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What Matters to Young People in Rural and Regional Victoria 2018

June 2018

**About Youth Affairs Council Victoria**

YACVic is the leading advocate for young people aged 12–25 in Victoria. As a peak body, we work closely with young Victorians and the sector that supports them to deliver effective advocacy, events, training, resources and support – so that young people can live their best lives.

Our vision is that young Victorians have their rights upheld and are valued as active participants in their communities. As Victoria’s youth peak body, we work across the state in the best interests of young people and the youth sector to:

* lead policy responses to issues affecting young people
* represent the youth sector to government
* resource high quality youth work practice
* research and advocate on youth issues.

We value our members and prioritise their needs.

**About YACVic Rural**

Young people and youth professionals in rural and regional Victoria often have unique insights and face different challenges to those in metropolitan Melbourne. In response, YACVic Rural expands our state-wide advocacy for young people in regional communities and the rural youth sector. We focus our presence across the Great South Coast and Southern Mallee regions.

We hope to continue expanding our state-wide services to get the best outcomes for young people throughout rural and regional Victoria.

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**Executive summary**

In 2018, YACVic Rural held 10 youth forums across rural and regional Victoria under the banner of ‘What Matters’. We met with young people in Beechworth, Camperdown, Echuca, Heywood, Mildura, Phillip Island, Swan Hill, Warrnambool, Wodonga and Wonthaggi. These forums were run in partnership with existing youth councils and student leaderships groups. During these forums we asked young people what mattered to them, and what short term and long term solutions might be able to address these issues. In parallel, YACVic developed to an online consultation tool which allowed [young people to have their say](http://www.vicyouth.org.au) and has been conducting broader sector consultations. All of these contributions feed in to this report and YACVic’s state-wide advocacy.

Living in rural and regional Victoria is unique and provides a number of opportunities for young people. However, there are some complex challenges including:

* The limited number of youth, community, or health service providers available in or near a community. This limits choice for young people and also creates privacy concerns for those in small towns where they may personally know service providers
* Living on the border of another state presents challenges for young people as they are subject to conflicting laws and policies, and may have to travel interstate to access services.
* For young people who live in a smaller town their whole life, they might find it difficult to shake off the reputations other community members have of them.
* The lack of access to the digital world due to poor internet connections and unreliable network connections.
* Staying engaged with high school education and being able to access the pathways they desire.
* Receiving little or poor quality careers counselling advice in schools and participating in meaningless or inappropriate work experience placements.
* Dealing with bullying and the impact it is having on mental health and wellbeing.
* The lack of post-high school education options locally, and the lack of support available to undertake further education away from home.
* Higher youth unemployment rates in rural and regional Victoria and lack of part-time and casual employment opportunities available for young people looking for work while studying.
* Lack of rental properties available in some rural and regional towns, and lack of crisis support for young people at risk of, or facing homelessness.
* A lack of safe spaces to go to access support for mental health and wellbeing concerns, particularly in schools and in rural and regional communities with no access to physical mental health services.
* Increased participation in underage alcohol consumption and illicit drug use, with a lack of appropriate education programs to prevent this.
* Lack of local specialist medical providers available in a timely manner, and lack of awareness about local healthcare services available, including access to sexual health care.
* Transport accessibility issues, including unpunctual and limited public transport services, poor quality roads, and difficulty in accessing support to gain a driver’s licence.
* Discrimination in the community and lack of diversity compared to Melbourne.
* Concerns for their own safety in their community, particularly for girls and women who feel that sexual assault isn’t being taken seriously by the community or local authorities.
* A lack of opportunities to be engaged and involved in the community and contribute to decision making.
* That several local youth engagement programs only exist in the short-term and cease after one funding cycle.

Due to the broad range of issues covered, the recommendations provided in this report are not a comprehensive list of asks that will fix all the challenges young people are facing. Each section contains a number of recommendations and suggested actions that have been developed by YACVic based on our conversations with young people and the youth sector more broadly. The recommendations provide a starting point to address the challenges rural and regional young people have raised with us. However, they will not be effective if we don’t ensure that young peoples’ voices are prominent in shaping the way services, policies, and programs are designed and delivered. The sector can no longer just work for young people. We need to work in collaboration with young people in order to create a resilient and effective youth sector that supports them to live their best lives.

1. Provide a wide-range of high quality and meaningful education pathways for young people across rural and regional Victoria which meet students’ needs and interests.
2. Ensure all students and young people have access to appropriate, meaningful, and aspirational careers education
3. Support more young people from rural and regional communities to access higher education
4. Prioritise youth employment as a key element of economic and community planning at state and regional levels
5. Facilitate experiences for young people to connect them to their community, and potentially open up local career opportunities.
6. Work holistically with support services, schools and communities to prevent young people from becoming homeless and intervene early when young people are without a safe home.
7. Strengthen the capacity of the community, schools and mental health service providers to support young peoples’ mental health and wellbeing and be able to react in times of crisis or mental ill health.
8. Provide appropriate and accurate education for all young people around alcohol and other drugs, and adequate programs and services for young people who require support with alcohol and other drug additions or challenges.
9. Ensure young people have their physical and sexual health needs met including through high quality education and access to appropriate services.
10. Ensure young people from rural and regional Victoria can access adequate public transport, and support to obtain their driver’s licence where they live.
11. Develop a number of mandatory training programs for all rural and regional teachers including cultural competency and anti-racism training, and Aboriginal cultural safety training.
12. Continue to support the Safe Schools program to ensure schools are safe and welcoming places for students, staff and family members who are same sex attracted and/or sex or gender diverse.
13. Develop and continue community-wide approaches to shift attitudes and conditions which lead to family violence and violence against women and develop a culture which rejects the normalisation of these forms of violence.
14. Strengthen early support for children and young people who have been victims of crime, including family violence, with access to justice and community-based support to cope with trauma.
15. Ensure youth justice practices such as diversion and bail support models are designed and funded to work in rural and regional areas. At present, models that require intensive supervision of young people can be very hard to implement in rural areas where there are few local staff, and where young people are scattered geographically. Strategic initiatives are needed to increase the number of qualified workers and services based long-term in rural communities.
16. Provide strong support for young people leaving custody in rural and regional areas with housing, education, employment, mental health, and alcohol and other drug support from workers who are easily accessible to young people.
17. Strengthen the capacity for rural and regional young people to be involved and contribute to state and local government policy and decision making as outlined in the current *Youth Policy: Building Stronger Youth Engagement* in Victoria.
18. Develop flexibility in state government funding and program guidelines to ensure that policies and programs can be implemented in the best way to support a local community.
19. Support and increase the capacity of rural and regional youth workers to ensure there is comprehensive workforce who can focus on working with and supporting Victorian young people.

**Background**

Young people, aged 12 to 25, from rural and regional Victoria make up 22 percent of all young Victorians, and approximately 16 per cent of all people living outside of metropolitan Melbourne are young people.[[1]](#endnote-1) While rural and regional parts of Victoria have experienced lower rates of population growth, we know that these regions are full of young people, their voices, and their contributions to the community.[[2]](#endnote-2) As the peak body and leading policy advocate for young people in Victoria, YACVic has long recognised, and worked to better understand and address, the unique challenges young people in rural and regional Victoria face compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

Funded by the Victorian Government, the Youth Affairs Council Victoria’s Rural Presence Project, known as YACVic Rural, has been on the ground in regional Victoria since 2016. YACVic Rural has a physical presence in the Great South Coast and Southern Mallee and works across rural and regional Victoria to facilitate lasting improvements for young people and the sector that supports them. Since 1 July 2016 YACVic Rural has worked directly with over 2,000 young people across rural and regional Victoria to inform its state-wide advocacy of the issues that matter to them, and build their capacity as community advocates for these issues.

In 2016, YACVic Rural, in partnership the Victorian Government's Office for Youth, held 12 youth forums across Victoria, from Bairnsdale to Dunkeld, Port Fairy to Shepparton. These forums encouraged 472 young people to express their concerns and ideas for action on issues affecting them and their communities, and produced the *Turning Ideas into Action Youth Forums 2016 Report[[3]](#endnote-3)*. In 2018, YACVic Rural again held a youth forums series, in ten locations across rural and regional Victoria, under the banner of ‘What Matters’. In parallel we heard directly from young people state-wide via our online consultation tool.

Building upon all our work with rural and regional young people, *What Matters to Young People in Rural and Regional Victoria 2018* looks more deeply at some of the key issues young people in rural and regional Victoria are facing. Informed by the voice of rural and regional young people, backed by research and data and consultation with the youth sector, we create a more detailed picture of some of the issues raised in the *Turning Ideas into Action Forums 2016 Report*. Throughout are quotes directly from young people from around rural and regional Victoria. These quotes are de-identified, but include the young person’s age and local government area they are from. Presenting young people’s voices is a key part of ensuring that young people are being heard and presented throughout our advocacy and policy work. While we use the research and data that is available to us, there is a limited amount of data on rural and regional young Victorians available, so we find that using young people's voices allows us to paint the best picture of what they are actually going though. While young people themselves are experts of their own experience, we have also worked with youth workers and the sector to gain a professional insight into how service systems are and aren’t working for young people. To explore the youth worker perspective more, see *What Matters to Youth Workers in Rural and Regional Victoria 2018*.

**The rural and regional overlay**

The issues rural and regional young people are facing are complex and interconnected. While young people across Victoria are facing many similar challenges and hurdles, the hurdles for rural and regional young people are often a little bit higher, a bit harder to get over, which means they cannot always engage with, or notice, other more “mainstream” or common issues. For example, it might be hard for young people in rural and regional Victoria to think about housing affordability when they can’t get a part time job after school, or they might not be concerned about the gig-economy and the changing face of work when they face the hurdle of having unreliable internet connections.

*No jobs, means no money, means no home
Young Person, 13, Ballarat City Council*

In order to lower the hurdles we need to tackle some of the rural and regional specific barriers that make overcoming challenges more difficult. These barriers often don’t occur in isolation and impact different young people in different ways.

***Limited options and privacy concerns***

In smaller communities there are generally fewer service providers available for young people.  While this is an accepted element of living in a smaller town, it can cause privacy issues and can limit young people’s ability to seek appropriate support. In a small community, a young person might have a previous relationship with a worker, which may stop them from attending a service provider due to confidentiality concerns, or just not wanting to talk to that person about a particular concern.

When dealing with a range of issues it can sometimes take time for an individual to find the right service provider that suits their needs and personality. This is particularly important for young people seeking support with mental health and wellbeing concerns. If a young person doesn’t feel comfortable with the service provider they seek support from, they may not have any other options in their local or nearby communities so either must return to that provider, or they may cease to seek help at all.

***Border headaches***

Young people living near the border of other states face another set of challenges beyond just living in rural and regional Victoria. Learner and probationary driving laws, education curriculums, and service providers and systems are all different depending on the state young people live in. Young people living in border towns have to deal with conflicting laws and policies on a regular basis, and they struggle to find clear information on what state’s laws and policies to follow.

A classic example of this struggle centres around being a probationary driver. The laws around probationary drivers in Victoria and New South Wales are vastly different. For example, a P1 licence holder in Victoria must not carry more than one peer passenger aged 16 to 22 years of age at any time. A P1 licence holder in NSW must not carry more than one peer passenger who is under 21 between 11pm and 5am. Furthermore, a P2 licence holder in Victoria has no speed restrictions and must follow the speed limit, whereas a P2 licence holder in NSW must never drive over the maximum speed limit of 100km/h. For young people living near the border these differences are confusing and cause issues for them on a daily basis. Young people in Echuca/Moama told us they often receive conflicting advice from Victoria and NSW police force members regarding which rules to follow when driving in a state different to their licence-issuing state.

*For my community I want clarification on the differences between Victorian and NSW driving laws for L plate and P plate drivers.
Young Person, 22, Campaspe Shire Council*

***Reputations***

Young people reflect that in smaller towns it can be difficult to break out of stigmas surrounding family names or previous behaviours. This can limit young people’s access to employment or housing opportunities and can even mean they are placed on industry “blacklists”. This can make it difficult for young people to change the course they are currently taking. Unless they have the resources to relocate, these stigmas can follow young people and limit their opportunities for many years.

*If you not going with the waves, you’re making waves
Young Person, 24, Gannawarra Shire Council*

***Staying connected online***

Unreliable internet connections are a frustration to rural and regional communities, including rural and regional young people. Poor internet connections limits young people’s ability to complete schoolwork, commit to undertaking further education online, access telehealth facilities, engage in culture, and participate in digital communities. Approximately 1 in 4 rural households, and 1 in 5 regional households, do not have access to the internet, compared to 1 in 10 households in metropolitan Melbourne.[[4]](#endnote-4) Without adequate and reliable access to the internet young people in rural and regional Victoria have to modify their participation in the online space around patchy internet connections.

*Internet access is the gateway to information, socialisation, and entertainment. The NBN is shockingly inadequate and not even available to a large amount of people.
Young Person, 23, Wangaratta Rural City Council*

**Issues young people are facing**

***High school education***

High school education and relevant pathways are critical for all young people. Unfortunately, young people in rural and regional areas of Victoria have lower levels of engagement, high absenteeism and poorer academic achievement compared to their metropolitan counterparts, with fewer students choosing to continue on to further education or training.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Several young people highlighted that limited elective options is an issue for them. Due to small school cohorts, sometimes students aren’t able to access the subjects they wish to pursue. This leaves young people in a situation where they cannot study what they wish, or they undertake the subject via distance education. Data provided to YACVic from the Distance Education Centre Victoria highlighted that 2,427 students undertook a subject via distance education in 2017, an additional 317 enrolments than in 2014. While these sorts of programs provide young people with the opportunity to study their desired subjects, some young people highlighted that sometimes they don’t feel supported and engaged enough by teachers to undertake the subjects by distance to their best ability.

*For my community I want to be able to go to school and be proud of going there
Young person, 13, Indigo Shire Council*

As seen in the ongoing *Inquiry into careers advice activities in schools*, young people are generally dissatisfied with the careers and further education advice they receive. Throughout our consultations and the Inquiry, young people have spoken about the lack of ‘life-skills’ they are taught at school, and the difficulty in trying to have meaningful conversations and support from careers counsellors.[[6]](#endnote-6) [[7]](#endnote-7) Several rural and regional young people spoke about the difficulty of finding meaningful and effective work experience and some indicated they would have to leave their local community to do work experience, or wouldn’t do it at all. One young person suggested a creative solution of having work experience holiday programs which are more meaningful and do not disrupt school-times. Young people also suggest there should be greater connection and collaboration with local industry and businesses in the work experience process.

*I want more local short-term holiday programs to involve youth, and let them try a number of activities and careers to inform them about which subjects to choose in year 11 and 12*

*Young person, 16, Campaspe Shire Council*

Young people report that a focus on academic achievements and pressure from teachers is contributing to increased stress levels that is affecting their mental health and wellbeing. Mission Australia’s *Youth Survey Report 2017* highlighted that ‘Coping with stress’ was the top issue for Victorian young people aged 15 to 19, with 44.9 per cent of respondents indicating they were either extremely or very concerned about this issue. ‘School or study problems’ was the second most concerning issue.[[8]](#endnote-8)

While it is not an issue embedded in all rural and regional schools or communities, several young people raised with us the issue of sport-centric schools and communities. Some rural and regional communities have very strong sporting clubs that support the community overall, however, for young people who do not participate in sport this can be isolating and a point of frustration. When this occurs in schools, young people feel that schools prioritise sports and physical activity events over academics, and students who are not engaged in sports are not prioritised and feel either less a part of, or less welcome into the community.

*I'd like students to be encouraged to also go to TAFE or seek employment, rather than the constant push to University and stress regarding ATAR. I'd like more opportunities for extra curricular activities (not all of them need to be sport orientated!)
Young person, 24, Golden Plains Shire Council*

Young people consistently discussed bullying and its impacts as a main issue they are facing. While reported bullying prevalence is slightly lower in rural and regional Victoria than metropolitan Melbourne, 43 per cent of young rural and regional Victorians experience bullying.[[9]](#endnote-9) The young people we spoke to feel that better education is needed to highlight to students the effects of bullying and ways to combat bullying in the school community. Young people also suggested that current consequences for bullying are not effective deterrents for perpetrators. Young people understand that bullying is a complex issue, and support is needed for victims and perpetrators of bullying.

*I want more support groups to be dealing with bullying
Young person, 19, Campaspe Shire Council*

Recommendations

* 1. Provide a wide-range of high quality and meaningful education pathways for young people across rural and regional Victoria which meet students’ needs and interests.

**Suggested action:** Provide a range of geographically accessible VET, VCAL and flexible learning options to young people which provide high-quality education and provide meaningful educational outcomes for young people who attend.

**Suggested action:** Increase investment in rural and regional schools so that students have opportunities on an equal basis to their Melbourne peers. Ensure rural schools have enough staff with adequate qualifications, time, and professional support to support their students.

**Suggested action:** Ensure all students facing school disengagement can access the Navigator program across rural and regional Victoria. Furthermore, ensure that vulnerable young people up to age 21 can access comparable supports to the Navigator program in recognition of the challenges they can face when re-engaging with education, and the importance of post-school qualifications.

**Suggested action:** Treat school expulsion as a last resort and ensure no student is excluded from the state school system as a whole. Special consideration should be taken to ensure that there are alternative education options available in an appropriate radius when expulsions take place in rural and isolated areas. Regional engagement coordinators should coordinate supports for the student for at least six months, including working with community sector organisations.

* 1. Ensure all students and young people have access to appropriate, meaningful, and aspirational careers education

**Suggested action:** Fund full-time, dedicated careers educators for every secondary school, with a particular focus on rural and regional schools with limited staff and resources. These educators must have the time and capacity to work well with all students, understand labour trends, and build strong relationships with employers, higher education and training providers, unions, community services and industry associations.

**Suggested action:** Work with students and young people to develop meaningful careers education and work-experience programs that provide young people with a worthwhile experiences.

**Suggested action:** Engage families and the broader community in careers education by building their knowledge of employment pathways and how best to support young people seeking work in their community.

**Suggested action:** Embed workplace rights in careers education to ensure students understand issues like minimum wage, pay rates, enterprise agreements and workplace safety as they start to enter the workforce.

***Post high school education***

In 2016, on average, 76.8 per cent of Victorians completing Year 12 went on to further education and training. The highest percentage of those completing Year 12 in a rural or regional regions was 68.6 per cent in the Central highlands and Barwon regions. [[10]](#endnote-10) See Table 1 for a full list of percentage of year 12 completers in further education or training across the non-metropolitan regions. [[11]](#endnote-11) Post high school education is something at the forefront of young people's’ minds. In rural and regional Victoria, they are concerned about the lack of options in their local area, and know that if they decide to move to pursue further education they will face distance and financial barriers.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Department of Education and Training Regional Areas** | **Percentage of Year 12 completers in further education and training, 2016** |
| Central Highlands  | 68.6 |
| Wimmera South West | 58.1 |
| Barwon | 68.6 |
| Inner Gippsland | 67.5 |
| Outer Gippsland | 59.1 |
| Loddon | 60.4 |
| Mallee | 62.2 |
| Ovens Murray  | 53.9 |
| Goulburn | 68.1 |

**Table 1**

*After I finish TAFE I cannot further my education without moving away 3 hours to study*

*Young person, 24, Moyne Shire Council*

Young people living in rural and regional Victoria, particularly away from regional centres face limited options when it comes to further education. While there are a number of further education institutions in rural and regional Victoria, they offer a limited number of courses and some face uncertain long-term futures due to declining student numbers and financial results.[[12]](#endnote-12) An analysis of the La Trobe University *Undergraduate guide 2019*, presented in Table 2, shows that a heavily reduced number of courses are offered at the four regional campuses, particular as they spread further out from metropolitan Melbourne.[[13]](#endnote-13) It is a similar story across rural and regional TAFE providers. While there are 41 TAFE locations scattered across rural and regional Victoria, the existence of a TAFE location does not mean that a high number or appropriate types of courses are being undertaken. For example, at the Robinvale campus of Sunraysia Institute, only First Aid courses, and a short course in Agriculture Chemical Application are available.

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| --- | --- |
| **La Trobe University Campuses** | **Number of Undergraduate courses offered** |
| Melbourne Campus | 100 |
| Bendigo Campus | 69 |
| Albury-Wodonga Campus | 29 |
| Mildura Campus | 20 |
| Shepparton Campus  | 20 |

**Table 2**

Due to the lack of providers some young people have to move to undertake further studies, or make a decision between limited options which they may not ultimately wish to study. Young people highlighted throughout *the Inquiry into careers advice activities in schools* that moving from rural or regional areas to Melbourne to study can be extremely daunting. Some young people identified that they would prefer to move to a regional centre to pursue further education than to Melbourne to ease some of the “culture shock”.[[14]](#endnote-14) There is also a huge financial burden on young people and their families if they decide to leave where they live in order to be closer to further education. A young person at the Inquiry highlighted how cost was a barrier to attending University, “When I finished Year 12 we had had two years of drought and unless I got a scholarship I was not going to university, because I could not put that on my parents, as farmers, to pay for my accommodation...”[[15]](#endnote-15).

Recommendations

* 1. Support more young people from rural and regional communities to access higher education

**Suggested action:** Support programs, informed by rural and regional young people, to assist them with dealing with the ‘culture shock’ associated with moving to a metropolitan area or regional centre when attending higher education.

**Suggested action:**  In communities that have a local higher education provider, support programs that connect local schools, higher education providers, and employers to raise the profile of higher education and give young people a greater understanding of what undertaking further education entails.

**Suggested action:** Support existing and emerging study pathways that assist young people from rural and regional areas to access higher education institutions.

***Employment***

Youth unemployment is generally higher in rural and regional areas and is another hot topic for young people.[[16]](#endnote-16) In January 2018, four Victorian regions were in the regions with the 20 highest youth unemployment rates in Australia. With a national youth unemployment rate of 12.2 per cent, youth unemployment in the Bendigo and Shepparton regions are at 16.2 per cent and 16.1 per cent respectively. The youth unemployment rate in Bendigo increased 4.8 percentage points from 2016 to 2018.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Young people from rural and regional areas mentioned they face significant struggles attempting to gain casual employment while at high school. Young people felt that there was not enough work for them, and positions were often going to older workers who could work during school times. Young people struggle further if they play sport, which limits their availability to work on weekends, and therefore some employers are less willing to employ them. For those living in smaller rural towns there is an struggle to find work as there may only a few places in the town to work, such as one supermarket, one pub, and one petrol station. If there are no jobs available in these smaller towns’ young people may have to travel to find work. Due to infrequent public transport services, they must rely on friends or family to drive them to places of employment, and if this isn’t available, they may not be able to access employment.

*Many people who live out of big towns must travel into town to gain employment
Young person, 16, Moyne Shire Council*

Young people also expressed they are struggling to find employment as many employers want them to have experience, but they can’t get experience due to the limited work opportunities available in the community. Young people want employers to be more willing to train young people and give those without work experience a chance. This could also be addressed by having more comprehensive work experience programs in schools.

*Too many businesses want experienced employees and are unwilling to train the inexperienced
Young person, 20, Shire of East Gippsland*

Recommendations

* 1. Prioritise youth employment as a key element of economic and community planning at state and regional levels

**Suggested action:** Develop a state-wideyouth employment plan, which engages young people and their communities in planning the future of employment.

**Suggested action:** Ensure youth employment is part of regional economic development plans. Support rural and regional communities to map local industries, job growth and shortages, assess how these issues link to school-to-work transitions, and resource solutions based on local expertise.

1. Facilitate experiences for young people to connect them to their community, and potentially open up local career opportunities.

**Suggested action:** Work with the local community and community services tocreate meaningful and accessible volunteering opportunities for young people.

***Housing and homelessness***

While finding and securing affordable housing is a well-publicised issue for young people, some young people are still struggling to find secure and safe accommodation, let alone thinking of entering the property market. On the 2016 Census night, it was estimated that 9,742 people under the age of 25 were homeless.[[18]](#endnote-18) Homelessness is not only characterised by those rough sleeping, but includes those in overcrowded dwellings, refuges and supported accommodation for the homeless, and those temporarily staying with others, commonly known as ‘couch surfing’. In rural areas it is more common for people facing homelessness people to be staying in supported accommodation for the homeless or temporarily staying with others, compared to those in metropolitan Melbourne.[[19]](#endnote-19) Young people we spoke to talked about the lack of availability of rental properties and the impact ‘blacklisting’ by landlords or agents can have when trying to find a place to live in smaller towns.

There are groups of young people in rural and regional communities, including those leaving out-of-home care or the youth justice system, who need additional support to avoid facing homelessness or to find safe and secure housing. However, due to increasing rental costs, high youth unemployment rates, and competitive housing markets we need to ensure that services and supports in place for all rural and regional young people to ensure they are not at risk of becoming homeless. Released in early 2018, *Victoria’s homelessness and rough sleeping action plan* commits to establishing five assertive outreach teams in rural and regional areas to support up to 120 people sleeping rough each year.[[20]](#endnote-20) While this is welcome, the action plan fails to mention how young people who are not in specific priority groups will be supported.

Recommendations

1. Work holistically with support services, schools and communities to prevent young people from becoming homeless and intervene early when young people are without a safe home.

**Suggested action:** Invest in universal prevention and early intervention services for families – including counselling and specialised supports – which any parent can access to improve their parenting skills and relationships with their children, without stigma or barriers.

**Suggested action:** Fund service models which combine homelessness prevention with supports for young people in education, employment, mental health, family functioning and life skills

**Suggested action:** Intervene effectively and early with young people who are ‘couch surfing’.

**Suggested action:** Invest in specialist youth homelessness services and supported housing for young people (short and long-term) in rural and regional areas and ensure they are planned for future demand and can be accessed by young people in surrounding towns and areas.

***Mental health and wellbeing***

Mental health and wellbeing has been an increasing priority for young Victorians over the past few years. During the 2016 Turning Ideas into Action Forums it was the most prominent topic raised and it is high on the list of issues of concern to young people in the *2017 Youth Survey* conducted by Mission Australia.[[21]](#endnote-21) Young people across rural and regional Victoria have stated that peer-pressure and bullying is causing mental health distress in their peers. They are also seeing depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation commonly in the community. Unfortunately, youth suicide rates are still increasing and young people are becoming increasingly aware of their role in looking after their friends.[[22]](#endnote-22) Young people repeatedly reported the lack of places to go to when dealing with a mental health concern.

Students indicated that there were not enough ‘safe places’ to go to, or people to check in with to see how they are going at school. While peer support is a useful tool in identifying and working through mental health concerns, some young people spoke about how this was taking a toll on their own mental health and wellbeing. Students reflect that they want to receive more training on how to help a friend who is going through mental health distress. Students also highlighted that teachers were not equipped with the skills to deal with bullying and more serious mental health concerns at school, and at times there is a lack of counsellors and mental health support staff available. Students are concerned about the lack of confidentiality when reaching out for support at school. While there are requirements for wellbeing support staff to make parents aware of concerns for a young person, if this is done carelessly, young people may lose confidence in the system, and may be less likely to reach out for support in the future.

*I want better mental health care programs implemented in schools to prevent kids from slipping through the cracks.
Young person, 16, Wellington Shire Council*

Outside of school young people reported that there aren’t enough places to go to for help and that sometimes there are no services or outreach available in their local communities. One young person we spoke to highlighted that it is difficult to access mental health support for complex or long-term concerns when they can receive a Medicare rebate for only ten psychologist sessions per year. Rural and regional young people also spoke of the challenge of accessing mental health specialists as they are not available locally and rarely do outreach. In order to see a specialist they must travel to Melbourne or another major city which can be a barrier due to the costs and time involved.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen the capacity of the community, schools and mental health service providers to support young peoples’ mental health and wellbeing and be able to react in times of crisis or mental ill health.

**Suggested action:** Increase the capacity of the community, including young people, to support each other’s mental health by:

* Ensuring all secondary school communities can access training in Teen Mental Health First Aid and Youth Mental Health First Aid.
* Fund place-based, localised youth mental health promotion initiatives to support whole-communities to increase their mental health literacy, decrease self-harm and suicide rates and increase awareness of mental health support services available. Initiatives should be evaluated by clinical experts, and, if successful, resourced long term.

**Suggested action:** Increase the capacity of schools and students by:

* Ensuring all secondary students have adequate access to wellbeing services, counsellors, trained youth workers, and Aboriginal and disability support staff.
* Ensuring all school wellbeing teams can access clinical supervision and secondary consultation.

**Suggested action:** In order to support young people in rural and regional Victoria accessing high-quality mental health care wherever they live by:

* Funding a fully integrated youth mental health service system, ranging from early intervention to specialist care for young people with severe mental illness. Services should be able to work flexibly, e.g. after hours or in non-clinical settings, according to the needs of the community.
* Fully cover the costs of distance, travel and outreach in the design and funding of mental health services operating in rural and regional areas.
* Building the capacity of youth mental health services to be culturally competent through appropriate training for all youth mental health workers

***Alcohol and drug abuse***

Young people are concerned about the increased rates of alcohol consumption and drug use amongst peers. Nationally there are higher levels of alcohol and illicit drug use in rural and regional areas.[[23]](#endnote-23) In a 2016 survey of year 5, 8 and 11 students in Victoria, 62 per cent of rural and regional students indicated they had consumed alcohol compared to 52 per cent of students in metropolitan Melbourne.[[24]](#endnote-24) The same survey highlighted that one in ten Victorian students report having smoked tobacco, with higher proportions of students reporting from rural and regional Victoria.[[25]](#endnote-25) Young people are reflecting that they are seeing their peers consume alcohol and drugs at risky levels and are concerned that there are not appropriate deterrents in place. They also reflect that it seems to be happening at a younger and younger age. Young people believe there should be more education programs in place to ensure children from a young age understand the risks of consuming alcohol and drugs.

*Young people need to have an education on drugs and alcohol and their effects from a young age*

*Young person, 15, Moyne Shire Council*

Recommendations

1. Provide appropriate and accurate education for all young people around alcohol and other drugs, and adequate programs and services for young people who require support with alcohol and other drug additions or challenges.

**Suggested action:** Ensure all secondary students have access to age-appropriate, accurate education about alcohol and other drugs. Education models should engage students in design, involve families, be relevant to young people’s lives, and address prevention, harm minimisation and help-seeking.

**Suggested action:** Extend and expand youth-specific alcohol and drug services to ensure young people in rural and regional communities can access support, ensuring that funding models fully cover the costs of comprehensive rural service delivery.

***Healthcare and wellbeing***

While young people don’t usually reflect on their general health and wellbeing they do raise specific health and wellbeing concerns that affect them and their communities. Some young people raised the issue of sexual health in rural and regional communities. In 2014 there were 12,607 notifications for sexually transmitted infections among Victorians aged 15 to 24.[[26]](#endnote-26)  Ninety percent of these notifications were for chlamydia, and the notification rate of chlamydia in rural Victoria is about 50 per cent higher than in metropolitan Melbourne.[[27]](#endnote-27) Young people in rural and regional Victoria stressed that they don’t always have access to a safe space when seeking help for sexual health concerns. While these services might be available to young people in an area, they may not be ‘young people friendly’ or might not promote themselves as a service that welcomes young people. Young people were also concerned at not knowing where to go and having people to talk to about women’s health concerns including contraception and pregnancy.

*There isn’t a safe space for young females to go when they need consults about the morning after pill, pregnancy etc.*

*Young person, 22, Warrnambool City Council*

Young people also highlighted that the wait for specialist doctors is affecting their health and wellbeing. With wait times for some specialists reaching up to 12 months, some young people make the trip into metro Melbourne, or another regional centre to access the healthcare professionals they need. Due to infrequent and unreliable public transport services, a trip to a medical professional can be costly and time consuming as the young person might need to stay overnight due to long travel times.

Recommendations

1. Ensure young people have their physical and sexual health needs met including through high quality education and access to appropriate services.

**Suggested action:** Work with community stakeholders such as sporting clubs, health providers and youth services to expand opportunities for young people to take part in physical exercise including ensuing young girls and women are provided with accessible spaces and equitable opportunities.

**Suggested action:** Ensure all secondary students can access sexual health education that is accurate, evidence-based, age-appropriate, relevant to the students' lives, and addresses big issues affecting young people, including consent, respect, critical media skills, and coping with impacts of social media and porn.

**Suggested action:** Ensure young people in rural and regional communities can access a generalist health care provider. This could be done by expanding the Doctors in Secondary Schools program to ensure coverage across areas with limited access to GPs.

***Transport***

Transport is a big issue for many rural and regional young people. Access to both public and private transport raises challenges for young people where services, education and employment opportunities are spread out and may not be available locally. Buses and trains run on limited timetables, sometimes only once a day through smaller towns. This makes it difficult for young people to do things outside of the town they live or go to school in, including taking part in employment or joining a sporting team. Young people also struggle when travelling on public transport to regional centres or Melbourne for appointments or other opportunities due to a lack of reliability to get to their destination on time. In May 2018, only one V/Line train line, out of 11, met monthly punctuality targets.[[28]](#endnote-28)

When travelling on the roads, young people highlighted the poor quality of roads in their communities. Several young people would speak to each other and could all know what pot-holes the others were talking about and have to swerve around when learning to drive.

*Fill the damn pot-holes. It’s terrifying to drive on our roads, especially for young people*

*Young person, 17, Ballarat City Council*

Young people also highlighted that getting a driver's licence is difficult, as some young people don’t have access to a car they can learn and get their hours in, and they also can’t afford driving lessons. This means they have to rely on friends and family members in order to accrue enough driving practice to get their probationary licence. While many areas are covered by the L2P program, the strict driver criteria means that young people who are over 20 years of age, or who have guardian with a vehicle but is not willing to take a learner out driving, cannot access the program.

*My friends experience getting their driver's licence is difficult as they don’t have a car, nor can afford driving lessons, or access to a fully licenced driver with a car.*

*Young person, 22, Warrnambool City Council*

Recommendations

1. Ensure young people from rural and regional Victoria can access adequate public transport, and support to obtain their driver’s licence where they live.

**Suggested action:** Strengthen public transport in rural and regional Victoria, to strengthen young people’s access to training, employment, services and community life.

**Suggested action:** Strengthen the L2P program by:

* Increasing per-head funding in line with CPI
* Developing a ‘rural loading’ to funding arrangements to cover the higher delivery costs in rural and regional areas.
* Developing flexible criteria guidelines so that providers can amend the eligibility criteria based on their community’s needs. This could assist communities who have an increased demand for the service from young people over 20 years of age, or by those who fit the criteria but do not have a positive relationship with a potential supervising driver.

***Discrimination***

Young people often spoke about the ‘old-fashioned views’ which were causing discrimination in the community. Rural and regional areas have smaller known numbers of same-sex couples living in the community and are less likely to be culturally diverse.[[29]](#endnote-29) Young people feel that in schools there is little open support for the LGBTIQ+ community, there are strictly enforced gendered uniform requirements and people are just generally less open minded.

Discrimination is also faced by those from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and due to lower levels of cultural diversity in rural and regional communities, young people feel that generally in the community those who are culturally diverse are treated differently. According to the 2016 Census, only 19.3 per cent of all people living outside of metropolitan Melbourne were born outside of Australia, compared to 40.2 per cent of those living in Greater Melbourne.[[30]](#endnote-30)  Furthermore, only 13.4 per cent of people speak a language other than English at home in rural and regional Victoria, compared to 38 per cent of those in Greater Melbourne.[[31]](#endnote-31)

*In rural areas, people aren’t as open minded and tend to use derogatory terms. As well as, they don’t tend to act normal to people of different cultures.
Young person, 15, Corangamite Shire Council*

Recommendations

1. Develop a number of mandatory training programs for all rural and regional teachers including cultural competency and anti-racism training, and Aboriginal cultural safety training.
2. Continue to support the Safe Schools program to ensure schools are safe and welcoming places for students, staff and family members who are same sex attracted and/or sex or gender diverse.

***Crime***

While some young people in rural and regional areas do experience crime and have safety concerns, a higher proportion of young people in rural and regional Victoria reported positive perceptions of safety in their neighbourhood over metropolitan Melbourne.[[32]](#endnote-32) Young people in rural and regional Victoria have told us they don’t always feel safe and state there needs to be more security and surveillance in the community to make them feel safer. They also believe that there is leniency in the justice system which is leading them to feel unsafe. Young people from smaller towns reflected that due to limited emergency services resourcing they felt that there were long response times in emergencies. There is also a higher prevalence of family violence throughout rural and regional Victoria.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Unfortunately, young people living in rural and regional Victoria are less likely to be diverted from the criminal justice system than those living in metropolitan Melbourne.[[34]](#endnote-34) This could be caused by several factors including limited access to resources, local community influence, the lower number of diversion programs available and smaller proportions of youth offenders in the community.

The young people we spoke to were also concerned about sexual assault taking place, particularly violence against women, and felt that at times these crimes weren’t treated seriously enough by community members or local authorities. Young women in rural and regional areas of Victoria are a part of the global discourse around speaking up in regards to sexual assault and gendered violence. The support systems must be in place to match the expectation of young rural and regional women to ensure their confidence in reporting unacceptable and illegal behaviours.

Recommendations

1. Develop and continue community-wide approaches to shift attitudes and conditions which lead to family violence and violence against women and develop a culture which rejects the normalisation of these forms of violence.
2. Strengthen early support for children and young people who have been victims of crime, including family violence, with access to justice and community-based support to cope with trauma.
3. Ensure youth justice practices such as diversion and bail support models are designed and funded to work in rural and regional areas. At present, models that require intensive supervision of young people can be very hard to implement in rural areas where there are few local staff, and where young people are scattered geographically. Strategic initiatives are needed to increase the number of qualified workers and services based long-term in rural communities.
4. Provide strong support for young people leaving custody in rural and regional areas with housing, education, employment, mental health, and alcohol and other drug support from workers who are easily accessible to young people.

***Youth Engagement***

Young people reflected to us their disappointment in the lack of opportunities to engage with each other and their local community. Due to the lack of opportunities and programs available young people reflect that this leads to boredom in the community. Increased levels of boredom in rural and regional young people have been linked to increased alcohol consumption and higher rates of sexual activity.[[35]](#endnote-35) [[36]](#endnote-36)  The young people we spoke to suggest that more youth engagement programs and accessible youth spaces could increase their engagement in the community. Some rural and regional communities don’t have youth or community spaces available for young people to come together at, or the young people in the community are unaware of these spaces.

*It would be wonderful to set up a council for young leaders in the community to join forces and discuss initiatives that we want to start
Young person, 17, Golden Plains Shire Council*

There are several state-wide events and forums that rural and regional young people could participate in, however not enough consideration is given to ensure equity of access. In order to participate in metropolitan based opportunities, rural and regional young people, and the people that work with them, need adequate notice of these opportunities, and for organisers to consider transport and accommodation costs. While young people need to be provided with local opportunities, attending state-wide events and forums increases young people's understanding of their local context, awareness of diversity in the broader community, develops connections with peers across the state, and gives them new ideas to take back to their local areas.

As highlighted previously, a number of young people feel that their communities are sport-centric. While sporting clubs provide a strong community for those involved, those excluded from this group either by choice or other barriers including financial costs , can feel isolated from the broader community. The young people we spoke to wish there were more programs available with a creative-focus, including arts and crafts, and performing arts.

Young people are also frustrated that many programs are short-term and do not continue beyond a short funding cycle or a pilot program. They want to be able to participate in these programs but due to funding sometimes they cease to continue. As reflected in the state government’s *Youth Policy: Building Stronger Youth Engagement in Victoria*, young people should have the opportunity to participate in decision making in their community, however there are not always adequate or meaningful opportunities to do so. A 2011 survey into local government support for young people indicated that 73 per cent of councils self-reported that they had strategies in place to actively involve young people in decision-making processes, however, there was no analysis done of the meaningfulness of these participation opportunities.[[37]](#endnote-37)

*Young people need a platform where they can speak directly to local and state governments and be heard
Young person, 17, Bass Coast Shire Council*

Recommendations

1. Strengthen the capacity for rural and regional young people to be involved and contribute to state and local government policy and decision making as outlined in the current *Youth Policy: Building Stronger Youth Engagement* in Victoria.

**Suggested action:** Providing additional financial and logistical support to facilitate rural and regional young people’s engagement in existing and new youth participation activities. This support includes accommodation, travel costs and adequate notification time for metropolitan based activities.

**Suggested action:** Ensure young people from a diverse range of communities and localities are engaged in existing and new state government level youth participation opportunities to give a more comprehensive representation of rural and regional young people.

1. Develop flexibility in state government funding and program guidelines to ensure that policies and programs can be implemented in the best way to support a local community.

**Suggested action:** Undertake an evaluation of the application process and funding guidelines for all Office for Youth distributed grants including *Engage!, FReeZA, Empower* and *Victorian Youth Week* grants.

* Incorporated into this evaluation should be a comprehensive consultation with youth workers from around Victoria in regards to their experience being a part of, and applying for, these programs.
* Guidelines for metropolitan, rural, and regional areas should be separate and guidelines must be flexible to each region, their geography, population and needs.
1. Support and increase the capacity of rural and regional youth workers to ensure there is comprehensive workforce who can focus on working with and supporting Victorian young people.

**Suggested action:** Increasing the number of trained, supported youth workers in rural and regional Victoria. YACVic’s Youth Work Matters campaign calls on the Government to do this by –

* Developing a state-wide youth work strategy so that every young person can access the right support in rural, regional or metropolitan Victoria.
* Implementing a new initiative to recruit, train and employ youth workers from diverse communities, focused on those where young people experience high levels of disadvantage, exclusion or crime.
* More youth workers employed to help address our state’s priority issues, such as employment, mental health, youth justice and education.

**Now what…**

Young people in rural and regional Victoria need a supported youth services sector in order to help overcome the hurdles they face, and feel supported though this time of transition. The sector can no longer just work for young people. We need to work in collaboration with young people in order to create a resilient and effective youth services sector.

YACVic Rural will continue to work with young people across our sites and state-wide to support their voices to be heard, and to facilitate youth participation opportunities in local communities. We will work with young people to understand the solutions they believe will solve these challenges, and advocate with and for them to create the best sector to support them.

To support the sector which supports young people, in March 2018, YACVic launched Youth Work Matters, a campaign to raise the profile of youth work and strengthen community understanding of it as a valued discipline. Youth Work Matters calls on the Victorian Government to increase the number of trained and supported youth workers in our rural, regional and metropolitan communities. A part of Youth Work Matters looks to ensure generalist youth work provision is available in all Victorian local government areas by prioritising funding to employ youth workers, ensuring at least one appropriately trained youth worker operates in each local government area. The campaign also asks for a new initiative to recruit, train and employ youth workers from diverse communities, including rural and regional communities by creating a scholarship program for young people in priority communities to study a Bachelor of Youth Work. To find out more about the campaign go to [www.youthworkmatters.org.au](http://www.youthworkmatters.org.au)

Furthermore, in the coming months, YACVic will release an updated policy platform outlining our policy priorities over the next two years. This work, combined with our previous policy positions give us and our sector a strong policy position to advocate from on the issues that matter to all young Victorians. We encourage young people living, working or studying in rural and regional Victoria to contribute to our ongoing policy work by letting us know what matters to them at [www.vicyouth.org.au](http://www.vicyouth.org.au)

While this is not a comprehensive list, we believe implementing these recommendations is a logical next step in better resourcing and supporting the sector which supports young people across rural and regional Victoria, by putting young people's voices at the front of any change which will impact them.

To find out more about what the Youth Affairs Council Victoria is doing in this space please visit us at [www.yacvicrural.org.au](http://www.yacvicrural.org.au)

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