore opportunities to work together and encourage reporting of complaints
- its *Community Engagement Strategy 2024–2027*, by engaging with community members and community organisations to increase awareness of IBAC and confidence that IBAC will independently assess and investigate complaints and notifications
- the upcoming publication of case studies from investigations, so people have an opportunity to understand the types of matters they investigate and build confidence in their investigations and outcomes
- media engagement and the ‘Trust in IBAC’ survey.

The Expert Working Group recommends that:

- Victoria Police and IBAC take steps to strengthen community access to and trust in the police complaints process
- IBAC report on trends in police complaint data involving South Sudanese Australian complainants
- the Victorian Government strengthen IBAC’s role to independently investigate complaints of police misconduct against children and young people, given their vulnerability.

A youth-specific complaints process and supporting materials will help to ensure children and young people understand their rights and how to make a complaint about the police.

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<sup>252</sup> Recommendation 27. Yoorrook Justice Commission, [Yoorrook for justice: report into Victoria’s child protection and criminal justice systems](#), Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023, p 279, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>253</sup> Victorian Government, [Victorian Government response to the Yoorrook for Justice report](#), Victorian Government, 2024, p 25, accessed 13 November 2025.



This process and the supporting materials should be developed in partnership with South Sudanese Australian children and young people.

### **Recommendation 37. Improving trust in police complaints processes**

That Victoria Police and the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission take action to strengthen community trust in the police complaints process. Actions should include:

- (a) supporting a complainant to make a complaint, including through a designated and trained African Australian Communities Liaison Officer
- (b) ensuring the availability of resources in relevant languages that explain the police complaints process
- (c) establishing a complaint tracking system so complainants can monitor the progress of their complaint
- (d) ensuring that updates are provided to complainants and outcomes are clearly communicated and explained in writing, including how the complainant's human rights have been considered.

Actions taken should be reported to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) by July 2027, and feedback should be sought from the South Sudanese Australian community on the effectiveness of these measures in practice by July 2029.

### **Recommendation 38. Analysing police complaints for systemic issues**

That the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission report on trends in police complaint data involving South Sudanese Australian complainants to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) at least annually, and commencing by the end of 2026, so that:

- (a) systemic issues can be identified and addressed
- (b) formal complaints information can be compared to other sources of data, including feedback from community members.

### **Recommendation 39. Independent police complaints – children and young people**

That the Victorian Government (by July 2028) strengthen the role of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) to independently investigate all complaints of police misconduct against children and young people. IBAC should work with South Sudanese Australian young people in developing the process and information materials.



## 10. Improving access to effective interventions following police contact (diversion)

This chapter recommends ways to improve the availability of – and access to – effective interventions for South Sudanese Australian children and young people following police contact.

### 10.1 The role of diversion

Diversion refers to strategies and programs that keep children and young people who have committed an offence out of formal court processes. Instead of proceeding to prosecution and a criminal conviction, a young person is diverted into responses that address underlying causes, repair harm and support positive development.

As noted in Chapter 3, the Victorian Government's *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030* envisions a youth justice system that reduces offending, improves community safety and works with others to provide genuine opportunities for children and young people to turn their lives around.<sup>254</sup> One of the strategy's reform directions prioritises prevention and early intervention, with a commitment to improve diversion so that children and young people remain closely connected to school, family, culture and recreation – where rehabilitation is more effective.<sup>255</sup>

In 2022, the Government expanded on its approach by publishing a policy statement detailing its commitment to diversion, early intervention and prevention.<sup>256</sup>

Research shows that adolescent brains continue to develop into the early 20s. Young people have less capacity to foresee consequences and regulate emotions, but a greater capacity to rehabilitate and change. Most do not offend; those who do are most likely to engage in lower-level behaviour and 'age out' with minimal or no intervention. Only a small cohort continues offending into adulthood.

Disproportionate or unnecessary interventions can entrench involvement in the justice system – exposing young people to anti-social peers, increasing stigma and disrupting protective factors.

Conversely, diversion pathways allow young people to stop offending without escalation. When supported through education, mentoring, counselling and community-based programs, young people are more likely to build resilience, develop pro-social pathways and avoid reoffending. Rehabilitation is not always a linear journey – sometimes young people will need more than one opportunity to be successfully diverted from the criminal justice system.

Diversion is not 'going easy' – it's about doing what works. It recognises that early, targeted support reduces harm to victims, young people and the broader community, and lowers

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<sup>254</sup> Victorian Government, [Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030](#), Victorian Government, 2020, p 15, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>255</sup> Victorian Government, [Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030](#), Victorian Government, 2020, p 13, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>256</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, [Diversion: keeping young people out of youth justice to lead successful lives](#), Victorian Government, 2022, accessed 13 November 2025.



future demand on the justice system. Evidence also indicates that the threat or severity of punishment has a relatively limited deterrent effect for adolescents compared with adults.

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* requires States Parties to establish measures to deal with children alleged to have committed an offence without resorting to judicial proceedings.<sup>257</sup>

## 10.2 Police diversion

Police powers and discretion shape how young people enter the justice system and their opportunities for diversion.

The exercise of police discretion is guided by policy and law, including the *Victoria Police Manual* (VPM – Dispositions), relevant common law principles, Victorian legislation, the specific circumstances of the offence, the impact on the victim and potential harm to the community. Police discretion is not unfettered and operates within a decision-making framework.

When it comes into operation on 30 September 2026, the *Youth Justice Act 2024* will apply new provisions that guide police decision-making (see Box 10.1).

### Box 10.1. Police diversion under the *Youth Justice Act 2024*

The *Youth Justice Act 2024* sets out a hierarchy of options for alleged offending behaviour by a child, each of which must be rejected as ‘clearly inappropriate in the circumstances’ before considering the next option:

- taking no action against the child
- giving the child a ‘youth warning’
- giving the child a youth caution
- referring the child to participate in an ‘early diversion group conference’
- commencing a criminal proceeding against the child.<sup>258</sup>

A police officer must record their reasons for any decision not to warn or caution a child, or not to refer the child to an early diversion group conference.<sup>259</sup>

## Trends in police outcomes

### Charge rates

As discussed in Chapter 3, the Expert Working Group commissioned the Evidence and Insights Unit within the Department of Justice and Community Safety to undertake research on South Sudanese Australian children and young people’s contact with the criminal justice system (the E&I study).

<sup>257</sup> *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 40.3(b).

<sup>258</sup> *Youth Justice Act 2024* (Vic), section 92.

<sup>259</sup> *Youth Justice Act 2024* (Vic), section 93.



The E&I study found that, over the 5-year period examined (2016–17 to 2020–21):

- 10 to 17-year-old South Sudanese Australian children and young people were almost twice as likely to be charged at their first alleged incident as the comparison cohort (44% compared to 23%)
- for all alleged criminal incidents involving 10 to 17-year-olds (excluding COVID-19 breach only incidents), 79% involving South Sudanese Australians resulted in charges, compared with 62% for the comparison cohort
- on average, South Sudanese Australian children and young people had over twice as many alleged incidents recorded as the comparison cohort (8.9 vs 3.5).

As outlined in Chapter 3, statistical analysis found that observable factors only partially explained the disparities in charge rates between South Sudanese Australians aged 10 to 17 years and the same age group in the comparison cohort.

### *Recent patterns*

Follow-up analysis by Evidence and Insights to 2023–24 found the overall proportion of South Sudanese Australians (aged 10 to 17 years) proceeding to charge remained high (68%). However, first-time alleged offenders fell (57 in 2020–21 to 17 in 2023–24), and the proportion of first-timers charged dropped (35% to <20%).

By contrast, for 18 to 24-year-olds, the proportion of alleged incidents resulting in a charge increased from 42% (2020–21) to 70% (2023–24).

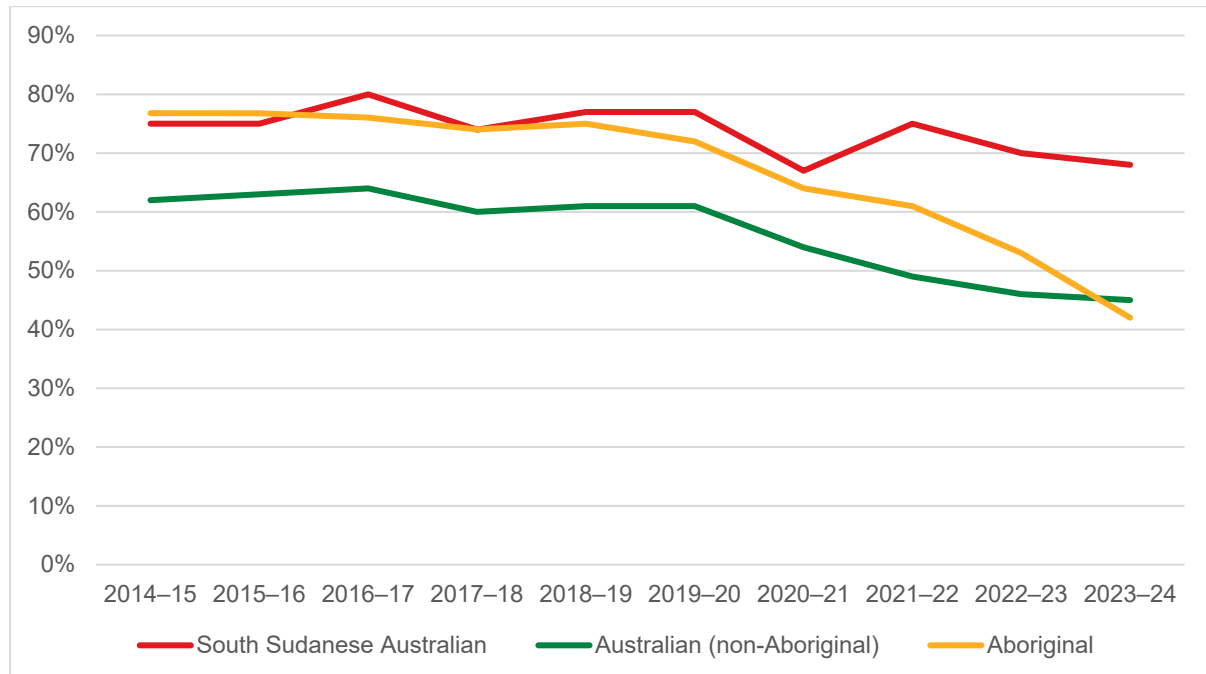
The decreases for 10 to 17-year-olds may reflect:

- demographic change (more Australian-born, thus not identified by the methodology), and/or
- July 2021 cautioning policy amendments (noting broader decreases in charge rates across all cohorts).

Despite these decreases, over the last 10 years, the charge rate for 10 to 17-year-old South Sudanese Australians has remained high compared to their Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peers (Figure 10.1).



**Figure 10.1. Proportion of alleged offender incidents committed by 10 to 17-year-olds proceeding to charge by cohort, July 2014 to June 2024<sup>260</sup>**



### Cautioning

Cautioning is a key diversion mechanism. Eligibility includes consideration of seriousness and other criteria within which discretion is exercised.

In 2021, Victoria Police policy amendments:

- removed the requirement for an alleged youth offender to make admissions to be eligible for a caution
- enhanced localised monitoring of caution decisions
- enabled more than one caution to be administered
- promoted the benefits of cautioning internally.

These amendments applied 3 of the 4 main elements of the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program to all children and young people.

The remaining element that is specific under the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program is providing the opportunity for voluntary referrals to culturally relevant support.

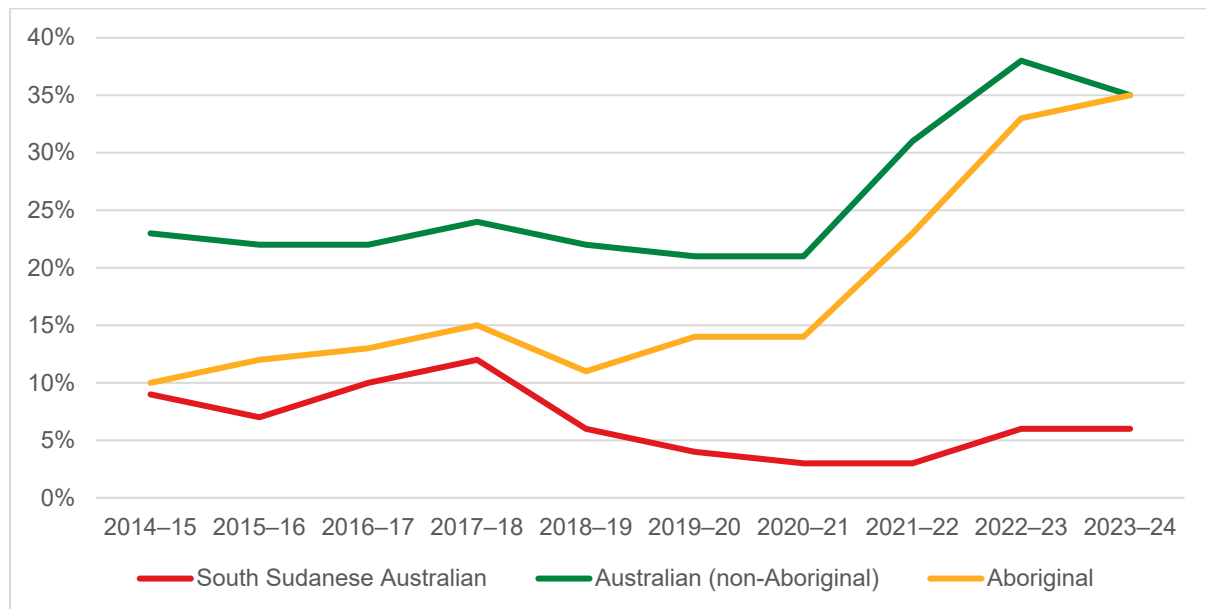
In the last decade, the cautioning rate for South Sudanese Australian 10 to 17-year-olds has remained very low, whereas Aboriginal children and young people's cautioning has increased from 10% to 35%, potentially reflecting the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (see Figure 10.2). In 2023–24, **only 6%** of South Sudanese Australian alleged offenders

<sup>260</sup> Information provided by Evidence and Insights, Department of Justice and Community Safety, November 2025 (unpublished). Australian (non-Aboriginal) includes Australian-born, non-South Sudanese, non-Aboriginal children, also referred to in the E&I study as the 'Comparison cohort'.



aged 10–17 years received a caution or warning, compared with **35%** of Australian-born non-Aboriginal, non-South Sudanese peers (Figure 10.2).

**Figure 10.2. Proportion of alleged offender incidents committed by 10 to 17-year-olds resulting in a caution or warning by cohort, July 2014 to June 2024<sup>261</sup>**



## Findings and recommendations

The Expert Working Group has found that South Sudanese Australian children and young people are substantially less likely to be cautioned than other groups of children and young people who come into contact with police. They are also more likely to be charged.

While some progress has been made, proactive measures are required to counteract the current over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in police charge rates.

Fifty-six per cent of African Australian children and young people in the Youth Justice Case File Review had no record of any referral to a police diversion program.<sup>262</sup>

Initiatives such as the Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP) and the Youth Crime Prevention and Early Intervention Program (YCPEIP) (outlined in Box 10.2 below) are positive and could be expanded to support effective diversion.

Diversion programs should provide opportunities for eligible children and young people to connect with community leaders and culturally safe community-led services in their local area, drawing on the strengths and culture of local communities.

Expanded programs could be trialled in 2 in-demand locations and then evaluated and scaled up over time in consultation with South Sudanese Australian community members.

<sup>261</sup> Information provided by Evidence and Insights, Department of Justice and Community Safety, November 2025 (unpublished).

<sup>262</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety.



## **Box 10.2. Police youth diversion programs**

### **The Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP)**

EYOP provides a youth outreach service as part of a police response. It works with young people at high risk of anti-social or criminal behaviour and/or victimisation.

It includes police contact and 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.

It currently operates in Werribee, Dandenong, Caroline Springs and Shepparton.

Between September 2018 and October 2025, 470 clients in EYOP in Dandenong and 647 clients in EYOP in Werribee identified as having an African background.<sup>263</sup>

### **The Youth Crime Prevention and Early Intervention Program (YCPEIP)**

The YCPEIP aims to reduce youth offending and reoffending for children and young people who commit low-level, less serious crimes. It helps to steer young people away from the criminal justice system and minimise contact with police and the courts.

It does this by issuing cautions, warnings and diversions, and providing referrals to specialist support and legal services. To support the program, Victoria Police has established a revised caution and diversion decision-making framework.

The program is for young people aged 10 to 24 years who have committed low-level, less serious crime, or are a first-time offender.

The program runs across Wyndham, Brimbank and Melton. It will expand to Dandenong, Frankston, Geelong, Latrobe, Mildura and Shepparton.

The final evaluation of the YCPEIP reported a substantial reduction in remand rates in Brimbank and Wyndham, from 46.8% and 30.6% (respectively) pre-program, down to 14.2% and 5.3% 23 months after the program's commencement. This was matched by a significant increase in both pilot areas in the use of warnings and cautions.<sup>264</sup> The YCPEIP is also estimated to have reduced youth reoffending among first-time offenders from 54.7% to 30.5%.<sup>265</sup>

The final evaluation of the YCPEIP observed that a lack of official Crime Statistics Agency data relating to children and young people in 'priority cohorts', including those of African Australian background, limited the evaluators' ability to assess the impact of the YCPEIP

<sup>263</sup> Information provided by Victoria Police, 6 November 2025.

<sup>264</sup> Cautions and warnings increased from below 10% prior to the program to above 30% at 23 months post program. Allen + Clarke Consulting, *Youth Crime Prevention and Early Intervention Project: final evaluation report*, Allen + Clarke Consulting, 2024, p 3.

<sup>265</sup> Allen + Clarke Consulting, *Youth Crime Prevention and Early Intervention Project: final evaluation report*, Allen + Clarke Consulting, 2024, p 4.



in improving outcomes for these groups as part of the formal evaluation.<sup>266</sup> However, the evaluators were able to draw on perceptions-based demographic data captured in police station logs to present to the inter-agency committee. This analysis showed that cautions were provided to children and young people from priority cohorts at a rate generally commensurate with the rate of offending.

Overall, the evaluation showed that the YCPEIP demonstrated significant cost savings by increasing the use of cautions over prosecutions and reducing criminal justice processing costs, administrative burdens and the need for court cases or detention. The initiative is estimated to save \$4.4 million annually in criminal system costs – a return of 5.1 times the program's investment. Additionally, by reducing youth reoffending, the program generates an estimated \$8.6 million in annual social cost savings for Brimbank and Wyndham.<sup>267</sup>

While aspects of the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program have been rolled out to all children and young people, the tailored element that remains is referral to culturally relevant support. As highlighted in earlier chapters, gaps in culturally relevant (and culturally effective) support for South Sudanese Australian young people are high.

Throughout this report, the Expert Working Group makes recommendations to expand community-led services, including mental health and AOD services.

To complement this, the Expert Working Group recommends establishing an African Australian Youth Cautioning Program.

### **Box 10.3. Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program**

In 2019, Victoria Police established an Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program to reduce the number of Aboriginal young people in the criminal justice system. Developed in partnership with Aboriginal communities and drawing upon local Aboriginal culture and knowledge, the program is 'an enhanced police cautioning approach', which provides young people in contact with police with an opportunity to connect with Aboriginal Elders and support services in their local area.<sup>268</sup>

The Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program is available in over 20 local government areas to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children and young people aged 10 to 17 years who consent to participate.<sup>269</sup>

After receiving a caution, an Aboriginal young person is offered a consent-based referral to a community-led support panel, which assesses the young person's needs and supports them to engage with culturally appropriate local services (such as education support, cultural activities or employment programs) to address the factors underlying the

<sup>266</sup> Allen + Clarke Consulting, *Youth Crime Prevention and Early Intervention Project: final evaluation report*, Allen + Clarke Consulting, 2024, pp 10–11.

<sup>267</sup> Allen + Clarke Consulting, *Youth Crime Prevention and Early Intervention Project: final evaluation report*, Allen + Clarke Consulting, 2024, p 37.

<sup>268</sup> Victoria Police, [Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program \(AYCP\)](#), Victoria Police website, undated, accessed 26 July 2025; Victoria Police, [Victoria Police Corporate Plan 2023–2024](#), Victoria Police, 2023, p 14, accessed 26 July 2025.

<sup>269</sup> Victoria Police, [Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program \(AYCP\)](#), Victoria Police website, undated, accessed 26 July 2025; Victoria Police, [Victoria Police Corporate Plan 2023–2024](#), Victoria Police, 2023, p 14, accessed 26 July 2025.



young person's offending behaviour. Panel members often provide follow-up support to participants beyond their initial engagement.<sup>270</sup>

In 2023, Victoria Police committed to employing 5 Aboriginal Cautioning Support Officers to oversee the daily operation of the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program and support its statewide expansion.<sup>271</sup> The program has also been complemented by the roll-out of the Victoria Police Aboriginal Cultural Awareness Training Package.<sup>272</sup>

In 2023–24, Victoria Police cautioned 82% of Aboriginal first-time alleged offenders aged 10 to 17 years, compared with 78% of non-Aboriginal first-time alleged offenders in the same age group. This constitutes a reversal of the position in 2018–19, when Aboriginal children and young people were less likely to be cautioned than their non-Aboriginal peers.<sup>273</sup>

The Yoorrook Justice Commission noted the value of the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program.<sup>274</sup> An evaluation of the program found that it had 'the potential to serve as a model for a culturally safe and effective justice program'. The evaluation identified the valuable contributions of Elders and community members as a strength of the program, but also referred to some significant implementation challenges, including inconsistencies across regions and limitations in program resources and support.<sup>275</sup>

#### **Recommendation 40. Police diversion into culturally appropriate service responses**

(a) That the Victorian Government expand and enhance (by the end of 2026) the Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP) and the Youth Crime Prevention and Early Intervention Program (YCPEIP) for South Sudanese Australian children and young people, and commence recording participation in these programs by South Sudanese Australian children and young people.

(b) That Victoria Police establish (by July 2027) a youth cautioning program for South Sudanese Australian children and young people aged 12 to 17 years who come into contact with police.

### **10.3 Children's Court Youth Diversion**

*Never got a diversion, never been offered it. Barrister says I should have got it ages ago.*<sup>276</sup>

Children's Court Youth Diversion (CCYD) is a pre-plea option available in the Children's Court that enables a child or young person to complete a diversion plan while proceedings are adjourned, have charges dismissed and avoid a conviction.<sup>277</sup> It targets those with

<sup>270</sup> First Peoples – State Relations, [Justice and safety](#), Victorian Government website, undated, accessed 26 July 2025.

<sup>271</sup> Victoria Police, [Victoria Police Corporate Plan 2023–2024](#), Victoria Police, 2023, p 14, accessed 26 July 2025.

<sup>272</sup> First Peoples – State Relations, [Justice and safety](#), Victorian Government website, undated, accessed 23 July 2025.

<sup>273</sup> Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC), [Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report 2024](#), DPC, Victorian Government, 2025, p 153, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>274</sup> Yoorrook Justice Commission, [Yoorrook for justice: report into Victoria's child protection and criminal justice systems](#), Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023, p 319, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>275</sup> Karabena Consulting, [Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program \(AYCP\) review](#), Karabena Consulting website, undated, accessed 23 July 2025.

<sup>276</sup> Young person, Custody consultation, 2024.

<sup>277</sup> Children's Court of Victoria, [Youth diversion service](#), Children's Court of Victoria website, 2021, accessed 22 July 2025.



limited or no criminal history who would otherwise receive a non-supervision outcome.<sup>278</sup> CCYD requires the consent of the young person and the prosecutor.<sup>279</sup> This means that the prosecutor may effectively ‘veto’ the use of CCYD, regardless of the Children’s Court’s views.

When considering consent, prosecutors must take into account matters set out in legislation, including the availability of suitable diversion programs, the alleged level of involvement and any other relevant matters.<sup>280</sup> The *Victoria Police Manual* also guides employees on recommending diversion, including consideration of human rights under the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*.

## Use of prosecutorial veto

In 2021–22, police exercised a veto (i.e. refused to consent to CCYD) in 54 cases. The highest rate was at Dandenong (15), followed by Ringwood (9), Bendigo (9), Sunshine/Werribee (7) and Shepparton (4).<sup>281</sup> Elsewhere, no unit exercised more than 3 vetoes; 10 units exercised none. The Expert Working Group asked Victoria Police for more recent data and was advised that Victoria Police does not maintain an aggregated record of diversion vetoes.

## How CCYD works in practice

CCYD coordinators assess suitability, advise the Court and develop diversion plans. Plans may include letters of apology, education-related interventions (e.g., attendance support), or structured pro-social activities (e.g., sport, music, art).<sup>282</sup> CCYD is a central element of the Government’s diversion strategy.<sup>283</sup>

### Box 10.4. The effectiveness of Children’s Court Youth Diversion

CCYD has been available statewide since 2017. In 2022, DJCS published the findings of a statutory review of the *Children and Justice Legislation Amendment (Youth Justice Reform) Act 2017* (the Youth Justice Reform Act Review), which included an examination of the effectiveness of CCYD.<sup>284</sup>

The Youth Justice Reform Act Review found that CCYD was a highly positive program. In particular CCYD:

- was associated with reduced offending for over three-quarters of participants
- participants were statistically more likely to show reductions in the frequency and seriousness of reoffending compared with young people who were not diverted

<sup>278</sup> Children’s Court of Victoria, [Youth diversion service](#), Children’s Court of Victoria website, 2021, accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>279</sup> *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic), sections 356D(3), 356E(1)(b); *Youth Justice Act 2024* (Vic), sections 193(5), 194(1)(b).

<sup>280</sup> *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic), section 356F; *Youth Justice Act 2024* (Vic), section 195.

<sup>281</sup> Victoria Police data extracted 9 May 2022 and provided to the Expert Working Group.

<sup>282</sup> Children’s Court of Victoria, [Youth diversion service](#), Children’s Court of Victoria website, 2021, accessed 22 July 2025.

<sup>283</sup> Victorian Government, [Diversion: keeping young people out of youth justice to lead successful lives](#), Victorian Government, 2022, accessed 23 July 2025.

<sup>284</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, [Review of the Children and Justice Legislation Amendment \(Youth Justice Reform\) Act 2017: statutory review under section 492B of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005](#), Victorian Government, 2022, pp 35–81, accessed 13 November 2025.



- contributed to enhanced protective factors for young people, including increased engagement in education and/or vocational activities, and strengthened connections with family
- contributed to positive attitudinal and behavioural shifts among participants.<sup>285</sup>

## Under-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in CCYD

The Youth Justice Reform Act Review found that African Australians were under-represented in CCYD – 13% of young people under supervision in 2019–20 were African Australian, but African Australians accounted for only 5% of CCYD participants.<sup>286</sup> The Youth Justice Case File Review found that only 29% of African Australian young people had ever participated in CCYD.<sup>287</sup>

Between 2014–15 and 2020–21, there was a 287% increase in the number of South Sudanese/Sudanese young people under Youth Justice supervision, but this was not mirrored in CCYD referrals – only 3% of CCYD participants had South Sudanese/Sudanese heritage.<sup>288</sup>

In 2023–24, under-representation continued – South Sudanese/Sudanese Australians comprised 16% of all under Youth Justice supervision (including remand), but only 6% of CCYD participants (Figure 10.3).

<sup>285</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, [Review of the Children and Justice Legislation Amendment \(Youth Justice Reform\) Act 2017: statutory review under section 492B of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005](#), Victorian Government, 2022, p 70, accessed 13 November 2025. These findings were in part based on analysis undertaken by the Crime Statistics Agency of a specific group of young people who had sufficient data to be matched in the Justice Data Linkage Database.

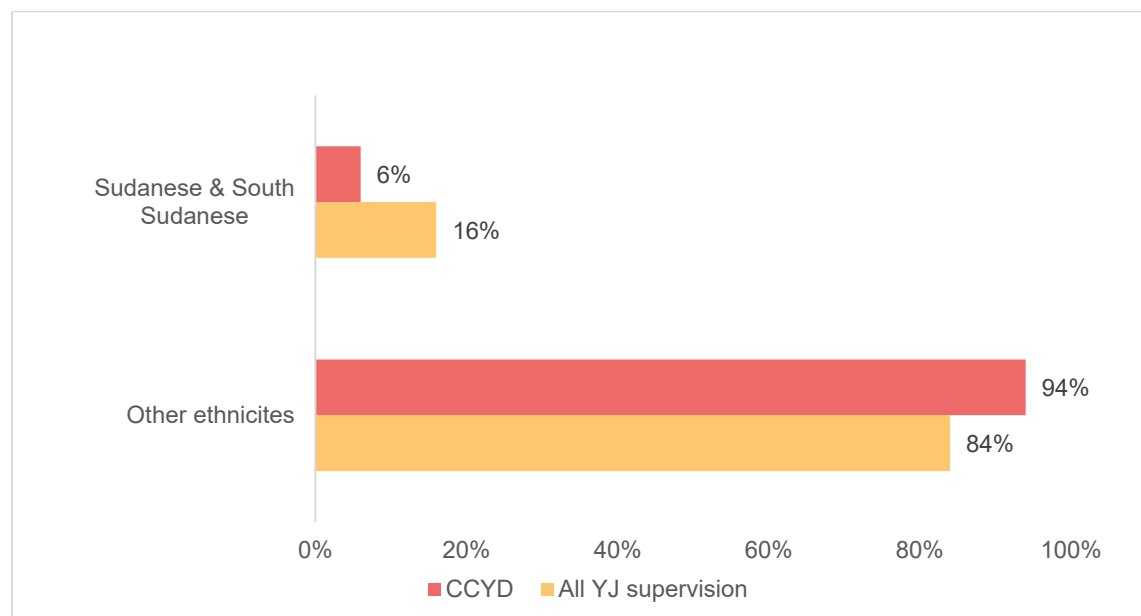
<sup>286</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, [Review of the Children and Justice Legislation Amendment \(Youth Justice Reform\) Act 2017: statutory review under section 492B of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005](#), Victorian Government, 2022, pp 76, 79, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>287</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

<sup>288</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, [Review of the Children and Justice Legislation Amendment \(Youth Justice Reform\) Act 2017: statutory review under section 492B of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005](#), Victorian Government, 2022, pp 39–40, accessed 13 November 2025.



**Figure 10.3. Children and young people in Children’s Court Youth Diversion compared with Youth Justice supervision 2023–2024**



The E&I study found that of 800 unique South Sudanese Australian alleged offenders (aged 10–17 years), 31.4% received a CCYD referral (vs 20.2% of the comparison cohort).<sup>289</sup> However, per the alleged offender incident, the South Sudanese Australian group received fewer referrals (8.3% compared to 13.6%) (Table 10.1), reflecting a higher number of recorded incidents per person.<sup>290</sup> Completion per incident was also lower (7.1% vs 12.8%).<sup>291</sup>

**Table 10.1. CCYD referrals by completion for 10 to 17-year-olds for alleged offender incidents<sup>292</sup>**

|                | South Sudanese Australian alleged offender incidents |            | Comparison cohort alleged offender incidents |            |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------|----------------------------------------------|------------|
|                | No.                                                  | Percentage | No.                                          | Percentage |
| <b>Total</b>   | 7,900                                                | 100%       | 61,688                                       | 100%       |
| CCYD referral  |                                                      |            |                                              |            |
| Yes            | 657                                                  | 8.3%       | 8,390                                        | 13.6%      |
| - Complete     | 562                                                  | 7.1%       | 7,874                                        | 12.8%      |
| - Not complete | 95                                                   | 1.2%       | 516                                          | 0.8%       |
| No             | 7,243                                                | 91.7%      | 53,298                                       | 86.4%      |

The E&I study observed that prior offending (including proven charges) was the largest explanatory variable for being charged by police in the future, suggesting that missed CCYD

<sup>289</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, p 32.

<sup>290</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, p 32.

<sup>291</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, p 33.

<sup>292</sup> Excluding COVID-19 breach only incidents.



opportunities (and resulting formal records) can contribute to the likelihood of being charged later.<sup>293</sup>

## Barriers to participation

The Youth Justice Reform Act Review identified challenges for culturally and linguistically diverse young people, including African Australians, in accessing and completing CCYD:<sup>294</sup>

- higher likelihood of being charged rather than cautioned (accumulation of charges later becomes a barrier)
- poor community-police relationships
- inconsistent access to CCYD across pre-court and court processes
- cultural/language barriers (including interpreter gaps) affecting family engagement at charge, pre-court and assessment.

## Findings and recommendations

The Expert Working Group has found that South Sudanese Australian children and young people are under-represented in CCYD.

A number of people raised concerns about the prosecutorial veto to CCYD during our consultations.

Historically, in Victoria, diversion was a pre-court decision made by the police. The expansion of diversion into a court-based system requires further thought about the appropriate role of the police prosecutors and the appropriate role of the Children's Court of Victoria.

There was a strong community perception that decision-making on court-based diversion is properly the role of the judicial officer.

Referral to diversion is an adjournment by the court of the proceedings before it,<sup>295</sup> assessment of successful completion of diversion is a question for the court,<sup>296</sup> and the outcome of successful completion of diversion is a discharge by the court without any finding of guilt (not a prosecutorial decision to withdraw the charges).<sup>297</sup> Further, prosecutorial consent is not placed as a limit on judicial decision-making in relation to any other decision under the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* or the new Youth Justice Act.

The Victorian Parliament's Legal and Social Issues Committee (2022) found prosecutorial consent for diversion (including but not limited to the Children's Court) varies by offence and across courts, recommending a review.<sup>298</sup> Other inquiries have recommended removing

<sup>293</sup> Evidence & Insights (Department of Justice and Community Safety), *Criminal justice pathways and outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people*, Victorian Government, 2024, unpublished, p 34.

<sup>294</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, [Review of the Children and Justice Legislation Amendment \(Youth Justice Reform\) Act 2017: statutory review under section 492B of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005](#), Victorian Government, 2022, pp 62–64, 76–77, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>295</sup> *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic), section 356D(1).

<sup>296</sup> *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic), section 356I(1).

<sup>297</sup> *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic), section 356I(1)(b).

<sup>298</sup> Finding 20. Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee, [Inquiry into Victoria's criminal justice system: volume 1](#), Parliament of Victoria, 2022, p 227, accessed 13 November 2025.



prosecutorial consent for Children's Court diversion.<sup>299</sup> However, the Parliament retained this discretion in the Youth Justice Act.<sup>300</sup>

There is insufficient evidence to determine whether prosecutorial discretion is being exercised in a discriminatory manner. Nevertheless, the outcomes for South Sudanese Australian children and young people are not equitable. When combined with the lack of community trust in police described in Chapter 9, this inequity understandably fuels community concern and makes it harder for Victoria Police to build confidence and legitimacy.

The Expert Working Group therefore recommends removal of the prosecutorial veto to CCYD, and, until this veto power is repealed, there should be regular reporting on police prosecutors' consent and refusal decisions for South Sudanese Australian young people, to support ongoing equity analysis and strengthen community understanding of how discretion is being applied.

#### **Recommendation 41. Reduce barriers to Children's Court Youth Diversion**

(a) That the Victorian Government (by July 2028) standardise judicial decision-making on youth diversion and repeal the requirement for the prosecution to consent to diversion before it can be ordered by the Court. The legislation should instead allow for the prosecution to make submissions on whether it considers that diversion should be ordered in a particular case.

(b) That, until the requirement for prosecutor consent is repealed, Victoria Police annually provide the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) with data on when police prosecutors consent and refuse to consent to Children's Court Youth Diversion for a South Sudanese Australian young person to promote transparency and provide opportunities for further analysis of the equity of decision-making as required.

<sup>299</sup> See, for example, Recommendation 56, Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP), [Our youth, our way: inquiry into the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the Victorian youth justice system](#), CCYP, 2021, p 450, accessed 13 November 2025. See also Recommendation 4, Department of Justice and Community Safety, [Review of the Children and Justice Legislation Amendment \(Youth Justice Reform\) Act 2017: statutory review under section 492B of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005](#), Victorian Government, 2022, p 7, accessed 13 November 2025.

<sup>300</sup> *Youth Justice Act 2024* (Vic), section 193(5)(a).



## 11. Youth Justice: Improving outcomes for young people under supervision

This chapter makes recommendations to improve outcomes for South Sudanese Australian young people whom Youth Justice supervises in custody and in the community.

Youth justice custody and community supervision represent a critical window for intervention, stabilisation and support. This period provides a unique opportunity to pause harmful trajectories, address the drivers of offending, reconnect young people with education, health care and stable routines, and strengthen relationships with family, culture and community.

When supported by a skilled, culturally competent workforce and a structured, rehabilitative environment, custody and community supervision can help young people rebuild confidence, re-establish positive identity, and develop the skills, motivation and pathways needed to thrive after release. In this way, the youth justice system is not only a statutory response to offending, but an intervention point that can change the course of a young person's life – supporting rehabilitation, promoting community safety and giving young people the chance to get back on track.

### 11.1 What we heard

Consultations with South Sudanese Australian young people, their families, community leaders, Youth Advisory Group members, and Youth Justice and Parkville College staff provided a detailed understanding of the experiences, aspirations and challenges faced by South Sudanese Australian young people in the youth justice system. What we heard demonstrates a consistent set of themes: the value of cultural connection, the need for trusted relationships with workers, significant gaps in meaningful activity and education in custody, the ongoing impact of group conflict, and the critical importance of culturally informed support during transition from Youth Justice into the community.

#### Representation, trust and cultural safety in the workforce

Young people strongly emphasised how much it matters to see themselves reflected in the workforce around them. They described feeling more understood, respected and hopeful when supported by African Australian or culturally informed staff. One young person reflected on the importance of seeing themselves in the workers they engage with every day in custody, and called for 'more Black people, Black staff'.<sup>301</sup>

Young people, families and staff consistently spoke about the unique value of Community Engagement Officers, Cultural Liaison Officers and other specialist cultural roles. These workers were described as cultural bridges who could interpret cultural nuances, advocate for families, and restore trust between community and government systems. As one young person reflected:

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<sup>301</sup> Youth Advisory Group member, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.



*They speak our language, they know our culture, and they bring government to the community and community to government ... no one else can do that.*<sup>302</sup>

Cultural workers were also credited with helping young people maintain their sense of identity, navigate grief and trauma, reconnect with family, and feel seen within the system. Their work was described as extending far beyond case management:

*[The cultural support worker] has helped me with my religion ... goes out of his way to teach us to read and write in Arabic. You can tell he really cares.*<sup>303</sup>

Workers with lived experience also offered credibility, hope, and a connection that professionals without similar backgrounds could not easily replicate. Young people stated clearly that lived-experience mentors helped them trust the system and believe change was possible.

#### **Box 11.1. A YAG member's case management experience**

The only worker this YAG member felt he could trust was an African Australian Jesuit Social Services case manager from the same neighbourhood as him. Their shared culture and background created an immediate connection. But the YAG member reflected that what he really needed was someone with lived experience of custody who could guide him through school instability, reintegration and rebuilding family trust. Beyond professional oversight, he longed for practical support and understanding from someone who had 'walked the path' and could show him that change was possible. His experience makes clear the urgent need to value and embed lived-experience roles within the Youth Justice workforce.<sup>304</sup>

### **The importance of culturally specific programs**

Across consultations, young people overwhelmingly valued culturally grounded programs that connected them to community, culture and identity. Yet they reported limited availability of such programs in both custody and the community.

#### **Programs in custody**

The value of 2 programs in custody was particularly highlighted during the Expert Working Group's consultations. These programs are described in Boxes 11.2 and 11.3 below.

Young people described these programs as transformative. As one participant shared:

*The Sunday service, the aunties, the food. The boys love it a lot, we really enjoy it and appreciate it. He's only been here a few months, and the change already is crazy. ... It brings a lot of hope. Because sometimes it can feel like our community has forgotten us.*<sup>305</sup>

<sup>302</sup> Feedback from an ASPYA Foundation employee to the Expert Working Group.

<sup>303</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>304</sup> See also ABC listen, [Former youth offender shares perspective on how to improve youth justice system](#), 7 October 2024, accessed 2 December 2025.

<sup>305</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.



### Box 11.2. The Community Custody Visits Program

Reverend Deacon George Piech Meat (Deacon George) established the Community Custody Visits Program in May 2024 in collaboration with Youth Justice and the South Sudanese Mother's Coalition as well as other mothers and women. The program was created in response to the disconnection Deacon George observed between African Australian young people in custody and their families, culture and community. He wanted to play a more active role in providing cultural, spiritual, and emotional support.

The program is culturally grounded and has now expanded to a larger, community-led initiative, supported by South Sudanese community members across Victoria. It is available to African Australian young people in the Parkville and Cherry Creek Youth Justice Centres. It is the primary cultural program available to South Sudanese Australian young people in custody.

The program operates monthly at each precinct over 2 days. On the first day, mothers attend the youth justice precinct to cook traditional food with young people in preparation for the following day's event. On the second day, families, other community members and invited speakers gather at the youth justice precinct for a half-day event. The event opens with a religious service led by Deacon George, offering spiritual reflection. A Youth Advisory Group member then shares their personal story and reflections on their journey, followed by a guest speaker who covers broader topics relevant to the young people's lives and aspirations. The talks are followed by a discussion that encourages the young people to express themselves, ask questions and consider opportunities for their future. The event culminates in a communal meal of the traditional dishes prepared the previous day, followed by basketball games. Mothers have also had the opportunity to attend hair-braiding and personal care sessions at the youth justice precincts. These sessions allow young people to connect with 'auntie' figures who offer cultural guidance, encouragement and emotional support.

Lived-experience mentors also play an important role in the Community Custody Visits Program.

*Every week, I go into one of the youth justice centres and we run programs with the young people inside. Our sessions usually include sports, food and real conversations. But more than anything, it's about building connections. We use our stories to show them that there's a way out. That someone like them – someone who's walked in their shoes – has not only made it out but is now actively giving back.*

*We don't just speak at them – we walk with them. We offer hope and support, showing them that they're not alone and that transformation is possible. It's powerful because they don't see us as outsiders. They see us as living proof that change is real.<sup>306</sup>*

The program seeks to build a sense of identity, belonging and hope, and show young people that they are valued members of their community. This not only helps young people reconnect with their culture and rebuild relationships with family, but also to gain the tools they need for successful reintegration into society after custody.

<sup>306</sup> Youth Advisory Group member, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.



The Expert Working Group heard that the Community Custody Visits Program is consistently well attended and has made a clear and significant difference for South Sudanese and other African Australian young people in custody.

*There was no such thing as a Sunday service back in the day. Now we go in and see the fruit, like kids transforming right before our eyes.<sup>307</sup>*

Many young people said that the Community Custody Visits Program helped them reconnect with their families and communities, and brought about a greater sense of safety, belonging and hope – reducing the isolation they felt in custody.

*The stuff that he [Deacon George] brings to the table is different. The Sunday service, the aunties, the food. The boys love it a lot, we really enjoy it and appreciate it. He's only been here a few months, and the change already is crazy. These programs I think help with the strained relationship between us and [the] older generation. It's a big impact. We haven't seen that here for a couple of years. It brings a lot of hope. Because sometimes it can feel like our community has forgotten us.<sup>308</sup>*

*Ever since Deacon George came, this place has gotten way better.  
I even talk to my Mum more now.<sup>309</sup>*

*We don't have to talk to him [Deacon George] about church things, we talk to him about everything... he has done a lot. [He] makes me feel like I'm back with my community, [that] I'm around people I trust and am safe with.<sup>310</sup>*

Youth Justice staff also observed a marked shift in how South Sudanese Australian young people talk about the future because of the program, with many expressing an interest in youth work or community service, showing a new sense of purpose and a desire to give back to the community.

Despite South Sudanese Australian young people representing around one-quarter of the custodial population, the Expert Working Group heard that the only other dedicated cultural program in custody for African Australian young people is Umoja – Parkville College's cultural education program (see **Error! Reference source not found.**11.3).

### **Box 11.3. Umoja cultural education program**

Umoja – a Kiswahili word meaning 'unity' – is a cultural education program delivered by Parkville College for South Sudanese and other African Australian young people in custody. The program supports students from African backgrounds to explore their identity and nurture meaningful connections with their culture and community.

Umoja involves weekly classes where African Australian students from various units come together with cultural educators to discuss their heritage, engage in cultural activities (such as art, music and film) and talk about challenges like racism. Community Elders,

<sup>307</sup> Youth Advisory Group member, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>308</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>309</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>310</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.



cultural leaders and African role models are also invited into custody to participate in classes.

Many African Australian young people have felt alienated in mainstream education settings. Umoja directly tackles these issues by creating a culturally safe learning space where African Australian students are understood and valued. By affirming students' cultural identity, the program aims to rebuild pride and positive self-image, a protective factor against education disengagement.<sup>311</sup>

The Expert Working Group heard that students are motivated to attend Umoja, and it has consistently higher attendance rates than other Parkville College classes. It plays an important role in supporting young people's engagement in school, while increasing their cultural knowledge and fostering pride in their identity.

*Umoja's lit – we do it once a week. Because I was born here, I didn't get to learn much about my country and in Umoja I get to learn about our history and I hear things and I'm like wow, I would have never known that if it wasn't for Umoja.*<sup>312</sup>

Youth Advisory Group members identified the impact of Umoja on broader learning outcomes, noting that the interest of South Sudanese Australian young people in reading increased dramatically because Umoja provided culturally relevant books.

Despite these successes, young people consistently reported that culturally specific programs were too few and did not reflect the scale of cultural need across centres.

### **Programs in the community**

As part of their case management, South Sudanese Australian young people supervised in the community can also access culturally specific services and programs to address their needs.

Youth Justice funds community-based cultural supports in each region, delivered by local community organisations.<sup>313</sup> DJCS has also invested in South Sudanese and African community organisations through the Expert Working Group project (see Chapter 1). Despite this investment, there are still insufficient culturally relevant service options to meet the needs of South Sudanese Australian young people being supervised by Youth Justice in the community.

The Expert Working Group heard that mainstream community-based programs and services may not be as appealing to South Sudanese and African Australian young people compared to African-led services. However, these services are small, under-resourced and unable to take referrals at scale. There is a particular lack of referral options for services that work with whole families, in languages (for example, Dinka or Nuer), and for youth-led services that reflect the specific social realities young people face. This leaves case managers knowing

<sup>311</sup> Information provided by Parkville College, Department of Education.

<sup>312</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>313</sup> Examples of supports for young people from South Sudanese and other African Australian communities include: ASPYA Foundation, based in Melbourne's West, which focuses on empowering African youth through mentorship, education, leadership and wellbeing programs; the Centre for Multicultural Youth's Mentorship Program that connects South Sudanese Australian young people with positive mentors to guide and support their journey; and Junubi Wyndham, which provides culturally informed support and activities for the South Sudanese community in Wyndham.



what would work but struggling to find an appropriate service to refer to or to keep a young person engaged once they have been referred and are waiting for a service.

## **Lack of meaningful activity and routine in custody**

A dominant theme across consultations was the absence of structured daily routines and meaningful activity for young people in custody. Young people repeatedly emphasised boredom, isolation and long periods of inactivity in their units.

*You know how hard it is, sitting in a place like this for so long doing nothing and then to go to a 9 to 5 in the real world.<sup>314</sup>*

Young people and staff described frequent lockdowns, inconsistent access to programs, and variations in staff practice across units. Independent Visitors from the Commission for Children and Young People consistently observed young people asleep late into the day or idle in units during hours when structured programs should be occurring.

One young person noted the impact on mental health:

*They put us on rotation... it stuffs up your mental health.<sup>315</sup>*

Staff shortages and rising incidents contributed to repeated disruptions. Young people reported that they struggled to adjust to community routines after release because custody had not provided structure or preparation.

*The system has failed us. We are supposed to be here for rehabilitation.<sup>316</sup>*

## **Education: Capacity, capability and blocked pathways**

Young people placed significant value on education and held high academic aspirations. Many had strong literacy and numeracy skills prior to custody, and their families had high expectations for them. Yet their experiences of education in custody were mixed.

Several young people felt they were steered into lower-level programs or repeated basic classes that did not align with their abilities:

*I'm not going to get out of here painting.<sup>317</sup>*

*I'm so disappointed in the system because when I first came in here I knew I would be on remand for a while and I told them I want to study. But I wasn't allowed to because I wasn't sentenced. I could've had a Bachelor's [degree] by now.<sup>318</sup>*

Others described differences between Parkville and Cherry Creek, with inconsistent class delivery and limited access to teachers or materials.

*They would throw whatever classes at you.<sup>319</sup>*

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<sup>314</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>315</sup> Youth Advisory Group member, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>316</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation 2024–25.

<sup>317</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>318</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>319</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.



Young adults and dual-track young people expressed frustration at the lack of age-appropriate or advanced options. Barriers to accessing placements or on-site learning meant qualifications could not be completed before release.

Despite these challenges, when young people were supported, they succeeded. The majority of VCE completions in custody in 2024 were by South Sudanese Australian students, demonstrating their capability when provided with appropriate pathways.

### **Case management: The difference a good worker makes**

Young people described starkly different experiences with case managers. Some felt deeply supported:

*I felt like my old YJ [worker] was working against me and she just did her job and didn't care. My new YJ [worker] actually cares, works with me and she's actually trying to help me.<sup>320</sup>*

Others described long gaps without contact, feeling unsupported or experiencing changes in workers that disrupted their progress:

*There was one time I didn't see her for 3 months.<sup>321</sup>*

Young people were acutely aware when case managers were invested in their lives, and when they were not. Those who had positive relationships credited their case managers with motivating them, supporting their families and helping them navigate custody.

### **Mental health, substance use and the need for culturally informed wellbeing support**

Consultations highlighted rising mental health needs and substance use challenges. Young people attributed this to trauma, grief, family instability, racism and community violence – factors that disproportionately affect South Sudanese Australian communities.

However, they felt the mental health supports available in custody were too generic:

*It's one size fits all.<sup>322</sup>*

Young people expressed interest in group-based, culturally relevant wellbeing programs and access to practitioners from African backgrounds, particularly female practitioners, to support African girls and young women.

### **Preparing for release: Anxiety, disconnection and the need for guidance**

Transition from custody was repeatedly described as daunting. Many young people felt unprepared and anxious.

*I forgot how it feels to be free again<sup>323</sup>*

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<sup>320</sup> Youth Advisory Group member, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>321</sup> Youth Advisory Group member, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>322</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>323</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.



Young people highlighted practical barriers, especially identification documents:

*I was here 2 years... When I got home, I had no idea. I couldn't get a job... When I got an ID, it changed everything.*<sup>324</sup>

They also frequently described frustration at late preparation for parole and confusion about processes. Meaningful preparation, including life skills, employment pathways, and structured temporary leave, was viewed as essential but severely lacking.

## The ongoing impact of peer conflict and group-related harm

A significant proportion of young people spoke about the risks they faced upon returning to the community, particularly the challenge of avoiding past peer groups and conflicts.

*If you want to leave that lifestyle, you have to leave everything behind.*<sup>325</sup>

They described the difficulty of being targeted or drawn back into conflict, even when trying to make positive change:

*Back then the repercussions were a brawl or shaming your name.  
These kids are at risk of death.*

*I can understand why it's scarier for younger kids to leave that lifestyle.*<sup>326</sup>

Youth Advisory Group members spoke about escalating seriousness of harm, weapons involvement and the need for structured supports in both custody and the community to help young people disengage safely (these issues are also discussed in Chapter 8).

## The transformative role of lived-experience mentors

Young people consistently emphasised the importance of role models with lived experience:

*I need someone, not to take me under their wing but show me the ropes.  
I feel like I'm doing it on my own.*<sup>327</sup>

Young people, in particular, highlighted the credibility of lived-experience workers. As one young person reflected:

*I needed someone who really understood my experience.  
Someone who had walked that path.*<sup>328</sup>

Lived-experience mentors – both through formal programs and the Community Custody Visits framework were described as credible, relatable and able to guide young people through both custody and release. One mentor explained:

*We don't just speak at them — we walk with them.*<sup>329</sup>

Young people described these relationships as life-changing – providing hope, structure and encouragement.

<sup>324</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>325</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>326</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>327</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>328</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>329</sup> Youth Advisory Group member, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.



## 11.2 Findings and recommendations

The findings in this chapter reinforce that culturally responsive practice, meaningful engagement and strong connections to family and community are not optional extras – they are the essential foundations of an effective youth justice system. South Sudanese Australian young people demonstrate considerable strength, aspiration and resilience, even when facing profound adversity. With the proper supports – culturally relevant programs, trusted relationships and clear pathways into education, employment and community leadership – young people have a powerful capacity to change their trajectory and build positive futures.

Implementing the recommendations in this chapter will enable the youth justice system to better meet young people's needs, support rehabilitation, reduce reoffending and enhance community safety, while upholding dignity, cultural identity and lived experience. Achieving these outcomes requires a skilled and diverse workforce, safe and rehabilitative custodial environments, meaningful and purposeful daily activity, and strong transition supports that connect custody and community. The recommendations that follow address each of these elements in turn.

### Building a culturally responsive Youth Justice workforce

Having a Youth Justice workforce that reflects the diversity of the communities it works with allows children, young people and their families to connect with and be supported by people who understand their culture, traditions and experience. It also helps shape organisational culture and promote accountability for inclusive, responsive and non-discriminatory practice.

The Victorian Government's *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030* identifies an effective and highly skilled workforce as the most important factor in addressing the needs of young people supervised by Youth Justice.<sup>330</sup> A culturally safe approach to supporting young people in the youth justice system is one that 'includes meaningful engagement with communities and reliance on skilled workers from different cultures who can model and reflect cultural values and operate in a culturally diverse environment'.<sup>331</sup>

Specialist cultural roles provide an important foundation for cultural safety and trust. The existing specialist roles within Youth Justice are:

#### Community-based roles

- One Community Engagement Officer, North-West Metropolitan region and one Community Engagement Officer, South-East Metropolitan region: providing an interface between Youth Justice community services and African communities and supporting case managers to deliver culturally responsive case management.
- 4 multicultural practitioner roles (2 in the South-East Metropolitan region, one in the North Metropolitan region, and one in the West Metropolitan region):

<sup>330</sup> Victorian Government, [Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030](#), Victorian Government, 2020, p 46, accessed 10 August 2025.

<sup>331</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, *Youth justice case management evidence base*, Victorian Government, 2018, p 44, accessed 12 August 2025.



providing consultation and practice support to case managers and diversion coordinators working with young people from multicultural and multifaith communities. This work includes consultation with community organisations, linkages with relevant stakeholders and staff training.

### **Custody-based roles**

- 10 Cultural Liaison Officers, one Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Program Coordinator, one Manager of Multicultural and Multifaith Operations: providing support to custodial and case management staff and working directly with young people around their cultural needs.
- A dedicated cultural education team – comprising one Culturally Responsive Practice Manager and 7 program staff – in Parkville College, delivering cultural programs and providing educational support to young people from multicultural backgrounds and staff at Parkville College and within Youth Justice.

Youth Justice has made concerted efforts to increase the cultural diversity of its frontline workforce in recent years. A major focus has been on engaging with South Sudanese and Pasifika communities to raise awareness of careers in Youth Justice and to generate interest among community members in applying for roles.<sup>332</sup> Multiple career information sessions for the South Sudanese Australian community have been held over 2024–25, in partnership with organisations including the Sudd Foundation, Aspiring Young Africans (ASPYA), Next Gen Unite and the African Youth Alliance.

Youth Justice told the Expert Working Group that a number of staff with African heritage are employed in custody and community operations; however, exact numbers cannot be confirmed because data is not collected with that level of specificity.

Further work is needed to grow and support African Australian staff in the youth justice system, noting that this should be applied to all oversight bodies in the youth justice system. The Expert Working Group recommends the following areas of focus.

### **Workforce representation**

DJCS should publicly report on the cultural diversity profile of its workforce to improve accountability for the commitments made under its Multicultural and Multifaith Action Plan. DJCS identified improving workforce cultural diversity data and reporting as a key priority for 2023–24, noting that, if implemented, the data would be collected through staff self-reporting.<sup>333</sup> While some progress has been made, data is still not available. This work should be prioritised so that Youth Justice can monitor its progress in increasing the representation of staff from South Sudanese and other African Australian communities across roles at all levels.

<sup>332</sup> Victorian Government, [Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030](#), Victorian Government, 2020, p 42, accessed 10 August 2025.

<sup>333</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, [Multicultural and Multifaith Action Plan 2023–2027](#), Victorian Government, 2023, p 62, accessed 2 September 2025.



### Leadership roles

DJCS has also made commitments to increase the representation of staff from multicultural backgrounds at the senior leadership level.<sup>334</sup> These initiatives have progressed in Youth Justice with staff from African backgrounds holding senior leadership and executive positions. The Expert Working Group recommends that Youth Justice continue to further these efforts across the custodial, clinical and community workforce.

### Specialist cultural positions

The 2 South Sudanese Australian Community Engagement Officers carry a heavy personal load as they perform their professional roles, with the additional emotional, relational and cultural labour required of staff from diverse backgrounds when supporting their own communities. Two positions dedicated to the African community in the North-West and South-East Metropolitan regions are insufficient.

### Professional development

Staff employed in specialist cultural roles may experience fewer opportunities for progression and can feel 'stuck' in their roles. Tailored support for cultural staff who want to progress into generalist leadership positions should be incorporated into DJCS's professional development program for multicultural staff. This supports staff retention in the organisation while enabling them to share their cultural expertise in a broader context. It also contributes to increased representation in leadership roles and opens employment opportunities for other members of the community.

### Removing barriers to lived-experience employment

There is a growing body of evidence on the ability of people with lived experience to connect with and improve outcomes for justice-involved young people.<sup>335</sup> Lived-experience workers are common in many health and social services fields, but their inclusion in the justice system is less advanced.<sup>336</sup> Case workers with lived experience of the justice system can be highly effective at engaging and supporting young people in the change process.<sup>337</sup> Employing people with lived experience is not only a means of strengthening the Youth Justice workforce but also provides a concrete demonstration that 'redemption' and acceptance in the broader community is possible.<sup>338</sup>

*We need to rethink what redemption looks like. Because the truth is, many of us who've fallen and risen again have something powerful to offer. We just need a chance. That possibility — that people can rise, that society can evolve, that systems can listen — that's what gives me hope.*<sup>339</sup>

<sup>334</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, [Multicultural and Multifaith Action Plan 2023–2027](#), Victorian Government, 2023, p 67, accessed 2 September 2025.

<sup>335</sup> C Hartung et al., 'Mentoring young people involved in the justice system: unpacking the 'black box' of rapport and relationship-building', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2025, 1–17, doi: 10.1080/13676261.2025.2471806.

<sup>336</sup> T McPhee, [Lived experience framework](#), Justice Reform Initiative, 2024, p 3, accessed 5 September 2025.

<sup>337</sup> S Shepherd et al., *Addressing the needs of justice-involved African-Australian and Pasifika young people and their families*, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, 2025.

<sup>338</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, *Youth justice case management evidence base*, Victorian Government, 2018, p 37.

<sup>339</sup> Youth Advisory Group member, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.



#### **Box 11.4. The redemption principle**

Promoting 'redemption' is one of 8 principles for supporting the desistance process for young people in the youth justice system, as outlined in the *Youth Justice Case Management Framework Evidence Base*.

The principle reflects that efforts to move away from offending should be recognised and rewarded by criminal justice policy and practice to encourage and affirm positive change: 'For ex-offenders, there has to be an end to their punishment and a means of signalling their redemption and inclusion in their communities and wider society.'<sup>340</sup>

Youth Justice is currently developing a lived-experience policy that will establish a formal position on employing people with justice system lived experience in operational roles. To date, decisions to employ people with lived experience have been made on a case-by-case basis to overcome automatic exclusions that may have otherwise prevented their employment due to their criminal histories.

While the Expert Working Group welcomes the greater policy clarity, it has found that structural barriers to employing and retaining people with lived experience must also be addressed.<sup>341</sup> These include blunt requirements relating to criminal history checks and Working with Children Checks that can sometimes unfairly exclude people from roles they are safe and suitable for. Stigma and discrimination also operate to exclude people with lived experience from employment, and lived-experience staff need to be supported in organisations through training, supervision and professional development.

#### **Better support for African Australian staff**

Mainstream Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are not always well-equipped to address the complexities and cultural dynamics faced by cultural staff operating in these roles. Youth Justice has engaged culturally responsive mental health services to provide culturally relevant wellbeing and development support for staff from African Australian backgrounds. The Commission for Children and Young People also engaged these services, for example, to support the YAG as part of the Expert Working Group project. Youth Justice has also funded collective healing events to foster healing and recovery for African Australian staff who have been impacted by the cultural burden of supporting young people from their own communities. These efforts should be expanded.

#### **Recommendation 42. Building a culturally responsive workforce**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, improve and support the representation of African Australian and lived-experience staff in Youth Justice by:

- (a) continuing initiatives to recruit African Australian staff in frontline custody and community roles, and developing initiatives to further increase representation of people

<sup>340</sup> B Weaver and F McNeill, *Giving Up Crime: Directions For Policy*, Glasgow School of Social Work and Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, page 1

<sup>341</sup> T McPhee, [Lived experience framework](#), Justice Reform Initiative, 2024, p 6, accessed 5 September 2025.



from African backgrounds in clinical, senior leadership and executive roles in Youth Justice, such as targeted recruitment and tailored professional development support

(b) prioritising the collection and reporting of data on the cultural background of staff to inform efforts to increase the representation of staff from key communities working in Youth Justice at all levels

(c) developing a policy position and associated processes to support the recruitment, retention, supervision and management of community members with lived experience of the justice system in Youth Justice

(d) increasing the number of Community Engagement Officer roles for the African Australian community from one each in the North-West and South-East Metropolitan regions to at least 2 per region

(e) embedding a cultural wellbeing service for African Australian staff to provide dedicated cultural support, debriefing and professional development, either through or alongside the department's existing EAP service.

## Strengthening culturally specific programs and services

The Victorian Government's *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030* identifies that delivering culturally appropriate interventions and supports for young people from multicultural and multifaith backgrounds is key to addressing their over-representation in Youth Justice.<sup>342</sup>

The Expert Working Group acknowledges that Youth Justice has improved access to culturally specific programs and services for South Sudanese Australian young people over the past 2 years, but has found that gaps remain. The value and impact of these programs are clear and warrant further investment and expansion.

The Expert Working Group recommends the following areas of focus.

### **Strengthening community-based programs and services**

Access to the culturally specific programs and services in the community should be made available to young people under community supervision.

### **Sustaining and enhancing the Community Custody Visits Program**

The Community Custody Visits Program is unique in its approach to promoting cultural healing through combining connection to faith and community with lived experience and culturally relevant professional role models.

Youth Justice support for the program has been critically important. Youth Justice funds the purchase of supplies for shared meals, compensates the women who prepare the food and allocates additional custodial staffing resources to supervise program sessions.<sup>343</sup> Youth Justice also facilitated security clearances for Youth Advisory Group members to enter

<sup>342</sup> Victorian Government, [Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030](#), Victorian Government, 2020, p 40, accessed 10 August 2025.

<sup>343</sup> Initially, an African community organisation, AAFRO, funded supplies for the shared meals through a time-limited grant.



custody to support this program. But there are barriers to its long-term sustainability that need to be addressed.

Deacon George relies heavily on the support of community members to help plan and organise program sessions.<sup>344</sup> Community members dedicate substantial time and effort to the program outside of their regular roles, in a largely voluntary capacity. Throughout the Expert Working Group project, Youth Advisory Group members were remunerated by the Commission for Children and Young People for their participation and recognition of their lived-experience expertise. These arrangements have now ceased, and alternative remuneration arrangements need to be established to support lived-experience involvement in the program going forward.

The Expert Working Group further found that the program's impact could be enhanced through a dedicated focus on family reconnection and restorative practice alongside existing program sessions. Supporting family reconnection and rebuilding prior to release was a key recommendation from research recently commissioned by Youth Justice.<sup>345</sup> With additional capacity, the Community Custody Visits Program is well placed to deliver on this direction and to foster greater inclusion of Elders.

Deacon George currently weaves restorative themes into program sessions, but is limited in his ability to work with young people in custody to address conflicts that are resulting in incidents and preventing young people from mixing. There is an opportunity to build restorative practice capability within the program to engage young people in a trusted and culturally relevant manner.

The Expert Working Group recommends that an expanded Community Custody Visits Program be sustainably resourced to operate as a core ongoing cultural program in Youth Justice. Funding for the program should cover:

- establishing a program coordination/administration role
- expanding family reconnection and restorative practice functions within the program
- contributions for guest speakers, young people with lived experience, and other community members who contribute to program sessions<sup>346</sup>
- continuing to provide full reimbursement for cultural activities (food, sports, mentoring)
- an evaluation to measure outcomes on cultural identity, wellbeing and reintegration, with the evaluation report to be made publicly available.

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<sup>344</sup> Deacon George runs the program alongside his regular chaplaincy duties in custody 4 days a week and other church commitments in the community.

<sup>345</sup> S Shepherd et al., *Addressing the needs of justice-involved African-Australian and Pasifika young people and their families*, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, 2025, p 80.

<sup>346</sup> Community members who are employed in cultural roles by the Department of Justice and Community Safety but who participate in addition to their regular duties should be remunerated for their participation through suitable arrangements such as time in lieu.



The Expert Working Group further recommends that delivery of the Community Custody Visits Program be extended to the adult prison system to ensure that all African Australian young adults in custody have equivalent cultural support.

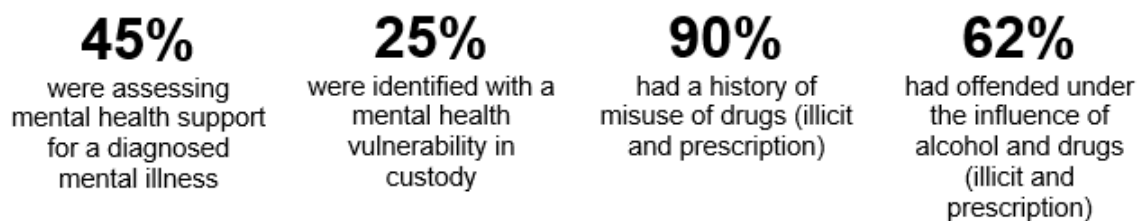
The program's long-term sustainability should be ensured through succession planning to maintain continuity beyond individual leaders and by building a sustainable base of trained cultural mentors. There is also an opportunity to leverage the program as a platform to provide cultural development and experiential learning for non-African Youth Justice staff.

### ***Implementing a culturally based wellbeing program in custody***

South Sudanese Australian young people in custody experience disproportionately high rates of mental health concerns and substance use issues (see Figure 11.1). The Expert Working Group heard that these challenges are often linked to experiences of trauma, family instability, poverty, racism and grief associated with the deaths of young people in the community. These factors weigh heavily on young people's wellbeing and are a significant contributor to offending.

**Figure 11.1. Experience of mental health and substance use<sup>347</sup>**

**For South Sudanese Australian young people in custody -**

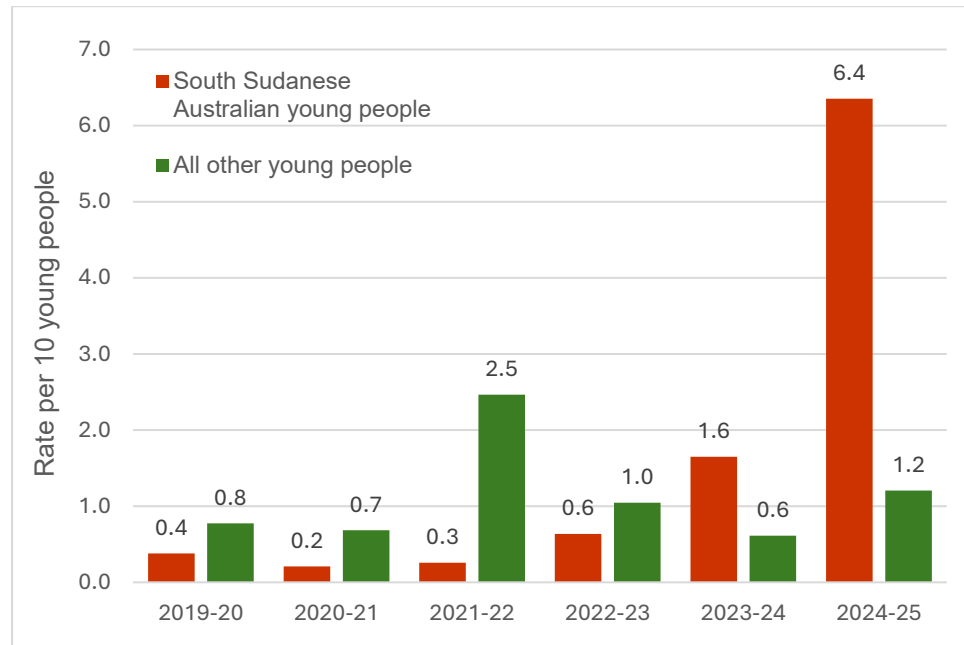


Rates of self-harm among South Sudanese Australian young people in custody have also risen sharply in the past year (see Figure 11.2). This trend is deeply concerning and points to the need for strengthened wellbeing supports that are culturally relevant and responsive.

<sup>347</sup> Youth Justice data, Case File Review of all African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision from September 2022 to April 2023, Department of Justice and Community Safety; Youth Justice annual custody survey 2023–24.



**Figure 11.2. Rate of self-harm incidents for young people in Youth Justice custody, 2019–20 to 2024–25<sup>348</sup>**



In 2024–25, the self-harm rate of 6.4 incidents for every 10 South Sudanese Australian young people was nearly 6 times that for all other young people. There were 18 self-harm incidents recorded for South Sudanese Australian young people in 2024–25, up from 4 the previous year.

In the community, South Sudanese and other African Australian young people under Youth Justice supervision can access culturally grounded wellbeing programs such as Nas Recovery Centre's *Path2Home*. However, in custody, primary health, mental health, and alcohol and other drug services are delivered entirely by mainstream providers. Some young people consulted by the Expert Working Group reported positive experiences with these services. Others described them as too generalised, insufficiently attuned to cultural norms or unable to address experiences unique to African Australian young people, for example, cultural expectations regarding alcohol use, stigma around help-seeking, or the role of family and community in healing.

Several young people emphasised the importance of group-based approaches, where they could reflect on their experiences alongside peers.

*We should be able to have group counselling sessions to talk about mental health or drugs and alcohol ... we did it in adults and it was actually really good.*<sup>349</sup>

Victoria's Department of Health recognises, through its multicultural health approach, the importance of targeted programs delivered alongside accessible mainstream services. The Expert Working Group heard that culturally based wellbeing programs can break down

<sup>348</sup> Unpublished Youth Justice incident data.

<sup>349</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.



barriers to engagement, normalise help-seeking and provide additional pathways for young people who may not connect with mainstream models of care.

The Expert Advisory Group recommends establishing a culturally based group program focused on substance use, mental health and wellbeing for African Australian young people in custody. This program would complement, rather than replace, the existing mainstream health and mental health services, offering a culturally safe platform for prevention, early intervention and recovery.

Members of the Youth Advisory Group also highlighted the importance of African Australian mental health and alcohol and other drug practitioners being part of general custodial health teams. This is essential to ensure that young people can access culturally appropriate one-on-one support, particularly for African girls and young women, for whom numbers may be too small to form a group program.

#### **Recommendation 43. Culturally specific programs and services**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety:

- (a) improve access to culturally specific programs and services for South Sudanese Australian young people under community supervision
- (b) embed an expanded Community Custody Visits Program as an ongoing cultural program in Youth Justice custody and resource it to operate sustainably
- (c) extend the delivery of the Community Custody Visits Program into the adult prison system to provide equivalent cultural support for all African Australian young adults in custody
- (d) introduce a cultural group-based wellbeing program focused on mental health and substance use for South Sudanese and other African Australian young people in custody.

### **Improving the management of South Sudanese Australian young people in custody**

A structured, safe and rehabilitative custodial environment is central to supporting young people turning their lives around. However, consultations revealed persistent challenges impacting South Sudanese Australian young people, including inconsistent routines, limited access to meaningful activity, high rates of behavioural isolation and rising incidents.

Several young people described spending extended periods in their units without structured engagement:

*It's hard being here, doing nothing most of the day. It affects your mind.*<sup>350</sup>

The Victorian Government's *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030* recognises that a young person's rehabilitation 'depends on a safe and effective custodial system'.<sup>351</sup> The

<sup>350</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>351</sup> Victorian Government, *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030*, Victorian Government, 2020, p 28, accessed 10 August 2025.



*Youth Justice Custodial Operating Philosophy* translates this into a set of core principles that underpin community safety and rehabilitative outcomes, including:

- a skilled, safe and stable workforce able to maintain a positive, secure environment
- relational security, including staff delivering behaviour management that is consistent, timely and fair
- meaningful, structured activity, maximising out-of-room hours and preparing young people for education, work and community life
- culturally responsive case management, including tailored support for young people from multicultural and multifaith communities.<sup>352</sup>

Evidence consistently shows that a structured, safe and rehabilitative custodial environment leads to better outcomes for both young people and staff.<sup>353</sup> As one review noted, the most effective approach is to maintain the least restrictive environment possible and to keep young people engaged in purposeful activity.<sup>354</sup>

Despite these principles, consultations revealed significant gaps between intended practice and young people's lived experience, particularly for South Sudanese Australian young people in custody.

The Expert Working Group identified 4 areas requiring immediate improvement to better support South Sudanese Australian young people in custody and strengthen rehabilitative outcomes (while acknowledging these issues affect all young people in custody). These areas are addressed in turn below.

### ***Behaviour management***

Consultations highlighted perceptions of inconsistent and unfair rule enforcement, reluctance by staff to challenge difficult behaviour, and escalating reliance on restrictive responses and isolation. These trends disproportionately affect South Sudanese Australian young people and contribute to instability. One Independent Visitor observed:

*... the difficult boys seem to rule the roost.*<sup>355</sup>

The 2017 Youth Justice Strategy and Review highlighted that:

*... perceptions of inconsistent or unfair treatment of people in an institutional setting are a material concern that can lead to instability.*<sup>356</sup>

<sup>352</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, *Youth Justice custodial operating philosophy*, Victorian Government, undated, accessed 25 August 2025.

<sup>353</sup> V van Miert et al., 'Young people's perception of group climate in juvenile justice centres in an Australian state, a pilot study', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 2022, 66(8):856–875, doi:10.1177/0306624x211022664.

<sup>354</sup> L Shearer, *Ministerial review into the riot at Frank Baxter detention centre 21 and 22 July 2019*, New South Wales Government, 2019, p 1, accessed 21 September 2024.

<sup>355</sup> Independent Visitor feedback provided to the Expert Working Group, September 2025.

<sup>356</sup> P Armytage and J Ogloff, *Youth justice review and strategy: meeting needs and reducing offending*, Victorian Government, 2017, Part 2, p 254, accessed 2 December 2025.



It further identified that increasing reliance on restrictive system responses to incidents and poor behaviour results in a ‘cycle of challenges’ that undermines the safety and security of the system and its ability to address young people’s rehabilitative needs.

Following the review, Youth Justice undertook considerable reforms to improve the conditions in youth justice custody and the responses to and treatment of children and young people. These measures included increased staff training, recruitment of additional staff, establishment of new behaviour support specialists, efforts to reduce isolation, reviews of the behaviour management model, and training in responding to behaviours of concern.

Despite considerable progress following the review, including recruiting to all custodial frontline positions, incidents and use of behavioural isolation are again escalating across the system.<sup>357</sup> Young people also continue to be ‘locked down’ during the day because of dynamic risk assessments, often identifying gang-related dynamic issues.<sup>358</sup> These trends raise concerns about the safe and therapeutic operation of youth justice centres broadly, but also disproportionately affect South Sudanese Australian young people.

#### **Box 11.5. Incidents and isolation**

Over the last 2 years there has been a large increase in the number of incidents recorded in youth justice custody and in the use of behavioural isolation:

- Category 1 (serious) and 2 (less serious) incidents increased from 2,321 in 2022–23 to 7,486 in 2024–25 – a 223% increase that was largely driven by increases in dangerous or disruptive behaviour and assaults on staff or other young people. In the 2024-25 year, Youth Justice identified a significant number of incidents (1692 incidents – 23% of all incidents recorded in 2024-25) which related to the covering of observation windows.<sup>359</sup> This reflects that during this financial year, Youth Justice changed its recording policy and began reporting all coverage of observation windows as part of the dangerous behaviour category. Youth Justice also noted that the number of young people in custody on an average day also increased during this period (from 108 young people in 2022-23 to 127 in 2024-25).
- Instances of behavioural isolation increased from 662 in 2022–23 to 7,085 in 2024–25 – a nearly 10-fold increase. Youth Justice reflected that following significant impacts for custodial operations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2022-23, Youth Justice undertook a substantial education piece with custodial staff to clarify the appropriate basis for the classification and recording of isolations (given the focus had been on supporting public health efforts and keeping young people safe through COVID-19 health related isolations

<sup>357</sup> A child or young person may be isolated in a locked room separate from others and the normal routine of the centre for a number of reasons including to prevent or respond to an immediate threat of them harming themselves or another person – referred to as ‘behavioural’ isolation (*Youth Justice Act 2024* (Vic), section 481(1)(a)). The use of isolation as a punishment, or for the purposes of disciplining a child or young person or as a generalised behaviour management strategy is prohibited (*Youth Justice Act 2024* (Vic), section 474(1)(f)).

<sup>358</sup> A lockdown is a form of isolation that involves placement of a child or young person in a locked room or other contained area separate from other children and young people and the normal routine of the centre ‘in the interests of the security or safe operation of the youth justice custodial centre’ (*Youth Justice Act 2024* (Vic), section 481(1)(a)(iv)).

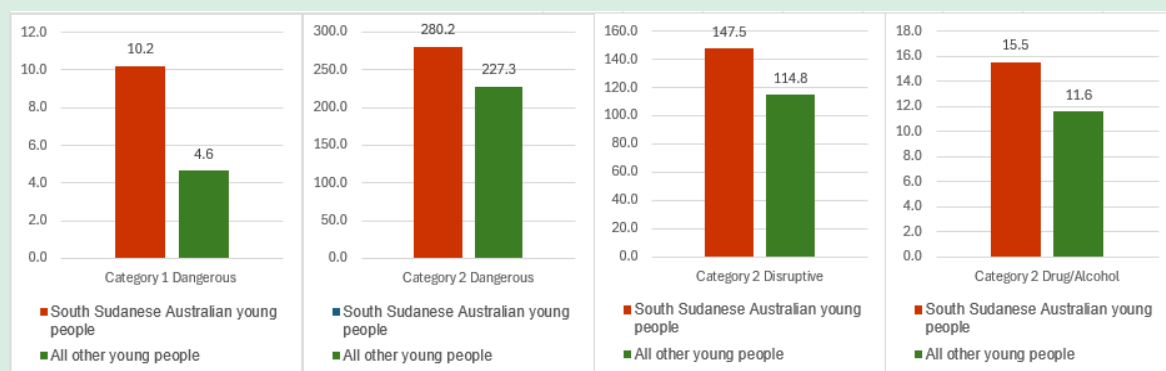
<sup>359</sup> Note: Youth Justice indicated that of the 1692 incidents involving references to ‘observation windows’, a proportion of these may capture other incidents.



that were authorised as security of Youth Justice centre concerns).<sup>360</sup> It is important to note that the overall number of isolations (behavioural and security) decreased by 10% from 2022-23 to 2024-25.<sup>361</sup>

South Sudanese Australian young people are disproportionately involved in some types of incidents (see Figure 11.3) – including dangerous and disruptive behaviour, but not assaults on staff or other young people.

**Figure 11.3. Rate (per 10 young people) of select incidents, 2024–25**



In 2024–25, approximately three-quarters of all young people who were in custody across the year received one or more behavioural isolations. The average cumulative time that South Sudanese Australian young people spent in behavioural isolation per day was higher than for other young people, at 4.5 hours in 2024–25 compared with 3.6 hours for all other young people.

Despite reductions in security lockdowns in recent years, their use remains widespread with young people being ‘locked down’ for an average of 2 hours each day in 2024–25.<sup>362</sup>

Cherry Creek’s mixed workforce experience levels, including relatively new and inexperienced staff, have also created challenges in maintaining routine and relational security. Between 30 June 2019 and 30 June 2024, the number of full time equivalent custodial staff increased by 18%. In 2023–24, the attrition rate for custodial staff was 33.8% – considerably higher than for the Youth Justice community workforce (9.4%) and the New South Wales youth justice custodial workforce (15% in 2022). On 30 June 2024, the average length of service at Cherry Creek was 2.4 years, compared to an average of 5.1 years at Parkville.<sup>363</sup> Cherry Creek began accommodating young people in August 2023.

The Commission for Children and Young People has expressed concern about behaviour management practices contributing to applications for transfers of South Sudanese Australian young people to adult prison, based on perceptions that Youth Justice cannot manage their behaviour.

<sup>360</sup> Following expiry of section 600M of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, these isolations were authorised under s.488(7).

<sup>361</sup> Note: Youth Justice reported data undergoes routine data validation and as such is subject to minor changes over time.

<sup>362</sup> Unpublished Youth Justice incident and isolation data, 2022–23 to 2024–25.

<sup>363</sup> Unpublished Youth Justice workforce data.



Youth Justice has invested in workforce uplift and introduced a restorative practice unit, which shows early promise. However, consistent, confident implementation and adequate resourcing for this work across the system remain a challenge.

Improved behaviour management is needed across 3 domains:

- staff confidence, capability and consistency
- evidence-based behaviour change approaches
- expanded use of restorative practices (supported by continued use of external experts to maintain integrity).<sup>364</sup>

#### **Recommendation 44. Custodial behaviour management**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, improve behaviour management in custody through:

(a) re-examining Youth Justice custodial staffing structures and behaviour management approaches to strengthen staff capability to provide consistent expectations, communication and responses. These approaches will enable young people to be engaged in positive, structured daily routines.

(b) expansion of restorative practices in the custodial operating model, drawing on external restorative practice expertise to support continued delivery of high-quality evidence-based practice.

### **Education and training**

The Victorian Department of Education's Strategic Plan notes that while many children face obstacles to learning, every young person has a fundamental human right to equitable and inclusive education, which empowers them to participate fully in society and realise their potential.<sup>365</sup>

Education remains a critical protective factor for young people. While many South Sudanese Australian young people arrive in custody with strong academic potential, school attendance is low, and access to higher-level study is limited. Some young people felt discouraged from pursuing VCE or tertiary study, and others faced practical barriers in completing vocational training due to restricted access to leave or equipment.

Parkville College's attendance data shows extremely low overall participation: 17.6% in 2024, with South Sudanese Australian young people attending at 21%, slightly above others, but still far below expectations.<sup>366</sup> Attendance can be impacted by student refusal as well as operational factors.

<sup>364</sup> C Walsh et al., *Restorative justice in youth correctional facilities: a guide to success in implementation*, Just Outcomes, 2024, accessed 26 September 2025.

<sup>365</sup> Department of Education, *Strategic Plan 2024–28*, Victorian Government, 2024, accessed 28 July 2025.

<sup>366</sup> Unpublished data provided by the Department of Education. The attendance rate reflects hours attended by students divided by hours scheduled for students and excludes students who were in custody for 10 days or less, as they are unlikely to attend classes during that period. Non-attendance reasons were provided for 26% of absences, with student choice accounting for nearly half of all recorded absence reasons.



Umoja's 90% attendance shows the value of cultural relevance, relational approaches and active support in getting young people to class. This model should be leveraged.

The Expert Working Group notes that Umoja's high attendance rate is not only due to student motivation but also to the tenacity of program staff, who will often attend units to get young people out of bed and then walk with them to class. Most teachers cannot provide this level of support. Nor should it be their responsibility. Instead, custodial staff are expected to take on the 'parental' role in ensuring students attend classes and other activities.

Recent Independent Visitor feedback about a lack of scheduled classes and the absence of educators also indicated to the Expert Working Group that Parkville College programming and staffing at Cherry Creek needs closer attention.

*The lack of coordination of what they are supposed to be doing. Yes, they don't get up and miss the session that they want to go to, but Parkville College don't turn up and provide the outside skills.<sup>367</sup>*

*The young people stated that Parkville College don't come and that if they do come, it's only for 10 minutes at the end of the allocation. Visitors attended the gym with a group of young people and there was no Parkville College staff there. The young people didn't have any balls to play with and were given a tiny yellow ball to occupy their time as there were no Parkville College staff there to assist.<sup>368</sup>*

The most recent Parkville College school review report for 2021–2025 noted that there has been a period of high staff turnover, and this was a factor impacting student engagement in learning. The Department of Education confirmed that there have been staff vacancies at Parkville College, particularly at Cherry Creek, and that recruitment to fill them is underway.

#### **Box 11.6. VCE success**

Notwithstanding the experiences of South Sudanese Australian young people in being directed away from VCE and having low school attendance rates, they have shown resilience and motivation in successfully completing VCE in custody.

In 2024, 6 young people in custody completed VCE, 5 of whom were South Sudanese Australian<sup>369</sup>.

This success highlights the capability and motivation of South Sudanese Australian young people to achieve educationally when they are encouraged and supported.

For young people not enrolled at school, Parkville College provides a range of short construction and traffic management courses as well as VET certificates in construction, engineering, hairdressing, hospitality and fitness. Accredited training is further supported by 2 work experience programs: the STREAT café and placements at the Lort Smith Animal

<sup>367</sup> Independent Visitor feedback provided to the Expert Working Group, September 2025.

<sup>368</sup> Independent Visitor Program update to the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Cherry Creek visit, 27 August 2025.

<sup>369</sup> Youth Justice data, received December 2025.



Hospital's adoption centre. Young people can also access some tertiary education online through the University of New England.

The Expert Working Group was advised that post-secondary education options are more limited in Youth Justice custody than in the adult system, and some popular courses, such as carpentry and engineering, have very limited availability. South Sudanese Australian young people are also not accessing the available work experience or pre-release programs.

Recent research with justice-involved African Australian young people identified a desire for custodial education offerings better aligned with their interests and future ambitions, such as digital skills, coding, content creation and entrepreneurship, along with greater access to tertiary degrees.<sup>370</sup>

The Expert Working Group heard about a range of practical barriers that limit participation and completion of qualifications in custody. These include an inability to access computers and online course materials outside of class to undertake independent learning, and inconsistent support from custodial and educational staff. Systems to support self-paced learning are important because of the practical challenges of undertaking education in a custodial environment.

Limited access to temporary leave means that courses with on-site classes or practice components cannot always be completed while in custody. The Expert Working Group also heard that there are inconsistencies in funding approvals for courses identified in young people's individual education plans, with Youth Justice case managers approving funding for some young people but not others.

The Expert Working Group found opportunities to:

- strengthen university partnerships
- expand VET and short-course availability
- remove practical barriers to completing coursework.

#### **Recommendation 45. Education and training in custody**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Education and the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, improve education and training access and attendance in custody through:

(a) addressing the Parkville College staffing gaps to ensure consistent education provision

(b) leveraging the *Umoja* cultural education program to support education delivery for African Australian young people by:

- (i) increasing the frequency of *Umoja* classes from once a week
- (ii) considering how the *Umoja* program can be further developed to support the delivery of the school curriculum and key learning competencies

<sup>370</sup> S Shepherd et al., *Addressing the needs of justice-involved African-Australian and Pasifika young people and their families*, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, 2025, pp 32, 79.



(ii) scheduling *Umoja* classes first thing in the morning to encourage young people to be up and ready for class at the start of the day

(c) working with the Department of Justice and Community Safety to improve access to post-secondary education and training that reflects young people's interests and aspirations by:

(i) developing partnerships with Victorian universities to enable young people to undertake a broader range of tertiary courses, facilitated by greater access to equipment, technology and custodial/educator support

(ii) exploring options to expand the range of short-course and VET certificates young people can access with a focus on supporting completion of qualifications while in custody.

### ***Delivery of a structured day***

The Youth Justice Review and Strategy identified a structured day as an essential component of an effective custodial operating model that lets young people know what is expected of them, keeps them active and engaged, promotes rehabilitation and prepares them for release.<sup>371</sup>

#### **Box 11.7. The structured day**

A 'structured day' ideally includes 11 hours out of the young person's bedroom or unit out of every 24 hours and should:

- maximise daily out-of-room hours
- provide constructive engagement
- incentivise participation and engagement
- provide activities that focus on life skills
- reward positive behaviour
- facilitate access to family, community and pastoral care through a generous visits program.

For children and young people in custody, education and training are the cornerstones of the structured day, ideally comprising 6 hours per day, 5 or 6 days a week. The remainder of the daily schedule should consist of access to health and rehabilitative services, time to pursue individual leisure activities, and visits with family and community.

The Youth Justice Strategy and Review emphasised that all young people must be required and actively encouraged to participate, unless they are unwell or subject to formal isolation. Young people should not be allowed to opt out of daily structured

<sup>371</sup> P Armytage and J Ogloff, *Youth justice review and strategy: meeting needs and reducing offending*, Victorian Government, 2017, Part 2, p 258, accessed 2 December 2025.



activities, and their attendance should be incentivised through linking participation in activities to allowances and other incentives under the behaviour management model.<sup>372</sup>

Evidence from staff, visitors and young people indicates the structured day is not being reliably delivered.

Two key gaps were identified:

- **Clear expectations for custodial staff:** Staff are critical to engaging young people in daily routines, yet expectations and support are inconsistent.
- **System-level oversight:** Youth Justice is currently unable to monitor participation or total hours spent in structured activity systematically.

The failure to reliably deliver a structured day weakens accountability, undermines behaviour management and erodes rehabilitation.

#### **Recommendation 46. Ensuring a structured day in custody**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, improve delivery and oversight of the structured day through:

- (a) developing practice guidance for staff that establishes expectations for delivering on the objectives of the 'meaningful and structured activity' custody operating principle
- (b) implementing appropriate direction and oversight to ensure custodial staff are consistently facilitating young people's participation in daily scheduled activities, including getting young people up and ready in the morning
- (c) developing data and analytic capability to monitor delivery of structured activity at the individual and system level
- (d) reporting on the hours and types of structured activity young people participate in, and the hours of lockdowns they experience.

#### **Regular contact with case managers**

Case management is defined as a 'collaborative, structured process of assessment, planning, intervention and review that determines and responds to a young person's individual risks and criminogenic needs in order to reduce reoffending and improve community safety'.<sup>373</sup>

Case managers are responsible for developing and coordinating the implementation of a young person's case plan, and having 'regular and direct contact' with the young person in

<sup>372</sup> P Armytage and J Ogloff, *Youth justice review and strategy: meeting needs and reducing offending*, Victorian Government, 2017, Part 2, accessed 2 December 2025.

<sup>373</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, *Youth Justice case management framework*, Victorian Government, 2018, p 10. In custody, the Classification and Placement Unit (CPU) and Custodial Key Worker work with the Case Manager to coordinate and oversee a young person's case management.



custody, either in person, or via video conferencing or telephone.<sup>374</sup> Regular case manager contact is a mandated requirement and a cornerstone of rehabilitation and release preparation.

The *Youth Justice Case Management Framework* establishes a differentiated approach to case management based on the level of risk, with sessions between the young person and case manager occurring fortnightly to monthly for low-risk young people, increasing up to twice-weekly for very high-risk young people.<sup>375</sup>

Case management experiences varied significantly. For some, regular contact provided reassurance and progress; others reported long periods without meaningful engagement.

Inadequate contact compromises:

- case plan progression
- identification of risks
- preparation for parole
- young people's sense of support and hope.

#### **Recommendation 47. Contact with case managers in custody**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, ensure case managers have regular contact with all young people in custody according to mandated levels of service as part of effectively overseeing case plans and providing support and encouragement to the young person.

### **Better supporting South Sudanese Australian young people as they transition out of custody and back into the community**

The transition from Youth Justice custody to the community is a critical period. It is a time when young people are trying to establish new routines, reconnect with family and community, and sustain a non-offending lifestyle – often in the face of stigma, peer pressure and limited opportunities. Effective preparation in custody and coordinated support after release are essential to help young people make this transition successfully.

Several barriers undermine effective reintegration, including delays in obtaining identification, limited use of temporary leave, inconsistent parole preparation, and insufficient support to find and maintain employment or education.

Group conflict and community safety risks also remain significant challenges.

The Expert Working Group found that more can be done to support South Sudanese Australian young people to prepare for release and transition successfully out of custody and

<sup>374</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, *Youth Justice case management framework*, Victorian Government, 2018, p 44. In a 2018 report, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office found that nearly half of the sample of young people it examined did not have a case plan. Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO), [Managing rehabilitation services in youth detention](#), VAGO, 2018, accessed 2 December 2025.

<sup>375</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, *Youth Justice case management framework*, Victorian Government, 2018, p 32.



back into the community. Five interconnected priorities were identified. These priorities are discussed below.

### ***Early and proactive transition planning***

The Expert Working Group recommends improvements to transition preparation – including early action on identification documents and greater use of temporary leave.

#### **Identification documents**

Identification is essential for everyday life – opening a bank account, getting a Medicare card, accessing income support, signing a lease, enrolling in education or employment. Leaving custody without identification makes it difficult for young people to meet basic needs and increases the risk of returning to offending.

Although the *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020–2030* states that reintegration planning should commence when a young person enters custody, the Expert Working Group heard that work to obtain identification is often undertaken only weeks before release.<sup>376</sup> This is often too late, particularly for young people born overseas or with complex documentation histories.

The Expert Working Group noted that the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing has an expedited process to obtain identification for children and young people leaving out-of-home care. A similar approach is needed for those in Youth Justice custody.

### ***Expanded temporary leave opportunities, including young people on remand***

Temporary leave is a key mechanism for gradual, supported reintegration, including re-establishing family and community connections and building work and education pathways. Youth Justice's temporary leave program allows leave (escorted or unescorted) for:

- education, employment or vocational training
- maintaining or rebuilding family and community links
- participating in pre-release programs.<sup>377</sup>

Despite this, South Sudanese Australian young people are not benefiting from temporary leave at the same rates as others. In 2023–24, of the 17 sentenced South Sudanese Australians in custody:

- only 4 South Sudanese Australian young people received leave for education, training or employment
- only 7 received leave for family or community connection

<sup>376</sup> The Youth Justice practice instruction *Planning for exit* directs staff 'In the weeks prior to the young person's exit ... Ensure the young person has suitable personal identification'.

<sup>377</sup> Department of Justice and Community Safety, *Youth Justice practice instruction: types of leave*, Victorian Government, unpublished. The leave program provides for other types of leave that are not transition focused, for example medical leave, compassionate leave and leave for the administration of justice.



- no South Sudanese Australian young people participated in the pre-release program.<sup>378</sup>

Difficulty obtaining leave was identified as a barrier to completing vocational training and gaining work experience. This is particularly concerning for young people on remand, many of whom ultimately receive non-custodial sentences; for them, productive engagement in education and employment during custody is especially important.

Young people emphasised that leave can also be a powerful motivator:

*I remember, when I was in custody and was doing well, they organised a home leave for me. For one whole year, I was doing good because I was looking forward to the home leave. Days before my home leave, it got cancelled because of COVID and I didn't get proper explanation or support. After that, my behaviour changed, and my attitude went down. I had nothing to look forward to.*<sup>379</sup>

The approved leave cancellation rate was 30% for South Sudanese Australian young people and 14% for young people from all other backgrounds.

The Expert Working Group recognises the need to balance risk management with rehabilitation, but found that leave is underused as a structured tool to support transition, especially for South Sudanese Australian young people.

#### **Recommendation 48. Improving transition preparation**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Department of Education, improve transition preparation for South Sudanese Australian young people in custody through:

- (a) ensuring that gaps in young people's identification documents are identified on entry to custody and addressed immediately, and that young people are made aware of the spent convictions scheme (relevant practice guidance should be updated to reflect this requirement)
- (b) establishing formal, expedited arrangements with the Victorian Department of Government Services, Services Australia and Department of Home Affairs to facilitate obtaining relevant documents for young people in custody in a timely manner
- (c) making greater use of temporary leave as part of well-planned preparation for release, including for young people on remand, to undertake education, training and employment.

#### **Structured support for Working with Children Check applications**

*We're ready to lead – but the system still sees our past.*<sup>380</sup>

<sup>378</sup> Unpublished data provided by Youth Justice.

<sup>379</sup> Young person, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.

<sup>380</sup> Youth Advisory Group member, Expert Working Group consultation, 2024–25.



Many South Sudanese Australian young people aspire to work with children and young people, including in youth work, education, community services and mentoring roles. For these pathways, a Working with Children Check (WWCC) is essential.

The Expert Working Group heard that:

- young people with criminal histories often assume they will be refused a WWCC
- some are discouraged from pursuing relevant study because case managers believe WWCCs will be unattainable
- the WWCC process is complex, legalistic and heavily reliant on written submissions.

Box 11.8 (a YAG member's story) illustrates how even highly motivated young people with long periods of good behaviour can be effectively 'locked out' without intensive advocacy and support. This not only undermines rehabilitation and inclusion but also restricts the development of a lived-experience workforce that could significantly benefit the youth justice system and the community.



### **Box 11.8. Supporting a YAG member to obtain a Working with Children Check**

This YAG member's experience illustrates the barriers young people with justice involvement face when trying to rebuild their lives.

Despite not reoffending for more than 6 years and establishing himself as a respected volunteer and mentor, his initial Working with Children Check (WWCC) application was declined because of an offence committed when he was 16–17. He described this as a 'second punishment' that denied him a fair chance to pursue his goals and questioned, 'Where's the second chance in life?' – a sentiment shared by many rehabilitated young people who remain locked out of work and mentoring roles due to childhood mistakes.

With intensive support, the YAG member eventually succeeded on appeal. The process, however, was long, complex and dependent on advocacy that most young people cannot access. The Expert Working Group's project team worked closely with him to prepare a detailed application, contextualise his past and demonstrate his rehabilitation, securing multiple support letters and senior endorsements. Only after months of effort was the decision to refuse the WWCC overturned.

This YAG member's case highlights the inequity of the current system. The WWCC process is complex, legalistic and heavily reliant on written submissions, creating major barriers for young people without literacy support, advocates or networks. Even after years of positive behaviour, applicants are often treated as ongoing risks, limiting their ability to contribute to their communities and restricting the youth justice sector's access to credible lived-experience mentors. This YAG member's success is the exception; without systemic reform, most young people who have genuinely turned their lives around will continue to face unfair exclusion from employment and peer mentoring opportunities.

The Expert Working Group also noted potential risks that changes arising from the 2025 Rapid Child Safety Review could make it even harder for rehabilitated young people to obtain a WWCC if safeguards are not built in.<sup>381</sup>

The Expert Working Group notes that the proposed process for supporting young people to apply for WWCC's aligns with DJCS' existing responsibilities and is intended to formalise and streamline the process. In addition, the proposed internal review function offers a mechanism for a more nuanced consideration of applicants' suitability than currently exists. The Expert Working Group recommends that, in establishing the new internal review function, the Social Services Regulator ensure that there is a clear pathway for applicants with criminal histories who do not pose a risk to child safety to be granted a WWCC, particularly where the offending occurred in adolescence. The

<sup>381</sup> J Weatherill and P White, [Rapid child safety review](#), Victorian Government, 2025, accessed 15 September 2025.



#### **Recommendation 49. Working with Children Checks**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Social Services Regulator, provide guidance and support for young people to obtain Working with Children Checks by:

- (a) formalising a process for supporting young people supervised by Youth Justice to apply for Working with Children Checks through developing practice guidance for staff, ensuring senior leadership support and establishing process arrangements with the Working with Children Check unit
- (b) establishing a clear pathway for applicants with criminal histories who do not pose a risk to child safety to be given the best opportunity to be granted a Working with Children Check through the Social Services Regulator's internal review process.

#### ***Flexible, place-based employment and education support***

Young people consistently emphasised that education, training and meaningful work are central to their plans for a different life after custody. They also highlighted the need for practical, ongoing and flexible support to navigate barriers and stay engaged, especially beyond the initial transition period.

The Expert Working Group heard that:

- Parkville College's transitions team does strong work reconnecting young people to education and training, but capacity and duration are limited
- very few South Sudanese Australian young people secure jobs while in custody that are then sustained after release
- existing supports, such as Parkville College's Work and Industry team and the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions' (DJSIR) Reconnect program, use outreach models that can struggle to maintain consistent contact with young people facing multiple and complex barriers.

At the same time, external structural barriers, such as employer reluctance to hire people with a criminal record, limit opportunities and require a broader, whole-of-government response.

The Expert Working Group concluded that more flexible, place-based support is needed, embedded in trusted community settings.



### **Recommendation 50. Flexible support to connect with education, training and employment in the community**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, the Department of Education and the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, provide more intensive, flexible support to connect young people with education, training and employment in the community after release by considering how aspects of an alternative education model can be established within an existing youth-focused African community organisation in the West and South-East of Melbourne or a community hub model. This approach should be co-developed between the government, community organisations and South Sudanese Australian young people with lived experience of custody.

#### ***Lived-experience mentoring beginning in custody***

Lived-experience peer mentoring – where mentors draw on their own justice experience – can be a powerful intervention for justice-involved young people.<sup>382</sup> Evidence and practice highlight:

- **Improved engagement:** Young people are more likely to trust and listen to someone who has ‘walked the same path’.
- **Pathways and leadership:** Mentoring creates employment and leadership opportunities for people who have moved away from offending but face exclusion elsewhere.
- **Wellbeing and safety:** Effective peer mentoring requires training, supervision and support to protect both mentors and mentees.

DJCS has begun trialling a range of lived-experience and peer mentoring approaches in the youth justice system. This includes the Youth Justice Lived Experience Mentoring Program that commenced in June 2024. As of August 2025, 22 South Sudanese Australian young people had participated. Members of the Youth Advisory Group are also undertaking informal peer mentoring as part of Deacon George’s Community Custody Visits Program.

The Expert Working Group found that:

- current programs show strong promise
- there is a need for mentoring that begins in custody and continues post-release, particularly for South Sudanese Australian young people
- mentors require structured training, professional development, supervision and wellbeing supports.

Investment in professionalised lived-experience mentoring programs in custody and the community was also a recommendation of the recent Youth Justice-commissioned research

<sup>382</sup> See for example C Hartung et al., ‘Mentoring young people involved in the justice system: unpacking the ‘black box’ of rapport and relationship-building’, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2025, 1–17, doi: 10.1080/13676261.2025.2471806.



into addressing the needs of justice-involved African Australian and Pasifika young people and their families.<sup>383</sup>

#### **Recommendation 51. Lived-experience peer mentoring**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, establish a suite of lived-experience peer mentoring programs for the youth justice system that include:

- (a) mentoring for African Australian young people that starts in custody to support their transition back to the community
- (b) training, professional development, supervision and wellbeing support for mentors.

#### ***A coordinated, multi-agency approach to group conflict and safety***

The Expert Working Group heard that youth involvement in gangs and group-related conflict has increased the seriousness of offending and the level of risk to young people's lives. The Youth Advisory Group described an environment where:

- conflict increasingly involves weapons and serious harm
- loyalties, reputations and fears follow young people out of custody
- many young people feel 'chased back' into conflict, even when they want to change.

Young people emphasised that meaningful change often starts in custody, where structured, reflective programs, such as the Community Custody Visits Program, can help them examine their choices, associations and values, and plan safer futures (including relocation or safety planning where needed).

Youth Justice community supervision staff are increasingly undertaking intensive safety work with young people and their families, including whole-of-family safety planning, home security measures and, at times, relocation. Much of this work is beyond Youth Justice's traditional remit but falls to them because no other service is equipped or funded to respond.

Youth Justice leverages Multi-Agency Panels (MAPs) to coordinate responses for the highest-risk young people under Youth Justice supervision. A young person who is at high-risk of engaging in serious offending or causing serious harm, who is subject to Youth Justice supervision, in custody, or has previously been supervised by a MAP is eligible for MAP supervision.<sup>384</sup> There is a gap for those who are at high risk but not yet MAP-eligible, reducing opportunities for early intervention. Further, other multiagency panel models, such as family violence Risk Assessment and Management Panels, are established to prevent serious harm and are not limited to individuals with statutory system involvement.<sup>385</sup>

<sup>383</sup> S Shepherd et al., *Addressing the needs of justice-involved African-Australian and Pasifika young people and their families*, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, 2025, p 79.

<sup>384</sup> *Youth Justice Act 2024* (Vic), section 689.

<sup>385</sup> See Safe and Equal, *Risk Assessment and Management Panels (RAMPs)*, Safe and Equal website, undated, accessed 2 December 2025.



The Expert Working Group concluded that:

- clearer practice guidance, specialised training and intervention models are needed for Youth Justice and MAP partners to work safely and effectively with gang-involved young people
- a broader multiagency panel approach is required to coordinate responses for gang-involved children and young people and their families, regardless of whether they are under Youth Justice supervision.

**Recommendation 52. Addressing conflict and gang involvement in the community**

That the Victorian Government, through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, strengthen the youth justice system's ability to safely and effectively supervise young people who are gang-involved through:

- (a) developing practice guidance, specialised training and intervention approaches to support Youth Justice staff to work with gang-involved young people under supervision and their families
- (b) developing resources and training to build the capability of MAP partner agencies to effectively coordinate and oversee responses for gang-involved young people and their families
- (c) establishing a comprehensive multiagency panel approach to coordinate government agency and community service system responses for gang-involved children and young people and their families who are at risk of serious harm, whether or not Youth Justice supervises them.



## **Part D. A shared responsibility and a shared future—the role of the broader community**

This part of the report sets out findings and recommendations about the role of the broader community and the need:

- to tackle racism and support belonging in Victoria
- for shared commitment and accountability for this work going forward.



## 12. Tackling racism and supporting belonging in the Victorian community

Tackling racism in the Victorian community is not only a matter of justice; it is essential to building the conditions in which young South Sudanese Australians can thrive.

This chapter calls for a deliberate effort to challenge racist narratives, prevent discrimination, and promote belonging through community-led storytelling, positive representation and fair access to opportunity. It recommends actions to hold the media accountable, strengthen equal opportunity education, establish public reporting of data on African Australian employees in the Victorian public sector, improve access to citizenship, and invest in African Australian media and storytelling initiatives that amplify voices from within the community and celebrate culture, identity and contribution.

### 12.1 What we heard

For many South Sudanese Australians, daily life in Victoria is shaped by the lingering effects of racialised public discourse. Inflammatory language and over-reporting of alleged offending by African Australian young people – particularly between 2016 and 2019 – have entrenched harmful and false stereotypes associating young people of African appearance with crime and disorder.

*When you watch the news, they talk about African gangs in Melbourne. They believe that because that's what they hear in the media and they feel like the whole community is bad. The media is a real issue that is why people feel about youth crime.<sup>386</sup>*

The negative portrayal in sections of the media has been substantial and far-reaching. The Expert Working Group heard that these portrayals have caused lasting harm to community confidence and social cohesion. Young South Sudanese Australians describe feeling constantly judged, unsafe and excluded from the broader community. The stigma also affects parents and carers, who face increased anxiety about how their children are perceived in schools, workplaces and public spaces.

*Going into a store, they think I am going to steal, internally you feel like you have done something wrong – there is a stigma around it.<sup>387</sup>*

Persistent stereotypes influence the way young people are treated across multiple systems, particularly in education, employment and policing. When bias shapes opportunity, it erodes trust in institutions and reinforces the sense that participation in mainstream society is conditional rather than equal.

As the Expert Working Group heard repeatedly, racism does not only exist in overt acts; it operates through everyday assumptions, omissions and structural patterns that restrict opportunity and reinforce inequality.

*My children are in private school and that's where my struggles come from. They have not been listened to and they have been described as problematic and so are us as parents.*

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<sup>386</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2024.

<sup>387</sup> Young person, Youth forum, 2023.



*When they speak up for themselves, they are considered as instigators and described as angry and are forced to defend themselves.<sup>388</sup>*

*The assumption that something has to be overt racism for it to be taken seriously – there are the microaggressions, and you then have to explain that.<sup>389</sup>*

## 12.2 Findings and recommendations

### Harmful media reporting and racist stereotypes

Public discourse about South Sudanese Australian young people in Victoria has too often been, and continues to be, shaped by harmful and racist stereotypes. Media coverage, particularly during the height of the so-called ‘African gangs’ narrative in the late 2010s, repeatedly portrayed young South Sudanese Australians as threatening, criminal and unassimilated. These depictions exaggerated isolated incidents and constructed a racialised moral panic that bore little resemblance to reality. The Expert Working Group heard that such depictions continue.

Headlines and political commentary frequently frame South Sudanese young people collectively as a ‘problem’, reinforcing fear and suspicion within the broader community. Such narratives ignore the diversity, achievements and contributions of South Sudanese Australians, and fail to situate the challenges faced by some young people within the broader social and structural contexts of disadvantage, trauma and discrimination.

The cumulative impact of this portrayal has been profound. Negative media stereotypes fuel prejudice and shape how institutions and individuals perceive and respond to South Sudanese Australians – influencing policing, education and employment experiences, and eroding trust in mainstream systems.

Many South Sudanese Australian young people report being unfairly targeted, followed in shops or stopped by police, as a direct consequence of being publicly identified with crime.

Parents and community leaders describe the emotional toll of continually defending their children against public stigma. At the same time, the sensationalism of mainstream reporting drowns out the many positive stories of resilience, leadership and community contribution. Redressing these harmful narratives requires sustained commitment from media outlets and government alike to support balanced, accurate and respectful reporting that reflects the whole humanity and diversity of the South Sudanese Australian community.

#### **Recommendation 53. Prevent harmful and racist stereotypes in media discourse**

That the Victorian Government explore opportunities, such as with the Commonwealth Government or philanthropic organisations, to commission research into media reporting about South Sudanese Australian community members over a defined period and report on any non-compliance with industry codes and standards, racism or bias with respect to stories that relate to people from multicultural and multifaith communities. The Victorian

<sup>388</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.

<sup>389</sup> School Community Liaison Officer, Youth forum, 2023.



Government should report back to the community implementation committee (see Recommendation 59) on its exploration and proposed next steps by July 2027.

## **Changing the story: Representation and positive storytelling**

Despite experiencing challenging circumstances, the South Sudanese Australian community continues to demonstrate extraordinary resilience, creativity and leadership. There is strength in culture, connection and collective identity. Community organisations, youth leaders and Elders have played a vital role in supporting young people to find belonging and pride in who they are.

The community's cultural richness – expressed through dance, language, storytelling, cuisine, art, sport and faith – has been a source of strength and healing. With recognition and support, this cultural vitality can enrich Victoria's broader social fabric and help to counteract negative public narratives.

The proposed community hub (see Chapter 4) is one example of how this can be achieved in practice: a shared space where cultural traditions can be celebrated, positive stories can be told, and belonging can be actively cultivated.

Supporting the community to tell its own stories is one of the most powerful ways to challenge stigma and promote belonging. When communities are able to share their strengths, achievements, and contributions, it helps reshape public narratives that might otherwise focus on deficits or risks.

To challenge the ongoing harm caused by negative media narratives about youth crime, in 2024–25, the Commission for Children and Young People convened a screening and youth panel discussion of *Reclaimed Voices*. This documentary, produced by young South Sudanese Australians, confronts stereotypes and highlights the importance of authentic storytelling. The event engaged government and community stakeholders in dialogue about shifting public perceptions and promoting fairer representation of young people.

Positive storytelling fosters pride, connection and identity, particularly for young people navigating experiences of marginalisation. It also builds empathy within the wider community by humanising and contextualising the experiences of migrants, refugees and their children.

Community-led and youth-led media initiatives, whether radio, podcast, film, photography or social media, can powerfully shift perceptions and generate understanding. They allow young people to frame their own stories in their own words, reinforcing agency and self-determination.

These initiatives need modest but sustained investment. Philanthropic organisations, alongside government, can play a pivotal role in creating pathways for South Sudanese Australian creatives and storytellers to reach mainstream audiences.



#### **Recommendation 54. African Australian media and storytelling**

That the Victorian Government establish a fund (by the end of 2026) to support the development of African Australian community-led and youth-led media (including radio, podcast, print, short film/documentary) with the aim of showcasing the culture, resilience and talents of the community and its positive contribution to Victoria and Australia.

### **Addressing discrimination and creating equal opportunity**

Racism and discrimination continue to create significant barriers to economic participation for South Sudanese Australian people. Many South Sudanese Australians report facing bias in recruitment processes, where applicants with African-sounding names are less likely to be shortlisted for interviews. Those who secure employment often describe differential treatment, microaggressions or social exclusion in the workplace.

These experiences undermine confidence, job satisfaction and career progression. For young people, unemployment and underemployment increase social and economic stress and heighten the risk of contact with the youth justice system.

Despite the community reporting widespread experiences of discrimination, very few complaints are made under Victoria's anti-discrimination legislation. Between 1 July 2020 and 30 June 2025, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) recorded 6 discrimination complaints from people identifying as South Sudanese, and an additional 62 complaints from people identifying as being African or of African descent<sup>390</sup> This gap between lived experience and formal complaint highlights the limited use of existing justice mechanisms.

The Expert Working Group considers that stronger systemic and community-based action is needed to prevent racism, improve institutional accountability and build community confidence that Victoria's human rights framework works for all people in Victoria.

This includes working directly with employers in high-priority local government areas to improve diversity and inclusion practices, and supporting South Sudanese Australians to understand and assert their rights under the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010*, the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001*, and the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*.

These measures must be practical, visible and accessible – delivered through trusted community channels and informed by lived experience.

#### **Recommendation 55. Equal opportunity rights and obligations**

That the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission:

(a) partner (by July 2027) with others in priority local government areas (those with a high South Sudanese Australian population) to help employers understand how they can

<sup>390</sup> This information is based on self-reported identification and may not show all people from the South Sudanese Australian community who have made discrimination complaints to VEOHRC.



support economic participation and prevent racial discrimination in their employment practices

(b) deliver (by July 2027) tailored community education to help South Sudanese Australian people understand their rights under the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010*, *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001*, and the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*.

## Ensuring publicly funded services reflect the communities they serve

Representation matters. When professionals of African Australian descent are present across all levels of the public sector and publicly funded services, including policy, frontline delivery, management and leadership, government and services gain insight, trust and legitimacy within diverse communities. Representation strengthens policy design, improves service relevance and builds public confidence. Yet, despite this clear value, African Australians remain under-represented and largely invisible within publicly funded services in Victoria.

There is currently no systematic approach to measuring, reporting on, or acting on the representation of African Australians in the Victorian public sector workforce. The absence of this data limits the government's ability to identify barriers to recruitment, retention and career progression – and to recognise and celebrate the contributions of African Australians across the system.

### *Victoria's leadership through measurement and accountability*

Victoria has demonstrated that leadership, when combined with transparent reporting, can drive deep and lasting reform.

### *Gender equality*

The Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, established under the *Gender Equality Act 2020*, requires defined entities, including government departments, statutory bodies and local councils, to collect data, analyse workplace gender composition, and publicly report on progress towards gender equality.

This approach has transformed accountability across the public sector. By requiring departments to identify inequalities, set measurable goals and publish Gender Equality Action Plans, the Commission has created a culture in which inclusion is understood as a measurable indicator of performance and leadership, not simply a matter of goodwill.

### *Aboriginal employment commitments*

Victoria's approach to increasing Aboriginal employment also provides a strong model for how leadership, accountability and sustained commitment can achieve change. Through the *Barring Djinang First Peoples Workforce Development Framework* (2024 to 2028), the Victorian Public Sector Commission supports departments to increase the number of First Nations people employed in the Victorian public sector.<sup>391</sup>

<sup>391</sup> Victorian Public Sector Commission (VPSC), *Barring Djinang: First Peoples Workforce Development Strategy*, VPSC, 2025, accessed 8 November 2025.



Annual workforce data and departmental progress are reported publicly, supported by targeted initiatives such as Aboriginal graduate and traineeship programs, leadership development pathways and mentoring networks. Since June 2017, the proportion of Victorian Public Service employees who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander has increased from 1.1% to 1.3%.<sup>392</sup>

This commitment has normalised the expectation that government workforces should reflect the communities they serve. It has also demonstrated that systemic change is possible when supported by data, leadership accountability, and culturally safe employment pathways.

### ***Learning from these approaches to increase the African Australian representation***

The same principles of data, accountability and co-design can be applied to increase the representation of people of African Australian descent. Departments and agencies could begin by collecting and reporting disaggregated data on recruitment, retention and career progression of African Australian employees.

Victoria Police, for example, has begun taking steps in the right direction with its *Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Framework 2023–2030* and *CALD Inclusion Action Plan 2023–2024*; however, stronger commitments to measuring and publicly reporting on the recruitment and retention of employees of African heritage are necessary to drive positive change and demonstrate impact.

A consistent, statewide framework for measuring and improving representation, supported by the Victorian Public Sector Commission, in collaboration with community leaders, would enable meaningful progress over time.

Public reporting on this issue would:

- provide a clear baseline for understanding under-representation and monitoring progress over time
- drive evidence-based workforce strategies that address barriers to recruitment and advancement
- signal to communities that the public sector values and reflects the diversity of the population it serves
- demonstrate to young African Australians that leadership in publicly funded services is attainable and welcomed.

### **Recommendation 56. Establish a framework for measuring and improving African Australian representation across publicly funded services**

The Victorian Government should establish a consistent, statewide framework, co-designed with African Australian community leaders and the Victorian Public Sector Commission to measure, report on, and strengthen African Australian representation across all state-government-funded services, including health, education, justice, and community services, by July 2027.

<sup>392</sup> Victorian Public Sector Commission (VPSC), [Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander 2024](#), VPSC website, 2025, accessed 8 November 2025.



## Citizenship, security and belonging

Tackling racism is not only about preventing harm; it is about building belonging. Belonging grows when people feel seen, respected and able to contribute. Supporting the South Sudanese Australian community to tell its own stories, to lead local initiatives and to access fair opportunities in education and employment strengthens both the community and the broader social fabric of Victoria.

For many South Sudanese Australians, pathways to Australian citizenship remain critical but sometimes difficult process. Without citizenship, individuals and families often face uncertainty about their long-term security. This insecurity can heighten stress and anxiety, particularly for those already dealing with trauma from displacement and resettlement and create barriers to employment, education and access to government services.

At a community level, these individual insecurities can erode trust in institutions and make it harder for families to feel fully part of Australian society. The result is a cycle of disconnection that undermines efforts to build belonging and stability.

Australian citizenship represents more than a legal status; it is the foundation of a social contract between individuals and the state. It embodies mutual responsibility – where citizens are expected to contribute to and comply with the laws and values of their country, and, in return, are afforded the full protection of those laws and the rights, freedoms, and security that come with belonging to the nation.

For people who have experienced displacement, war or persecution, this recognition carries profound symbolic and practical significance. Citizenship affirms that they are no longer temporary participants in the Australian story but equal members of it.

Ensuring that all eligible South Sudanese Australians can access timely and affordable legal assistance to support their citizenship applications is therefore essential to strengthening belonging, participation and trust – both within the community and in the relationship between the community and the state. The Youth Citizenship in the West project, run by Victoria Legal Aid and Westjustice, provides an example that could be expanded on (see Box 12.1).

### **Box 12.1. Example – Youth Citizenship in the West project**

The Youth Citizenship in the West project reaches out to eligible young people aged up to 24 years through schools and community groups so they can access free legal support to make an application.

The project aims to increase awareness of the benefits of gaining Australian citizenship and provide legal assistance to young people in Melbourne's western suburbs who are on a visa, are eligible for citizenship and for different reasons have not applied for it.

The project focuses particularly on people with a refugee background, supporting them to consider undertaking this journey and to fully embrace a sense of belonging to their Australian community. It also reduces the risks of visa cancellation and potential



deportation for young people with a refugee background who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

The barriers to citizenship that were most often identified by clients in the project were:

- inability to pass the competency test due to either a lack of familiarity with online systems or low proficiency in English
- complexity of the application.

While the process to apply for citizenship seems straightforward, there are a number of compounding issues that may prevent young people from applying, including:

- a perception that being on a permanent visa is sufficiently secure
- difficulty in accessing the documentation required to support the application
- cost of the application
- difficult family relations
- anxiety about navigating an unfamiliar system.

The project has provided more than 800 people with legal advice or assistance, conducted community legal education events for more than 300 people, and provided professional legal education to lawyers and settlement workers from partner organisations and local community workers.<sup>393</sup>

The project takes a people-centred design approach and is being implemented as a partnership between Victoria Legal Aid and community legal centre Westjustice and other local partners, to provide a wraparound citizenship service that young people can access to be supported and assisted along their citizenship journey.

The project was started with one-year funding by the Victorian Legal Services Board and the Commissioner.

As the Expert Working Group's consultations have shown, belonging is the foundation of safety, participation and hope. A Victoria that embraces the full diversity of its people is not only fairer – it is stronger, more cohesive and more resilient.

### **Recommendation 57. Strengthening paths to citizenship**

That the Victorian Government expand (by July 2027) the legal assistance available to help eligible South Sudanese Australians to make a citizenship application, recognising that Australian citizenship is a key foundation for promoting belonging, inclusion and access to opportunity.

<sup>393</sup> Information provided by Victoria Legal Aid. See also Victoria Legal Aid, [Strengthening a sense of belonging through citizenship](#), Victoria Legal Aid website, 2024, accessed 24 November 2025.



## 13. Taking the next steps together

The South Sudanese Australian community accepted the Victorian Government's invitation in 2022 to come together to address the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in the youth justice system.

The establishment of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group created a new partnership between community and government – one grounded in evidence and shared purpose.

Through the establishment of advisory groups, community consultation forums and direct engagement with young people in custody, the Expert Working Group has ensured that the voices and lived experiences of the South Sudanese Australian community have been embedded at every stage. Hundreds of people have contributed their time, stories and expertise to shape the recommendations in this report.

This work has laid the foundations for ongoing partnership and accountability. The South Sudanese Australian community has set clear expectations for the government: that this process must lead to real change, and that the momentum generated over the past 3 years must not be lost.

### 13.1 What we heard

During the course of this work, community members consistently emphasised the importance of:

- **Partnership and shared ownership.** The community wants to remain at the table, co-designing the next phase of work with the government.
- **Accountability and transparency.** Community members expressed the need for regular public reporting and visible progress on the recommendations.
- **Consolidating progress and leadership.** Sustaining the relationships built through the Expert Working Group and maintaining senior government commitment are seen as critical to success.
- **Inclusion.** While the focus of this report is the South Sudanese Australian community, participants recognised the importance of ensuring that lessons learned are shared and adapted across other African and culturally diverse communities.

*The solution requires government input. It's not just the community or VicPol alone, it has to be a collective solution.*<sup>394</sup>

*We hope that departments work together to provide a solution.*<sup>395</sup>

These messages reflect a strong, collective commitment to partnership and the belief that progress must be measured not just by plans made, but by outcomes achieved for young people, families and communities.

<sup>394</sup> Community member, Community consultation, 2025.

<sup>395</sup> Mother, Community consultation, 2024.



## 13.2 Findings and recommendations

The work of the South Sudanese Australian community and the Expert Working Group has created a powerful foundation for change. Taking the next steps together, through continued partnership, shared accountability and sustained investment, is critical and will ensure that all the work and time invested so far achieve positive outcomes for the community.

The mechanisms that have enabled this work – community-led advisory structures, direct engagement with young people and collaboration between departments, should not end with the delivery of this report. They should serve as the basis for an enduring model of engagement and oversight.

Embedding structured, longer-term engagement between the South Sudanese Australian community and senior government decision-makers will help ensure that future policies and interventions remain culturally responsive, community-led and evidence-informed. This ongoing partnership is essential to translate the Expert Working Group's recommendations into tangible, lasting change.

When government and community stand side by side, learning from each other and building together, every young person has a better chance to thrive, and Victoria becomes stronger for it.

### **Recommendation 58. Opportunities for inclusive approaches**

That, while noting the need for tailored and effective approaches, all lead agencies and organisations responsible for implementing recommendations consider, where appropriate and relevant:

- (a) the applicability of programs and activities to other African and culturally and linguistically diverse communities to promote inclusion and maximise wellbeing in the Victorian community
- (b) opportunities to engage with and/or share learnings with the Victorian African Communities Committee.

### **Recommendation 59. Oversight and accountability**

That the Victorian Government, to ensure the effective implementation of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group's recommendations, and maintain transparency and accountability over time:

- (a) establish (by July 2026) a dedicated implementation lead at the executive level to coordinate and drive delivery of the recommendations across relevant agencies and partners – this position should be designated for a South Sudanese Australian community member
- (b) establish (by July 2026) a South Sudanese Australian community implementation committee to meet with the government at least 3 times a year over the next 5 years to



track progress and provide advice on design and implementation, building on the work of the Expert Working Group and supporting advisory groups

(c) report annually on implementation to the Victorian Secretaries Board and the responsible Minister/s, ensuring cross-departmental oversight and accountability

(d) provide annual public updates on the work to support transparency and build community confidence in the implementation process

(e) develop a monitoring and evaluation framework to guide implementation, measure outcomes, and inform continuous improvement.



## Appendix 1. Excerpt from the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group terms of reference

### Objectives

The primary objective of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group is to help reduce the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in Youth Justice.

The knowledge, expertise and voices of the South Sudanese Australian community is at the heart of this initiative. The Victorian Government is committed to promoting the full participation of the South Sudanese Australian community by prioritising meaningful and accessible community consultation and engagement.

In partnership with the South Sudanese Australian community, the Expert Working Group will do this by:

- leveraging the strengths and aspirations of South Sudanese Australian children and young people and their families to support them out of, and prevent their return to Youth Justice, in a manner tailored to their lived experience. This will include supporting connections to education, employment, and social services.
- improving services for young South Sudanese Australians, including improved availability of culturally appropriate services.
- identifying whole of government and community organisation actions to reduce the over-representation of South Sudanese Australians in the youth justice system.
- strengthening government engagement and partnerships with the South Sudanese Australian community in order to grow the capability of community-led organisations and the cultural competency of mainstream services.

...

### Scope

The Expert Working Group will seek to engage with all South Sudanese Australian children and young people under Youth Justice community or custodial supervision and in diversionary programs.

The Expert Working Group will engage across government and service systems to better understand the experiences of children and young people and their families, and to identify collective actions to address the drivers and causes of offending. These include services and initiatives delivered by:

- Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS), including Youth Justice
- Victoria Police
- Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, including multicultural affairs, child protection, child and family services, maternal health, housing, disability, and family violence services
- Department of Education, including engagement with school and vocational training, the navigator program and suspension and expulsion data



- Department of Health, including the provision of primary, mental health and alcohol and other drug services
- DJSIR, including the provision of employment and vocational support
- Department of Premier and Cabinet
- Department of Treasury and Finance
- Department of Transport.

## Deliverables

To achieve the project objectives, the Expert Working Group will conduct its work towards three deliverables:

- **One:** Undertake immediate actions to support children and young people out of Youth Justice supervision – hearing from children and young people and their families about what works for them
- **Two:** Strengthen community trust and grow an effective South Sudanese Australian community-led service sector
- **Three:** Identify and recommend systemic improvements and monitor action plans.

### **One: Undertake immediate actions to support children and young people out of Youth Justice supervision – hearing from children and young people and families about what works for them**

For this deliverable, the Expert Working Group will:

- undertake a review of African Australian children and young people's case plans and support structures in line with their strengths and aspirations
- conduct private sessions with consenting children and young people, their families and/or additional supports, such as a support person, a trusted worker or a service provider
- consider data trends and themes pertaining to youth offending and diversion
- for consenting child and young person, put in place actions to address the drivers of offending and strengthen protective factors (see Joint Actions below). These actions will leverage the child and young person's strengths, their families, and communities to maximise success
- engage relevant departments and the South Sudanese Australian community sector to deliver the Expert Working Group actions.

### **Two: Strengthen community trust and grow an effective South Sudanese Australian community-led service sector**

For this deliverable, the Expert Working Group will:

- lead engagement with community groups, religious and local networks, parents, carers, children and young people with lived experience
- develop strong connections with the South Sudanese Australian community sector and support them in developing capability
- through the Department of Justice and Community Safety, fund South Sudanese Australian community-led service organisations and partner community organisations, to effectively support young South Sudanese Australians at risk of involvement, or involved with, Youth Justice.



### **Three: Identify and recommend systemic improvements**

For this deliverable, the Expert Working Group will:

- monitor the delivery of actions put in place (under Deliverable One). The Expert Working Group may also reconsider and update actions as necessary
- identify and validate the drivers of over-representation through:
  - a thematic analysis of case reviews and private sessions to identify systemic drivers of over-representation
  - forums with South Sudanese Australian community members, families, service providers and key government agencies
  - data analysis of emerging trends and themes, identification of service gaps and comparative analysis of alternative service models in Youth Justice centres across Australia and New Zealand
- recommend systemic solutions that are required to address over-representation.
- provide reports to the Minister for Youth Justice on the progress and work of the Expert Working Group.



## Appendix 2. Excerpt from the terms of reference for the Advisory Groups

### Objectives

The primary purpose of the Advisory Group of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group (Expert Working Group) is to help enable South Sudanese Australian children and young people, families, and communities to contribute to meaningful and strategic responses to the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian children and young people in the justice system.

The knowledge, expertise and voices of the South Sudanese Australian community is at the heart of this initiative. The Victorian Government is committed to promoting the full participation of the South Sudanese Australian community by prioritising meaningful and accessible community consultation and engagement.

...

### Deliverables

The Expert Working Group has funding of \$5 million over three years until 30 June 2025, which will be directed to the individual, community and systems levels. The sequencing of the three deliverables is designed to ensure young people receive targeted support earlier and system wide reforms are developed and implemented in partnership with the community.

The deliverables are to:

- Undertake immediate actions to support children and young people out of Youth Justice supervision – hearing from children and young people and families about what works for them: Complete case reviews of all young African Australians in Youth Justice, in addition to private sessions with consenting young people, their families and service providers, to identify and implement actions to address the drivers of offending and strengthen protective factors.
- Strengthen community trust and grow an effective South Sudanese Australian community-led service sector: Engage with community organisations, religious and local networks, families, and young people with lived experience to identify effective community organisations and build their capacity through training and investment.
- Identify and drive systemic improvements to reflect the project's capacity and timeframes: Monitor the delivery of actions under the case review process, identify and validate the drivers of over-representation and effective service responses, and recommend systemic reforms in existing government structures, programs, and community organisations.

### Scope

This Advisory Group (Adult Membership) Terms of Reference document should be read alongside the Youth-led Advisory Group Terms of Reference and the Expert Working Group's Terms of Reference.

Both the adult and the youth Advisory Groups will seek to centralise the voices, knowledge and expertise of the South Sudanese Australian community by:



- a) undertaking detailed consideration of the project's objectives
- b) providing strategic advice to the Chair, Deputy Chair and Inter-Agency Committee
- c) sharing and harnessing cultural knowledge and expertise
- d) prioritising children and young people's lived experiences.

The Adult-led Advisory Group will be led by the Department of Justice and Community Safety and comprise of members and the Advisory Group Chair (nine members in total). The members will be from the South Sudanese Australian and broader African Australian community, which may include:

- community leaders, community members and lived-experience adults
- representatives from community organisations that work with and support South Sudanese children and young people
- representatives from peak organisations and experts (academics).

Advisory Group members will not have any decision-making responsibility in relation to the grant program to support the Expert Working Group or the provision of any other government funding. The conduct of grants processes and the allocation of funding to support the Expert Working Group project, or other Youth Justice initiatives, are the responsibility of DJCS and the Minister for Youth Justice.

### ***Chair of the Advisory Group (Adult Membership)***

The Chair of the Advisory Group (Adult Membership) will be accountable for the following key deliverables:

- Managing discussions in each meeting to ensure collaboration of members to consider relevant factors that contribute to the over-representation of South Sudanese children and young people.
- Liaising directly with the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Expert Working Group to progress actions arising from meetings.
- Work with the Expert Working Group secretariat to provide comprehensive advice to the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Expert Working Group.
- Ensuring each Advisory Group member is provided with accurate and meaningful information prior to each meeting.
- Summarising the action items and decisions made by the Advisory Group after each meeting.

### ***Members of the Advisory Group (Adult Membership)***

The Advisory Group (Adult Membership) members will be accountable for the following key deliverables:

- Contribute to the development of strategic responses to the over-representation of South Sudanese children and young people in the Justice system
- Provide advice to the Expert Working Group, as required by the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Expert Working Group



- Where possible, assist the Expert Working Group in seeking sector specific advice.
- Support the evaluation of the impact and efficacy of Expert Working Group project deliverables against community needs and recommendations.

The Chair and Deputy Chair of the Expert Working Group have open invitations to attend Advisory Group meetings but are not members of either Advisory Group.

Where the Chair of the Advisory Group is unable to attend a meeting, the Chair of the Advisory Group may nominate another member of the Advisory Group to act as Chair.

### **Youth Membership**

***The Deputy Chair of the Expert Working Group will sponsor and support up to twelve (12) youth members of the Advisory Group (Youth Membership).***

The youth members will meet separately from other Advisory Group members to ensure their voices and experiences are equally heard. The youth members and adult members may also meet collectively.

...



### **Appendix 3. Centre for Evaluation report: Rapid Assessment – South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group – Grants Program**

# Rapid Assessment

South Sudanese Australian Youth Expert Working Group – Grants  
Program

Centre for Evaluation



Justice  
and Community  
Safety



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## 1. The South Sudanese Australian Youth Expert Working Group – Grants Program

The Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS) support the work of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group (SSAYJEWG) by funding projects that support South Sudanese Australian (SSA) children and young people. Key challenges being experienced by the community include:

- racism and discrimination
- safety
- alcohol and drug use
- disengagement and exclusion from school
- unemployment and poverty
- mental wellbeing
- intergenerational clashes.

The SSAYJEWG Grants Program (the Grants program) recognises that SSA organisations are well-placed to deliver effective and sustainable programs and services to address the challenges experienced by the community.

DJCS has invested \$1.3 million through three grant rounds to support community initiatives, with individual projects receiving between \$50,000 to \$150,000.

The Grants program's identified **investment objectives** are to:

1. address the key issues that may be contributing to the overrepresentation issue
2. identify involve partnerships between organisations
3. build the skills and capacity of community organisations.

An overview of all grant recipient organisation's programs and activities is provided in Appendix 1. The 5 largest recipient organisations across the three rounds were:

- **Nas Recovery Centre**, a community-based service providing alcohol, drug, and mental health treatment.
- **NextGen Unite**, a youth-led not-for-profit empowering young people through music and creativity.
- **Australian African Foundation for Retention and Opportunity (AAFRO)** works with families and young people, offering culturally appropriate and holistic care.
- **Aspiring Young Africans Foundation**, a partnership supporting the projects including Christian men's group, a social group for young SSA women and arts and sport activities.
- **Stand Out Youth Empowerment** is an afterschool basketball and mentoring program for youth. The program also provides access to specialist support services (e.g. counselling and legal support).

### 1.1 Rapid Assessment methodology

The Rapid Assessment was undertaken by the **Centre for Evaluation**, DJCS, between October and December 2025.

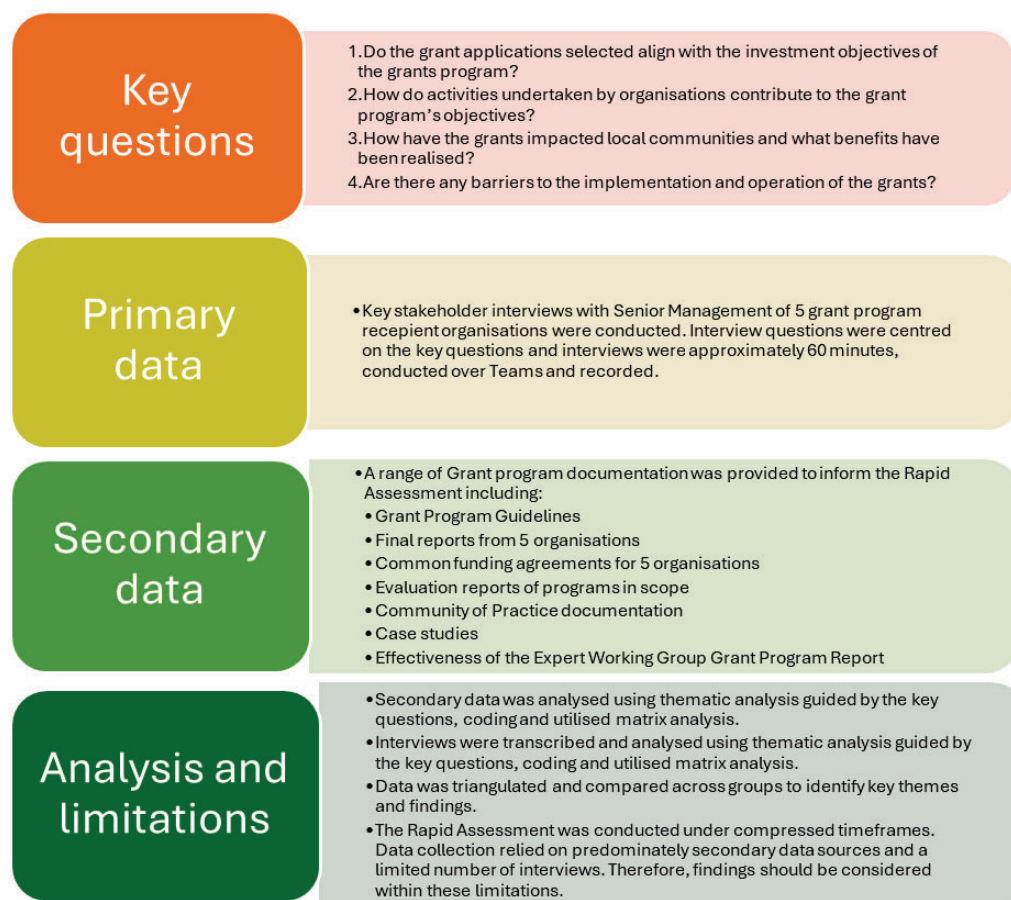
The Rapid Assessment looked at the performance of the Grants programs, predominately through a sample of the 5 largest recipient organisations across the 3 grant rounds (2023-25), including: Aspiring Young Africans Foundation (formerly known as African Youth Initiative), NAS



Recovery Centre, Stand Out Youth Empowerment, Australian African Foundation for Retention and Opportunity (AAFRO) and NextGen Unite. It also drew on collated evidence from other organisations and programs delivered over the 3 funding rounds to reflect broader activities and impacts where possible (Appendix 1).

The Rapid Assessment key questions and methodology are described below.

*Figure 1: Key questions and methodology*



## 2. Alignment with program objectives

Overall grant recipient organisations aligned with the investment objectives of the grants program by:

- ✓ addressing some of the key challenges being experienced by young people and their families in the South Sudanese and wider community
- ✓ forming partnerships with a range of organisations
- ✓ building the skills and capacity of community organisations.

### Addressing key challenges

Across the 5 organisations in scope, 4 key challenges were identified as the primary focus of the grant recipients' activities. Organisations undertook diverse programs and activities, with a wide range of impacts. While an organisation's grant application may have had a primary focus,



activities often overlapped into other work carried out by the organisation, addressing further challenges. This highlights the interconnectedness of these challenges and the young person, family and community focus (Figure 2).

*Figure 2: Alignment with key challenges identified in the grant program's objectives*

|                                                             | Racism and discrimination | Safety | Alcohol and drug use | Disengagement and exclusion from school | Unemployment and poverty | Mental wellbeing | Intergenerational clashes |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Aspiring Young Africans Foundation                          | ✓                         |        |                      | ✓                                       | ✓                        | ✓                |                           |
| Australian African Foundation for Retention and Opportunity |                           |        |                      | ✓                                       | ✓                        | ✓                | ✓                         |
| Nas Recovery Centre                                         |                           | ✓      | ✓                    | ✓                                       | ✓                        | ✓                |                           |
| NextGen Unite                                               |                           |        |                      | ✓                                       | ✓                        | ✓                | ✓                         |
| Stand Out Youth Empowerment                                 |                           |        |                      | ✓                                       |                          | ✓                | ✓                         |

✓ Primary focus of grant application  
 ✓ Secondary challenge organisation addresses

## Partnerships

Organisations developed partnerships across a diverse range of organisations and entities (Figure 3). These partnerships were formed to support successful program delivery and organisational sustainability, such as engaging with local councils to utilise local venues as well as to ensure participants were linked to other supports, such as mainstream mental health services when required. The diverse range of organisations and agencies partnered with by grant recipients indicates a proactive outreach and engagement approach which has supported the delivery and success of work undertaken.

Partnerships were also realised through the seed funding approach used by some organisations to provide governance and funding support to smaller or recently established organisations to uplift their capability in achieving outcomes for the SSA and wider community.

Mutual benefits were realised across these various partnerships, with partner organisations and agencies establishing access to the SSA community which may not have been possible previously. The grants program has enabled organisations to establish or expand on these partnerships and improve the reach and impact of both the grant program's recipients and the wider community.



Figure 3: Partnerships formed under the grants program



### Building skills and capacity of community organisations

In addition to fostering partnerships, the grants program enabled grant recipients to build on the skills and capacity of their own organisation, including through:

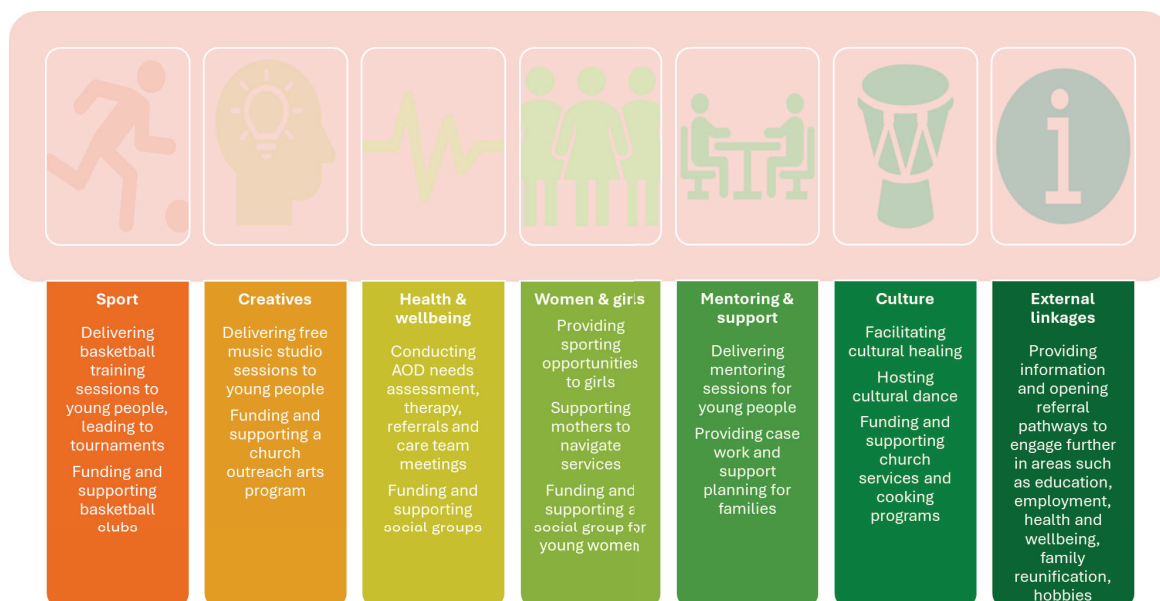
- employing additional staff to take on logistic or administrative work
- employing young people and providing leadership opportunities
- providing professional development, such as training from experts in the field
- learning about other local organisations, what they offer or how they can provide further support for their clients
- gaining an understanding of government processes, thinking more strategically about organisational direction and applying for other grant or philanthropic funding.

This has resulted in organisations realising enhanced capabilities supported through the funding. This uplift is contributing to a strengthened community response to the challenges being experienced by SSA young people, families and community.

## 3. Activities contributing to program objectives

Organisations utilised the grant funding to deliver their own programs or fund and support activities of other local organisations. Activities varied across several categories, from sport to mentoring (Figure 4), with some programs consisting of multiple activities. The diversity of activities offered to young people provided them with a variety of accessible ways to participate and demonstrates the diversity of expertise amongst these organisations.

Figure 4: Activities undertaken as part of the grants program funding



The activities undertaken contributed to the Grants program objectives by providing young people with opportunities to engage in positive endeavours and access community support.

Organisations further embedded this by:

- becoming a hub for external information and a safe space with a 'no wrong door' approach
- providing wraparound support and advocating for SSA young people and families
- facilitating local council and organisations access to the SSA community
- building sector capability by improving uptake and trust of the SSA community.

The Grant program funding contributed to the reach and engagement levels of all organisations. Analysis of program data across the 5 organisations showed a total of 1,531 SSA people participated in programs and activities in one year, with an average of 272 people per organisation (Figure 5).

Documentation also showed high levels of engagement in other activities and programs, with some noting hundreds of young people participating (for example some events attracting 600 participants) and a significant number of families being supported. Organisational leaders reported that families who had not previously engaged were now accessing support, as the funding allowed them to operate, support more people, and extend their reach. While the programs are aimed at young people, there were more people aged 25 years or older on average<sup>1</sup> across the 5 organisations (Figure 5). The focus of the funded programs on broader community engagement and support including with and for families aligns with the objectives of the grant program and recognises the importance of supporting a whole of

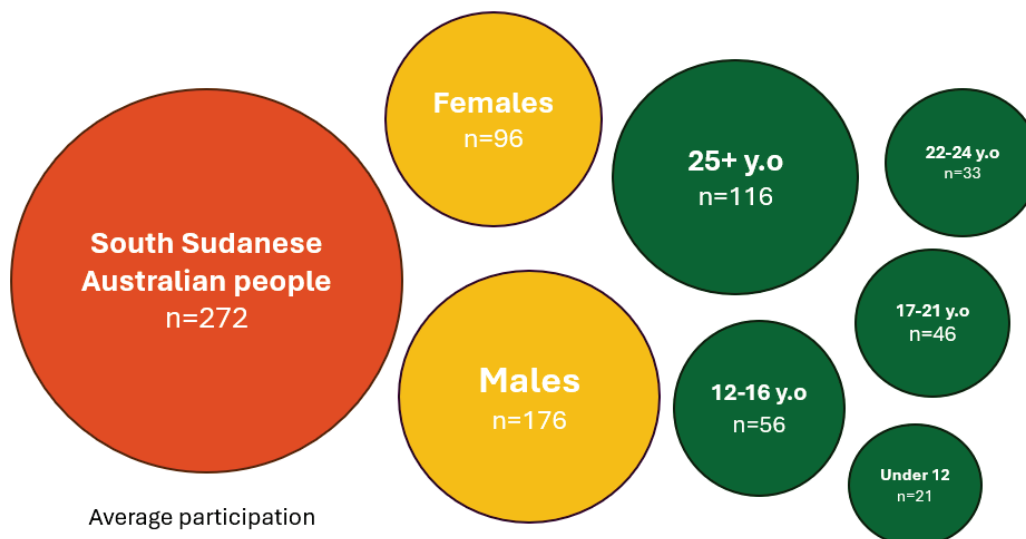
*"Although the initial aim of the program was to engage 30 young people, in the end, over 100 young people were supported due to community demand" – Organisational leader*

<sup>1</sup> The average was impacted by Nas Recovery Centre, which had more than half of their participants aged 25 years or over (n=456),



community effort to better support and address the needs of children and young people at risk of contact or in contact with the criminal justice system.

Figure 5: Average participation across the 5 organisations



Source: annual participation figures presented in final report delivered for the grant's program. Note: One organisation had more than half of their participants aged 25 years or over (n=456), but the median participation rate indicates participation was most common among the 12-16 and 17-21 age groups across the organisations.

## 4. Impacts and benefits realised

The Grant program funding has supported a range of benefits and impacts across the community. These include direct and indirect impacts and benefits contributing to a strengthened response to the challenges being experienced by young people and their families in the SSA and wider community. Evidence indicates an increase in engagement of young people from grant funding, with organisations seeing more young people choosing to participate in their activities and programs over time.

### Impacts and benefits

#### Supporting young people

Organisational leaders observed a range of impacts on the young people participating in programs and activities. Young people were reported to have an **increased connection and sense of belonging**, including forming friendships and renewed cultural connection. This included feeling like there were people who cared about them and being treated as a 'normal' community member when some may have otherwise been treated differently because of involvement with police or the youth justice system.

In partnering with Youth Justice and/or targeting at-risk youth, organisations facilitated peer mentorship and positive peer influences. Organisational leaders observed young people becoming **more motivated and independent**, with newfound confidence to connect with their parents or request support services. This increase in help-seeking behaviour was reinforced by the organisations making them feel safe and building trust with them to be able to make referrals.



Young people were reported to be **increasing their engagement with education, leadership roles or employment** – with one organisation employing 5 of their past program participants and receiving feedback from school principals on other students' improvement in school engagement. Organisations emphasised the importance they placed on education, leadership and work, with many programs/activities seeking to instil positive habits such as showing up, participating and being accountable. Additionally, young people were encouraged to look for employment and job opportunities, which were often facilitated by organisations by connecting young people with local businesses.

### Strengthening families

Parents, caregivers and families were often directly engaged in programs and activities or encouraged to be involved alongside the young person (for example, watching basketball training sessions and family days). Through these activities, organisations **enabled conversations** between families, young people and community on areas such as connecting with each other, recognising the impacts of trauma and breaking down the stigma of suicide and mental health.

Importantly, through making the programs accessible (for example, affordability) and working with families on a range of issues, organisations worked to **restore trust** between young people / their families and authorities / mainstream support services.

*"We try to promote to them that the majority of time parents don't really get the chance to spend time with their kids when not at home, coming to watch them they get to see their kids do something they love, fight through failure, excel, see them in different environments." – Organisational leader*

### Building community trust and engagement

Organisations demonstrated an **ability to engage young people, families and communities effectively through relatively small funding amounts**. This was achieved by them drawing on their lived experience to meet their community's needs, alongside proactive approaches to engagement.

Many organisations focused on **open access** which was not restricted by catchment restrictions, coupled with the 'no wrong door' approach which also assisted strong engagement.

Organisations reported the Grant program helped to **create a point of pride for the community** which assisted in countering the often-negative media attention and built awareness and recognition of SSA culture. **Other African Australian communities are also benefiting** through the expanded outreach and open approach of organisations to assist beyond their immediate community. This has extended the benefits and impacts and opened opportunities for other African Australian communities to work, volunteer or participate in the activities.

The creation of a safe environment for the SSA and wider community to come together whether through a community space or through regular activities and program, has been facilitated by **having young people with lived experience running programs/organisations**.

*"We hear from not only police but other orgs that they are thankful for our service, they want to pull us into care team meetings, co-design, we get requests on a daily basis." – Organisational leader*

### Enhanced collaboration

Organisations identified the Grant program had opened access to government and policy makers, including the SSAYJEWG. This has enhanced their knowledge of government, ability to influence and build cultural awareness and understanding between organisations and government.

The grant funding has supported organisations to:



- **build partnerships** with other organisations, government departments, agencies and businesses
- **establish a 'seed funding' approach** to support smaller organisations to deliver services/activities to young people, families and communities, whilst benefiting from a larger more established organisation's governance, skills and resources
- **explore other revenue endeavours**, such as the screening of a documentary in educational and workplace settings
- facilitated **opportunities for additional funding**
- **mobilise quickly** and expand service offerings when new needs are identified in the community or in response to a crisis (evidenced during recent significant incidents of trauma experienced in community)
- **establish a safe space** in the community.

There is evidence the **benefits and impacts expanded beyond the direct grant recipients, participants and communities through enhanced access to services**. Proactive outreach by grant recipient organisations to mainstream community organisations ensured participants were connected to the appropriate services. This has provided a bridge to services not easily accessed by SSA young people and families previously.

Additionally, the collective work of organisations has contributed **to building awareness of SSA culture**, providing critical information and awareness to better support engagement in mainstream organisations and **improve cultural safety**.

## 4.1 Stories about impacts

| Building trust                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Strengthening parenting                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Gaining confidence                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Woman A attended our organisation for support which included her participating in the Work and Development Permit Scheme to clear her fines. Through the 8 week program she undertook various activities including road safety training. When told she had cleared her fines she was so grateful and gave thanks for 10 minutes. She now has trust in the system and has been telling friends and family you can trust the system."</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Parent B attended the basketball program to watch their child participate. Through this experience they have gained a better understanding about how to best engage and communicate with their child. Watching them interact with the coach made them realise how to get their attention and guide them. They were very grateful for this insight."</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Young person C attended the music program as he lacked access to formal training and professional recording equipment. He was mentored by experienced musicians and throughout the program his confidence grew, he developed a strong sense of belonging with the music community and formed friendships with his peers. He went from being shy and withdrawn and now has the skills, support and confidence he needs to succeed."</li> </ul> |



## 4.2 Enablers supporting outcomes

### Trusted organisations, leaders and staff

Organisations, most often established as a direct response to an unmet need in the community, have staff who are known and/or trusted within their communities.

Trust with young people, families and the wider community has been:

- built over time, supported by the funding over multiple years
- enhanced by word of mouth through positive experiences
- strengthened by young people leading young people
- gained through culturally appropriate practices
- further established by having a physical location within the community
- achieved via holistic, wraparound support, with multiple entry points accepting all people and enquires.

### Building on specialist knowledge

The specialist knowledge, skills and professions of organisation heads were matched with a strong commitment to help the community to address challenges young people and families faced. This specialist knowledge included qualified mental health specialists and sporting professionals.

Their knowledge and professional standing supported organisations build professional connections within their area of expertise and opened opportunities to refer to a wider network of mainstream support services (for example within mental health sector) and identify opportunities for joint projects, such as partnering with a professional basketball club.

### Flexible approach

All organisations noted the importance of having a flexible approach to the work they did because of the complex and challenging nature of issues young people, and their families were facing. This flexible approach, supported through the grant funding and the way it was utilised by organisations, centred on the 'no wrong door' approach, being creative in engagement and leveraging connections with other services and strong partnerships.

### Multiyear funding and leveraging other funding

Organisations which received funding over multiple grant rounds spoke to the benefit of being able to build on the work established in the first year, noting the time required to design and deliver programs and activities. The multiyear funding also supported establishing brand awareness, trust with community and consistency in organisation's service delivery.

The grant funding provided organisations the resources and time to prepare and present bids and applications for other funding, sponsorship and collaboration opportunities. This has increased their overall funding opportunities and developed skills and experience in this area.

*"This multiyear funding helps break the stop start cycle which disrupts community trust." – Organisational leader*

### Collaboration

Organisations were proactive in identifying opportunities to collaborate with other organisations to support the realisation of their collective aims to help the SSA community. Examples of



collaboration included sharing resources such as transportation, facilities, volunteers and cross promotion of each other's events and activities.

Additionally, organisations demonstrated their ability to work with local community and businesses to link young people to jobs, highlighting small local businesses giving young people opportunities to work.

## 5. Barriers to implementation and operation of program

### Funding cycle

The annual funding cycle did pose challenges including:

- the impact of uncertainty of whether organisations would be successful in subsequent round
- the limitations on longer term planning due to short term funding
- insufficient funding amounts to address the need in the community
- impacts when there are delays with milestones payments
- as a barrier to establishing a sustainable operating model.

Organisations noted these funding challenges meant that successful engagement with young people and families is sometimes lost over time when programs and activities are not continued or numbers are reduced due to funding gaps.

### Reliance on volunteer/unpaid work

Organisations highlighted the significant contribution volunteers make, ensuring the many programs and activities can be delivered. However, the reliance on volunteer resourcing and staff working beyond contract hours, does limit the extent to which organisations can fully realise their objectives. Examples included staff working outside their paid hours to ensure young people and their families were supported, volunteers contributing substantial time and efforts, using their own car to transport young people home after programs, and paying for organisational costs until grant funding is received.

The demonstrated commitment of individuals (both staff and volunteers) is noteworthy; however, continued use of substantial volunteer or unpaid work does risk people burning out, coupled with the increasing cost of living pressures which may decrease individuals' ability to support organisations.

### Increasing demand

Organisations highlighted the increased demand for their services and activities over funding rounds and in some instances, demand exceeded their current capacity. This demand was likely driven by the continued and growing needs of young people and families for culturally appropriate services and supports to address the challenges being experienced in the community.

It is also likely impacted by the increased awareness of these organisations' services and the trust established within communities. Organisations spoke to the challenges of trying to ensure there were enough spaces for those who wanted to participate, not wanting to turn away young people who were willing to engage in activities.

*"...we are grateful for the funding; however, the work is too great and not enough resources to continue to do it sustainably."*  
– Organisational leader



### Increasing costs

Organisations acknowledged the increased cost of living was impacting their ability to deliver the programs at the same cost as previously. These costs included things such as transport, food and facilities (e.g. renting basketball courts).

### Complexity

Young people and their families have complex needs which require a multidisciplinary and flexible response. Organisations recognised they were often engaging with young people and families in crisis, adding to this complexity. Factors noted by organisations which contributed to the complexity included involvement with the youth justice system, family trauma, alcohol and drug misuse and school disengagement. This highlighted the need for organisations to be responsive to a range of needs and the high level of resources this work requires.

*"... the cost of court hire increased 3 times in a year."* – Organisational leader

## 6. Conclusion

The Grants program has provided an opportunity to empower community organisations to identify and address the challenges and needs within the SSA community, focusing on young people and their families. Recipient organisations have demonstrated a proactive approach to establishing programs and activities, working with communities to meet their needs, and using funding to reach a significant number of young people and their families.

The benefits of the Grants program are being realised across a range of groups including young people, families and the wider community. Benefits realised include positive role modelling, increased pride in culture, engagement in support and more open discussion about the challenges young people and their families are facing. This has assisted in addressing social isolation and disconnection from peers, family, community and culture.

There is evidence benefits are also being realised more widely in other African Australian communities, the broader community services network and other agencies. Provision and facilitation of access to services and the 'no wrong door' approach has opened access to support and enhanced cultural awareness and safety among communities and agencies.



## Appendix 1: Funded organisations program overview

| Organisation                                                         | Programs and activities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| African Youth Alliance                                               | <p>The African Youth Alliance deliver the following programs as part of their <u>Community of Hope</u> project:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Buildup Program: a 10-week program engaging a consortium of five community organisations who engage with and offer programs and services for South Sudanese Australian youth. The program will also include group-based capacity building training, mentorship, brokerage and the co-design and delivery of community programs.</li> <li>2. Hope Centre Program: offering fortnightly homework support and skills development opportunities through open mic sessions, debating, theatre sports and mentorship. The program will also host termly BBQ celebrations that strengthen community connection and participation.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Africause                                                            | <p>Africause deliver the following education, mentoring and intergenerational connection programs as part of their <u>South Sudanese Culturally Connected to Education Mentoring</u> project:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In-school Mentoring Program: a weekly, group-based program offered throughout the school term, providing tailored mentoring and support to engage youth who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from upper primary, secondary and specialist (juvenile justice) education. Parents of participants are also involved in the program for intergenerational connection and support.</li> <li>2. Intergenerational Camp Program: a four-day overnight camp for youths and their parents, focusing on intergenerational connection and holistic family support.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Aspiring Young Africans Foundation (ASPYA Foundation) *              | <p>ASPYA Foundation delivered the <u>African Youth Partnership</u> supporting the following five projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faithful Coalition is a youth-led Christian men's group with majority SSA membership. Activities include weekly meetings, an annual camp and regular BBQs and sports activities.</li> <li>• Girl Chat is a social group for young SSA women which provides a safe space for conversations, networking, and personal development programs.</li> <li>• Grace Community is an outreach of Melton Uniting Church with strong connections to the SSA community. Activities include art classes and the Grace Community Youth Basketball Team.</li> <li>• Home Court hosts weekly basketball games in Derrimut. It promotes social cohesion and belonging amongst young men through mental health discussions and annual tournaments.</li> <li>• African Youth Initiative's drop-in sessions and Reclaimed Voices Project, a documentary project involving youth SSA who have had contact with the youth justice system and desisted from offending.</li> </ul> |
| Australian African Foundation for Retention and Opportunity (AARFO)* | <p>AAFRO works with families and young people, offering culturally appropriate and holistic care through the following programs:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <u>Beat the Time Program</u>: a responsive, early intervention and culturally safe school holiday program that engages youth of SSA and African backgrounds four times a year during the school holidays.</li> <li>2. <u>AAFRO-Circles</u>: providing comprehensive wrap-around support to adults and single parents and their families through one-on-one and group support, intensive case management and advocacy.</li> <li>3. Training for Staff: provide comprehensive training to staff members to enhance their ability to effectively support and engage with program participants.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Junubi Stars Basketball Club                                         | <p>Junubi Stars Basketball Club is a group of young athletes from Melbourne's Western Suburbs. The <u>Empowering South Sudanese Initiative</u> engages primary and high school-aged youths of SSA backgrounds in structured basketball sessions three times a week.</p> <p>The program focus' on physical activity, leadership, and peer mentorship. It strengthens community connections while offering a positive, supportive environment for young people.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |



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|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Multicultural Youth Support Services            | <p>Multicultural Youth Support Services deliver the following programs as part of their <u>Mentoring for new pathways together</u> project:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Homework Club: a weekly homework club located at a secondary college in the Southeast Metro area, focusing on improving students English, Mathematics and Science skills.</li> <li>2. Mentoring Program: a weekly mentoring program located in Cranbourne North, where 5 youth leaders will receive peer-to-peer mentorship training, equipping them to mentor and engage other youth through social and sport-based activities.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Mzuri Dance ArtisTree and Nurturing African Gen | <p>Mzuri Dance ArtisTree, in partnership with Nurturing African Gen, deliver the following programs as part of the <u>Rise Together Project</u>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Culture Club: a 13-week drop-in after-school program for 18-20 youth of South Sudanese backgrounds, providing activities such as dance, drumming, yoga, arts, and wellbeing sessions to promote cultural and social connections and encourage healthy lifestyle choices, including exercise and eating habits. Participants will also have three excursion performance opportunities in public community spaces.</li> <li>2. Community Cook-up: a 10-week cultural cooking program for 30-40 residents, families, and youth of South Sudanese backgrounds, culminating with a Christmas BBQ party allowing participants to showcase their culture through food, dance, and music.</li> <li>3. Carer's Circle: a 10-week parents' program for 15 community members of South Sudanese backgrounds, offering valuable parenting advice following the 'Tuning into Teens' framework.</li> </ol> |
| Nas Recovery Centre (NRC)*                      | <p>NRC deliver collaborative and culturally determined substance use and related mental health support. <u>Operation Path2Home</u> offers holistic, in-home support to SSA youth and families impacted by substance misuse and justice system involvement, including referrals, school engagement, legal assistance and individualised case management. NRC deliver:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• substance use and mental health day rehabilitation programs</li> <li>• community outreach, in partnership with Project Sunrise</li> <li>• an online support group for families, friends, and carers</li> <li>• collective healing events for community.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| NextGen Unite (NGU)*                            | <p>NGU is a youth-led not-for-profit empowering young people through music and creativity delivering the NGU <u>Music Program</u> and <u>Music and Justice to Inspiration Program</u>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Free weekly studio and music recording sessions providing a safe and supportive environment for SSA and other African Australian youth to develop their skills in producing and mastering music.</li> <li>• Connect youth with mentors for personal and professional growth and provide an alternative to negative influences.</li> <li>• Provide a safe and supportive environment for youth who have been involved in the justice system to develop their storytelling skills.</li> <li>• Facilitate access to support services, including employment, mentoring, counselling, legal aid, substance use and mental health.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Oyiti Foundation for Multicultural Youth        | <p>Oyiti Foundation for Multicultural Youth focus on mental health education and awareness within SSA community in Melbourne. The foundation addresses cultural stigma surrounding mental health and promotes cross-generational dialogue to prevent adverse mental health outcomes that may lead to justice system involvement.</p> <p>The <u>Youth Connect Project</u> delivers the following programs:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mental Health Facilitator Training (Touchpoints): Training 7 South Sudanese Australian facilitators to support their communities.</li> <li>2. Oyiti Foundation Cup: A 3-day basketball tournament, featuring mental health sessions led by trained facilitators to reduce stigma and promote intergenerational dialogue.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |



|                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| South Sudanese Australian Academic Society           | <p>The <u>Just Drop-In Youth Centre and Homework Club</u> is an early intervention program that aims to support South Sudanese children and young people between the ages of 5 and 18 years and empower them to reach their potential through educational, recreational, and family support activities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Homework Club: a weekly homework club providing study assistance for youth of South Sudanese backgrounds.</li> <li>A Friend with Purpose Mentoring Program: culturally safe group-based and one-on-one mentoring for youth of South Sudanese backgrounds.</li> <li>Parent Engagement and Support: information sessions on intergenerational conflict, parental role modelling and English conversation classes.</li> <li>Recreational Activities for Children and Youth: a culturally safe "drop-in" space for socialising and supervised recreational activities both before and during the homework club, with excursions planned to expose children to diverse learning environments, nature, and places of inspiration.</li> </ul> |
| South Sudanese Christian Welfare Association (SSCWA) | <p>SSCWA supports refugees and migrants of South Sudanese backgrounds. SSCWA deliver the following programs as part of their <u>Building Resilient South Sudanese Youth and Families</u> project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parenting Support Program: Equips parents with skills to support children, particularly those in the justice system or disengaged from education, through training and mentorship.</li> <li>Group-Based Workshops: Engages youths and families in culturally enriching activities that strengthen intergenerational connections.</li> <li>Brokerage for Mental Health Support: Facilitates access to mental health services for vulnerable community members.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| South Sudanese Minds                                 | <p>The <u>Culture Party</u> is an event celebrating South Sudanese Australian talent and includes live interviews with artists and guests about mental health and wellbeing.</p> <p><u>Mental Health Training</u> includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mindfulness Monday: a regular meeting for young people to check in, reflect on the week and their wellbeing with the support of peers and a counsellor</li> <li>free counselling sessions with an Ethiopian Australian or SSA counsellor for up to 20 SSA young people</li> <li>culturally safe and relevant mental health training for 20 young SSAs to create a network of SSAs with mental health training.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Stand Out Youth Empowerment*                         | <p><u>Stand Out Basketball</u> is an afterschool basketball and mentoring program for youth. The program also provides access to specialist support services (e.g. counselling and legal support). The program promotes physical activity, skill development, and personal growth, empowering young people through sports and dedicated mentorship. The activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>twice weekly basketball training sessions and catering</li> <li>weekly mentoring sessions and catering.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Sudanese Mothers Coalition in Victoria               | <p>The <u>Impact Initiative</u> provides funding for South Sudanese mothers to cook together and provide meals to young SSAs involved, or at risk of involvement, with youth justice. The Sudanese Mothers Coalition deliver monthly food relief activities in west and south metropolitan Melbourne over 12 months.</p> <p>The Sudanese Mothers Coalition supports Sudanese and South Sudanese youths and their families across the state. The community organisation host cooking and cultural sessions at Melbourne Youth Justice Centres – engaging young people in custody, their families, and community leaders. Offering a holistic cultural experience aimed at strengthening community and intergenerational connections and reducing recidivism.</p> <p>The <u>Visitation Program</u> includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>South Sudanese storytelling</li> <li>traditional dancing</li> <li>prayer.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                |

\*The focus of the Rapid Assessment

