2023–24 Youth Forum Report 1

A snapshot of consultations with young people as part of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group

COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Contents

Acknowledgement

The Commission for Children and Young People would like to acknowledge the young people who participated in a series of forums for young people of South Sudanese and other African backgrounds in 2023. Young people at these forums were incredibly generous and open. They were also articulate and insightful, and many showed great strength and resilience. They were clearly and understandably proud of their culture and identity and highly motivated to support and strengthen their community. We are grateful for their candour and for trusting us with their experiences, feelings and ideas for change.

We also want to thank the organisations who partnered with us for our first three forums, including African Youth Initiative, Next Gen Unite and South Sudanese Minds.

In addition, the Commission would also like to acknowledge and celebrate the talent and artistry of South Sudanese Australian young people. The various art pieces that flow throughout this report are the creation of Melbourne's local South Sudanese Australian artist, Deng Deng*. Deng's artwork in this report is about capturing the spirited identity of South Sudanese Australian young people.

'I'm South Sudanese, born in Egypt and raised in Australia. I took an appeal to the creative industry and it's where I've found my passion and joy. Growing up in Australia has shaped my perspective in profound ways. I've come to understand the power of storytelling and the transformative potential of art to bridge division, foster understanding and inspire change.

The art pieces for this project and report were created as an ode to South Sudanese Australian identity, to express the duality between two cultures - that being, South Sudanese and Australian. The idea behind it is to highlight how young people may hide aspects of their identity due to societal pressures and fear of judgement. It is about capturing that dual sense of being.' – Deng Deng

*More on Deng's artwork can be found on his Instagram page via @prodxsaintt

Background

South Sudanese Australian young people are significantly over-represented in Victoria's youth justice system, and there has been a steady increase in the number of South Sudanese Australian young people becoming involved in the criminal justice system since 2014–15.[1]

To respond to this alarming rate of over-representation, the Victorian Government established the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group ('Expert Working Group') in May 2022. The Expert Working Group is tasked with developing short and longer-term strategies for reducing the over-representation of South Sudanese Australian young people within the youth justice system. The Expert Working Group is led by Dr Santino Deng as Chair and the Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People, Liana Buchanan, as Deputy Chair. The Expert Working Group is supported by staff from the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Commission for Children and Young People.

As part of its broad-ranging consultations, the Expert Working Group wanted to hear directly from young people from the South Sudanese Australian community. They wanted to understand what their day-to-day life was like, including their experiences of school, work and home life.

This is important context to help understand why some young people might get involved in criminal offending. Where relevant, the Expert Working Group also wanted to learn about young people's direct experiences of the Victorian youth justice system.

To support the Expert Working Group, the Commission for Children and Young People convened a number of youth forums in partnership with various African youth-led organisations. This report captures the key themes and insights that emerged from the first three of these forums, which were held in Dandenong, Melton and Richmond in 2023.

While this project focuses specifically on South Sudanese Australian young people, and some of the problems will be unique to this community, many of these insights will likely resonate more broadly, particularly for other African Australian young people.

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1   Youth Justice data obtained internally from the Department of Justice and Community Safety.

Overview of consultations

The perspectives and life experiences of South Sudanese Australian young people reflect the diversity of their community.

Some young people arrived in Australia as refugees and carry harrowing experiences of trauma, war and displacement. On arrival, they had to adapt to a new life that may have required them to learn a language, establish social connections and adjust to the customs and practices of Australia. Others are born in Australia into established social and familial networks and have not needed to navigate these challenges.

The family circumstances of young people also vary, with some raised in homes that closely conform to South Sudanese culture and beliefs and others whose parents may hold these practices more lightly. Language proficiency, education levels and experiences of paid work also vary between families. In addition to this diversity of life experience, South Sudanese Australians also have different tribal and ethnic groups (such as the Dinka and Nuer peoples) that inform their cultural practices, social relationships and religious beliefs.

Over 150 participants in our youth forums reflected these varied perspectives and life experiences, which they generously drew on to describe what it was like growing up in Australia with a South Sudanese background. They described what it was like to go to school, to work and spend time in the community, which gives a sense of some of the day-to-day challenges they navigate and

some of the factors that may increase risks of youth offending. Some participants were able to speak directly to experiences of the youth justice system, either as someone who had been remanded or sentenced to youth justice or as family members, friends or support workers of those young people.

Some of the challenges participants described would be familiar to many young people. Stress about academic performance, uncertainty about future careers, a desire to fit in and frustrations with parental boundaries reflect universal teenage experiences. However, it was clear that some of the difficulties shared were particular to being a South Sudanese Australian young person. These can be summarised as follows:

Racism and discrimination

Many South Sudanese Australian young people reported experiences of racism and discrimination, which undermined their feelings of safety and belonging. This prejudice sometimes created practical barriers to reaching their full potential in school and work, due to inaccurate assumptions about their character, skills and capabilities. External factors such as inflammatory media reporting on 'African gangs' are felt to have fuelled negative attitudes towards African-Australian young people and contributed to experiences of racism, police profiling and a sense of social exclusion. These factors, as well as a lack of support for young people, could leave them feeling angry, rejected and disillusioned and in turn can contribute to anti-social or offending behaviours.

> *'We are blocked out of opportunities, I always have to prove my worth to white people. I have to be the smartest, stand up straight – it is such a heavy burden.'*

> *'We are portrayed in the news as African gangs – I am a straight A student.'*

School and work

Experiences of school and work were often defined by how young people were treated by peers or by adults in authority. Despite having strong academic potential in school, young people sometimes felt their teachers underestimated their abilities and routed them into less challenging subjects or courses, sometimes making incorrect assumptions about their intellect or their English proficiency. Some suspected potential employers discriminated against them based on their name, appearance and cultural background, which made it hard to get a job, particularly as some were still learning about the process of applying for work. Once employed, some young people had to contend with explicit racism or micro-aggressions relating to their accent, the pronunciation of their name or their hairstyle.

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

> *'My name – when you give your résumé, the first thing they see is your name. My name can be foreign to other people and (your) résumé can be thrown in the bin. I think about changing my name but my name is my identity so I don't want to change it.'*

Poverty and financial hardship

Some South Sudanese Australian young people spoke about how their families were struggling financially, particularly in single parent households. Some families could not afford basic necessities and parents were often required to work long hours to try and keep the family afloat. This sometimes placed pressure on teenagers to care for younger siblings and meant they got less parental support than they wanted.

> *'The financial side of things was always a struggle. I remember we moved houses consistently. I'd see kids playing sport, parents buying this and this and that, but I had no way to access that.'*

Parental expectations and competing cultural norms

Young people often reported challenges in bridging competing cultural norms and practices. Some found it hard that their parents were holding on to South Sudanese beliefs that were not suited to Australian life. Other young people felt stressed about meeting high standards set by parents, including those related to performing well at school.

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

> *'Shame is a big thing in our community. Our parents hold our last names very dear to them. They don't want to talk about anything bad about the family because the community talks. How do we address the notion of shame without the parents feeling ashamed?'*

Mental health and wellbeing

Many young people discussed the issue of mental health, with some describing the mental health struggles of friends or family, or sharing their own difficulties. Cultural stigma associated with mental health problems, as well as the limited number of suitable services, were seen as barriers to accessing help. Many participants felt strongly that attitudes relating to mental ill health within their community needed to change to allow these issues to be more openly discussed and addressed.

'A few weeks ago there was a guy who had symptoms of psychosis and he went to ED (Emergency Department) to seek help and was sent home after one day.'

'We need to find a way to make the conversation about mental health not so scary.'

Alcohol and other drugs

Many young people shared stories of peers or family members abusing alcohol, as well as their own experiences of binge drinking. They explained that sometimes young people drank too much due to peer pressure, while in other instances drinking is used as a coping mechanism for trauma or mental health problems. Navigating alcohol and drug use was described as particularly challenging, as it holds a particular stigma and is frowned upon by many South Sudanese people. Parents would often adopt a zero-tolerance approach to alcohol, which young people sometimes felt contributed to unsafe drinking behaviours as young people lacked information on how to limit risks and were more likely to drink in public places. The shame associated with drinking often discouraged young people and their families from seeking professional help.

'My dad is a chronic alcoholic. My dad's been an addict for so long. His body can't cope without alcohol. I feel like there's a lot of peer pressure. I've wanted to like, go to a party, and seeing everyone else taking a shot makes you feel like you need to. One shot, turns into two shots, three, four.'

'I don't like the taste and smell of alcohol. But for some people, that's what they need. In our household, there was a big shock when my little sister was drinking. My mum went on a rampage to punish my younger sister.'

Interactions with police

Young people described instances of discrimination and racial profiling by police, even in circumstances where they were doing nothing wrong. These interactions increase the risk of young people entering the youth justice system and understandably lead to feelings of distrust and frustration towards law enforcement. In addition, some participants felt police were quick to jump to punishment rather than trying to divert South Sudanese Australian young people away from the youth justice system by working to understand and address the factors that increase the risks of offending.

'Police have violated my siblings and being exposed to that kind of discrimination just has a huge toll on my family, especially my parents.'

Factors contributing to youth offending

Young people get involved in criminal offending for a wide range of reasons. For some, it begins as a means to overcome poverty and gain access to food and basic necessities. Others may be attracted to crime to obtain a sense of status and belonging they cannot get in a community that too often stereotypes and assumes the worst of them. Young people were particularly vulnerable to this if they felt disconnected from their parents and families. A young person entering the youth justice system was a great source of pain and sadness for families, who often struggled to know how best to support them, particularly following release from detention.

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

> '*He kept reoffending and they kept missing that it was his environment. He kept going into the continuous cycle of crime and now he's an adult, but you can see it had an effect on him. If you're going to change the person you also have to focus on the environment.*'

Participants had many suggestions on what could be improved not only to reduce the risks of youth offending, but to support South Sudanese Australian young people to feel safe, supported to reach their goals and embraced by the broader community. The need to address racism within schools, workplaces, justice agencies and across the broader community was consistently highlighted.

Overwhelmingly, the need for community-led and culturally safe programs and services was highlighted as a priority, particularly drug and alcohol programs and mental health support services. Practical programs to help with employment or additional support for school were also suggested. Many young people found sport and recreational activities helpful and reported the positive influence of mentors. A range of suggestions to improve policing practices and the youth justice system were also discussed.

> '*They've got to understand what you've been through. They need to be someone who's been in your shoes. You have to be able to relate to someone and be around someone that understands you. No cookie cutter approach.*'

These themes are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

159 young people

12 to 25 years old

3 youth forums

Topics discussed at forums

Mental health

Education

Employment

Alcohol and other drugs

Youth crime

Melton

Richmond

Dandenong

Co-hosting organisations:

African Youth Initiative, NextGen Unite, South Sudanese Minds

Experiences of racism and discrimination in the community

Many South Sudanese Australian young people described experiences of racism and discrimination in their everyday lives, including at work, school or when spending time in the community. These experiences were not only hurtful and stigmatising for young people, but also had implications for their ability to reach their potential in school or work.

Many young people attributed some of this mistreatment to inflammatory media reporting in recent years, which has given disproportionate attention to offences committed by young African Australians and fixated on 'African gangs'. Many participants felt sensationalist media reporting fuelled negative stereotypes that caused the community to view them as inherently frightening and violent, or as criminal gang members.

'When you watch the news, they talk about African gangs in Melbourne. They believe that because that's what they hear in the media and they feel like the whole community is bad. The media is a real issue that is why people feel about youth crime.'

'Gang things had a huge influence on me and my siblings at school. We use to do fire drills and students would call out "APEX" and then they would all look at me.'

'The media scare society about people who look like us and that needs to stop. Even though crime rates are lower now than 50 years ago, the news is always looking for a story to scare everyone. If they can't find anything else that gets views, they'll label us and put us up there because it's going to get ratings.'

'My teachers used to ask me if I was a part of APEX. They never let us hang out in groups.'

The harmful stereotyping young people reported would arise in a range of settings, including at school, in the workplace or when they were out in public. These inaccurate perceptions not only made young people feel misunderstood, unsafe and unwelcome in the community but also negatively affected their sense of self.

'Going into a store, they think I am going to steal, internally you feel like you have done something wrong – there is a stigma around it.'

'I work at Myer. One time some retail workers hid the dark shades of makeup. I asked them "do you see me as an employee when I'm in uniform, but out of my uniform you see me as a criminal?"'

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

> *'I always get bag-checked when I'm in a store. Never my friends who aren't black. Just me.'*

Sometimes the fear of playing into harmful stereotypes made South Sudanese Australian young people wary of asserting themselves or advocating for their rights, particularly in the workplace.

> *'I'm 24 – I think the last two years is where I've learnt to negotiate my contract. Before that they saw a sense of naivety. I'm going to stay quiet because I don't want to be perceived as an angry black woman… Because our parents aren't working, you don't get that information from your parents. But now our generation are learning that. I expect better and I deserve better. Even with some of the young people I work with, I step in and say no you can do better. It's hard when people see us as disruptive (because we negotiate for what we are worth).'*

> *'I tried to explain why my myki didn't tap on properly to a PSO one time, they didn't care and told me to shut up and just pay the fine on the spot or they'll call the cops.'*

Experiences of racism, police profiling, a sense of exclusion and 'othering' from the broader community, combined with inadequate support services, were felt to increase risks of anti-social behaviour from South Sudanese Australian young people who were often driven to find connection and understanding from less positive influences. This is discussed in more detail later in this report.

Experiences of school

South Sudanese Australian young people shared a variety of experiences of school. Some young people who arrived more recently in Australia had challenges at school connected to language barriers or because their education was disrupted during the migration process.

'The mainstream education system is full on, let's change the system so that it works better for South Sudanese children. In primary school I was lucky to have a teacher who was from an African background to help me and enabled me to catch up to my peers. I didn't go home and speak English, I spoke Dinka at home. So English was only happening from 9–5pm so that exposure to English went out the window. If you're speaking English 24/7 it's much easier to grapple with it.'

More commonly, however, young people described experiences that left them feeling unsupported and excluded by their broader school community. These experiences were common to young people born in Australia and those born elsewhere. A number of young people described being disengaged from school and explained that this was often a product of the attitude and approach of their teachers. Some felt like they got better support from their school when they were younger, but felt this care and attentiveness fell away as they got older.

'I used to like school, but this year I don't like it because the teacher doesn't explain the work properly and now no one really does work in the class. Each day all the students in my class just muck around and talk. They don't care anymore.'

'The last three years of high school I wasn't really there. I'm a nerd, reading a lot, very inquisitive by nature. At the age of five I wanted to be a biological engineer. I've always enjoyed learning and understanding. The intensity of year 12 is a nightmare. My attendance dropped to 40 per cent, from 90 per cent. A big part of this was because of my teachers. I swore my teacher hated me sometimes. Teachers assumed things about me. I was still doing English, maths and science in year 12 and lots of teachers were taken aback and didn't like it that I asked questions in class. There was too much friction, so I would stay home.'

Young people also spoke about how they sometimes felt their school was quick to move to punish their disengagement, rather than trying to understand what may be underlying it.

> *'They don't care that I haven't done the homework because I prioritised working. Also giving them (young people) the space and understanding as to why – (instead) it goes straight to suspension, notifying child protection, etc. It's never, "ok, what's going on, let's see what we can do to help, ok this assignment is too hard, let's see what we can do to teach you".'*

Several young people described their schools underestimating their academic potential. Some schools automatically assumed South Sudanese Australian students had language barriers or learning difficulties, regardless of their circumstances. As a result, some teachers did not encourage young people to be ambitious in their goals or express belief in their abilities.

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

> *'There is a laziness on teachers to push students to do VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) instead of VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education). There was a forum specific for Africans for them to do VCAL.'*

A number of examples pointed to poor cultural awareness within schools. Many South Sudanese Australian young people acknowledged good intentions behind initiatives to acknowledge different cultures but felt frustrated when their unique South Sudanese culture was generalised and flattened to 'African'. This often contributed to inaccurate and overly simplistic portrayals of their culture at school. Some participants described insensitive teaching practices that uncomfortably singled them out in class.

> *'(T)here is a bit of difficulty as an African to celebrate your culture because the schools don't recognise that there are different countries in Africa and even specifically among young people since there are so many different tribes and different cultures and practices within each tribe. There is a lot of effort that we have to do to emphasise that each group has its own unique practices even within one country and there needs to be more respect for unique diversity.'*

> *'There was a previous diversity day where South Sudanese were doing a cultural dance and they labelled it as African when it should have been South Sudanese.'*

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

Some young people reported outright prejudice and racism at school from teachers.

> *'My teacher asked if I was a part of the APEX gang. I wasn't allowed to hang out in groups.'*

'I would run into the issue of being labelled an angry black girl because I was asking the teacher questions. I would avoid talking because she would call me out.'

Many young people described a disconnect between their parents and their school. Sometimes this arose because their parents did not speak English well and had difficulties communicating with teachers. In other cases young people said their parents were not made to feel comfortable or included when engaging with school professionals. Competing pressures on parents also made it difficult for some parents to stay closely engaged with their children's schooling, particularly in larger families.

'Mum spoke a little English but not enough to understand what teachers were communicating about my schooling.'

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

Ideas for reform

Young people had ideas of ways to improve school, which included improving cultural safety and representation amongst teachers, greater access to tutoring, having more support in the classroom to help and schools offering flexible timetables. Young people also highlighted the need to improve connections between students, their parents and teachers at the school.

Overwhelmingly, young people felt improving diversity and cultural safety within schools was critical. Participants encouraged more training for teachers and school staff to overcome the lack of cultural safety and, for some, the racism they experienced. Initiatives within schools, such as community liaison staff, were also cited as an important way to access support for young people provided these staff are given authority and influence in the school.

'In terms of special programs, it goes back to culturally safe practice, but it takes a lot to do that, it takes training for staff and teachers, schools need to be more open to implementing more programs for more students, because if not it pushes people away.'

'For the EAL (English as an additional language) kids there is a need to have people that understand culture and some of the experiences that they go through when settling.'

'Seeing someone that looks like you and I is so important. I remember seeing the first woman of colour at my school and I latched on to the teacher for dear life. Those are the people you remember the most.'

'I always think about culturally safe practices within schools, for all cultures, I think schools are the least supportive in that element. I don't know if it's ignorance, you can't ignore that you have people from all communities and races, school is a part of your lifestyle, the morals that you adhere to in your community, your school should be able to adhere to them. For example, Ramadan and fasting, just provide support and education, so kids don't feel like they're weird. I might not be able to understand (Australian) history as well as someone who was born here, I don't know, I only came here a few years ago. Need to make it more interactive.'

Experiences of work

Many young people described being unsure how to go about applying for a job, including how to prepare a résumé, what to wear and what to say in a job interview. A number of participants spoke about how helpful it was (or would be) to get advice and guidance from someone experienced in these processes, to give them confidence.

'It's so overwhelming knowing where to start, what's my résumé meant to look like, where to apply. We had career support at high school, but it doesn't tell you how many jobs to apply for and the disappointment and hopelessness when you don't get any jobs.'

'(T)here are resources to help but people don't know about them. And the type of job, people go for fast food or warehousing because they are easy. The baby steps aren't explained at the beginning. Do I wear a suit? I don't have any experience; do I lie about it? (we're) not supported in school, they just make your résumé for you.'

Young people shared that parents were not always able to help with job applications, as they may not have experience navigating the employment market in Australia themselves, although young people told us sometimes their older siblings could help.

'We are the first generation doing it in Australia, so it's either I know what I have to do or you just give up. And I don't have parents that speak English and can point me where to go. They have their own problems. They need (me) to be able to deal with it on my own and also help them too.'

A number of participants said racial discrimination was a major barrier to getting a job and affected their enjoyment of work. Young people who had previous youth justice involvement spoke about additional challenges in getting a job.

'For some of the young people I work with they've been through youth justice, a young man who's now 24, got into trouble when he was 16 and 17, and last offence was 18 and he still carries that with him now. He's trying to get his WWCC (Working with Children Check) card now and he applied almost a year ago, and the process has been a struggle. He put a lengthy post on Facebook, saying he feels like he has no prospects in his life at all, he really wants to pursue a career in having an impact on other young people. How do you redeem yourself when the system says you're marked for the rest of your life pretty much. And how do you rectify this…'

Young people worried potential employers would dismiss their applications based on their name alone. Those who did get work often had to contend with requests to change their name and careless mispronunciations. Understandably, young people took pride in their name and felt frustrated when their employers and colleagues didn't make an effort to say their names correctly.

> *'Name is a big one…. it has made me anxious about applying for jobs… I had applied for a job, got the job and started. And first day on the job they asked me to change my name. I was like no, I'm not going to change my name…'*

> *'Age and name are things that are constantly coming up for me. We can just move on and pretend it's not a thing. But it's how people put us into a box and then we have to work twice as hard to get the opportunities. People can't pronounce my name, some don't even try and then when they do, they laugh about it. If I can pronounce Anglo names, then they should be able to pronounce mine. It might be a small thing, but it's a huge thing for me because it points out how different I am and it makes me worried about the types of opportunities I'll be given.'*

> *'Especially with the South Sudanese youth, often we have to revert back to our Christian names (because people can't remember/ say them), but why are you removing our identity? On the phone I sound like a Caucasian person but now you see me and I'm South Sudanese. But I've seen it with my clients and family members who have to use their Christian names and it's not fair. I have to change name because my name is too hard. But there are some quite complicated Caucasian names out there and why aren't they getting asked the same thing?'*

Participants also explained receiving comments at work about their accent, with employers sometimes expressing surprise when their accent did not match expectations associated with their appearance. Some young people described having to 'code switch' at work, which is a term used to describe an under-represented group feeling obliged to change the way they look, talk or behave in order to better conform to the expectations of people around them.

> *'What I struggled with was coming here at such an age that I had an accent. I had a friend who applied for a job, his aussie accent was very good, then he went there, they were like wow I didn't know it was you, your accent was so good.'*

> *'I've been working since 15 and it's been interesting whenever I walk into job interviews, my name is ambiguous and people are surprised when I walk into the room. I code switch and change the way I talk depending on the company and this can lead to micro-aggressions. "If I didn't know, I'd have thought you were white", expectations that I should deal with (this discrimination) because it's part of a job, but actually it's not part of the job legally. And then getting reprimanded for pushing back.'*

Some young people felt like they were singled out for comment by their superiors for how they dressed or how they wore their hair. Underlying these comments were prejudicial stereotypes about what is 'professional'.

'I thought I wanted to work in law, I started off in the corporate sector. Getting the internship was a win for them because they had a black girl in the team. But my presentation was being looked at, I would dress the same as the white girl, but my manager would say 'maybe don't wear that', and the hair, I was told not to wear my hair like that. I googled what professional hair was and unprofessional was curly black hair. In youth work I would resonate more with the young black kids, then age and gender came into question, within my career it happens a lot, maybe I've connected with the young person because of my skills, but my age and gender are looked at as a factor. But I've learnt a lot and those things have challenged me to work harder to prove myself.'

Some participants described some of the challenges in applying for or maintaining a job alongside other responsibilities to family, such as caring for younger siblings.

'(Y)ou know understand that you might not be a parent, but your siblings might basically be your kids and understanding that you have to go pick them up at 3:30pm because your parents can't…'

Ideas for reform

A number of participants spoke to the value of someone giving them practical advice and guidance on how to apply for a job and suggested it would be helpful to facilitate connections with recruiters who have an understanding of the migrant community.

'Lack of education when it comes to the hiring process, and even the résumé and how it's supposed to be set up. I met someone at a networking event, they looked at my résumé, they pinpointed those things, it gave me some confidence to apply for jobs. Having the confidence in knowing I had that set up. Just that little bit of assistance.'

'I thought my résumé was amazing but then getting feedback, realising it wasn't. So it was like actually reaching out and getting that help... they helped with like the setting out of the résumé, what recruiters look for… now when I help young people I can show them what we are looking for… not knowing what they want in a résumé it's a hard part.'

Improving diversity within workplaces was seen as an important way to make them feel safer and more inclusive for South Sudanese Australian young people.

'Representation is important in any form. Even when I worked at McDonalds and worked my way up to a manager. I had a customer come in and saw me as a manager and said great, I'm going to bring my daughter in. And slowly over time, the demographic of the restaurant became more multicultural. Even being in child protection now, I can see the impact of having my voice on the panels for South Sudanese children and young people.'

Poverty and financial hardship

Some South Sudanese Australian young people described families living in poverty and financial hardship. It could mean living in cramped and overcrowded homes with parents struggling to afford basic necessities.

> *'Their family is so poor. He lives in four-bedroom government house with 13 kids – no space, no privacy. So how are they going to have money to afford anything else? They need money.'*

> *'Very normal to be South Sudanese and be in a bedroom with five people. Not having the luxuries of others, going home and unable to relax. This brings a lot of stress to parents as well.'*

> *'It's a never ending list of you just don't have any money, mum doesn't have enough change, you ask today and then you go to training and she can't keep up and you're too young to work, you don't have your parents with you who could drive you to get you something to eat.'*

A number of participants described being raised by single mothers, sometimes alongside several siblings, which placed significant pressure on their mother not only to financially provide for the family but also do all the day-to-day parenting.

> *'My mum having to raise the kids on her own made it very difficult.'*

> *'The cultural differences as well. There will be a project overseas that your father is working on and then he has married someone else. Then your mother is left here and has to work and send money back home. This all adds pressure and stress onto the issue. The father gets to go scot-free and the burden is left to the single mothers. How is it fair?'*

Some teenagers are relied upon to provide care and supervision to younger siblings while parents worked; a responsibility that sometimes affected their ability to meet school and work commitments. In pressured households struggling to make ends meet, it was sometimes difficult for parents to give dedicated time to each of their children, particularly once children were older and seen to need less attention.

> *'A really big one is that parents are working so much. I grew up in a household where my mum was a single mother working all the time. The siblings in our family essentially raised each other and now I need to take on the parenting role while also trying to grow myself. The mentality is, as long as I'm putting food on the table then I'm okay.'*

'There was communication every now and then with my parents, but from year 10 it was me by myself and that's because I had so many siblings and they (parents) had to focus on the younger ones. Because I was doing alright at school there was never a focus on me so if I was disengaged it wasn't really noticed.'
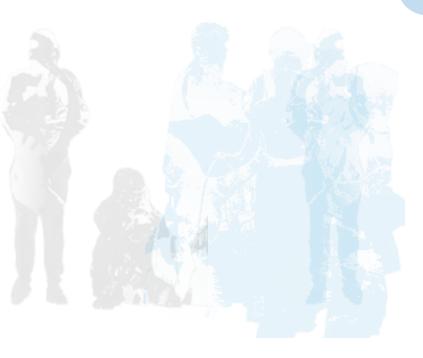
Ideas for reform

A participant noted the supportive nature of the South Sudanese Australian community, which often worked informally to support other families in need.

'South Sudanese families often support one another, whether financially or socially.'

However, understanding and addressing structural inequality and creating more opportunities for South Sudanese Australians in education and work was seen as important to improving financial security. Some suggestions around this are described in earlier sections of this report.

'Having people who look like us in positions of power and understanding our struggles makes a difference. Opportunities at home are going to be limited compared to someone who was born here, went to a private school where their parents can step in and take care of those things.'

Competing cultural norms and parental expectations

South Sudanese Australian families settle in Australia at different times and in varying circumstances. This can influence their level of connectedness to South Sudanese beliefs and traditions. Young people frequently spoke about the challenge of having to straddle South Sudanese norms imposed by their parents alongside sometimes quite different ways of thinking they are exposed to in Australia through school or time with friends.

'The disconnect from culture is a big one for us. It's hard to feel like you belong when it's a new country and your parents aren't like other kids' parents.'

'We were raised in Australia so we had access to these types of conversation, but not the parents.'

Sometimes frustrations were generational, but in other instances they related to parents upholding South Sudanese cultural norms that young people felt were outdated or unsuited to life in Australia. Some of these differences were raised in relation to cultural attitudes to mental health issues or the use of alcohol and other drugs, which are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

'It's about those small things that are positive in the home. We are so restricted. We don't talk about sex. We don't talk about mental health. It's become such an issue.'

The difference is that Nate's mum is cool with it (drinking alcohol). But for us, I wouldn't drink in front of my mum. But when my parents see it, it becomes a negative thing. I reckon that's where the big gap is – it's the culture and the age divide with our parents.

The absence of a father (or father figure) in families was sometimes seen as problematic within families, particularly for boys and young men, who may gravitate towards negative influences in the community – particularly if they were in conflict with their mothers.

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

'For a lot of us our fathers weren't around, either working or overseas – you never see them.'

In addition to these challenges relating to cultural and generational differences, some young people described feeling enormous pressure from their parents to succeed academically, pursue particular career paths and to become positive role models.

'I'm the youngest girl of three older brothers, and girls have to be perfect. My parents are really educated and I have a lot of people who are expecting me to take after them and lead an example for the community.'

'My dad was a school teacher, so education was really important. When I started to play sport, it went against everything he wanted me to do. I was so fortunate, we had a really supportive environment but a lot of my friends didn't have that. Stable support at home and having a good relationship with your parents makes a big difference. My dad wanted me to be a school teacher, but I wanted to be a footballer. Similar issues about not fitting in, racism, getting suspended, and I still wanted to prove my parents wrong by succeeding in football. I managed to balance both. Hopefully my son, he will have choices, he can go to TAFE, have a trade, parents need to understand the flexibility (to pursue different career options).'

Difficulties connecting with parents was often a source of sadness and frustration for young people. However, many participants were sympathetic to the difficulties their parents faced in adjusting to cultural changes, particularly where their parents were expected to overturn long-held beliefs while also navigating other life challenges.

'Right now the parents are uneducated in life. They need to understand how we feel. But we need to understand them. Some young people don't understand the struggles of their parents.'

'Just be patient with African parents. Because they've had this one culture for many, many years. If we're consistent enough we can make a change.'

Ideas for reform

Participants thought it was important to educate and support newly-arrived parents in particular to help them to adjust to different attitudes and parenting practices in Australia. This was seen as an important way to reduce tension and conflict and encourage young people to seek support and positive connection within their families.

'Sometimes parents need support in order to support their kids.'

'Our parents need to be retrained as to how to speak to the children.'

'Most of the time it's not that they don't have the capacity to understand (parents) we just need to translate it into a language that they will understand.'

People saw older generations as a critical part of the solution to challenges faced by South Sudanese Australian youth, with some people lamenting that there weren't more parents in the room during workshops to hear and learn from what young people were saying. Community leaders were also seen as important to positively influencing parental attitudes and supporting their adjustment to different norms.

'Our older generation in the community need to be a part of the conversation as well, to be able to help the youth.'

'I would've loved to have seen more parents here today. The parents need to be hearing the strategies. Hey how can my kids be a part of your program. These conversations can only happen if parents are in the room. Kids are frustrated but to articulate that to our parents is so difficult.

'There has been a depletion in community leadership – our parents still have the African mindset.'

While there was broad agreement on the need to bridge connections between generations, some people recognised there would always be a need for young people to have avenues for support or connection beyond their parents, particularly if their home did not feel safe.

'It's very unlikely that young people will talk about their issues in front of their parents. Whereas if it's just them they're likely to. It's important to provide safe spaces for these discussions.'

'Sometimes our home isn't our safe place. Some kids aren't happy at home. They don't like their home environment, they need someone who they can connect with. These support systems can give them a sense of hope and support. Because when they go home there's nothing at home. They don't have good relationships with their parents.'

Young people also had a range of recommendations to encourage more open discussion of mental health issues and drug and alcohol use, which are discussed in the following sections.

Mental health and wellbeing

Many participants highlighted problems accessing mental health services and sometimes reported negative or discriminatory experiences where they did. Young people often reported that mental health services did not take account of the specific needs of their community.

'The mental health system is quite broken and has failed a lot of people out there.'

'I used to work in the ED (Emergency Department) at the Royal Children's Hospital and sometimes we would get kids come in who were angry and instead of providing them with someone to speak to, there would be a security guard assigned to stand next to them.'

'Sometimes there is only one way or solution provided to treating various mental health issues and this doesn't work for everyone or sufficiently support the community.'

Young people were conscious that their parents were sometimes dealing with their own mental health challenges, particularly if they had been through highly traumatic experiences.

'There are some family members who say they are okay, but you can tell that they are going through something. But because of our culture's pressure to always be strong, it is hard for them to say that they are struggling.'

'A lot of parents have trauma from the civil war.'

'My parents always say they do not have time to express their feelings as they are always worrying about someone else.'

Sometimes, young people described that the scale of trauma experienced by parents made it more difficult for them to empathise with the day-to-day struggles of their children in Australia, which could seem insignificant by comparison. This made it harder for young people to confide in their parents when they were struggling, as they feared having their feelings dismissed or downplayed.

'They know what mental health is. Parents don't always make it easy for me to talk about my own problems. They always say things like "we went through so much" and they compare their stuff with mine and say I need to be grateful for what I have.'

> '*Mental health is only viewed from the extreme standpoint by most parents. Therefore, if a young person is struggling with their mental health but can still get out of bed in the morning and go to school/work then parents do not take them seriously.*'

> '*My family laughs when I try to bring up my feelings.*'

Participants explained that having poor mental health often carried stigma and negative connotations in South Sudanese culture, which could make these problems difficult to talk about openly, even within families.

> '*Some of the negative connotations associated with mental health in our culture is that some people see mental ill-health as witchcraft or a curse from God. This makes it hard to seek help.*'

> '*It brings so many people shame to talk about it. My parents think that having mental health issues is like being crazy. It's taboo and you just don't talk about it to each other.*'

Young people also described cultural expectations on boys to be strong and not to show emotion. These gender norms made it difficult for young men in particular to acknowledge or discuss their feelings, or to get help if their mental health was suffering.

> '*With the older generation, the more you open up, the more they think you're being weak. And especially being a man, you have to always keep it together.*'

> '*As a boy, my parents taught me not to deal with my emotions. Really, they made me bottle it up and just tough it out.*'

> '*Being a 27-year-old male of African background, it is not easy to talk about feelings. It's about learning and relearning what we've been taught.*'

Some participants found religion and faith a helpful source of strength and support for their mental health.

> '*Religion helped me deal with my trauma more. Going to church helps but I think that's mainly because it's a black church.*'

> '*Finding faith helped me heal a little. I was so lost in life and I fell out of a lot of relationships. I didn't talk to my parents and my siblings are young. Sometimes my friends were there but they weren't always around. I found faith and it helped. But I think we need more churches or places of worship where people can come freely without feeling they have to be Christian or anything.*'

Ideas for reform

A number of young people described a lack of culturally safe services to seek help for mental health problems, particularly as some did not trust mainstream services.

'When you live in a country where people don't look like you and the people who do don't want to talk about mental health issues, who else have you got?'

'There aren't many safe spaces where African men can go to talk about their issues. So with so much bottled anger, some of us just end up resorting to violence to let it all out or solve our problems. It's not healthy but with all this bottled up stuff it's hard to find another way to let it out when you've never been taught how.'

'There is a need for more accessible mental health programs for the people in our community.'

'I feel there aren't services that are appropriate and culturally informed, that's not the community's fault.'

'Having representation when it comes to admin and whoever will be first point of contact, I think it leaves a much better impression. For e.g. When my mum has an appointment and she sees a South Sudanese person at the desk, she instantly feels a lot more comfortable, it impacts the interaction.'

Many young people emphasised the need for the South Sudanese community in Australia to unlearn negative associations towards mental illness. This was seen as essential to opening up important discussions within the community and improving pathways to help.

'We need more intergenerational conversation about mental health.'

'There is a lack of conversation about mental health in our community.'

'It would be good for the health system to provide education to our parents about mental health.'

Alcohol and other drugs

Many young people talked about the impact of alcohol on their families, or their own use of alcohol. Peer pressure was often described as a reason young people would experiment with alcohol, or lead to them drinking too much. Sometimes young people were reluctant to drink, but felt they needed to in order to fit in with others. The glamourisation of drinking by celebrities was also thought to influence young people.

'When I see my younger brother and the music from the rappers about how off their head they are. It's not cool. One time I was driving to school and my little brother opened a snapchat. It was a 14-year-old kid in my little brother's group drinking Jack Daniels before school. I think that's why it's important about peer pressure. Especially with social media.'

'I really understand why young people feel the peer pressure. I've been finding a lot of pop culture is giving kids ideas to drink. The influence of others is so real for them. The kids feel like they're living the lifestyle.'

'I reckon peer pressure is a big one. I remember at a party, the birthday girl was like 'you must drink'. It was really difficult to say 'no I can't'. If you say no, then there's consequences. I think to myself, do I just drink? Do I just deal with the consequences of drinking? Do I just deal with the consequences of not drinking? I think you're just surrounded by alcohol 24/7. That's what my dad does. That's what my brother does.'

Other reasons that young people turned to alcohol could be to self-medicate and manage the effects of trauma. Some young people told us that they were affected by trauma passed down through generations, particularly as it is often not spoken about openly.

'I think sometimes using alcohol means I don't have to deal with the responsibility of anything. I don't have to deal with the emotions.'

'After the past couple of years, a lot of young people have died in really horrendous ways. Not being able to cope with the grief has meant that a lot of the young people around me to cope with the deaths of friends, are using alcohol. I think not knowing about grief counselling is a bit of a problem.'

'(S)exual assault is a big one. I don't have any experience of it, but I know some of my cousins. They say they were assaulted, and they don't want to think about it anymore, that they drink a lot.'

'(I)t's pretty much going back to PTSD and trauma. It makes people sleepy.'

Some young people described witnessing others in their family suffering with the effects of alcohol abuse, including parents, siblings or extended family members. Sometimes, this was seen as a reason young people in the family also developed problematic drinking behaviours.

'My dad and my older brother. My dad is a chronic alcoholic. He'd have alcohol with tea, with a side of bread. When he picked me up from school on Thursday he had a bottle in the car.'

'My brother had a negative experience. He was drunk and he passed out on the side of the road. He was passed out … Seeing my dad always relying on alcohol, it's hard. Especially for my younger brothers because that's all they know. They barely drink water.'

A number of participants spoke about how they felt their parents were unrealistically strict in banning alcohol. Drinking alcohol, even socially and by adults, is met with disapproval by many South Sudanese people. Some young people reflected on this cultural difference, noting this was out of step with norms related to drinking in Australia.

'I finished year 12 and was trying to explain schoolies to dad. You want to fit in, but you might not be allowed to go.'

Some young people felt that rigid parental views on alcohol contributed to young people engaging in riskier behaviours as they ended up drinking in public places, such as parks. It also made it more difficult for young people to access accurate information about alcohol and how to reduce risks of its harmful effects.

'I had to put my thinking hat on how we best support our sister. I don't have enough alcohol experience. Unless you will know what it actually does to your body, you won't know. I said to my mum that why don't we get someone in who has experience of alcohol to talk to my sister. I'm often finding that our parents forbid us to use alcohol. What I had to tell my mum that day, I had to get someone else in to teach my sister how to responsibly drink. That would give my sister the opportunity to drink safely.'

Attitudes of shame towards alcohol and other drugs sometimes discouraged families from seeking help from services, compounded by the fact that services often lack cultural awareness, creating additional barriers and making it harder to address these problems within their families.

'In the community you barely talk about alcohol addiction. You will also be shunned from the community if you go to a facility to seek help. The facility says there is no shame, but we know there is shame in our community.'

'People in my community. They actually have a drug addiction. I think culturally because it's not accepted, it's swept under the carpet. The direct family is actually suffering a lot. Because obviously if you don't acknowledge the issue, there's no pathway to fix it.'

Ideas for reform

Young people highlighted the need for accessible services that can help the whole family with drug and alcohol problems. These services should have information and support in a language and format understood by South Sudanese Australian families.

'I think providing a culturally safe space for parents and young people to get support and knowledge about the effects of AOD (alcohol or drugs) is important. I've been struggling to find spaces for the older generation to get support for addiction. I wish there was a culturally safe space where the older generation could get assistance.'

'The drug and alcohol workers need to come to the community to deliver sessions to the community.'

As expressed in relation to cultural attitudes to mental health problems, South Sudanese Australian young people wanted older generations to relax some of their reservations about alcohol.

'Our families now have to reassess. Especially we are the next generation of families. We have to be realistic. Alcohol is readily available now in our communities. We have this notion that our culture is static, that it's fixed, and that it doesn't want to change even if we're now living in Australia. It makes it hard for young people to grow up and make their own choices. There are people who have careers who drink alcohol, who function normally. I think it starts in the home that we as the future generation have to be teaching about the ability to have alcohol and eat dinner responsibly.'

Interactions with police

Many South Sudanese Australian young people described being racially profiled or mistreated by police. Being unfairly targeted by police felt upsetting and stigmatising for many young people, particularly if they had done nothing wrong.

'Sometimes it … is just young people being happy, having a good time, but police racially profile young people, and use their powers to control them if they feel like they are being talked back to.'

'I am really young; I shouldn't have to worry about getting my bag searched (referring to retail stores). I know my rights – did work experience at a criminal law firm.'

'Police have violated my siblings and being exposed to that kind of discrimination just has a huge toll on my family, especially my parents.'

'One of my cousins who's 13... (went) through diversion but now he's in a cycle. They did family intervention, police are constantly at their house.'

'One of the parents called the police on a house party once because her kid got really super drunk. I was with a friend of a friend who was scared he would be targeted because he was her friend after police came to check on a house party and the police tackled him onto the floor as if he was already guilty of something. They tackled him so hard his wrist was busted for a month.'

Young people explained that discriminatory policing practices can increase the risk of involvement in the youth justice system. They can also contribute to young peoples' feelings of alienation and social exclusion. One participant explained that there can be complex reasons why South Sudanese Australian young people offend, which do not seem to be acknowledged by police. This includes young people being coerced or manipulated by organised crime groups to commit offences.

'There are also external influences at play as well. We have bikies from different ethnic groups that prey on our young people. There are Islander gangs, Lebanese gangs and Italian gangs that come to our suburbs and prey on our young people. It's not talked about by the police or by anyone.'

Ideas for reform

Young people wanted police to receive better training to address the discriminatory attitudes of members. They also wanted police to move away from a punishment mindset and instead use effective techniques to divert more young people away from the justice system.

'Police need to be trained as to how they can be more culturally appropriate when dealing with young people and those from our community. You need police officers with good EQ (emotional intelligence) and ones who genuinely want us to turn our lives around and aren't there with that whole 'lock up as many of them as you can' mentality. That stuff has to change.'

Factors contributing to youth offending

Participants shared a wide variety of factors that they felt contributed to youth offending. It could sometimes be a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, driven by poverty or a product of feeling ostracised by the broader community.

> *'The stereotype of youth crime it keeps being presented as a well thought through plan but it's not. Some young people end up in a car that they didn't know was stolen until they're in trouble.'*

A number of participants told us that youth offending was driven by necessity, as there often simply wasn't money around to help meet some of these basic needs. Sometimes what started as poverty-driven offending would escalate into more serious crimes over time.

> *'In school, not having enough money to buy food etc. and so I would steal and that was a gateway to other crimes.'*

South Sudanese Australian young people routinely experience racism and discrimination which makes them feel alienated from the broader community. However, they did not always feel better understood at home by their parents, who they felt often lacked insight into their lives. Many people pointed to the importance of understanding the external drivers of offending and how a young person's environment may contribute to offending behaviours.

> *'It's hard for him to find that support. He doesn't have that right now so he finds it easier to go back to those friends as they understand. It's always why would you do that, rather than how can we help you. The community is so stuck in that oh my god how could you do that rather than how can we help you get a job or how can we help you.'*

> *'He kept reoffending and they kept missing that it was his environment. He kept going into the continuous cycle of crime and now he's an adult but you can see it had an affect on him. If you're going to change the person you also have to focus on the environment.'*

Some young people felt disillusioned and excluded by negative stereotypes made about them. Sometimes they would seek community and belonging in places like sports clubs or religious groups. However, these avenues were not available to all young people, which could drive them to seek inclusion and respect in less constructive ways. This included spending time with young offenders, who they sometimes felt could offer them status and a sense of belonging.

> *'It's like a right of initiation, not having a strong identity, I've always wanted to feel like I belong somewhere with someone.'*

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

For some, negative stereotypes became self-fulfilling as they felt like no matter what they did, they would be seen as a criminal. Driven by anger and frustration, some young people would conform to people's worst assumptions about them.

> *'When you go into a shop and people are expecting you to steal why wouldn't I then? I might as well do it.'*

> *'I hear the term thugs used in media all the time. The way they are characterised in the media feeds into that fear in the community. The stereotypes are being put into the media and the notoriety. If that's what you're labelling me then I'll feed into that.'*

Pressures at home could sometimes affect the level of supervision parents could offer, as they were consumed by work or had to prioritise care for younger children in the family. A lack of structure and boundaries was sometimes given as a reason young people would get into trouble.

> *'A lot of parents are working a lot so nobody's watching the children and that's what's contributing to youth crime. When you are given that level of freedom and they feel like they have that sense of community and people that show them love.'*

> *'One of my cousins who's 13, wanted attention from his mum because they come from a big family started doing crime to get her to notice. It got worse and worse. They put him through diversion but now he's in a cycle. Their dad went to the police station to see him, but he wouldn't look at him. He can only stay out for six days before he's back in again.'*

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

Some young people reported negative experiences of youth justice workers, feeling they were out to punish them rather than genuinely invested in diverting them from the justice system or from future offending.

> *'If YJ (Youth Justice) was going to do something for us, they should have done something for the Indigenous people first.'*

> *'YJ is a business. If there are no young people inside, there are no jobs for the worker.'*

Some felt that young people in detention lacked support when they were released, placing a lot of stress and pressure on their family. They reported that not enough thought had gone into how to manage risks of reoffending once the young person was back in the community.

'Kids need help after they come out – they don't have documents, they need to be helped with résumés and so when they come out, they struggle to work in certain things. They struggle to get WWCC (Working with Children Check) and background checks.'

'Older adults, like our parents, need to be given support around how to support our youth when they come out of custody and how we can support them. I have a younger brother who's been coming in and out since the age of 18. Being in jail continuously has really screwed with my family's life. Even my mum's perspective everyday, is that she fears for his life when he's outside of jail because of the environments that he puts himself into. Sometimes she says to me, she would rather see him just stay in there forever so she knows at least he's not going to die.'

Ideas for reform

Sport and hobbies were seen as important ways for young people to make positive social connections, develop new skills and stay busy.

'Instruments, music, you might have a skill that you think has a lot of influence. Teach someone else that skill. There needs to be more than just sport as a way to help crime prevention. Something they enjoy doing. They're full of energy, we want to foster that energy for other things.'

'He's been trying to find new hobbies, helping a lot of his friends who have been in and out of jail.'

Many participants highlighted the benefit of positive mentors to motivate young people to stay out of trouble and engage in healthy and positive behaviours.

'At our weekly basketball game, they speak about drugs and alcohol. Vulnerable people who are willing to come out and speak up really help talk to us about how to turn our lives around.'

'I have a good friend, status can influence you to do crime, he was able to open up and talk about his crimes and then encourage others to not do it.'

'Good mentors are a game changer.'

The need for more support for the families of young people in detention and improvements to ensure a safer and smoother transition from youth detention back into the community.

> *'It's difficult when someone goes into jail for an extended period of time, and trying to have a connection with them whilst in there, something that a lot of families in the youth justice system don't have support with the trauma.'*

Next steps

This report is a reflection of feedback received across the first three of what is planned to be a number of forums convened by the Commission for Children and Young People. Further forums are planned over 2024, which will build on these themes. In addition to these community-based forums, a dedicated Youth Advisory Group has been established by the Commission for Children and Young People to inform the work of the Expert Working Group. It is composed of South Sudanese Australian young people who have personal and lived experience of the youth justice system. For more information on the Expert Working Group and the Youth Advisory Group, see Appendices 1 and 2 on pages 38 and 39.

The Expert Working Group will also be consulting with South Sudanese Australian young people who are remanded or sentenced to custody in youth justice as the work of the project continues over 2024, as well as conducting broader engagement with members of the South Sudanese Australian community. These consultations will inform the Expert Working Group's recommendations to the Victorian Government for changes to stop South Sudanese Australian young people coming into contact with the justice system.

A society that is effective in diverting young people away from criminal offending, that makes them feel valued and included in the community, and that supports their ambitions and aspirations – is a society that benefits everyone. Only by understanding and acting on the experiences of young South Sudanese Australians can we hope to achieve that.

Appendix 1.
About the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group

What is the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group?

A small group called the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group (EWG) is looking into why there are more South Sudanese Australian young people in the Youth Justice system relative to the population of South Sudanese Australian young people in Victoria. They want to determine why this is happening and find fair and realistic ways to fix this.

The EWG will focus on understanding why young people of South Sudanese and other African backgrounds come into contact with the justice system and finding ways to stop this from happening.

The group has been talking to people from the South Sudanese Australian community, young people, experts, and leaders to get their opinions and ideas. They are also guided by the thoughts and ideas of a Youth Advisory Group. Together, they hope to develop recommendations to the Victorian Government about how to reduce the number of young South Sudanese Australian young people who end up in contact with the law.

Appendix 2.
About the Youth Advisory Group

What is a youth advisory group and how does it fit with the broader project?

We know that the justice system often impacts young people, so their voices are important in this process. The Youth Advisory Group is a team of young people who provide their ideas, feedback and experiences to help guide the EWG project.

These members will have the opportunity to influence the goals and success of the project. The group meets throughout the year. Part of the work of this group will be about figuring out how to best influence the goals of this project and help make decisions about the best ways to support South Sudanese Australian young people who have experience with Youth Justice.

The Commission leads the Youth Advisory Group, with Malou Lueth as the Chair of the group. The adult Advisory Group, on the other hand, is led by the Department of Justice and Community Safety. Both the Youth Advisory Group and the adult Advisory Group will have opportunities to come together and share ideas. During these meetings, members can interact, exchange ideas and perspectives, and work collaboratively to achieve the project goals.

COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE