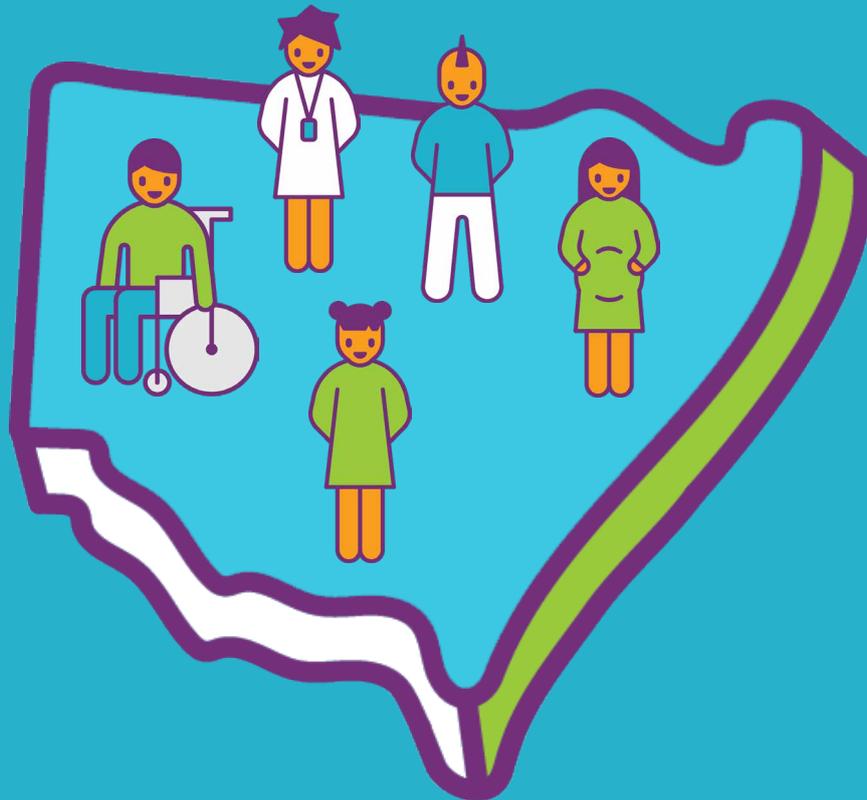


**YOUTH
ACTION**

A NSW for Young People: Beyond 2019



Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and youth services in NSW. Our work helps build the capacity of young people, youth workers and youth services, and we advocate for positive change on issues affecting these groups.

It is the role of Youth Action to:

1. Respond to social and political agendas relating to young people and the youth service sector.
.....
2. Provide proactive leadership and advocacy to shape the agenda on issues affecting young people and youth services.
.....
3. Collaborate on issues that affect young people and youth workers.
.....
4. Promote a positive profile in the media and the community of young people and youth services.
.....
5. Build capacity for young people to speak out and take action on issues that affect them.
.....
6. Enhance the capacity of the youth services sector to provide high quality services.
.....
7. Ensure Youth Action's organisational development, efficiency, effectiveness and good governance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Youth Action acknowledges and pays respect to the traditional owners of the land, past, present and future, across NSW. We are committed to a positive future for Aboriginal young people and their communities. The Youth Action office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and we acknowledge their traditional custodianship.



Youth Action NSW
Suite 401, 52-58 William St
Woolloomooloo NSW, 2011 Australia
p (02) 8354 3700
e info@youthaction.org.au
ABN 17 209 492 539

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Introduction

Young people are of critical importance to the NSW community. One third of Australia's young people live in NSW,¹ constituting 1.4 million young people 12–25 and they make up 18% of the population in the state.²



This report outlines each of the key actions the NSW Government needs to take across a range of issues that impact young people.

Youth Action, as the peak body for young people and youth services in NSW, has 30 years of expertise and experience working with young people and the youth support sector in NSW to ensure young people are supported, engaged and valued in our society.

Youth Action advocates for change for young people in NSW, particularly young people who are excluded or experience disadvantage. With young people and youth support services, we have identified a number of changes that the NSW government must make to improve the lives of young people. Our work is informed by significant primary research, consultation and engaging with thousands of young people and hundreds of youth services.

Young people are experts in their own experience, and their views are essential to solving the challenges for young people and their communities. Their views should not only be heard, but be influential – taken into account on matters that impact their lives at all levels. This principle underpins each of the key actions for the NSW Government.

Currently, there is no Minister for Young People in Cabinet to represent the specific needs of young people across portfolios. Renewing this portfolio is pivotal to changing the story for young people and to ensure that young people are part of central government decision making mechanisms. We need bi-partisan commitment from all sides of politics for a Minister for Young People with a corresponding portfolio.

Youth Action is calling on all parties to commit to a Minister for Young People with a corresponding portfolio, to commit to the actions in this report, and to make NSW a better place for young people.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Katie Acheson'.

Katie Acheson
CEO

ENDNOTES

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A call to action

NSW can be a place where all young people are valued, engaged and supported. Right now, while many young people in NSW are doing well, there are many more who consistently do not get the support they need, or who do not have opportunity to reach their potential.

The experiences young people have at this stage of development will have life-long impact. It is imperative that young people thrive now, not only because of the impact this has on the communities of the future, because they are a valued part of the community today.

The NSW Government can choose to make NSW the best possible place for young people, particularly those who experience intersectional and compounding disadvantage and exclusion.

There are 10 fundamental changes young people need.



AS DETAILED IN 'A NSW FOR YOUNG PEOPLE: BEYOND 2019' YOUTH ACTION IS CALLING ON ALL PARTIES TO:

REINTRODUCE REAL REPRESENTATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN GOVERNMENT

- Appoint a Minister for Young People

IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

- Ensure young people have appropriate mental health help and care that is timely and youth-specific.
- Take steps to prevent youth suicide.

PROTECT YOUNG PEOPLE AND CARE LEAVERS IN NSW TO GROW UP HEALTHILY, HAPPILY AND SAFELY

- Ensure young people at risk of harm get better protection and support.
- Invest in prevention and early intervention for young people to address issues before they become a crisis.
- Raise the age of leaving care to 21, for young people who wish to stay beyond 18.
- Give young people who are leaving care the support and skills they need to succeed.

ENABLE ALL YOUNG PEOPLE TO HAVE A SAFE AND AFFORDABLE PLACE TO CALL HOME

- Support first home buyers.
- Secure a better deal for young people who are renting.
- Plan to end homelessness.

CREATE AN EDUCATION SYSTEM THAT EQUIPS YOUNG PEOPLE FOR THEIR FUTURE

- Make sure all schools have a Student Support Officer.
- Improve the use of suspension so that it supports young people and their education outcomes.
- Ensure young people with disability educational equality.

ACHIEVE EXCELLENT AND AFFORDABLE POST SCHOOL PATHWAYS

- Improve school to work transitions through effective career guidance.
- Strengthen access to Vocational Education and Training.

CHANGE THE STORY ON YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

- Make a youth unemployment plan in the first 100 days of government.
- Lead the way on best youth employment practice.
- Help young people who need it to get and keep work.
- Make transport free for young jobseekers.

MAKE NSW A SAFE STATE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

- Make prevention of gender-based violence a key priority in NSW secondary schools.
- Ensure young people with experience of domestic and family violence can access the right support.

KEEP YOUNG PEOPLE OUT OF PRISON

- Support justice reinvestment via youth and community-led solutions.
- Use the whole range of diversionary options to their full extent.
- Raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility in NSW to at least 14 years.
- Implement immediate changes to make detention, as a last resort, safe for young people.

RESOURCE A JOINED-UP NSW YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SECTOR TO BE ACCESSIBLE TO ALL YOUNG PEOPLE

- Fund the youth development sector to meet need across the continuum.
- Change the system to enable services to adapt and respond to local need, including through outcomes frameworks.

Improve mental health outcomes for young people

Young people should live happy, healthy and fulfilled lives that give them a strong foundation for their mental wellbeing. However, young people are particularly at risk of poor mental health and, at the moment, we are not responding quickly or effectively enough.

75% of mental health problems first appear before the age of 25.¹

1 in 4 young people aged 16–24 experience a mental illness.²

More than **70%** of young **women** and **80%** of young **men** who need help and support don't get it.³

45% of all young people who died by suicide in 2016 were from NSW.

83% of young people turn to friends for help before others.⁴



THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Fund a fully integrated youth-specific mental health service system that coordinates care from prevention to early intervention, through to clinical and specialist care. This should prioritise gaps experienced by young people from regional, rural and remote areas, who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or who are LGBTI young people.
- Develop and implement a youth-specific suicide prevention plan in consultation with children and young people. This should include a culturally-appropriate, community-led and targeted Aboriginal plan.
- Fund a youth-specific mental health service system that acts to eliminate or subsidise transport barriers that prevent young people getting help.
- Introduce compulsory mental health first aid for GPs, frontline workers, and people who have high contact with young people.
- Support programs, such as Friend2Friend, which recognise that young people often turn to friends first, and their friends should be equipped to help out.

Young people should live happy, healthy and fulfilled lives that give them a strong foundation for their mental wellbeing. However, young people are particularly at risk of poor mental health and, at the moment, we are not responding quickly or effectively enough.

Young people also live with mental illnesses every day. Mental health issues are associated with social and economic disadvantages, such as impaired academic achievement and school attendance, hindered social development, unemployment and housing instability. Young people are particularly at risk:

- 1 in 4 young people aged 16–24 experience a mental illness.⁵
- 14% of those aged 14–17 experience a mental health condition each year.⁶
- 1 in 5 young people aged 15–19 have levels of psychological stress that indicate a probable serious mental illness.⁷

When young people are struggling with their mental health, they are prone to self-isolation and behaviours that risk their health, like substance abuse.⁸ Despite the high risks they face, quality and access to services for young people aged 12–24 is among the poorest.⁹ Only 9.9% of mental health expenditure by States and Territories in the year 2010–2011 was directed at child and adolescent mental health programs, and only 0.2% at youth mental health services specifically.¹⁰

One of the most frightening aspects of youth mental health is the growing rates of suicide. Suicide is the primary cause of death among young people in Australia and the number of young Australians who have died by suicide as the result of a mental health condition is the highest it has been in ten years.¹¹ Occurrences of intentional self-harm are estimated to be between 40–100 times greater than the number of young people who die due to intentional self-harm.¹²

Suicide remains a critical issue. More young people die by suicide than in car accidents.¹³ In 2016, 391 young people aged 15–24 died by suicide, with 45% of those being in NSW.¹⁴ From 2011 to 2015, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15–24 were around four times more likely than non-Indigenous Australians of the same age to die from intentional self-harm.¹⁵

Youth Action undertook significant primary research in 2017 consulting and engaging with young people, youth support services, and frontline workers providing mental health services in metropolitan, regional and remote areas. This research demonstrated that the current mental health system is segmented, outdated and adult-centric. This makes it difficult for young people to navigate, and the limited youth-focus is alienating. The inaccessibility of services means young people go without the support they need, and don't develop appropriate help-seeking behaviours.¹⁶

Young people living remotely are more likely to experience isolation, poverty and a lack of services, and often have a strong culture of self-reliance that discourages help-seeking behaviour. Rates of suicide and self-harm increase for young people who live outside of major cities and increase further with their remoteness. Because of this, there should be a specific focus on those in rural and regional areas. Youth service workers, frontline staff and other health professionals consistently report waits of up to three months to see mental health specialists.¹⁷ Psychiatric beds can take more than a year to access in critical situations.¹⁸

Because regional young people struggle with service availability, youth mental health providers such as headspace, ReachOut and Kids Helpline have successfully introduced e-mental health solutions. While these cannot substitute for in-person counselling, they are extremely effective at providing information, support, and assessment, and can assist prevention and management of symptoms. They have the benefit of a high degree of anonymity, meaning they are often useful early identification and referral tools.

Stigma continues to be a concern for young people. Four out of five young people in Australia think that people their age will not seek support for anxiety or depression because they are worried about what other people will think of them.¹⁹ The provision of meaningful e-health services helps young people overcome stigma and reluctance to seek help.

But there is a lot that can be done to improve outcomes for young people. Intervention can be particularly potent in adolescence. It is well established that young people experience a key period of rapid and extensive psychological and biological growth, 'second only to early childhood in the rate and breadth of developmental change',²⁰ coupled with an increase in vulnerability to a range of risks. During such an important period of growth, risks can become embedded or averted. Interventions during adolescence can decrease the adverse long-term impacts of, for example, violence and abuse with the potential to change life trajectories.²¹

Many of the mental health and wellbeing challenges faced by adults can be traced to adolescence or young adulthood and intervening early in a person's life and providing them with support and capacity-building when mental health concerns begin to emerge significantly decreases the impact and intensity of those issues later in life.²² Growing protective factors and access to services is essential. Early intervention can achieve the best outcomes for young people and can limit negative outcomes, such as the onset of chronic mental illness and suicide.²³

We commend the work of Government through successive suicide prevention strategies, collaboration with federal suicide prevention and mental health strategies and programs and the establishment of youth health services in Local Health Districts. However, improved coordination, funding and targeted programming are required to make sure we stem the increase of poor mental health among young people and vulnerable groups in NSW, and ensure they get the help they need when they need it.

The NSW can act to prevent poor youth mental health and suicide. Improving access to youth-specific mental health and suicide prevention services for young people, to address the complex mental health needs that are currently overlooked. Without significant funding and attention, the rates will not decrease.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Fund a fully integrated youth-specific mental health service system that coordinates a spectrum of care from prevention to early intervention, through to clinical and specialist care. This should prioritise gaps experienced by regional, rural and remote young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, as well as LGBTI young people.
- Develop and implement a youth-specific suicide prevention plan in consultation with children and young people. This should include a culturally-appropriate, community-led and targeted Aboriginal plan.
- Fund a youth-specific mental health service system that acts to eliminate or subsidise transport barriers that prevent young people getting help.
- Introduce compulsory mental health first aid for GPs, frontline workers, and people who have high contact with young people.
- Support programs, such as Friend2Friend, which recognise that young people often turn to friends first, and their friends should be equipped to help out.

ENDNOTES

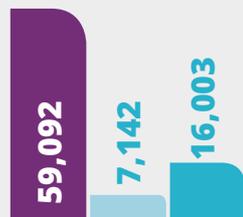
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Protect young people and care leavers in NSW to grow up healthily, happily and safely

All young people have the right to be safe and to receive loving care and support. Young people also have a right to receive the services they need to enable them to succeed in life.

However, in NSW the number of children and young people entering care is increasing, which places more pressure on the system. As a result, young people who need help often don't get it. The numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people entering care have increased and continue to be significantly overrepresented in the care population. Young people who leave care have significantly poor outcomes.

Out of a total **59,092** children in NSW receiving child protection services, **7,142** were aged 15–17 years, significantly less than the **16,003** aged 10–14 years.¹



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are **ten times** more likely to be placed in out of home care (OOHC),²

Investigation by the NSW Ombudsman in 2014 reported that 'a higher proportion of reports about adolescents were often receiving no response.'³



THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Develop a whole of government policy and practice framework, and a strategy that articulates a strong commitment specifically to at risk young people, including Aboriginal young people, with measures to track progress and provide accountability.
- Commit to increase expenditure to prevention and early intervention over a five-year period, including programs for prevention and early intervention for young people aged 12–25 in NSW.
- Raise the age of leaving out-of-home care to 21, for young people who wish to stay beyond 18, as recommended by the Home Stretch campaign.⁴ There should be adequate supports attached in relation to housing, education, employment, life skills, mental health and peer support, and adequate assistance for carers.
- Implement policies to prepare young people to transition to independence and invest in quality monitoring of agencies' compliance with these policies.

Young people have the right to a response when they require care and protection, and intervention can reap both personal and systemic rewards. Yet, as a consequence of additional pressure on the system, young people who are at risk and who need support don't get it. It is very clear from a range of systems reviews, government policy statements, data sets, and through evidence provided from youth support services that young people at risk in NSW are not receiving a sufficient systemic response.

Young people in NSW often are not receiving a statutory child protection intervention when it is needed. Aside from a statutory response, when a young person comes into contact with the system – whether they are reported as at Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) or below ROSH – there should be mechanisms in place that trigger a response.⁵ Many young people at risk of harm do not get the support they need.

As a result, the youth support sector is working with an increasing number of complex clients without the appropriate recognition or funding. This has flow-on effects as to how well NSW can stop the escalation of young people in crisis while early intervention services are increasingly dealing with complex and crisis clients.

There is also tension between children and young people the child protection system of NSW. There is no shortage of evidence that demonstrates the impact of the first years of life on lifelong health and wellbeing outcomes.⁶ It is well established that young people experience a key period of rapid and extensive psychological and biological growth, 'second only to early childhood in the rate and breadth of developmental change,⁷ coupled with an increase in vulnerability to a range of risks. During such an important period of growth, risks can become embedded or averted. Interventions during adolescence can decrease the adverse long-term impacts of, for example, violence and abuse.⁸ The intervention of the child protection system can serve to protect vulnerable young people from the

worst of poor social outcomes, such as involvement in justice systems, homelessness, unemployment and poor mental health.

This tension is reflected, but not well addressed, in NSW's child protection systems. While NSW has provided important investment in the early years of life, policy and strategy has not kept pace with the evidence base around adolescent intervention. This is also true of the child protection system; when prioritisation is necessary, very young children are considered a high priority while young people are not. Despite strong evidence on the importance of life cycles and the effectiveness of intervention both in early childhood as well as adolescence, it is clear from data, as well as reports from those who work on the ground with young people that are 'older,' young people such as those aged 14–17 are not well supported across the child protection system.

The 2011 Child Rights report further highlights the unmet need for young people, stating: 'There is a lack of government attention to older children and adolescents. This is most evident in the "buck-passing" between community services and youth justice authorities when children in need of care come into contact with the criminal justice system, the lack of adequate accommodation options for older children, and the abuse of children even after they have been the subject of care orders.'⁹

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are vastly over-represented in the child protection system. Multiple inquiries have reinforced the consistent and enduring issues of the child protection system in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Many of the 54 recommendations outlined *Bringing Them Home*,¹⁰ directed at healing and reconciliation, as well as addressing the policies and practices around contemporary removals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people from their families, remain unrealised almost 20 years later.

The asserted principle of self-determination for Indigenous peoples is the key to reversing the over-representation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system and to eliminating unjustified removals of Indigenous children from their families.¹¹

NSW has the highest rate of removals in Australia, with approximately one in ten Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in OOHHC.¹² While FaCS has made efforts to address this, such as developing the *Aboriginal Cultural Inclusion Framework 2015–2018*, aiming to embed Aboriginal cultural inclusion, accountability and monitoring processes into the work of FaCS,¹³ this has not been enough to reduce the disproportionate rate of removals. The facts of contemporary separation highlight a need for fundamental change in child protection legislation, policy and practice.

Young people should get timely and appropriate support services, even if it's not a statutory response, when they're reported at risk of harm.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Develop a whole of government policy and practice framework, and a strategy that articulates a strong commitment specifically to at risk young people, including Aboriginal young people, with measures to track progress and provide accountability.

We need to make sure that every preventative effort has been made so that removing a child or young person from a family is a last resort. Prevention and early intervention is critical to reduce the increasing numbers of children and young people in crisis. This is a core strategy of the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*: 'Australia needs to move from seeing "protecting children" merely as a response to abuse and neglect to one of promoting the safety and wellbeing of children.'¹⁴

It is well documented that prevention and early intervention are both more effective in achieving positive outcomes and a stronger investment. As put by Allen and Smith, 'The two public policy strengths of Early Intervention are firstly that it is less expensive and second it is more effective than late intervention. It is no longer viable to take ever increasing amounts of taxation from the public to deal with the ever-increasing impact of failing to intervene early.'¹⁵ As highlighted by Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 'expenditure on late intervention and crisis response is becoming unsustainable – rising demand and increasing complexity is creating significant long-term challenges for government budgets.'¹⁶

It is clear that the tertiary intervention to protect children and young people from harm is not adequately resourced. Nor does this give basis for a reduction or removal of funding from young people in crisis. It must, however, be recognised that there is a very real risk of the continual growth of young people in crisis, because support to prevent, intervene early or mitigate crisis is neglected. In NSW, while there are positive indications about early intervention, the rhetoric fails to shift to real financial commitment.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Commit to increase expenditure to prevention and early intervention over a five-year period, including programs for prevention and early intervention for young people aged 12–25 in NSW.

Young people leaving care are some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in Australia. In the first year of leaving care, 35% of young people are homeless, only 35% complete Year 12, 29% are unemployed, and 46% of males are involved in the youth justice system.¹⁷

In the past six months, Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia have all committed to or started implementing policies to extend support for young people in out-of-home care until the age of 21.¹⁸

Analysis from Deloitte found that compared with 18-year-old care leavers, those staying in care until 21 were half as likely to become homeless, 24% less likely to suffer mental illness and 13% less likely to be drug dependent.¹⁹ Every dollar invested in an extension of OOHHC support in NSW would see a return of \$3.40.²⁰

While extending out-of-home care is an excellent option for many young people, the NSW government needs to continue to improve its transition planning outcomes so that young people not only have, are aware of, and are happy with their leaving care plan, but that it goes beyond a piece of paper and ensures that young people have the skills and relationships in place to thrive independent of care.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Raise the age of leaving out-of-home care to 21, for young people who wish to stay beyond 18, as recommended by the Home Stretch campaign.²¹ There should be adequate supports attached in relation to housing, education, employment, life skills, mental health and peer support, and adequate assistance for carers.
- Implement policies to prepare young people to transition to independence and invest in quality monitoring of agencies' compliance with these policies.

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Enable all young people to have a safe and affordable place to call home

Every young person in NSW should have an affordable and secure place to call home. Housing impacts on all aspects of a young person's life such as health and wellbeing, access to education and skill development, and work opportunities.

For young people in NSW, high rental costs, low incomes, insecure share housing, and the lack of affordable housing and social housing stock all make having a place to live a challenge. While some young people are staying at home for longer, others don't have the option.

In the last ten years in NSW, homelessness amongst young people aged 18–24 has increased by 92%.¹



In 2016, there were 9,048 young people experiencing homelessness in NSW.²



More than half of young people under 24 continue to experience housing stress.³



NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

Support first home buyers by:

- Investing in the social and affordable housing that Australia needs.
- Prioritising first home-buyers over property speculators by resetting the tax system.

Secure a better deal for renters by:

- Prohibiting 'no grounds' evictions in the NSW Rental Tenancies Act 2010
- Tightening regulations around applications for rentals to stop discrimination.

Plan to end homelessness by:

- Addressing all the drivers of homelessness, including the lack of affordable housing, poverty and family violence.
- Rapidly rehousing people who are homeless and help them stay there.
- Addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal people among the homeless.
- Committing to ending homelessness by 2030 in negotiation with federal, state and territory governments by taking action to prevent homelessness and delivering rapid access to the housing and support people need if they do lose their own home.
- Improving access to early intervention programs that identify young people at risk before they reach crisis point.
- Expanding funding for long-term transitional services that include wrap-around support based on models designed and proven to work with young people

Stable, affordable and suitable housing is necessary to ensure a young person's economic, mental, physical and social wellbeing early in life. It is also connected to a positive sense of self, good health, social cohesion and educational completion. However, in NSW it is notoriously difficult for young people to attain stable housing and they are increasingly becoming long-term renters because rising housing prices lock them out of the market. Young people in NSW should have access to stable, affordable and appropriate housing options, and rarely find themselves at risk of homelessness.

When it comes to accessing housing generally, young people face barriers and discrimination. High rental costs, low incomes, insecure share housing, and the lack of affordable housing and social housing stock all make independent living a challenge for many young people. While some young people are staying at home for longer, for others this simply is not an option.

MORE YOUNG PEOPLE ARE RENTING IN AN INCREASINGLY UNAFFORDABLE AND INSECURE MARKET

With homeownership falling for younger people,⁴ more young people are renting. With a generation potentially destined to be 'permanent renters,' renting needs to be affordable, safe and secure. There was a 14.1% increase in young households renting (aged between 15–24 years) from 2005–2012.⁵ Indeed, in 2012, 77.7% of households headed by 15–24-year-olds in Australia were renting in the private rental market.⁶

The rental market is also becoming increasingly unviable for young people due to problems with the affordability and stability of renting in NSW. According to the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), four out of five 'very low-income' households pay an unaffordable rent.⁷ In 2018, only two out of 67,000 rental properties surveyed were 'affordable' to a young person receiving Youth Allowance or Newstart.⁸

Young people also tend to be low income earners. Young people are at a point in their lives in which they are employed part-time or casually, in part to enable flexibility for study commitments or to undertake apprenticeships. On average, those in full-time employment earn between \$600–\$900 per week, and those in part-time employment earn around \$180–\$380.⁹ A quarter of low-income households pay rent in excess of 50% of their total income.¹⁰ More than half of young people under 24 continue to experience housing stress even after receiving government-funded rental support.¹¹ In 2017, young people were hit the hardest by financial stress, with 50% of young people aged 18–29 having difficulty paying for the necessities – like food, rent or bills.¹²

This lack of affordable housing has resulted in concerning trends such as overcrowding, shared accommodation and informal leases. Rental accommodation is insecure in tenure, and young people are seen by landlords as 'risky.' As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult for young people to access what little affordable rental accommodation there is.

Discrimination is real for young people in the rental market. In a nationally representative survey, young people were 14% more likely to experience discrimination in relation to their age and were more likely to say they were discriminated against (55%) compared with those over the age of 35 – particularly in regard to their age (22%).¹³

In NSW, the Residential Tenancies Act 2010 allows landlords to evict tenants without requiring a reason. While recent changes to NSW legislation has been positive for renters, unfair 'no grounds' evictions and room for discrimination still exist. Research shows that 8% of Australians have experienced a 'no grounds' eviction during their rental history.¹⁴ These kinds of legal loopholes leave renters, especially young renters, vulnerable to housing instability and discrimination.

Another significant issue is the short-term nature of rental tenancies. Over two million people rent in NSW, and it is estimated that 83% are on a no fixed term lease.¹⁵

A NSW GOVERNMENT CAN (AS RECOMMENDED BY EVERYBODY'S HOME):

Support first home buyers by:

- Investing in the social and affordable housing that Australia needs.
- Prioritising first home-buyers over property speculators by resetting the tax system.

Secure a better deal for renters by:

- Prohibiting 'no grounds' evictions in the NSW Rental Tenancies Act 2010.
- Tightening regulations around applications for rentals to stop discrimination.

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IS INCREASING

Housing and rental unaffordability and insecurity are some of the factors that have increased the risk of youth homelessness. Young people are particularly vulnerable to homelessness.¹⁶ More young people experience homelessness in NSW than in any other state, and in 2016 there were 9,048 young people 12–24 experiencing homelessness in NSW.¹⁷

Young people are overrepresented in the homelessness population, representing approximately 25% of the homelessness population in NSW,¹⁸ despite only being 18% of the NSW population.¹⁹ Youth homelessness figures are also generally accepted as vastly underestimated, with ongoing difficulties in accounting for those who are, for example, couch surfing or living in overcrowded accommodation.

Homelessness does not affect every young person equally and particular groups face higher risks. It is therefore essential that housing and homelessness

services are culturally appropriate and aware of needs that are specific to particular groups.

Homelessness amongst young people costs Australia an estimated \$747 million extra per year in costs to the medical and criminal justice systems. This is in addition to the costs of providing specialist housing services.²⁰ Providing better pathways into safe and secure long-term housing will not only benefit young people, it will also benefit governments and community in the form of significant cost savings.

Ensuring that all young people have access to safe, secure housing requires a response from many areas, including federal and state government, the education system and employment providers. It will encompass working within an early intervention model with families and schools, addressing overall housing affordability, and ensuring better transitions out of government institutions such as juvenile justice, psychiatric hospital and OOHC.

Young people require a different model of support and service than adults.²¹ Youth-specific services are best placed to support the complex needs and vulnerability of young people who do not have a safe and stable place to live. Given the importance of adolescence and early adulthood for development, it is vital that intervention into homelessness occur as early as possible. Early intervention, outreach, rapid rehousing and ongoing support will greatly assist young people to transition out of homelessness. This should involve partnering with schools, other educational institutions, the community and youth organisations, to identify young people who are at risk of homelessness early.

Generalist youth services are essential services in relation to preventing and intervening early for young people at risk of homelessness. Their role is to form relationships and provide service to enhance the protective assets in young people's lives, as well as support them intensively in times of need. These services are different to the specialist programs that provide housing and support

to attain housing. Despite this, young people approach youth services for support for housing and homelessness. Services also work with correlates of homelessness including particularly family breakdown, family/household violence and relationship breakdown or violence; but also drug and alcohol support needs, mental health needs, and needs associated with exclusion from education, training and employment.²²

Homeless young people, rental stress and poverty, as well as the decrease in homeownership, are interrelated products of poor housing affordability.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN (AS RECOMMENDED BY EVERYBODY'S HOME):

- Address all the drivers of homelessness, including the lack of affordable housing, poverty and family violence.
- Rapidly rehouse people who are homeless and help them stay there.
- Address the over-representation of Aboriginal people.
- Commit to ending homelessness by 203 in negotiation with federal, state and territory governments, by taking action to prevent homelessness and delivering rapid access to the housing and support people need if they do lose their own home.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Improve access to early intervention programs that identify young people at risk before they reach crisis point.
- Expand funding for long-term transitional services that include wrap-around support based on models designed and proven to work with young people.

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Create an education system that equips young people for their future

Young people in NSW should enjoy full access to affordable and quality education that meets their current needs and prepares them for the future. This means moving beyond a 'bricks and mortar' approach to school investment, and ensuring all young people are engaged and supported to learn.

It's clear that young people need additional support to stay engaged in school, and we need to make sure that those who need the most support aren't excluded from education entirely. Transitions from school are a challenging time, and it's vital that pathways from school to higher education training or work are excellent, affordable and the right fit for the future.

20% of young people are **not attending school**, and a further 20% do not feel they belong in their school.¹



More than **half** of Australian students are studying in fields where more than **two-thirds** of jobs will be **automated**.²



27% or 26,535 of young people in NSW did not reach Year 12 or an equivalent by age 19.³



THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Provide committed and increased funding for Student Support Officers across NSW, with changes to the funding model to allow for more equitable access for schools, particularly in areas of high need and for regional, rural and remote areas.
- Require NSW schools to publish data on their school exclusion statistics and make their disciplinary policies publicly available.
- Require NSW schools to review suspension cases on a regular basis to ensure schools are using suspension as a safeguard and last resort.
- Form an independent body with expertise in both a school context and in working with young people to review school suspensions and ensure all young people have access to supportive and quality education.
- As recommended by the NSW Ombudsman, require NSW schools to systematically identify the students who require individualised intervention and support, and track practice, progress, and outcomes in relation to these students, including mechanisms for identifying those who require escalation to additional support.⁴
- Implement a consistent definition of disability in schools and appropriate funding for students with a disability.
- Improve inclusive training for teachers and staff coupled with appropriate policies and frameworks to ensure greater outcomes.

Education is a key determinant of a young person's economic, social and emotional development, and is crucial for establishing a sense of identity and place in the world. Young people have the right to an education that effectively prepares them for the present and the future, that is high-quality, affordable, safe and supportive and meets their individual and diverse needs. Education encompasses life-long learning that supports young people to develop socially, intellectually, physically and emotionally, as well as to engage in the labour market.

Across NSW there are over 3,000 government (public) and non-government (Independent and Catholic systemic) schools in NSW, supporting over 1.1 million primary and secondary school students.⁵ Of these, there are over 540,000 young people aged 12–17,⁶ with around 507,000 (as at 2015) positively participating in education.⁷

However, some young people are neither engaged in education or training. The school retention rate for NSW is one of the lowest across Australia, and although young people are increasingly at school, some are disengaging and others are not achieving.⁸ Over 21% are still not attaining a Year 12 qualification, and 25% are neither engaged in education nor employment Australia wide.⁹ Other research estimates that 20% of young people are not attending school, and a further 20% do not feel they belong in their school.¹⁰ Australian rates of youth participation in education are below those of many other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.¹¹

Inequalities in educational outcomes persist in NSW. Young people from low SES, Aboriginal or from rural backgrounds as well as young people with disabilities continue to be at a disadvantage in our education system.¹²

Education systems in NSW need to address the barriers that prevent some young people from education and schooling that meets their needs. In addition, there should be a particular focus on ensuring outcomes for those experiencing disadvantage and those disengaging from traditional delivery methods.

STUDENT SUPPORT OFFICERS

There is a significant body of research that shows links between a school's emphasis on wellbeing and positive mental health and social outcomes for its students.¹³ In NSW, the *Supported Students, Successful Schools* program provides schools with services such as psychologists, school counsellors and Student Support Officers (SSO). *Supported Students, Successful Schools* is flexible funding for wellbeing services, and of 3,000 public schools only 381 have access to funding. From 2018–2020 funding was allocated to the Student Wellbeing Support Program, a three-year program of \$7,000 annually to assist schools to fund the employment of a student wellbeing support officer.

Youth Action's consultation with members showed that the wellbeing programs in schools can be inconsistent, with:

- School counsellor positions being unfilled for long periods of time.
- Process issues with access to school counsellors, such as long wait lists or high rates of non-attendance at counsellor sessions.
- Stigma associated with being called out in the middle of class to see a counsellor.
- A lack of specialised psychologist capacity once issues progress past what can be handled by a school counsellor.
- Wellbeing funding being allocated towards targeted learning support in classrooms.
- A resistance to working with outside agencies who can support student wellbeing.

As part of the *Supported Students, Successful Schools* program, schools in NSW have the discretion to employ SSOs. The initiative aimed to provide support to secondary students, with a particular focus on reaching and engaging more vulnerable students to enhance protective factors such as supporting positive relationships, building resilience as well as providing

support with issues such as stress, mental health, disengagement and bullying.¹⁴

An independent review of SSOs found that there is overwhelming support for the SSO initiative from principals, school staff, SSOs, students and external organisations.¹⁵ The results found that:

- Almost two-thirds of students in participating schools reported having sought the help of the SSO.
- 80% of students said the SSO had made their school a safer place.
- 88% of principals said it had reduced bullying, including cyberbullying, 91% said it improved student behaviour, and 77% said it had improved academic performance.¹⁶

The review also found that SSOs complement (rather than duplicate) the existing range of wellbeing provisions in the schools and link the school with agencies and communities. Other research has found resistance and negative experiences amongst students to approaching school counsellors for support.¹⁷ It is essential to ensure young people reach out for help when they need it, and the review of SSOs demonstrate they bridge a gap between no support and crisis intervention.

Students saw their SSO neither as a teacher nor as a counsellor, but as something in between. This increased willingness to seek support and allowed wellbeing programs to take a more preventative approach.¹⁸

Since the end of the pilot period, the Department of Education has provided \$51 million for wellbeing, the equivalent of 200 SSOs. However, the Department no longer provides centralised support, training and coordination of SSOs. As a decentralised group, this leaves these positions subject to isolation, high stress and turn-over, all of which compromise the effectiveness and outcomes of the program, a serious threat considering its proven success.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Provide committed funding and an increase in funding for Student Support Officers across NSW, with changes to the funding model to allow for more equitable access for schools, particularly in areas of high need and for regional, rural and remote areas.

SUSPENSION

School should also be a safe and happy place for students, and they should only be excluded from this learning environment as a last resort. Suspension is a tool used by schools to manage behaviour but it is exclusionary, ineffective and significantly disrupts the learning of a young person. It can have significant and negative impacts on young people. Suspension disproportionately disrupts the education of students with cognitive/learning impairments, students with a child protection/OOHC history, and Aboriginal students.¹⁹ While the use of short suspensions decreased by 2.5% between 2013 and 2015, there has been no significant change in long suspensions or in the number of students receiving short and/or long suspensions.²⁰

One key driver for student disengagement is school disciplinary practices such as suspension.²¹ Young people often present with challenging behaviours, and while it is increasingly understood that they are a symptom of emotional or behavioural disorders and experience, suspension is still commonly used to manage such manifesting behaviours in a school environment.

Generally, suspension is understood to have two core purposes – to remove threats to the safety and wellbeing of the school community and to punish the offender. The end result is supposed to be better behavior or a reversal of a trend. Normally a 'zero tolerance' policy towards disruptive behavior warranting suspension is intended to have positive and

immediate effects, as well as act as a deterrent. Yet it is clear that the negative impact on students outweighs any benefits from this policy.

As stated by Department of Education Employment and Work Relations (DEEWR): 'Suspension is an indication that something has gone grievously wrong. It is a process of exclusion directly at odds with the philosophy of inclusion which appears consistently in national and Departmental statements of policy and intent.'²² The NSW Ombudsman has most recently confirmed that 'there is no research evidence that the use of suspensions reduces disruptive classroom behaviour, and the research indicates that it can have detrimental consequences, including increased recurrence of the problem behaviour, lower scores in academic achievement, lower school retention rates, increased likelihood of involvement with the youth justice system, and poor long-term health and wellbeing outcomes.'²³

Presently, students can be issued with a short suspension of up to and including four days, or a long suspension, up to and including 20 days at the discretion of their school principal.²⁴ Since 2005, suspensions have been on the rise in NSW.

Suspension has been proven to be ineffective in tackling problematic behaviour in students. For example, 73% of students have said that suspensions 'did little' or 'did not help at all' to solve the problem that led to their suspension.²⁵ Instead, it lowers student engagement, jeopardises relationships and academic performance and is proven to increase the likelihood of students being incarcerated later in life – a trend known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

School suspension disproportionately affects Indigenous students, students from rural areas, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students with disabilities. In 2015 alone, 47,622 short suspensions and 17,640 long suspensions were issued.²⁶ Of the long suspensions, 24% were for

Aboriginal students, despite only constituting 7% of enrolments.²⁷ Suspensions are unlikely to be isolated instances, so students are often suspended multiple times. The average long suspension is 11.5 days, meaning students have their learning significantly disrupted.²⁸ Data after 2015 for NSW is not available.

The NSW Ombudsman found that to 'identify and develop appropriately targeted and intensive individualised supports requires skills that would be uncommon among many school staff.' The NSW Ombudsman also found that schools need 'assistance that both: a) delivers appropriate expertise, and b) provides strategies that are practical for the school environment.'²⁹

Suspension should only be used when the behaviour of a student puts other students or faculty members at risk of harm. While there are plenty of examples of good practice, the fact that Aboriginal young people, young people with a history of trauma and young people with disability are overrepresented in suspension practices demonstrates that practice and policy can be improved. In place of suspensions, schools should implement alternative disciplinary practices that prioritise inclusion for students who are at risk. A suspension of a student should then, as a tool of last resort, be used as a mechanism to give support to the student.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Require NSW schools to publish data on their school exclusion statistics and make their disciplinary policies publicly available.
- Require NSW schools to review suspension cases on a regular basis to ensure schools are using suspension as a safeguard and last resort.
- Form an independent body with expertise in both a school context and in working with young people, to review school suspensions to ensure all young people have access to supportive and quality education.

- As recommend by the NSW Ombudsman, require NSW schools to systematically identify the students who require individualised intervention and support, and track practice, progress, and outcomes in relation to these students, including mechanisms for identifying those who require escalation to additional support.³⁰

DISABILITY IN SCHOOLS

Nearly 12% of NSW students have disability, and 75% of these students attend mainstreams schools and are placed in regular classrooms.³¹ Despite legislation and programs such as the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, the *Disability Education Standards 2005 and Every Student, Every School*, people with a disability are less likely to complete Year 12 than their peers without disability.³² This is largely because the current system does not meet the needs of students with disability or supply the resources to encourage their full participation in the school experience.

Youth Action supports the review of current student training regarding inclusive classrooms. The *Every Student, Every School* initiative should be also be reviewed at a state-wide level to determine its effectiveness. It is also vital that young people should be consulted and involved in these reviews.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Implement a consistent definition of disability in schools and appropriate funding for students with a disability.
- Improve inclusive training for teachers and staff coupled with appropriate policies and frameworks to ensure greater outcomes.

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Achieve excellent and affordable post school pathways

After students finish school, post school pathways are essential for young people to find and sustain study or work. This can include vocational education and training, university, or apprenticeships and traineeships. By considering a range of options, young people are able to get higher-skilled jobs, increased wages and longer term employment.

But there are considerable barriers to post school pathways. Accessibility, affordability, and a lack of information about the options available are just some of the barriers, and these issues are compounded for young people experiencing various kinds of disadvantage.

990,000 jobs will be created by 2020. Just **70,000** will only require a senior secondary level education.¹

Many schools spend less than a cup of coffee on career guidance per student.²

By 24, only **58.9%** of young Australians from disadvantaged backgrounds are in education, training or work, compared with **83.1%** of those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.



THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Establish a school-to-work transitions taskforce with the necessary expertise, authority and resourcing to substantially improve transition outcomes.
- Increase funding and full-time positions for careers advisors in NSW Government secondary and tertiary institutions.
- Invest in career guidance programs and establish minimum standards by writing a dedicated career development policy within the Department of Education and integrating career development in tertiary institutions.
- Strengthen supports for career advisers – professional development and training, including on labour trends, working with employers as well as relationship and network development.
- Invest in innovation brokerage programs that bring together schools, employers, community organisations and education providers to improve employment outcomes.
- Decrease fees and increase fees free-scholarships and literacy and numeracy courses at TAFEs and vocational education and training institutes.
- Improve supports for disadvantaged students undertaking courses at these institutes.

Post-secondary education (PSE) is a vital pathway to attain higher-skilled jobs, increased wages and longer-term employment after exiting the school education system. Young people are involved in PSE by studying in vocational education and training, university or undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship.

Due to the significant social, developmental and economic benefits of participating in post-secondary education, barriers that prevent young people from engagement must be addressed.³ Accessibility, affordability and a lack of comprehensive information about their options are just some of the barriers that impact and prevent young people from gaining access to post-secondary education.⁴ Young people experiencing disadvantage due to financial, situational, educational or locational factors can find it particularly hard to enter higher educational institutions, making further education and training a less viable option. However, if the education system addresses these barriers adequately, post-secondary education can become increasingly accessible to a diverse range of young people.

SCHOOLS TO WORK TRANSITIONS

The school to work transition can be a turbulent time for young people. This is a period of time described as 'coming of age events which all young people experience as they leave school, consolidate skills, develop a sense of job readiness and make decisions about life and career'⁵ In an increasingly complex employment context, all young people experience the increasing difficulty of gaining employment, but some young people face considerably more challenges. The reduction of entry-level job opportunities, increased competition, job automation and the rising casualisation of the workforce have all contributed to systemic barriers that stop young people getting jobs.⁶ By age 24, only 58.9% of young Australians from disadvantaged backgrounds are fully engaged in education, training or work. This compares to 83.1% of those from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds.⁷ It is vital that young people have the

appropriate educational experiences to prepare them for a changed employment context.

The transition between school and work is particularly fraught because young people are especially transient as they move between school and towards tertiary study or a job and are likely to move out of a parent or guardians' home, move cities, work multiple short-term jobs and change social circles. Similarly, this transition is particularly difficult for young people from regional, remote or rural areas because the existing challenges are exacerbated by poor access to educational infrastructure and employment opportunities.

Many young people feel that secondary school does not equip them with the right skills for work, and that comprehensive information about diverse career pathways is not available to them. Students report not being effectively informed, engaged and advised about their array of career options outside of university streams.⁸ This lack of information about alternate career options often makes university the default choice and causes other streams to be stigmatised due to a lack of exposure and understanding.

Career guidance is one of the missing links in the school-to-work transition. Careers guidance has been shown to improve a young person's chances of employment. It keeps people in school, builds confidence and self-awareness and connects pathways to education and employment, which is particularly important for young people who lack networks. Career guidance:

- Has the potential to improve engagement and increase completion rates by 10–20% when effectively.
- Leads to young people being five times less likely to be unemployed or disengaged from education or training if they undertake structured career activities.

Yet career guidance is undermined in NSW:

- Approximately 50% of schools in Australia (with populations of over a 1,000 students) dedicate less than \$3 per student for career guidance.

- More than half of career practitioners do their work on a part-time basis and two-thirds of these practitioners split their time between careers work and classroom teaching, counselling, managing and administration within a school environment.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Establish a school-to-work transitions taskforce with the necessary expertise, authority and resourcing to substantially improve transition outcomes.
- Increase funding and full-time positions for careers advisors in NSW Government secondary and tertiary institutions.
- Invest in career guidance programs and establish minimum standards by writing a dedicated career development policy within the Department of Education and integrating career development in tertiary institutions.
- Strengthen supports for career advisers – professional development and training, including on labour trends, working with employers as well as relationship and network development.
- Invest in innovation brokerage programs that bring together schools, employers, community organisations and education providers to improve employment outcomes.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is important for young people as a valued provider of a range of high-quality, flexible and accessible courses delivered consistently to all students, particularly young people experiencing disadvantage. It is an important connection to future employment – just over 30% of students enrolled in VET in NSW are between the ages of 15 and 24.⁹

Ensuring recruitment and retention in the VET sector has the capacity to reduce youth unemployment and increase employment participation. Of the 20–24-year-olds who completed a VET course in 2015, 75% were employed six months after graduation.¹⁰

In the current system, too many young people in NSW are confronted with significant barriers when entering the VET sector, and this is especially the case for those experiencing disadvantage. Challenges include financial constraints, socioeconomic factors, geographical remoteness and limited literacy and numeracy skills. These barriers are often exacerbated by funding rules, lack of information, and difficulties navigating the complex service systems.¹¹

These barriers should be addressed with a sense of urgency, particularly given the prominence of early school leavers in VET, with over 27,000 early school leavers aged 15–19 in NSW enrolled in TAFE and 16,000 with private providers.¹² This should include reviewing the eligibility criteria for fee-free scholarships, expanding these scholarships and improving access to VET FEE-HELP certificates.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Decrease fees and increase fees free-scholarships and literacy and numeracy courses at TAFEs and vocational education and training institutes.
- Improve supports for disadvantaged students undertaking courses at these institutes.

ENDNOTES

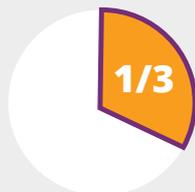
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Change the story on youth unemployment

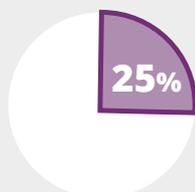
Clear pathways into sustained employment are necessary for young people to attain financial security, independence, wellbeing, a sense of belonging and skill development. All young people should be able to access meaningful, long-term employment so they can contribute to the Australian economy and community.

However, youth unemployment rates have remained stagnant, underemployment is increasing and finding work is increasingly difficult for all young people.

1 in 3
young people are
unemployed
or underemployed.¹



Around **25%** of
young people in NSW
are currently neither
engaged in full-time
work nor full-time
education.²



0.5%
of available positions
are entry-level.³



THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Develop a government plan to tackle youth unemployment in the first 100 days of government. This plan should be created with young people and the services that support young people to ensure it is relevant to their experiences, including those young people who are at risk of disadvantage.
- Take steps to broaden the minimum target of government youth workforces, ensuring 8% of total project workforces is aged 25 and under, as in the Infrastructure Skills Legacy Program. This could take place across the work of government, including councils, departments, ministerial offices and large-scale contracts.
- Provide additional support to young people who need it, so they can gain and keep employment. *Smart, Skilled and Hired* should be evaluated, including with young people and, if found to be effective, expanded.
- Ensure tailored employment support is given to young people experiencing disadvantage by improving cultural competency, addressing language skills and provide networking opportunities through mentoring within the community.
- Reduce the cost barriers to young people finding work, such as by providing free transport to young jobseekers.

Young people have enormous potential and they are a vital resource for the Australian economy and community. Employment is important for young people to attain financial security, independence, wellbeing, a sense of belonging and achievement, as well as skill development.

Yet youth unemployment and underemployment are significant issues for Australia, with a fast changing and challenging employment landscape. Youth unemployment is twice that of the overall population, at 11.6% compared with 5.3%.⁴ Of the Australians who are unemployed, 36% are young people.⁵ Currently, there are more than 659,000 young Australians unemployed or underemployed, which is 31.5% of the youth population in Australia.⁶ This is the highest level in 40 years.⁷ The deterioration of the job market for young people since the global financial crisis (GFC) is striking and has had a lasting impact. For young people aged 15–19 the number of full-time jobs halved since 2008, and the number of part-time jobs for the same group has barely grown.

In NSW specifically, the figures are no better. In NSW, 84,900 young people are experiencing unemployment.⁸ The youth unemployment rate is twice that of the general population.⁹ These numbers are significantly higher in the Hunter Valley Region and the Mid-North Coast across NSW,¹⁰ and in the Central Coast and Western Sydney across the Greater Sydney Area.¹¹ In specific sub-regions, like the Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven, there are hotspots of youth unemployment reaching up to 28%.¹²

Increasing rates of underemployment, the rise of casual and insecure work, as well as automation and globalisation have impacted young people significantly. In many cases there is a mismatch between the jobs available and the jobs that young people can fill. Young people are competing with more experienced workers for part-time or casual positions in jobs with low stability in industries like hospitality, retail and construction.

These jobs are also highly vulnerable to automation and change, and young people are often seeking roles after completing less training or education than those who have already entered the workforce.

This is coupled with a reduction in the number of entry-level positions and apprenticeships, with less than 1% of jobs advertised with no experience necessary.¹³

Although young people are more educated than past generations, youth unemployment trends cannot be dismissed as the consequence of rising participation in education and training, particularly when looking at a local level.¹⁴

While this is the context for all young people seeking work in Australia, evidence shows that employment outcomes are worse for some young people with specific life experiences.

The impact of youth unemployment for the broader community is huge. The Foundation for Young Australians reports that 'having so many young people out of the workforce costs our economy 790 million lost hours of work each year, equating to up to \$15.9 billion in lost GDP to the Australian economy annually. The social impact is equally compelling – loss of confidence, hope and self-esteem has led to mental health issues costing Australia \$7.2 billion per annum.'¹⁵

In NSW there is no current cohesive plan that brings together the expertise and responsibility of the public and private sectors to combat youth unemployment and tackle systemic barriers.

The NSW government can put the brakes on youth unemployment and should take steps to mitigate some of the employment challenges. Changes should make it as easy as possible for young people to get and keep rewarding employment, as there are benefits for young people here and now, as well as communities into the future.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Develop a government plan to tackle youth unemployment in the first 100 days of government. This plan should be created with young people and the services that support young people to ensure it is relevant to their experiences, including those young people who are at risk of disadvantage
- Take steps to broaden the minimum target of government youth workforces, ensuring 8% of total project workforces is aged 25 or under, as in the Infrastructure Skills Legacy Program. This could take place across the work of government, including councils, departments, ministerial offices and large-scale contracts.
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Make NSW a safe state for young people

Young people should have every opportunity to be safe, and to have secure and healthy relationships. Right now, prevalence of violence against women is highest for young women. Services are not funded to give support to young people and as a result, young people are falling through the gap. Negative attitudes about relationships and gender are linked to domestic violence, and young people provide the one of the best opportunities to break the cycle and effect large scale change, but investment in this area is lacking.

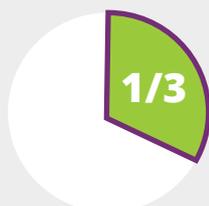
45% female sexual assault survivors (that were reported to NSW police) were under the age of 18.¹



Young women aged 15-19 years are **seven times more likely** to be sexually assaulted.²



Approximately **one third** of adolescents experience some type of violence from an intimate partner.³



THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN (AS RECOMMENDED BY A SAFE STATE):

- Commit \$32 million over four years to embed a specialist worker to provide child and young people-centred, trauma-informed support for children and young people in every refuge, NSW Health sexual assault service, domestic and family violence service and 'Staying Home Leaving Violence' program location in NSW.
- Commit \$14.7 million over four years to implement a long-term, coordinated, best practice whole school respectful relationships program for students, staff, parents and community members in 100 secondary schools.

Many young people 'witness' domestic and family violence taking place in their own families, and many also experience it in their own intimate and domestic relationships. Research shows that the prevalence of violence against women is highest for young women.⁴ Young women are at a higher risk of intimate partner violence than older women, with those aged 18–24 twice as likely to experience sexual assault, with some estimates that those aged 15–19 are four times as likely. The 2012 Personal Safety Survey identified that 13% of young women (aged 18–24) experienced at least one incidence of violence in the 12 months prior, a rate higher than for any other age group surveyed.

Despite this, young people are being left out of the conversation and, consequentially, violence is perpetuated for young people in NSW.

Young people have a very different experience from adults and children of domestic violence. They are new to relationships and unaware of what is acceptable behaviour. They live in a heavily gendered context. This makes it more difficult to spot domestic violence in their own relationships or in others'.

Research indicates that factors driving domestic and family violence for young people are unique and different to the experience of adults. Factors such as stronger peer group norms, inexperience and misinterpretation of jealousy, for example, as a sign of love, patterns of age differences in relationships, lack of access to services, and a tendency towards passivity in help seeking for self or peers, all contribute to greater vulnerability.⁵

The negative impacts of domestic violence on young people is distinct, due to age and developmental factors.⁶

As was highlighted in the Victorian Royal Commission, and as is true for NSW, there are massive service gaps. Young people experiencing DFV either receive no response by the child protection system or are too

young to access domestic and family violence services. Young people who experience sexual, domestic and family violence should be recognised as individual clients in their own right.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN (AS RECOMMENDATION BY A SAFE STATE):

- Commit \$32 million over four years to embed a specialist worker to provide child and young people-centred, trauma-informed support for children and young people in every refuge, NSW Health sexual assault service, domestic and family violence service and 'Staying Home Leaving Violence' program location in NSW.

There is ample research showing that negative attitudes about relationships and gender are closely correlated with domestic violence. But policies on this issue have failed to grasp that age has one of the most significant impacts on such attitudes.⁷

Youth Action's research, conducted in partnership with White Ribbon and UNSW, found that young men were more likely to agree with statements such as 'Girls like guys who are in charge of the relationship' or 'Men are supposed to be the head of the household and take control of the relationship.'⁸

This highlights the very real gaps between how young men and women conceive of 'normal' in relationships. This attitude gap is dangerous. It is also clear that gender inequality increases girls and young women's risk of violence.⁹ Moreover, attitudes shape behaviours, and violence in domestic settings is most common in communities where violence-supportive attitudes are prevalent.¹⁰ There is therefore a need to take action to address attitudes in communities.

Whole school respectful relationships education programs help students, staff, parents and community members to understand the drivers of gender-based violence and how they can change their attitudes and

behaviours to prevent violence. It involves working with schools as an educational institution and workplace to address the drivers of gender-based violence across the school curriculum and through the school's policies, practices and activities.

The evaluation of a whole school respectful relationships program in 19 Victorian schools found that it improved the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of students and school staff.¹¹ The World Health Organisation (WHO) has found that school-based programs that address gender norms have prevented domestic and family violence in the United States of America (USA) and Canada.¹²

Currently, community and health workers deliver respectful relationships programs in NSW schools on an ad hoc basis. A long-term, coordinated, best practice whole school respectful relationships program is needed across NSW schools so that we can end gender-based violence within this generation.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN (AS RECOMMENDED BY A SAFE STATE):

- Commit \$14.7 million over four years to implement a long-term, coordinated, best practice whole school respectful relationships program for students, staff, parents and community members in 100 secondary schools.

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Keep young people out of prison

Young people should not come into contact with the youth justice system, but when they do, they should only be detained as a last resort, and detention should be safe for them.

More can be done to address the root causes of contact with the justice system in NSW, to intervene early, and to utilise diversion to its full extent. A review of the youth justice system has found the health and wellbeing of young people has been put at risk. This must change.

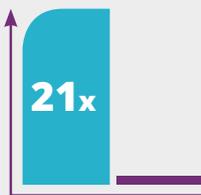
In 2016–2017, **1,500 young people** were being supervised either in the community or in a youth detention centre.¹



48% of children and young people in custody in NSW are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.²



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are **21 times** more likely to be detained than non-Indigenous children and young people in NSW.



87% of young people in NSW prisons have a mental health condition (including alcohol or drug-related problems).³



\$1,344 is the daily cost of detaining one child or young person in NSW. **\$490,560** is the cost of detaining one child or young person in NSW for one year.



66% of young people released from prison reoffend within 12 months.



THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Expand and support justice reinvestment via community-led solutions to break the cycle of offending, with specific focus on the potential of young people.
- Allocate \$15 million over five years from the corrections budget for three new community-led justice reinvestment initiatives across NSW.
- Provide \$5 million over five years from the corrections budget for the establishment of an independent NSW justice reinvestment body overseen by a board with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership.
- Expand diversionary approaches that keep young people away from contact with the justice system.
- Ensure the availability of age appropriate, strengthening and evidence-based programs to prevent and address identifiable risk factors for young people in NSW.
- Prevent exit into homelessness through better planning and through pre- and post-release programs.
- Improve early intervention outcomes through:
 - Implementing a comprehensive training program and policy changes so that teachers and school staff can identify risk factors and supports for adolescents
 - Strengthening programs to build formal linkages with schools, youth services and local diversionary programs and the local community
 - Increasing the number of student support officers in schools and support their activities
- Take a centralised commissioning approach to contracts.
- Prevent the criminalisation of young people by raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility in NSW to at least 14 years.
- Immediately respond to and implement the recommendations of the NSW Inspector of Custodial Services review, *Use of force, separation, segregation and confinement in NSW juvenile justice centres*.⁴
- Consider the application of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, as per the 2018 Child Rights report.⁵
- Review and amend youth justice legislation, policy and practice to ensure that children are treated consistently with the Children's Convention and the Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (the Beijing Rules).
- Ensure enforceable minimum standards in places of youth detention in line with international human rights standards, including to prohibit:
 - the use of solitary confinement other than as a last resort
 - the use of restraints against children, except where all other control measures have been exhausted and have failed, and
 - routine strip searches, unless other less invasive search options have been exhausted.

Both international human rights instruments⁶ and NSW law⁷ recognise that young people who come into contact with the youth justice system should only be detained as a last resort, and the evidence is clear that the most effective approaches to juvenile justice are firmly based on diversion.

There remains a need for a substantial shift to evidence-based early intervention strategies to address the underlying causes and risk factors that lead young people to have contact with the justice system and keep some young people churning through the system. It is well established that young people experience a key period of rapid and extensive psychological and biological growth, 'second only to early childhood in the rate and breadth of developmental change.'⁸ Interventions during adolescence can decrease the adverse long-term impacts of, for example, violence and abuse.⁹ Intervention at this point is pivotal and a sound investment.

Evidence shows that young people in contact with the NSW youth justice system experience frequent, intersectional and compounding disadvantage. We know that young people who are over represented in the justice system include:

- Aboriginal young people
- Young people from remote areas, very remote areas or areas of socioeconomic disadvantage
- Young people with experience of homelessness
- Those in contact with the child protection system, including children who have experienced family violence or maltreatment, particularly when placed in out-of-home care settings, and
- Young people reporting substance misuse, mental health issues and mental and cognitive disabilities.¹⁰

The trajectories that lead to young people's contact with the law need to be addressed. By focusing on the underlying causes of crime, young people have life chances rather than a life in detention. For example, in

Bourke NSW an initiative enabled 236 people to obtain a driver's license and the community saw a reduction of 72% in the number of young people proceeded against for driving without a licence.¹¹

One key approach is justice reinvestment. An impact assessment of the first major pilot site in Australia to adapt and implement an Aboriginal-led and place-based justice reinvestment approach, the *Maranguka JR Project*, showed a \$3.1 million in benefit to the community. There was significant impact for young people, including a 31% increase in the retention rate for Year 12 students in 2017, an 84% increase in the completion rate of VET courses by Bourke High School students and a 38% reduction last year in the number of juvenile charges in the top five offence categories.¹²

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN (AS RECOMMENDED BY JUST REINVEST):

- Expand and support justice reinvestment via community-led solutions to break the cycle of offending, with specific focus on the potential of young people.
- Allocate \$15 million over five years from the corrections budget for three new community-led justice reinvestment initiatives across NSW.
- Provide \$5 million over five years from the corrections budget for the establishment of an independent NSW justice reinvestment body overseen by a board with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership.

Diverting young people away from criminality is not only positive for their lifetime outcomes, but positive for society as a whole. It costs approximately \$1,500 per day (over \$500,000 per year)¹³ to hold a young person in juvenile detention. Not only is this expensive, but it has been well established that early interaction with courts and incarceration leads to poorer lifelong criminal outcomes, rather than preventing them.¹⁴

Child rights reports suggest that diversion is not being utilised to its full extent.¹⁵ Diversion includes early intervention, pre-court options utilised by policy and courts, pre-sentence diversion and post-conviction and detention diversion.¹⁶ In NSW, the non-government youth sector delivers programs that provide positive outcomes, through services that ‘wrap around’ young people who come in contact with the juvenile justice system or are at risk of coming into future contact. These diversionary measures avoid criminalising young people while they are at a critical stage of their development.

Youth services need to be able to work strategically, focusing on outcomes for young people at the centre of their work, planning for the long term and working collaboratively with other agencies. Despite the best intentions, consultations show that youth services face departments that operate in silos and systems that do not promote collaboration. There are also gaps in community knowledge about the impacts of outcomes on vulnerable young clients, and service contracts often expire very quickly.¹⁷ Positively, however, much of the infrastructure to support young people is already in place. Schools, youth services and successful programs executed effectively for diversionary efforts exist already.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Expand diversionary approaches that keep young people away from contact with the justice system.
- Ensure the availability of age appropriate, strengthening and evidence-based programs to prevent and address identifiable risk factors for young people in NSW.
- Prevent exit into homelessness through better planning and through pre- and post-release programs.
- Improve early intervention outcomes through:
 - implementing comprehensive training program and policy changes so that teachers and school

staff can identify risk factors and supports for adolescents

- strengthening programs to build formal linkages with schools, youth services and local diversionary programs and the local community
- increasing the number of student support officers in schools and support their activities, and
- taking a centralised commissioning approach to contracts.

The minimum age at which children can be held criminally responsible in NSW is ten years of age.¹⁸ The international child rights community, as well as national and community organisations, and various inquiries and royal commissions continue to advise governments to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to an internationally acceptable level.

In NSW, 66% of young people released from prison reoffend within 12 months.¹⁹ Evidence shows that the chances of future offending increase the younger a child has their first contact with the criminal justice system. In 2014–2015, 100% of those aged ten to twelve years at the start of their first supervised sentence returned to some form of sentenced supervision before they turned 18. This decreased slightly with successive age groups.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Prevent the criminalisation of young people by raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility in NSW to at least 14 years.

There are widespread and systematic failings in youth detention facilities across Australia, including in NSW.²⁰ Young people’s health, safety and wellbeing have been put at risk. A 2018 review into the NSW juvenile justice system found that young people under the care of the government had been subjected to inappropriate routine strip searches, excessive use of force and overreliance on solitary confinement as a punishment.²¹

There are also continued and repeated reports of children being held in adult detention facilities.²² In NSW, children 16 years and above can legally be held in adult detentions.²³ It is positive to see the NSW government has already begun implementing changes from a review of its services,²⁴ however, over the period of the two years it took to review NSW's facilities and practices, harm to young people continued while they were in the care and protection of the NSW Government. It is imperative that the NSW government take urgent action to implement changes and ensure some of NSW's most vulnerable young people are safe.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Immediately respond to and implement the recommendations of the NSW Inspector of Custodial Services review, *Use of force, separation, segregation and confinement in NSW juvenile justice centres*.²⁵
- Consider the application of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, as per the 2018 Child Rights report.²⁶
- Review and amend youth justice legislation, policy and practice to ensure that children are treated consistently with the Children's Convention and the Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (the Beijing Rules).
- Ensure enforceable minimum standards in places of youth detention in line with international human rights standards, including to prohibit:
 - the use of solitary confinement other than as a last resort
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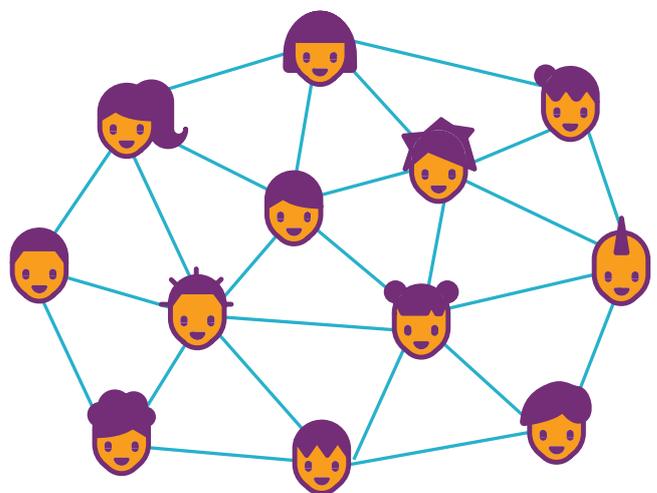
Resource a joined-up NSW youth development sector to be accessible to all young people

The youth sector is essential to building the connection of young people to family, peers, community, and caring and safe adults. It supports young people's healthy development and operates across a wide range of areas for the benefit of young people.

Many young people in NSW need additional support to reach their full potential. Young people present to youth services in NSW with issues most predominantly, of homelessness, employment, education and training, and family relationships or breakdown respectively.¹ The youth support sector provides services to enhance the protective assets in young people's lives and support them intensively in times of need. But the majority of youth services report working at capacity and not being able to meet demand.² The continuum of service provision in NSW is broken, and despite broad support for change, reforms haven't harnessed the expertise in the sector.

A NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Ensure appropriate levels of funding to meet need across the youth work service continuum.
- Facilitate tailoring of outcomes frameworks to serve local contexts and which respond to the needs of communities and the services supporting them.
- Enable reform processes to shift from prescriptive to flexible commissioning to enable local service sectors to adapt and respond to emergent local need.
- Increase contract length to five years, allowing youth services to plan for the long-term and work more collaboratively with other agencies.



Youth services do essential work that places young people and their interests first in order to establish a trusted and caring professional relationship within which healthy development can thrive. Youth workers are in a unique profession that facilitates independence, connectedness, and participation in society among young people participating in youth services.³

Youth work is commonly understood to be a tool for personal development with youth workers working alongside young people to support them in making informed choices on matters that impact their lives and which supports change at both an individual and structural level. Youth work links young people to a range of positive activities of a 'social, cultural, educational and political nature' and sits within the domain of non-formal education.⁴ Youth workers build connection to family, peers, community and caring and safe adults and supports young people's healthy development.⁵

Yet in NSW, many young people may not be getting the support they need. Young people present to youth services in NSW with issues most predominantly of homelessness, employment, education and training, and family relationships or breakdown respectively.⁶ The youth support sector provides services to enhance the protective assets in young people's lives and supports them intensively in times of need. But the majority of youth services report working at capacity and not being able to meet demand.⁷

Better outcomes are achieved when young people get support early in the life of an issue, not just earlier in life. Adolescence is a period of rapid developmental change, during which personal and environmental change can take place, and is an opportunity to provide the supports that lead to positive outcomes for young people. A rational early intervention approach targets critical periods of rapid development, both very early childhood and adolescence.⁸ It is clear that quality, evidence-based and developmentally appropriate prevention and early intervention programs result in better outcomes than those applied in crisis.⁹

Despite quality services to young people, there is a fragmentation of the NSW service system that impedes services from achieving greater and better outcomes for young people. It is necessary to build an overarching vision for services or the children and young people they support, providing direction and unity across the sector. Rigid and siloed approaches to contracting across the continuum of youth work service provision is problematic. Contracted delivery models and terms remain prescriptive (e.g. emphasis on case work), and of insufficient durations. Prescriptive contracting, which specify delivery models and activities to be undertaken, frequently fails to fit meet presenting need. Additionally, short-term funding cycles of up to three years, fail to allow services to engage in strategic long-term planning, including collaborative activities within local service system. These approaches to contracting fail to recognise 'on-the-ground' experience and expertise and reduce effective operational environments.¹⁰ The implications of these approaches are profound and result in ineffective work, creation of service gaps, and compromised outcomes for young people.

There is support from the sector for real and lasting change. Effective change requires co-design with the sector.¹¹ This co-design must be inclusive of young people and youth workers and must be implemented and evaluated in partnership. Additionally, youth services need to be able to work strategically, to plan for the long-term and to be able to work without fear of short-term competitive tendering.

For young people at risk and who experience exclusion and disadvantage in NSW to thrive, a shared vision for young people is required and must be inclusive of a well-connected and appropriately resourced continuum of youth work services from prevention and early intervention to targeted intensive supports.

THE NSW GOVERNMENT CAN:

- Ensure appropriate levels of funding to meet need across the youth work service continuum.
- Facilitate tailoring of outcomes frameworks to serve local contexts and which respond to the needs of communities and the services supporting them.
- Enable change processes to shift from prescriptive to flexible commissioning to enable local service sectors to adapt and respond to emergent local need.
- Increase contract length to five years, allowing youth services to plan for the long-term and work more collaboratively with other agencies.

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