

What Aboriginal children and young people have to say

2019



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About ACYP

The Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. ACYP advocates for and promotes the safety, welfare, wellbeing and voice of all children and young people aged 0-24 years, with a focus on the needs of those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Under the Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014, the functions of ACYP include:

- making recommendations to Parliament, government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services that affect children and young people;
- promoting children and young people's participation in activities and decision-making about issues that affect their lives;
- conducting research into children's issues and monitoring children's well-being;
- holding inquiries into important issues relating to children and young people;
- providing information to help children and young people; and
- preparing, in consultation with the Minister responsible for youth, a three-year, Strategic Plan for Children and Young People (Plan). The inaugural Plan was launched in July 2016.
- Further information about ACYP's work can be found at: www.acyp.nsw.gov.au.

Office Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People

Report What Aboriginal children and young people have to say

Year 2019

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We wish to pay our respects to Aboriginal elders – past, present and emerging – and acknowledge the important role of Aboriginal people and culture within the NSW community. ACYP advises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers this report may contain images of people who may have passed away.



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Overview

The Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. ACYP advocates for and promotes the safety, welfare, wellbeing and voice of all children and young people aged 0-24 years in NSW, with a special focus on the needs of those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Since its commencement in January 2015, ACYP has heard from almost 30,000 children

and young people on a wide array of topics and in a variety of ways, including through face-to-face consultations, online polling and citizens' juries. More than 2,800 children and young people consulted with to date have identified as Aboriginal.

This report is based on the views and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people, which were gathered through the following consultations:





Consultations for the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People:

To develop the State's first Strategic Plan for Children and Young People, ACYP consulted with over 4,000 children and young people in 2015 about what was and was not working well for them. More than 10% of these children and young people identified as Aboriginal.

Consultations with Aboriginal children and young people:

Between 2015 and 2019, ACYP has consulted with more than 1,300 Aboriginal children and young people from across NSW. These consultations have focused on; what is and is not working well for Aboriginal children and young people in their communities; what makes Aboriginal children and young people feel welcome and not welcome in their communities and what supports Aboriginal children and young people need to enhance learning at school.

What needs to happen to improve the experiences of children and young people in care:

In August 2018, ACYP consulted with 40 children and young people with a lived care experience; 30% of participants were Aboriginal. They put forward recommendations on what is needed to improve the experiences of young people in the out of home care system.

Supports needed before and after juvenile detention:

Between May 2015 and July 2019 ACYP has listened to 260 children and young people in Juvenile Justice Centres. More than three quarters of these children and young people were Aboriginal.

Other targeted consultations on a variety of topics:

Between 2015 and 2019; ACYP has conducted a range of targeted consultations to listen to children and young people's experiences and recommendations on a variety of topics including; bullying; violence; homelessness; mental health; living in regional NSW; how children and young people conceptualise community; creating child safe organisations and the future of education. In each of these consultations the percentage of Aboriginal children and young people consulted with has been between 5 and 10%.

Recommendations

Connection to culture

- That services targeting Aboriginal children and young people are designed, managed and delivered by Aboriginal people and through Aboriginal owned and controlled organisations.
- That Aboriginal owned and controlled organisations are further resourced to provide services to Aboriginal children and young people including connecting to culture programming.
- Reform of permanency planning measures towards stability, ensuring effective measures that ensure removal is an option of last resort, that support the safe return of children to their families, and that ensure adequate safeguards to protect Aboriginal children's right to family and culture.¹
- That all Aboriginal children and young people in care remain on country wherever possible, and if not that they have strong cultural supports.²
- That all Aboriginal children and young people in custody have access to a range of cultural support initiatives and programs that promote positive connections to culture.
- Empower Aboriginal communities to have self-determination over child protection and safety matters through a State-wide Aboriginal Family Led decision-making programs, and Family Matters program to trial local community strategies to strengthen families, redress local risks of abuse and neglect for children, oversee child safety and wellbeing, and input to decision making on the care and safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.³
- The Department of Communities and Justice should further reduce the removal of Aboriginal children from their families by introducing an ongoing program of training and support for caseworkers on applying the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (ACPP). This should be developed and delivered in partnership with Aboriginal communities, Elders and representative bodies.⁴
- That the Department of Communities and Justice should develop guidance for caseworkers on promoting regular contact between Aboriginal children in care and their family, kin and community.⁵
- That a NSW Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People be set up independently to the Advocate for Children and Young People.

¹ This is in line with the recommendations in The Family Matters Roadmap (September 2017) <https://www.familymatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/TheFamilyMattersRoadmap.pdf>

² This is in line with the recommendations in the AbSec Youth Ambassador Program report 2018-2019 <http://www.absec.org.au/images/downloads/AbSec-YouthReport-YAP-2018-2019-web.pdf>

³ This is in line with the recommendations in The Family Matters Roadmap (September 2017) <https://www.familymatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/TheFamilyMattersRoadmap.pdf>

⁴ This is in line with the recommendations in the report of the Independent Review of Aboriginal Children in OOH, Family Is Culture (Sydney, 2019) <https://www.familyisculture.nsw.gov.au/?a=726329>

⁵ This is in line with the recommendations in the report of the Independent Review of Aboriginal Children in OOH, Family Is Culture (Sydney, 2019) <https://www.familyisculture.nsw.gov.au/?a=726329>



Racism and discrimination

- That all frontline workers, working with children and young people, receive ongoing cultural awareness training.
- That additional programs and policies are developed to acknowledge and address the racism and discrimination experienced by Aboriginal children and young people.





Education

- That increased life skills programs are delivered in schools and through support programs to prepare children and young people for independent living and adulthood.
- Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school should be identified earlier and provided with tailored learning support, opportunities to receive counselling, referrals to appropriate services, information about career pathways and assistance identifying and enrolling in courses and programs relevant to their goals.
- School disciplinary procedures should be reviewed and alternatives to long suspensions should be introduced, including the expansion of suspension centres, including Aboriginal owned and controlled centers, that link behaviour management strategies with the provision of learning support.
- Enhance teacher training in meaningful engagement, cultural competence and trauma informed practice to improve the capacity of teachers to respond to children and young people who display challenging behaviours in school environments.

Accessible activities and programs

- That there is increased provision of after-hours and weekend programs to engage children and young people in meaningful activities. Activities should be free of cost, conveniently located and linked with opportunities to learn about and access support services.
- Greater co-ordination and overall strategy to further enhance and support Juvenile Justice staff to develop a suite of programs whose aim is to rehabilitate children and young people through educational, psychosocial, personal and living skills development.
- Further resource and train Juvenile Justice frontline staff to strengthen their capacity to run informal programs with children and young people on the Unit to keep them occupied and reduce stress and frustration caused by lack of activity.



Supportive workers and services

- That frontline workers receive further training and support to promote respectful service provision to children and young people.
- Increase investment in early intervention family support services for families at risk of child removal and those seeking reunification, including targeted early intervention programs for mothers on issues impacting the care of children, and holistic, best practice, intensive family support, preservation and reunification services tailored to vulnerable Aboriginal families.⁶
- That a hotline specifically for Aboriginal children and young people leaving care be created to provide independent, culturally embedded and confidential advice. The hotline should have 24 hour access and be staffed by specialised Aboriginal support workers.⁷
- That all Aboriginal children and young people transitioning out of care to independence are provided with support to obtain secure housing, including knowledge of and access to bond assistance, 100 points of identification, reference history, bank statements, and a knowledge of local support services.
- The Department of Communities and Justice should provide caseworkers with further training and support on conducting family meetings with Aboriginal families.⁸
- Taking into account capacity for workforce retention, the guiding principle in relation to provision of support to children and young people should be to ensure continuity and consistency for workers as much as practicable.
- Increase availability of intensive one-on-one casework support targeted towards children and young people identified as being at risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system to assist them to successfully navigate the service system.
- Explore opportunities for mentoring programs for children and young people tackling complex challenges to be delivered by community members, Elders and other respected people with similar lived experiences to share knowledge and life experience.

⁶ This is in line with the recommendations in The Family Matters Roadmap (September 2017) <https://www.familymatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/TheFamilyMattersRoadmap.pdf>

⁷ This is in line with the recommendations in the AbSec Youth Ambassador Program report 2018-2019 <http://www.absec.org.au/images/downloads/AbSec-YouthReport-YAP-2018-2019-web.pdf>

⁸ This is in line with the recommendations in the report of the Independent Review of Aboriginal Children in OOHC, Family Is Culture (Sydney, 2019) <https://www.familyisculture.nsw.gov.au/?a=726329>



Justice

- Ensure all young people in Juvenile Justice Centres have regular access to psychosocial, drug and alcohol and health support and that these services are available in the evening and on weekends.
- Develop and implement, in partnership with Aboriginal community controlled organisations, targeted employment support programs to assist Aboriginal young people leaving custody to transition into the workforce through opportunities to obtain work experience, apprentice and traineeships, certifications and training in life skills.
- Increase the availability of vocational and industry training courses for young people in detention to assist in development of pre-employment skills.
- Conduct work to investigate the factors contributing to lower rates of diversion of Aboriginal children and young people in the justice system, and how these can be addressed.
- Expand the use of diversionary programs which involve children and young people engaging with support services and programs as an alternative to custody.
- The Youth Koori Court should be fully funded and expanded across the State to provide a culturally appropriate and holistic response to Aboriginal children and young people charged with a crime.
- There should be greater consistency across all Juvenile Justice Centres in relation to the rules, support services and breadth of programs available.
- Create mechanisms to give children and young people in Juvenile Justice Centres the chance to be involved in decision making processes and procedures. This could include involvement in decisions about types of programs offered at the Centre, and about menus and food choice.
- Ensure the needs of young women are not compromised in regard to programming, access to support services, schooling or other Juvenile Justice Centre processes due to their being accommodated in Centres with larger numbers of young men.
- Establish and resource a pre-release unit at each Juvenile Justice Centre including a unit specifically catering for young women.
- For those children and young people serving a long period on remand there should be a particular focus on access to rehabilitative and reintegration supports and programs.
- While children and young people are still in custody, begin their engagement with community-based support services and networks that they can access post release.

Detailed findings from consultations with Aboriginal children and young people

Connection to culture

Across all consultations with Aboriginal children and young people, the importance of maintaining a connection to culture has been raised consistently:

“To have a culture at the heart of who we are, Aboriginal culture being rich in our lives and being able to feel a part of community.”

When Aboriginal children and young people discussed culture as working well for them they raised connecting with Elders, learning traditional ways through camping trips to the bush and river to hunt and fish, learning language, NAIDOC week celebrations, having Welcome to Country, Aboriginal studies at school and cultural dance.

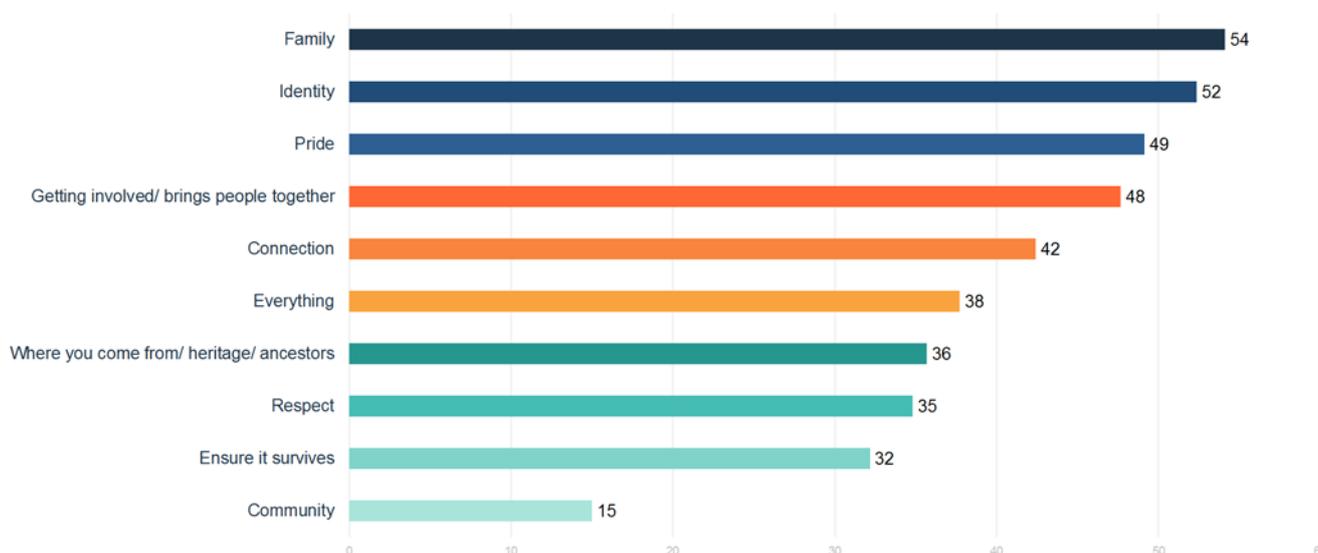
When they spoke about aspects of culture not working well for them, issues raised included Aboriginal language being lost, Elders being disrespected and children being removed from their families. One Aboriginal young person in detention spoke about the devastating effects of being removed from their family:

“I’ve been with 11 different carers you know what I mean...all I wanted when I was a young kid was to be with my family...it really took a part of me, you know and it really affected my life... young Aboriginal kids getting taken away from their family, it’s not right... just saying sorry and stuff like that, that’s not gonna help us...cos it’s affected our lives...growing up the way we grew up we never had them... opportunities.”

In the 2018 consultations, Aboriginal children and young people were asked what culture means to them. The results are shown in Figure 1. As shown, the word most frequently associated with culture was “family”, spoken about in more than half of the consultations (54.1%). Children and young people also shared that culture was vital to their sense of “identity” (52.3%) and “pride” (49.1%). They further discussed that culture allows them to feel connected and that it is an important avenue for engaging with other likeminded people, as well as providing opportunities to meet new people. Children and young people said they were proud of being part of the oldest living culture, speaking of the importance of respecting Elders, the land and environment and reflecting on past and present struggles.



Figure 1. What does culture mean to you?



During consultations with young people in detention, many reported that connection to culture was crucial to their wellbeing and sense of identity. Culture, it was said, makes Aboriginal people feel safe, proud, connected and provides a sense of belonging. Aboriginal young people shared that when they have genuine access to culture, they gain recognition of their responsibilities to themselves and to others to live healthier and more respectful lives.

Aboriginal young people in detention particularly appreciated programs that invited community members to come into Centres to speak with them and run cultural activities. They said that they would like to see more cultural programs and opportunities to connect to culture; including visits by Elders and community members who could talk with them and teach them language and different cultural practices such

as Aboriginal dance, art and traditions like boomerang and didgeridoo making:

“Teaching us more language, teach us how to speak the language and that.”

“Learning traditional ways I reckon, I don’t know one bit of mine, like...I don’t know my language, like it would be good to have some of my language that I know how to speak.”

“I reckon they should teach us more about dancing and that too, how to play instruments and that too, you know. Learn our mob and that like where we come from.”

“More cultural stuff. Like camping you know. The JJ used to do that, used to go get us all and just go camping for the weekend. Teach us about our culture, teach us how to make and do everything properly, you know. That’s what I want to see happen more. I reckon that’s what the Elders want to see happen more.”

Young people shared that such opportunities while in custody have the power to prompt them on a path towards rehabilitation. They said that practicing culture provides them with a sense of purpose and direction in life:

“Culture keeps us out of trouble.”

“I see how cultural programs make people change.”

For these reasons, Aboriginal children and young people in detention also discussed wanting opportunities to reconnect to culture upon their release from custody. This included wanting to reconnect with Elders to learn overall ways of life and being, such as creating artefacts and learning to live off the land:

“Our culture’s sleeping at the moment. We need to wake it back up, we need to learn more about our culture. We need someone there to help us do that cos we can’t just do it on our own.”

Aboriginal children and young people in the wider community also discussed the importance of connection to culture. For these children and young people the connection was often discussed in terms of community engagement. Specifically, they reported enjoying cultural and community events and gala days that foster a

close knit community where everyone is friendly and gets to know each other.

Finally, when talking about culture, Aboriginal children and young people spoke frequently about the need to connect with Aboriginal specific services and Aboriginal identified workers. They discussed how the nuances of culture determined whether or not they were entering into a safe space. This would often dictate whether or not a young person chose to engage with a service:

“[I like the Aboriginal Medical Service] cos like I know the workers very well like they’re my Aunties and all that. I can understand them more than I can understand the other people. I can open up to them and like if I go to that other doctor I won’t open up to him, I won’t tell him what’s wrong with me or nothing.”

“Cos he’s an Aboriginal worker so he would actually understand where we’re coming from and like, yeah he would understand what we’re talking about. And like why we’re in the situation we’re in. And stuff like that.”

“Yeah I’d like an Aboriginal worker – who can help us get a job, you know, and who knows what we’ve been through and how it is for us.”

Linked to this, Aboriginal children and young people with a lived care experience spoke about the need for more Aboriginal caseworkers who understand the importance of culture to young people in care and support them to remain connected to their cultural networks:



“We need more Aboriginal caseworkers working with Aboriginal children.”

“As a proud Wiradjuri woman I had no family follow-up or family finding done for me whilst in care. So I was also placed with non-Indigenous carers, which then led to the fact that I had a piece of me missing for most of my life until I actually left care and did cultural finding and understanding and practices by myself, without that support.”



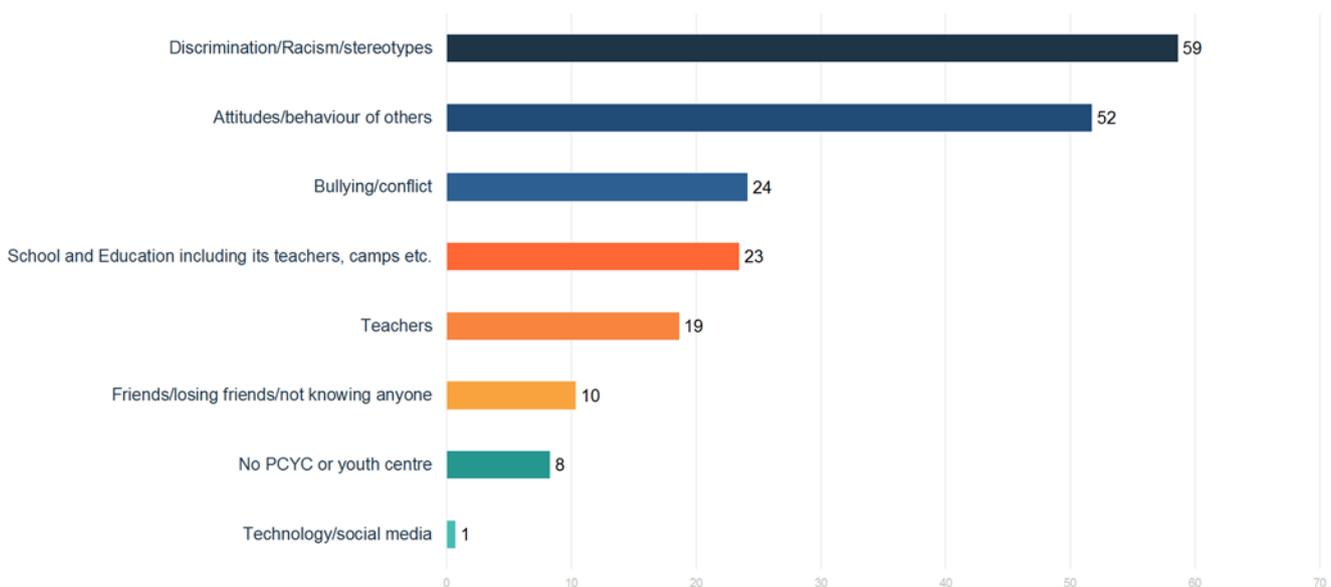


Racism and discrimination

Racism and discrimination have been raised as big issues across all consultations with Aboriginal children and young people. In a 2016 consultation with over 200 Aboriginal children and young people, participants were asked what makes them feel not welcome in their communities. Their responses are shown in Figure 2.

Almost 60% of children and young people raised discrimination, racism and youth stereotypes as issues in their communities causing them to feel unwelcome. Some reported that peer groups at school are defined by race. Others spoke about racist teachers at school and others about stereotypes of shopkeepers that young people are criminals.

Figure 2. What makes you and other young people feel not welcome?





Just over half of the young people said that the behaviour and attitude of other people can make them feel unwelcome. This included the person's tone of voice; being spoken down to; being excluded from activities and events; and simply negative attitudes towards young people.

One third of young people spoke about feeling unwelcome at school, including teachers not caring about them; teachers speaking rudely to them and not being allowed in certain places of the school.

Just under one-quarter of young people (24%) reported that experiencing bullying and conflict causes them to feel not welcome in their communities. In particular, they spoke about being laughed at; getting dirty looks and cyber bullying.

Another issue raised in consultations with Aboriginal children and young people was the feeling that they were being stopped or monitored by some police as a result of their race:

“Yeah coppers and security guards at shopping centres...we want to walk in here, we want to spend our money that we earned, that we were given. We getting tracked, we getting followed, you know.”

“Whenever I go I always get pulled up, I get searched and even on the streets when I’m doing nothing. I’m doing nothing and I get searched.”

“White coppers...like if they see one black person walking down the street they’ll pull them over and search them.”

Across consultations, Aboriginal children and young people also discussed feeling discriminated against by some teachers, potential employers and the community in general:

“Racism in community and at school from teachers.”

“People think that Aboriginal kids are nothing.”

“Teachers don’t treat Aboriginal young people well.”

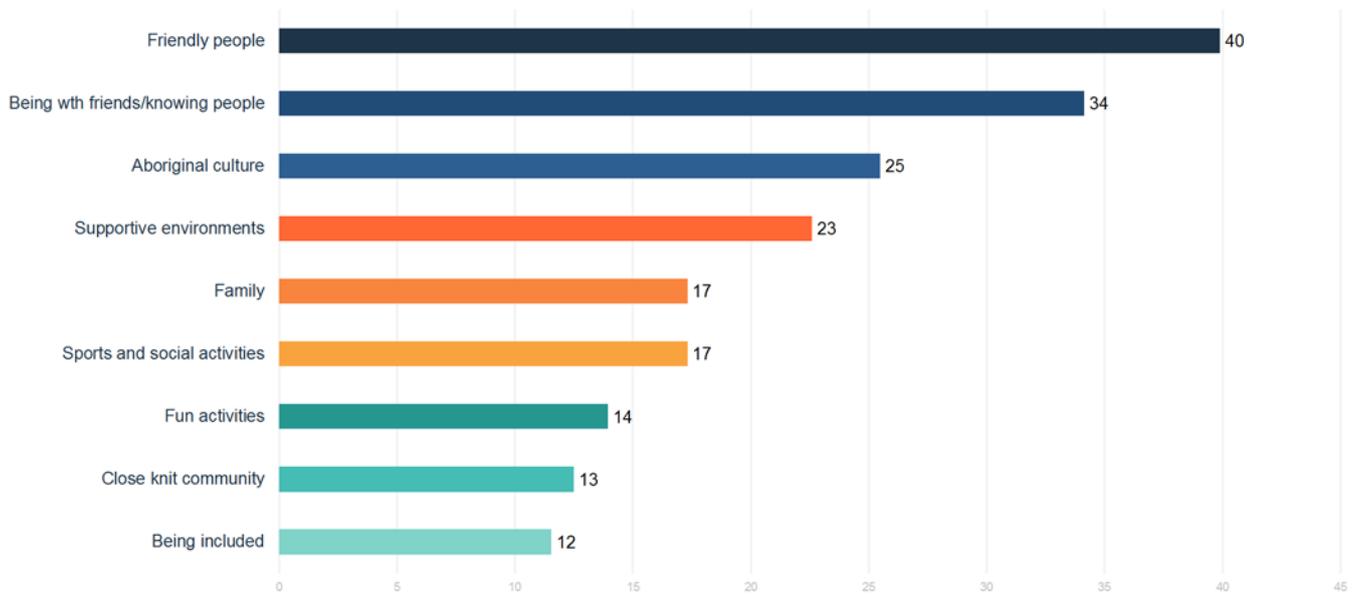
“You know when we put our name down on an application for a job and then someone else, you know, comes down and put a good application in – with a better recommendation and they see that Aboriginal box – yeah we tick that box and if they’ve come and put theirs in after ours, they’ll get the job before us.”

Some Aboriginal young people in custody discussed experiences of racism by centre workers. They had witnessed situations where racist comments were made by individual workers towards Aboriginal young people. As a result they thought it would be beneficial for all non-Aboriginal staff to receive cultural awareness training.

In contrast, Aboriginal children and young people in the 2016 consultations were also asked what makes them feel welcome in their communities. Figure 3 shows that being around friendly people (39.9%) and with friends (34.1%) were reported most frequently as enabling children and young people to feel welcome in their communities.



Figure 3. What makes you and other young people feel welcome?



Aboriginal culture (25.5%) was also raised, with NAIDOC week and sporting events both mentioned specifically as avenues supporting them to connect with community and culture.





Education

In the consultations for the Strategic Plan for Children and Young People and the consultations with children and young people in regional NSW, more than 70% of Aboriginal children and young people reported that education was working well for them.

Children and young people shared that they enjoy the social aspects of being at school with friends and also the various support programs offered at school. Those reported as working well included AIME (Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience); driver education (ACE); homework centres; Clontarf; Girls Academy and PCYC programs.

They spoke favourably about the Girls Academy and Clontarf providing educational opportunities, tertiary opportunities and opening up pathways to further education and employment, sporting opportunities, incentives for attendance, tutoring, food and transportation to and from school and addressing concerns of Aboriginal participants. Young people also discussed that these programs were good for meeting new people and motivating them to learn and try their best.

Some children and young people further shared that they liked the cultural support they received at school as Aboriginal students, such as having a safe room specifically dedicated to their wellbeing at school. Others reported that they appreciated the teachers who genuinely cared about them, providing both academic and wellbeing support.

While education was raised as working well for many Aboriginal children and young people, more than half also said that there were aspects of education that were not working well for them.

Specifically, children and young people spoke about poor teacher-student relationships; not being able to have a say in their schools; lack of tutoring; stress and fear of failure and lack of cultural supports and understanding in their schools:

“Not enough funding for Aboriginal young people that need tutors.”

“Not enough focus on Indigenous needs.”

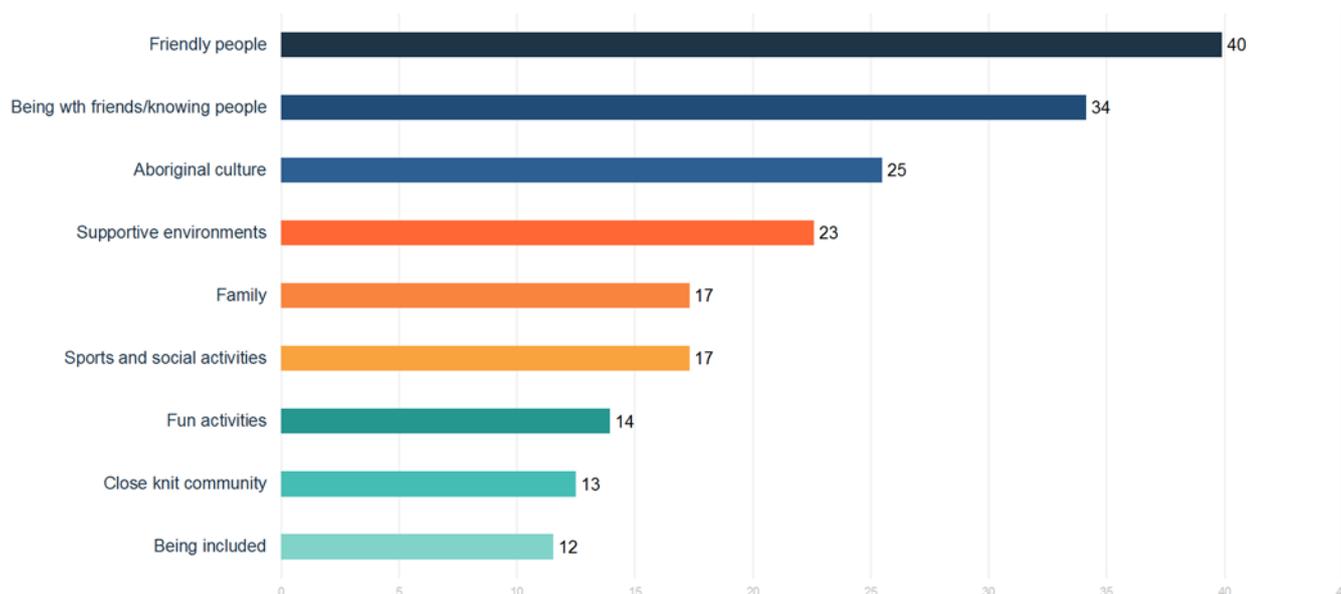
“Young people should be taught about Aboriginal culture.”

During the 2017 consultations with approximately 500 Aboriginal children and young people participants were asked what they would like us to know about their learning in school. Figure 4 shows that more than one quarter of young people reported wanting more life skills education at school (28.2%). Specifically, young people spoke about learning things at school that are not needed in life; that they want to learn about “how the world works” and things needed for their future “like taxes and careers”; they want to learn the basics in English and Maths including percentage “so that it can be used when shopping”; how to buy a house and how to vote.

Figure 4 also shows that one quarter of Aboriginal children and young people reported that they would like lessons to be more engaging (24.9%). In particular, they spoke about wanting more practical classes; for teachers to make learning more fun and to incorporate new things into their daily teaching methods.



Figure 4. What would you like us to know about learning at school?



Just under one quarter of young people in these consultations felt that teachers do not help students enough in class (23.5%). They would like teachers to spend more time explaining things; to help students more so they understand concepts; and to be more supportive. Young people discussed that not all students are on the same level and teachers do not stop to provide extra support to students who need it.

All Aboriginal young people in custody discussed the importance of educational, vocational and life skills programs in assisting them to make changes in their lives. While education was of high importance and value to young people in custody, most spoke of having been disengaged from school for long periods of time:

“I don’t do well at school but I want to finish my Year 10, my Year 11 and 12.”

“I’ve got goals set out for what I want to do; it’s just getting to them goals.”

Almost all young people in detention reported leaving school early and an increase in involvement in criminal behaviour after leaving. They described poor experiences at school as the reason for leaving, explaining that they struggled to learn in a mainstream environment due to large class sizes; not being supported in relation to learning difficulties; and problems with teachers and students, including experiences of bullying and racism. Several spoke about the difficulties in gaining one to one teacher support to assist young people with basic skills like reading:

“Teachers can’t just deal with you, they have to help other kids as well.”



Young people in detention also expressed frustration at the limited supports available to help them with behaviour and learning needs. They reported that schools should be more aware of the different learning abilities and needs within the classroom and subsequent feelings of shame for students who have fallen behind their peers:

“You know this person’s not good at this, this person’s not good at that, why do you give us all the same test? Everyone has their own way at being smart.”

“Cos like, you get the kids that are really good at [school]. And then you get the kids like us, who lack the concentration and then we get in trouble for that, or we get suspended for that, you know what I mean? So it’s like, what’s the point of going if I’m not going to get help at school.”

Some young people further suggested that schools should provide greater support to students who are experiencing serious issues at home:

“Instead of focusing on education they should also focus on what’s happening outside of school. Like what the kids are getting up to, if they have drug problems ... family problems, domestic violence and stuff like that. They should try to solve it within school cos that’s where boys spend most their time.”

One group of young people talked about how they thought schools should be more understanding of why students display challenging behaviours:

“More understanding of people’s journey, where they came from, what they have been through if they say you are doing the wrong thing but say it in a nice way.”

One young man spoke about the impact of commonly being excluded from activities at school as a punishment:

“That can make you even more depressed and sad ... teachers need to understand why you behaved that way.”

Young people reported that some of the behaviour management measures taken by schools caused them to disengage from the system. For example, they reported that it was not uncommon to be subjected to long suspensions of up to 20 days:

“Well I got heaps of suspensions all that. And I went and tried other high schools and all that but they just wouldn’t let me cos of my temper.”

“[I would get] 20 days, I would go back and stuff up and get another 20 days, it was like a repeat occurrence.”

“And when you get suspended from school you’ve got nothing else to do, walk the streets.”

Young people in nearly every Juvenile Justice Centre raised the issue of long suspensions, and reported that it is often during a long suspension that they get into trouble with police, as they typically lack supervision and constructive activities during this time. Discussions with these young people demonstrated that removing students from school as a form of discipline may

have the unintended consequence of further entrenching problematic behaviour and causing them to become disconnected from their main source of prosocial support:

“I wasn’t in school and I started doing crime.”

“Most of these young fellas need an education; they’re only 14, 15. There’s not even that much education there for them, you know they getting suspended from school nearly every day of the week. They get suspended when they come back from a suspension, they getting suspended again. It’s terrible and it should stop.”

Large periods of time away from school also caused young people to fall further behind, so that when they returned to school, they were not able to follow along and ended up misbehaving and being disciplined again. Young people reported that the cycle of back-to-back suspensions often repeats until a student is expelled or drops out. They called for in-school alternatives to suspension to maintain their connection to education, as well as greater one-on-one support to address their learning needs:

“I missed most of Year 10. When I came back they told me to go into Year 11 but I couldn’t do the work.”

“If we get suspended, we shouldn’t be staying home, instead of keeping us out of school they should be in a single class with a single teacher.”

“Yeah they should have like a room like in the school, for boys that muck up in school, go in there and learn, you

know what I mean . . . Yeah we’re not at the school you know, that’s when we getting bored, we sitting around with nothing to do, we may as well do this or...next thing you know we’re in here.”

Young people reported wanting the chance to gain an education, but would find it hard to re-engage in an institution that catered to their needs. Young people in regional areas faced additional difficulties as there was only often one school in the area that they could attend. If they had previously been expelled from that school, they were extremely limited in the educational opportunities available to them:

“I just got kicked out of every school in my town.”

“But I was thinking, they should have more opportunities to get back into schools. Cos I haven’t been going to school for nearly two years.”

When asked what kind of education would be more helpful young people said they would like smaller schools and classes sizes, and more individual teacher support. They also saw value in providing a mix of both educational and practical vocational industry training programs to increase their employability. They reported wanting mainstream schools to offer more skills based opportunities such as completing work experience or TAFE courses like White Card and 1st Aid certificate.

Some of the young people had attended Department of Education behavioural schools or alternative education centres such as Youth Off The Streets, Blacktown Youth College, and St Marys Flexible Learning Centre. They reported that these were better learning models, with



smaller class sizes, more hands on learning and offering activities that better engage students in learning; including sport, fitness, music, cooking and excursions. They further raised that there is less pressure in these schools for students to achieve high standards:

“Mainstream schools have a lot of pressure to do well and it’s hard, some people don’t know how to do it.”

Above all, young people reported needing more life skills education to assist them to become independent adults. They acknowledged they tend to come from difficult circumstances and saw part of the solution to that problem was gaining independence and becoming better equipped to be prepared for life growing up.

Young people spoke about needing support in certain areas that they believed would be critical in assisting them to transition to adulthood: outdoor maintenance, household chores (including washing clothes and cleaning), how to access basic services such as Centrelink and other supports, financial assistance such as banking and getting a tax file number, how to apply for a house and find stable accommodation, learning how to write a resume and preparedness for employment along with the practicalities surrounding engaging in education such as TAFE, university and apprenticeships:

“Like life skills, like how to work a washing machine, I don’t even know how to work a washing machine.”

“By the time I get out I want to go to Uni but I don’t know. I wouldn’t know how to even apply.”

“Education that’s the key, I reckon that’s number 1. Social skills be able to talk to people.”

Some young people in custody brought up positive experiences with the education system. One young man spoke very positively about the regional high school he attended and the strong connection he had to one of his teachers. This teacher had helped him to begin an apprenticeship at school to keep him engaged. He had eventually obtained paid work through this apprenticeship. He said the teacher has stayed in contact with him whilst he has been in custody and was encouraging him to return to school after his release. He spoke about how much he valued this ongoing support and was considering returning to complete his Year 12 at that school as a result of this encouragement.

Another young man spoke about completing Year 10 at a regional TAFE and had enjoyed the experience. He liked the adult learning environment which he described as having smaller class sizes, more teacher support, being treated as an adult, and being taught practical life skills through this course such as financial management.



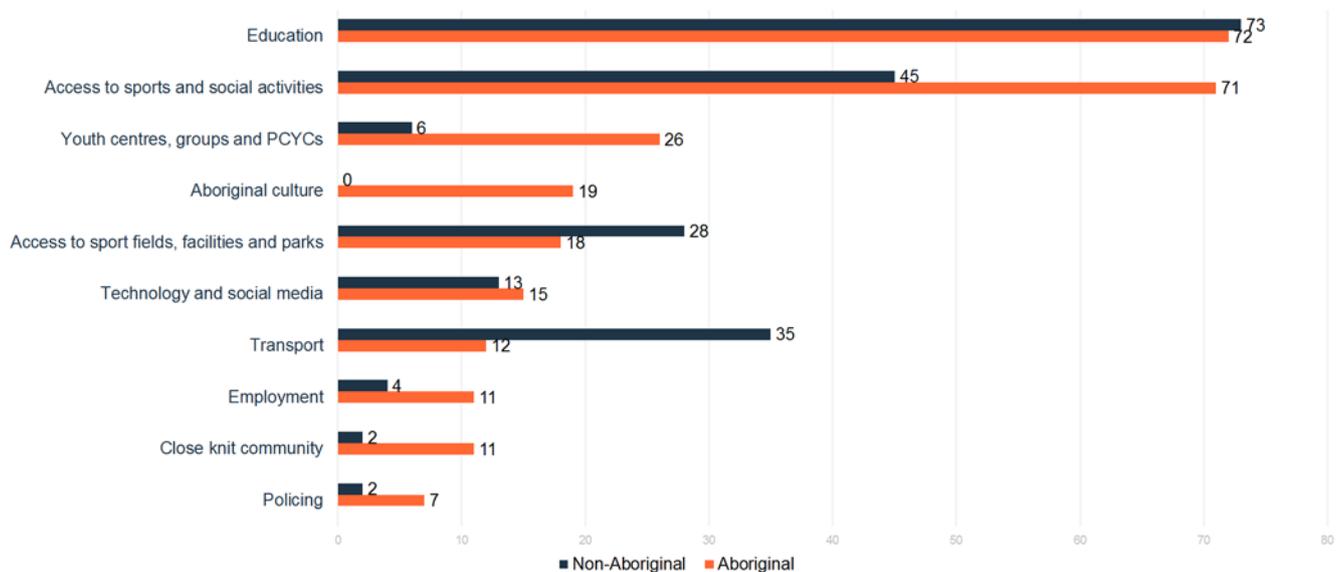
Accessible activities and programs

Across all consultations with Aboriginal children and young people, being able to access recreational activities and programs was reported as very important. Figure 5 shows the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and young people in response to the question of what was working well for them during the consultations for the Strategic Plan for Children and Young People.

As shown, Aboriginal children and young people were markedly more likely than non-Aboriginal

children and young people to report that youth centres, groups and PCYCs were working well for them (26.4% compared with 6.2%). The overwhelming majority specifically mentioned PCYCs and were extremely positive about these. More Aboriginal children and young people also reported that access to sports and social activities was working well for them than non-Aboriginal children and young people did (71.5% compared with 45.4%).

Figure 5. What's working well for children and young people: Differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and young people?





These findings are consistent with those from all ACYP consultations with Aboriginal children and young people. For example, in the 2018 consultations, 81.2% of children and young people reported that access to sport and social activities was working well for them and other young people in their communities. Sport was seen as providing opportunities to meet new people, bring people together and establish a sense of community. Young people appreciated the variety of sporting opportunities in their local areas, including those facilitated by schools and through weekend sports tournaments.

In the 2018 consultations, youth centres, groups and PCYCs were also raised by more than 40% of Aboriginal children and young people as working well. They spoke particularly favourably about the programs and activities offered by PCYC including anger management, kick boxing, night sports, laser skirmish and free sports. They further said that PCYC programs provide things for young people to do and get to know others, keep young people out of trouble and are easily accessible in central locations.

However, across consultations access to activities and programs were also seen as not working well for Aboriginal children and young people. For example, in the 2017 consultations, 44.4% of Aboriginal children and young people reported that there is a lack of activities available for them. Specifically, they talked about local areas not having enough activities to keep young people out of trouble, not enough sport available especially for girls and at low cost, youth centres not being open late enough; PCYCs being shut down and losing programs and wanting more free activities in their communities.

Similarly, in the 2018 consultations, more than one-third of Aboriginal children and young people spoke about a lack of school holiday activities, closure of entertainment facilities such as movie theatres, lack of swimming pools and shopping centres and a lack of variety of non-sporting based activities for young people once they reach 16 years of age.

ACYP consultations with socially excluded children and young people found that this cohort, including Aboriginal children and young people, face significant barriers to accessing activities and programs. These activities are often too costly or children and young people's circumstances prevent them from engaging in them:

“I’d go there every day if it was free [referring to PCYC].”

“You got to pay for a membership and that too.”

“I was playing soccer, but as it is, cos it’s premier league stage, its \$2500 and I was saying, I can’t afford that, so they kicked me out and it forced me to do what I have to do [crime].”

Some spoke about specific workers that let them participate in programs when they were unable to afford the fees. These young people reported that this had stopped them from engaging in criminal activity:

“It’s pretty expensive too; 23 dollars a night.”

“Cabramatta’s free, if they know your face you get in for free.”

“We used to pay, like ten bucks or fifteen bucks but the coppers knew that we were going out and that, cos we told them, it’s too much, that’s why we go do all this crime and they said ok, we’ll give you a free pass. So we just say our name and show our face and they let us in.”

Similarly, across all consultations with young people in custody, young people spoke about the influence of peers on their involvement in crime, in particular peers who were not engaged in school or employment, programs, or other positive activities. They reported that having greater access to free or low-cost recreational activities and programs within the community, especially after hours and on weekends, could provide young people with an alternative to getting into trouble and act as a soft entry point to connect to support services:

“That’s the thing that makes us reoffend is when we get out there and there’s nothing for us to do.”

“... on the weekends and after school, that’s all they do, all the kids there, just go thieving. That’s why we’re in and out. That’s what I tried to tell the caseworker at PCYC and that, I tried to tell them, like, this is why we’re in trouble all the time—cos there’s nothing to do.”

Young people in regional Juvenile Justice Centres especially reported the need for more recreational activities. Some young people had attended sport and recreation camps when they were younger but said there was nothing similar available for teenagers. They reported that boredom increased the likelihood of young people getting into trouble. Suggestions

included free or low cost activities to keep young people busy at night and on weekends such as sport (football, boxing, basketball), BBQs and excursions. One suggestion was a youth centre with a gaming room to reduce isolation among young people who liked gaming, as they could come together at the centre as well as access other support.

A group of Aboriginal young men in one centre who had been part of the Clontarf Program in high school, spoke positively about how programs such as that rewarded good behaviour and attendance at school over a period of time with a trip to special events such as State of Origin. They thought a Clontarf-type program for Aboriginal young people who were not at school would be helpful. They thought these initiatives helped young people develop a routine as well as having a goal to work towards:

“You need something to look forward to ... something that we want to get up out of bed and do.”

Some young people in custody reported the need for more funding for youth centres and PCYCs. They reported that these had good programs but not enough to keep young people busy at night and on weekends:

“Something you can do, outside of school, cos you just have hours to waste.”

“Sport was keeping me out of trouble to be honest, it was keeping me occupied.”

“Good cops work at PCYC, they help us, they do boxing training with us. PCYC helps a lot, it helps us stay off the streets, get fit and that.”



Several young people had been involved in programs designed specifically for young offenders. They spoke positively about these because they said everyone understood what each other was going through. Several young males describe how they enjoyed programs such as PCYC breakfast programs or the Breaking Barriers program with Mt Druitt Police and Clean Slate Without Prejudice with Redfern Police. They said these programs helped young people create a routine by linking them to caring, consistent workers and police officers who picked them up early for a fitness group, shared breakfast with them, and then took them to school or work. This experience of structure and working towards goals was often new for these young people and they were proud of what they had achieved in these programs:

“Workers help us do things that we thought we would never be able to do.”

Lack of access to transport was raised as a barrier for young people, especially in regional Juvenile Justice Centres, being able to engage in activities and programs. Some spoke about how their local Land Council or other services would drive to outlying communities to pick them up and take them to activities.

Young people in custody spoke very favourably about programs and activities they had been able to access while in custody and also gave suggestions for new programs. They particularly enjoyed programs that brought in external facilitators such as sport competitions where community teams or sporting celebrities came into the Centre to visit.

In addition, the positive impact of cultural programs in relation to a sense of identity and pride was very much appreciated. Aboriginal

young people said that not everyone knew about their family or background. They wanted to see more programs bringing in Elders to teach traditional skills and knowledge:

“A lot of us boys who come in doesn’t even know things about our culture, we just know the name but we don’t know what we stand for...how to become a man.”

Less formal programs that young people in custody also reported enjoying included sport such as basketball and football and physical activities like the gym, as they said these helped a lot of young men burn off stress in constructive ways. They thought more equipment in the gym could help increase the range of activities they could get involved in and a number spoke about how much they had enjoyed participating in boxing programs in the community because of the fitness and discipline it taught them. They spoke about how it helped to be able to train for goals in custody.

One young woman described learning about exercise while in custody. She had never been interested in fitness previously, however since starting an exercise regime in the Centre, she was now convinced of the health and psychological benefits. She looked forward to getting up and training every morning. Other young women spoke about what they had learnt through attending self-development programs run by external groups in the Centre:

“Good for young girls to be surrounded by positive women.”



Unit programs with prizes such as toiletries, chocolates, and biscuits were also popular. When asked why they liked prizes, several young people said they liked being rewarded for doing something well, acknowledging that this experience was something uncommon to them. They enjoyed activities where they had the chance to engage with workers, as they valued building connection with trusted adults. They reported that they would like to be able to do more of these kind of activities on a daily basis.

Young people said programs were offered through the Centre schools such as woodwork, hair and beauty, barista and bakery. They said they would like to see more programs like this run on the Units outside school hours as well. One frustration they spoke about related to program availability and regularity. They said they were told at times that programs could not happen due to the lack of funding and at other times that reduced staff levels meant programs could not go ahead. They found this difficult as they looked forward to programs and were upset when they were cancelled at short notice.

Young people also reported that they enjoyed programs that gave them the chance to socialise with different people, either young people from different units or having outside groups come in. Seeing different faces helped reduce frustrations of living with the same young people on the unit each day. They thought that having team sport competitions, including having teams from outside come into their Centres, was a great way for this to happen.

One issue raised by some young people who had been in Centres for a long time or who had several admissions was that program content was often repeated. They said the programs were good and they had learnt a lot, but they would like to have been able to build on the learning they had already developed. They said in cases such as this there could be an opportunity for them to take on a peer mentor role:

“We could teach the program ... I sometimes step in because I remember what I learnt and I tell the girls about things like resilience.”

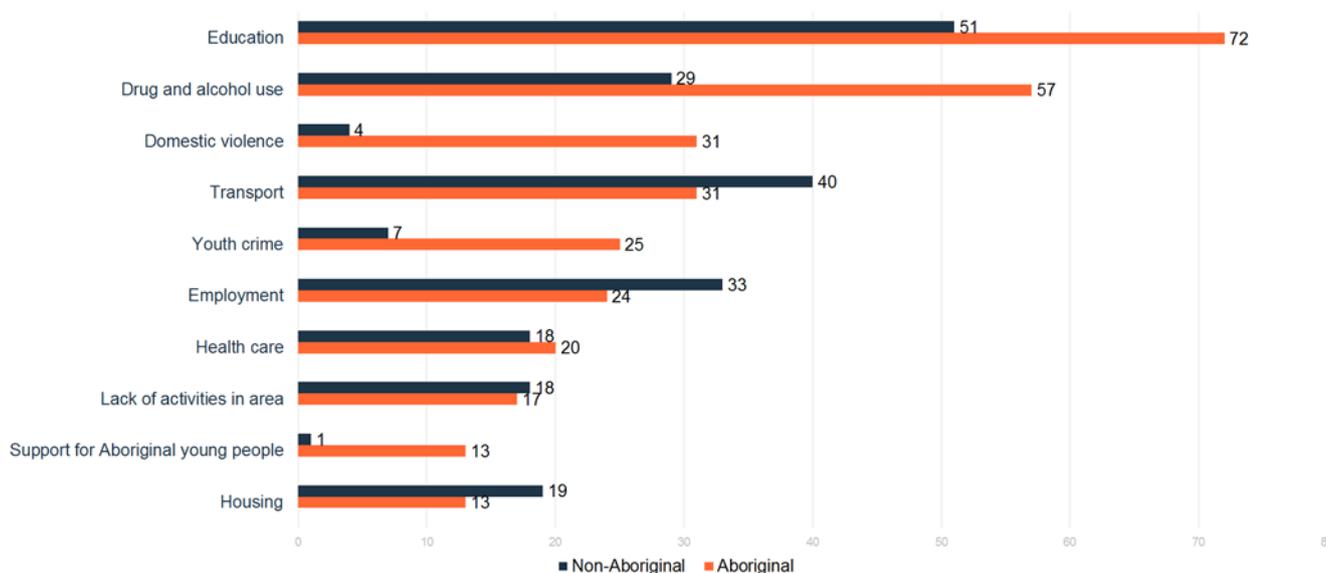
Young people also raised wanting to have more programs offered outside school hours, such as in the evening and on weekends.



Support services and workers

Aboriginal children and young people have consistently raised the need for more support services and supportive workers. Figure 6 shows the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and young people in response to the question of what was not working well for them during the consultations for the Strategic Plan for Children and Young People.

Figure 6. What's not working well for children and young people: Differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and young people



Aboriginal children and young people were more likely to report that support for Aboriginal children and young people was not working well than non-Aboriginal children and young people (13.1% compared with 1.0%).

They were also markedly more likely to state that domestic violence was an issue for them compared with non-Aboriginal children and young people (30.6% compared with 3.9%) as well as drug and alcohol use (57.1% compared with 28.6%). Figure 6 further shows that youth crime was seen as a big issue among one in four Aboriginal children and young people (25.1%

Aboriginal compared with 7.2% non-Aboriginal children and young people). These differences highlight the need for better support services and workers for Aboriginal children and young people.

Across consultations, Aboriginal children and young people have been asked to describe what makes a good worker. In many cases, young people reported that having a positive connection to their worker was more important than the actual service provided. They described a good worker as someone who is respectful and caring, able to listen and have a laugh or joke around

with them. Young people further said that a good worker will go the extra mile for them:

“I was in PCYC, they was picking me up every morning, taking me out, doing boxing, feeding, giving us food, it sort of kept me out of trouble and off the streets a bit more.”

As mentioned earlier, Aboriginal children and young people living in care discussed the importance of having Aboriginal caseworkers to support their needs:

“I feel that it is strongly important that we have culturally appropriate and aware caseworkers, especially with Aboriginal caseworkers working with Aboriginal children and young people in the care system.”

Young people in custody felt that it was particularly beneficial when they could have the same worker over a long period of time. They said this allowed the worker to really get to know the young person and understand their circumstances. They specifically spoke about caseworkers and counsellors from local Youth Centres, mental health services such as CAMHS and Headspace, PCYC’s, educational and training programs and cultural groups who they felt provided valuable individual assistance and programs to help young people stay out of trouble.

One young person in custody raised that supportive workers can teach young people limits and boundaries; assisting them to stay out of trouble:

“Most boys in here ... they need a role model, someone to look up to.”

A number of young people reported that their Juvenile Justice Officer (JJO) was the support worker with whom they had the closest connection. They said that supervision requirements meant they had to stay in touch with their JJO and this regular contact had helped them to form a bond with their worker. Young people gave many positive examples about support they had received from their JJOs which included: helping them set goals to keep out of trouble, picking them up and taking them to activities, school or employment; listening to them; and making referrals to support services. Young people spoke positively about the assistance they were receiving from their JJO’s to prepare them after release.

Young people from regional areas reported having fewer services in their communities. One young person spoke about how his local PCYC helped a lot of young people in the area stay out of trouble however when numbers dropped the program stopping running. Some young people in small regional areas spoke about how their JJO was the main support worker for young people in their community. They spoke about JJO’s taking groups of young people to sport activities and on outings to keep them busy.

When asked what would help them to stay out of trouble, several young people reinforced how they thought it would have been beneficial to have a connection to a single support worker or service who could assist them to navigate multiple issues related to their offending behaviour:

“If people had their own workers who were dedicated to them, they wouldn’t come in here.”



Young people spoke about workers who they described as going out of their way to support them. They gave examples such as workers texting to check how they were doing, picking them up and taking them to school and programs and making time to catch up with them when they needed it. Several young people reported that the reason they liked a particular worker was that even when they had resisted the worker's attempts to engage them, the worker had stuck by them and not withdrawn their support:

“My JJO does a lot for me, he doesn't give up, he was there for me.”

Young people also discussed that at times some service workers were not accommodating or inviting for young people coming from difficult backgrounds. They felt that workers representing these services were sometimes disrespectful and lacking optimism in regards to the capacity of young people to make changes in their lives:

“Well, I just take one of the caseworkers I previously had that I haven't quite thought did their job properly and I compare it to one that has and I can automatically see the difference. So [my current caseworker's] perfect, she helps me out in every way. She was at court yesterday for me and we were discussing what would happen when I got out, what sports I wanted to do.”

Finally, young people in custody also talked about how convoluted the process can be when seeking support from multiple services, suggesting that if there was a one stop shop approach for young people accessing support, it would be more advantageous for young people who were already disadvantaged in multiple ways:

“We need like, I reckon, a one stop shop where all of it is. Cos like to get paid you gotta go to Centrelink and then, from Centrelink you gotta go to another place to get housing, from there you gotta go to another place to get a reference or referral to a refuge and then you gotta go to a refuge. But if they were one person all in the one spot that could do it all for you, that would be better.”

They spoke about the difficulty of travelling to multiple appointments in different locations to access services, and the emotional burden of being asked to repeat their circumstances at each appointment:

“When I was out, I had to go to Juvenile Justice twice a week, go to TAFE and go to counselling for drug and alcohol and then had to go to behavioural counselling as well, so like, all that in one week, you have no time for anything else. And then I would get breached for not going to my appointments because all of them would be set as Juvenile Justice from the court and stuff so like, you just get breached for not attending like 6 appointments a week.”

Justice

Aboriginal children and young people in custody raised several issues that were specific to their experiences of incarceration. These young people were clear that they want their time spent in custody to be constructive. They want to be able to access supports and rehabilitative programs that help them to address the underlying reasons for their offending behaviour and to learn how to develop different strategies to make different decisions in the future.

Specifically, young people discussed a range of services and supports that either had been or would be helpful to receive while in custody. In addition to education and life skills and access to activities and programs that have been discussed earlier; other services and supports included psychosocial, health and caseworker support; opportunities to gain employment skills; internal Centre practices and preparation for their transition back to the community.

First, young people agreed that they valued having access to psychological, drug and alcohol and casework support in custody. They said this support helped them develop strategies to manage in the Centre, to address issues which had led to them coming into custody, and prepare for when they are released:

| **“To help you better yourself.”**

| **“I like having yarns with the psychs.”**

They thought it would be good to have more psychosocial support staff, especially drug and alcohol counsellors, as often it is necessary to book an appointment a few days ahead to see someone. Some suggested it would be good to have access to psychological support during

the evenings and on weekends when a lot of the young people became stressed or upset.

Some said they felt they had matured as a result of support they had received in custody and had developed insight about the path their lives had taken. As a result they learnt the benefit of seeking advice from supportive adults about how to make different decisions in the future.

Young people said having access to caseworkers was important in helping them both in custody and while preparing for release. They said connection to a caseworker should begin as soon as a young person comes into custody.

Young people repeatedly spoke about how support they were receiving in custody helped them to develop insight about the path their lives had taken. They spoke about how caseworkers can help them to develop strategies and set plans in place to make different decisions in the future.

“Being in here you have time to think, to build your future ... you know what you want in life.”

In relation to employment skills gained in custody, in some Centres young people reported feeling satisfied with the employment and life skills they had learnt including farm and agriculture skills, fitness and coaching certificates, toastmasters, barista, music, white card, tractor and learner motorbike and driver licenses, hospitality and café courses in Centres' commercial kitchens and working with dogs in the Unit.



In other Centres, young people repeatedly raised wanting greater access to employment preparation opportunities such as traineeships, apprenticeships or work experience while in custody that could continue post discharge. They felt strongly that time in custody should provide access to rehabilitative opportunities.

Some young people were doing TAFE and industry courses such as retail and white card through the Centre schools but thought there was an opportunity to do more. Suggestions included White Card Forklift and trade skills like electrician and carpentry. Others suggested allowing young people to mow lawns and learn basic maintenance skills like gardening and horticulture, which they believed was already occurring at other Centres.

Differences in procedures, programs, or support services across Juvenile Justice Centres was also repeatedly raised by young people in custody. Some young people spoke about choosing to stay in a particular Centre because they felt it offered better programs even though the Centre was further from their home community. They acknowledged that there would always be differences resulting from the size of a Centre, the nature and ages of young people, and the number of young people on remand or control orders, however they thought it would be better if there was more consistency across all Centres in regard to the way they implemented procedures and the kinds programs and supports services they offered. Young people also spoke about Centres being either stricter or more flexible in relation to applying rules and behavioural incentive systems.

Young women raised particular issues due to being such a small population group within the total number of young people in custody. Young women in consultations in mixed-gender Centres said because they were in a predominantly male Centre, at times programs and processes did not meet their needs appropriately because they had been developed to meet the needs of young men.

One example they gave was that the meal menus at the Centre were geared towards a teenage male diet. They said meals contained a lot of carbohydrate dense food which was problematic for many young women as they put on weight. They thought it would be better to develop a menu with young women that helped them learn to eat healthily and feel good about themselves. Another example was the range of products available for buy in which some felt was more geared towards young men.

One of the main ways the young people felt that Centre processes and procedures could be improved was by creating mechanisms that give young people the chance to be involved in decision making. They understood that while many decisions need to be made by Centre Management, they felt there were areas such as choice of food and suggestions for activities where there was room for greater consultation with young people. One young person thought it would be good if they could pick the music that was played on the Centre “radio” in their rooms. Young people said that being asked their opinion and having their input acted upon, increased their emotional wellbeing:

“In this type of place we can’t say what we want or what we need because this is a place where we have to come ... if I could choose, I would like for it to feel like home, that’s what we need so we can feel right in here.”

In some Centres young people reported liking the food provided, although also wanted to have healthier options such as multigrain bread and wanted to be able to eat seconds more often. In other Centres young people reported wanting a greater variety of foods. They said in a living environment where much of what happens is outside their control, having variety in food made a difference to them and gave them something to look forward to. Alternating hot food, sandwiches, and something special on a weekend was a suggestion made by young people, and was something that already happens at some Centres but not others.

Clothing was another area young people spoke about at length. They wanted to be asked about the kind of clothes they had to wear. Most said they would like to be able to wear longer socks rather than ankle socks. Several said they had been given second hand clothes to wear rather than new ones when they arrived. They also thought that being able to wear their own shoes, hats and shirts was a good reward and incentive for good behaviour and achieving high stages.

Young people spoke about the importance of visits to them and maintaining family contact. In some Centres they said they would like to have longer visits. In the large Centres, visits were only one hour, while at other Centres visits were two hours:



“Family helps to calm you down, you get to see something different, especially important for people doing a long sentence.”

Sharing food with family during visits was also something many of the young people said they would like to be able to do more often. This was allowed in some Centres but not others. Some suggested having a vending machine where family could purchase something to share with them.

Finally young people in custody spoke about the importance of being prepared for their transition back to the community. Young people talked about the value of commencing a discharge plan in custody so things were set up for before they are released, with many speaking about how they valued the process of goalsetting with their caseworkers:



“Instead of wasting time, in here talk to caseworkers try to get jobs interviews lined up outside, or seeing counselling ... whatever you need to for yourself, setting it up from the inside, having those steps already there, instead of having to start from scratch.”

However they acknowledged even with a case plan it can be tough for young people to turn their lives around. They described watching young people coming back to custody because they had either not taken advantage of the support offered to them in custody or that the level of support they had in custody was not available to them in the communities to which they returned:

“A support team before you get out, so you aren’t back in here a week later.”

They said that many came back into custody because drug use forced them to return to criminal behaviour and thought more targeted drug and alcohol programs focused on teaching young people skills to use when they are released would be beneficial:

“To help you get ready for the community just because everyone else is doing drugs and alcohol doesn’t mean you have to.”

Pre-release programs were spoken about very positively by young people. They said a pre-release Unit was important for young people to be able to learn living skills such as washing clothes, hygiene, cooking and cleaning as many had not been taught these skills before. They said it was helpful having six months prior to discharge to set up education, training and employment to develop a routine and connections before leaving custody. Young

people said this, along with having more freedom and not being supervised with the same level of scrutiny, helped them reduce anxiety and feel much more prepared to successfully reintegrate back in the community.

Young women talked about being able to access the pre-release Unit on a day basis but could not live in the Unit. They felt that there should be a similar pre-release unit for young women so they could fully utilise these opportunities as well. Young women serving long remands also said there needed to be more pre-release options for them. They felt more uncertainty because they did not know when they would be released but wanted to be able use their time in custody to develop plans to prevent them returning to situations that had led to their offending:

“I could be let out from court and not have any preparation.”

One issue raised by young people was the impact of long remand periods on the capacity of a young person to engage with programs, in particular being able to engage with programs they thought could help them reintegrate into the community. This included medium and high risk programs such as those teaching independent living skills and trade or vocational programs. They explained that they understood the security reasons why young people on remand have less access to programs while the Centre assesses their behaviour, although they felt it would be helpful to have rehabilitative programs that can be accessed by long term remandees with good behaviour levels. Some commented that they experienced a long remand period followed by a short control order to account for time served, which left them feeling less prepared for life after custody as they only had a short time to commence discharge planning with their

caseworker and to undertake programs to help them after release.

Several young people across Juvenile Justice Centres suggested that having a requirement to undertake conditions to connect to services, supports, and programs as either diversion from custody or part of a supervision order after release would be helpful. Some said they struggled with self-discipline, while others said young people made poor decisions but should be given an opportunity show they have learnt. Making attendance at services and programs conditional would force them to address issues that led them into trouble and help reduce the temptation become involved in negative activities post release. They specifically spoke about the Koori Court model as offering young Aboriginal people this opportunity.





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