

Sector Insights paper

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Category A and B serious youth offences committed by children and young people

Youth justice

Legislative reform

McGorry, P., Schollum, P., & Bathy, Z. (2026). *Category A and B serious youth offences committed by children and young people*. Sentencing Advisory Council; Australian Policy Online (APO). <https://apo.org.au/node/334955>

Context A baseline analysis by the Sentencing Advisory Council in Victoria reviewing 489 charge across 418 sentenced young people between February 2018 and June 2024. The study examines the impact of the 2018 legislation intended to uplift 16+ year old serious offenders to adult courts and impose adult imprisonment.

Key findings:

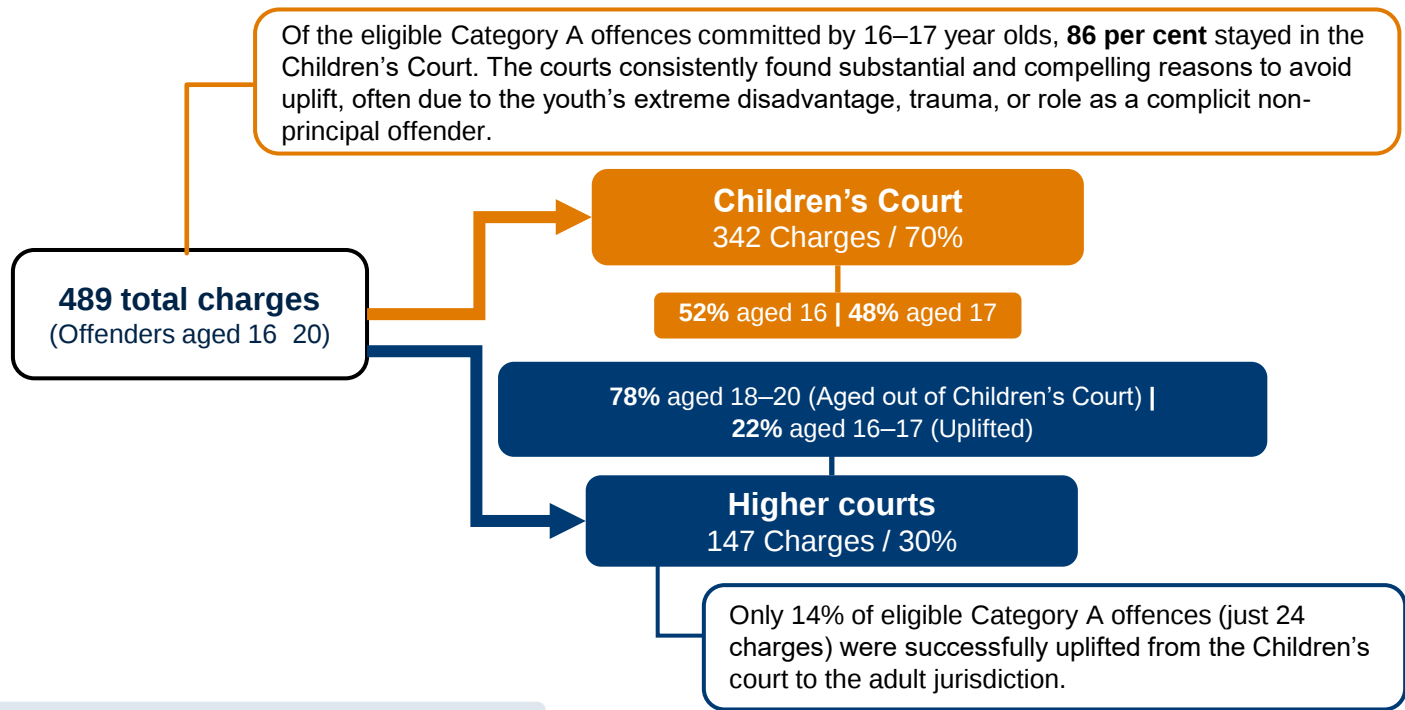
Volume & frequency: Relatively few cases occurred (averaging 66 per year). Repeat Category A (e.g., Murder, Attempted murder, Manslaughter) or Category B (e.g., Home invasion, Carjacking) serious youth offences were exceedingly rare, only 41 youths had relevant priors.

Gender & offending: Offending was overwhelmingly male. The 8% of female offenders were primarily involved in carjackings and home invasions, almost exclusively as co-offenders, with zero gross violence or rape offences.

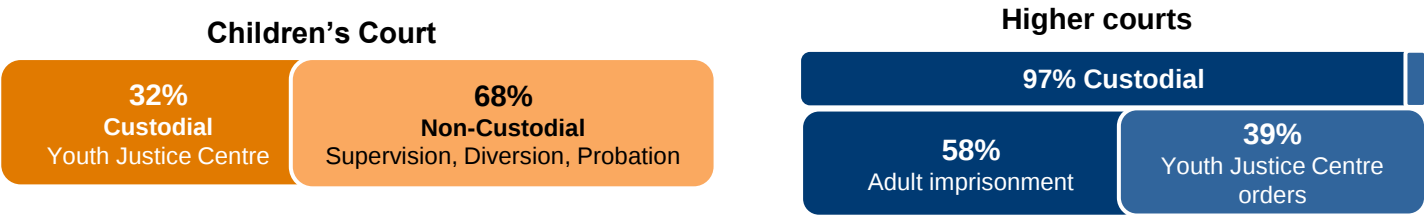
High rate of Category B: 55 per cent of all sentenced charges were Category B, which carries a default presumption to remain in the Children’s Court unless exceptional circumstances required transfer to adult jurisdiction.

*Please note, in Victoria, the correct name is *Children’s Court*.

Justice funnel and dual pathways:



Sentencing outcomes by jurisdiction:



Summary: While the 2018 legislation functioned as designed, actual uplift of cases to adult courts remained extremely low (14 per cent for eligible Category A offences). The exceptionally high rates of childhood trauma, violence, and disadvantage among these youths frequently met the strict legal thresholds required to keep their cases in the Children’s Court or avoid adult imprisonment.

Young peoples' experiences of professional relationships within youth justice services: the impact of relationships on development and transition

Youth justice

Workforce practice

Youth voice

Moore, K., O'Meara Daly, E., Ahern, E., Houghton, S., & Rogers, E. (2026). Young peoples' experiences of professional relationships within youth justice services: the impact of relationships on development and transition. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2026.2691057>

Key takeaway Eleven young adults who had been through youth diversion projects in Ireland described the relationship with their youth justice worker as central to their development and their move into adult life. The authors set out a three-stage model of this process. Participants were recruited through workers who knew them, negative themes were not identified in the analysis, and the model rests on the accounts of those who engaged well and reported positive experiences.

About the study

Qualitative study using 11 semi-structured interviews with young adults aged 18 to 27 who had previously been involved in Youth Diversion Projects across Ireland, for periods ranging from 2.5 to 10 years. Two participants were female and nine were male. Interviews ran from October 2023 to February 2024 and averaged about 30 minutes. Data were analysed using inductive reflexive thematic analysis, generating three themes and nine sub-themes.

The transitional healing model, as described by the authors



Key findings:

- Participants described entering services with low hope, shame and difficulty trusting others. They associated the worker's non-judgemental acceptance, consistency and respect for confidentiality with a renewed sense of worth and a greater willingness to trust other people and services.
- In the investment stage, participants described the worker as a consistent presence who advocated for them, connected them to education and employment, and supported the development of emotional regulation, less impulsive decision-making and social confidence.
- In the regenerative stage, participants reflected on a changed life trajectory, took responsibility for past and future decisions, and described independence as including knowing when to seek help rather than managing alone.
- Young people also reported a desire to give back, including through career choices in youth or community work, and through not wanting to let the worker down. The authors link this to the redemptive script on desistance from existing literature.
- Participants described exiting services at 18 as difficult and out of step with their readiness. The authors suggest extending the exit age may be supportive for young people in youth diversion projects.
- The authors recommend that management invest in relational training, supervision, reflective practice and staff support, and that dedicated time and space be provided for relational working.

Summary: The study contributes youth voice to a youth justice evidence base the authors describe as dominated by professional and quantitative perspectives. Its contribution is a model of how the worker relationship was experienced over time, not a measure of whether diversion reduces reoffending. The authors state that many factors contribute to recidivism and desistance, and the relationship is one of them. Practice implications centre on normalising early apprehension, investing in relational capability, and reconsidering the age at which support ends.

Please note, the use of **peoples' reflects the original title of the article.*

Implications of workforce turnover in child protection social work: The 'CARERS framework' conceptualized by the voice of those with lived experience

Care leavers

Foster care

Workforce turnover

MacLochlainn, J., McFadden, P., McGrory, S., McColgan, M., Naylor, R., McGinnis, E., McSherry, D., Martin, G., & Mallett, J. (2026). Implications of workforce turnover in child protection social work: The 'CARERS framework' conceptualized by the voice of those with lived experience. *The British Journal of Social Work*, bcag114. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcag114>

Key takeaway Care leavers, parents and foster carers described social worker turnover as a relational and emotional loss rather than an administrative matter, with consequences for trust, the timeliness of decisions and access to support. The authors argue turnover should be treated as a safeguarding concern. The evidence is qualitative, retrospective and drawn from one jurisdiction.

About the study Multi-method qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, analysed with reflexive thematic analysis and a hermeneutic phenomenological theory. Care leavers were at least 24 months post-care and parents at least three years past child protection involvement. An advisory group of care leavers, parents, carers and advocacy representatives contributed to design and interpretation.

The CARERS framework: six domains developed from participant accounts

Consistency

C

Continuity was linked to safety and progress; repeated changes to confusion and disengagement.

Access and fairness

A

Support was described as depending on whether a worker was in post rather than on assessed need.

Relationships and trust

R

Retelling histories to each new worker was described as retraumatising and led some to withhold information.

Endings and system gaps

E

Departures were often unexplained; others stepped in informally when cases went unallocated.

Records and communication

R

File errors, lost case knowledge and stalled life-story work left histories incomplete.

Safety and thresholds

S

Participants linked instability to higher intervention thresholds and crisis-led responses.

Key findings:

- Findings draw on 18 interviews (8 care leavers, 6 foster carers and 4 parents with prior child protection contact) and three focus groups with advocacy and supported living organisations in Northern Ireland.
- Participants described frequent, often unannounced changes of worker. One care leaver reported having had more than twenty social workers, and foster carers described six to eight months as the longest period they typically expected with the same worker.
- Turnover was linked to practical consequences as well as emotional ones, including delayed assessments and reviews, revisited decisions, and inconsistent access to items such as transport, clothing and education support.
- Endings were commonly described as abrupt and unexplained. Where cases were unallocated, foster carers, family members and third sector staff took on tasks outside their role.
- Records were reported as containing errors or omissions, and life-story work was described as repeatedly started and abandoned, leaving some young people without a coherent account of their own history.
- Where continuity was maintained, participants described earlier identification of concerns, more timely decisions and greater willingness to engage. Planned handovers, joint visits and clear explanations were identified as mitigating the effects of change.

Summary The study addresses a gap in turnover research, which has largely reported organisational and practitioner outcomes rather than the experience of service users. Applying an ecological systems lens, it argues that workforce instability at the system level is carried as a relational and psychological burden at the level of the individual child or family, and connects this to epistemic injustice where people's accounts of their own lives are displaced by fragmented records. The policy implication drawn is that workforce stability be treated as an indicator of service quality and a safeguarding matter.

Case and caseworker factors – Do they impact the substantiation decision in sexual abuse investigations

Child sexual abuse

Child protection

Workforce practice

Lyons, O., Fallon, B., King, B., & Collin-Vézina, D. (2026). Case and caseworker factors – Do they impact the substantiation decision in sexual abuse investigations. *Child Protection and Practice*, 10, 100331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chipro.2026.100331>

Context: The study investigates how case and caseworker characteristics influence the decision to substantiate child sexual abuse (CSA). Using a representative sample of CSA investigations from the Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS), the researchers applied the Decision-Making Ecology (DME) framework to analyse the clinical and organisational drivers behind these high-stakes decisions.

Key findings:

- **Low overall substantiation rate:** Only 29.7 per cent of investigated CSA cases were substantiated, while 64.3 per cent were concluded as unfounded for CSA.
- **Child functioning concerns were significantly more prevalent in substantiated cases:** This includes depression, anxiety, or withdrawal (34.5 %), suicidal thoughts (18.1%), and self-harming behaviour (15.5%).
- **Abuse and investigation characteristics:** Substantiation rates were significantly higher for contact-type sexual abuse (74.6% of substantiated cases) and investigations involving police charges (49.6%) or police investigations (33.8%).
- **The caseload barrier:** Caseworker workload was a major non-case predictor; investigators with a lower monthly caseload (10 cases or less) were significantly more likely to substantiate CSA compared to those with higher caseloads.

Summary: The study concludes that CSA substantiation is a highly complex decision-making process shaped by a combination of clinical evidence and structural caseworker constraints, with worker caseload size emerging as a key factor. Findings demonstrate that lower caseloads are associated with higher substantiation rates, particularly in complex, non-disclosure cases. The association may indicate that lower caseloads provide greater capacity for comprehensive investigation, although the study does not establish causation. Conversely, high caseloads present a significant operational challenge in Ontario, where over 40 per cent of investigators carry more than 16 cases, exceeding established standards.

With us, not against us: a systemic inquiry to learn from the experiences of children who entered the criminal justice system before 14

Youth justice

Cross-over youth

System reform

Commission for Children and Young People. (2026). *With us, not against us: A systemic inquiry to learn from the experiences of children who entered the criminal justice system before 14*. Victorian Government. <https://apo.org.au/node/335294>

Key takeaway: The report "With us, not against us" is a systemic inquiry by the Commission for Children and Young People into the experiences of children in Victoria who entered the criminal justice system before the age of 14. It argues that early criminalisation is ineffective, harmful, and costly, often punishing children for behaviours that are symptoms of trauma and unmet needs. The report calls for a shift from punitive responses toward a whole-of-system approach grounded in prevention, early intervention, and therapeutic support.

This report was prepared during rapid policy and legislation shifts, while Victoria raised the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 12, the government reversed its commitment to further raise it to 14.

Key findings:

- **Cumulative adversity:** All 26 children in the inquiry's targeted file review were known to Child Protection, and their school absence averaged 79 per cent since 2022. Family violence was the most common child safety concern among all reports.
- **Disproportionate impact:** Boys, Aboriginal children (27% of the file review cohort), and children from multicultural backgrounds (42%) are heavily overrepresented. 88 per cent of the children lived with disability.
- **Ineffective and harmful:** Early system contact fails to rehabilitate, with 75 per cent of the reviewed cohort allegedly reoffended after turning 14. Detention is extremely costly (\$7,304 per day in Victoria) and subjects children to severe trauma through behavioural isolations and lockdowns.

Summary: The Commission advocates for a complete shift from punitive adult-style responses toward prevention and therapeutic care. To achieve this, it recommends: Raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 without exceptions and removing children under 14 from the custodial system; Scoping an alternative first responder model to prevent initial police contact; Funding place-based youth hubs and formalising service coordination in primary schools to keep vulnerable children engaged.

Investing in Early Intervention Initiatives

Early Intervention

Government expenditure

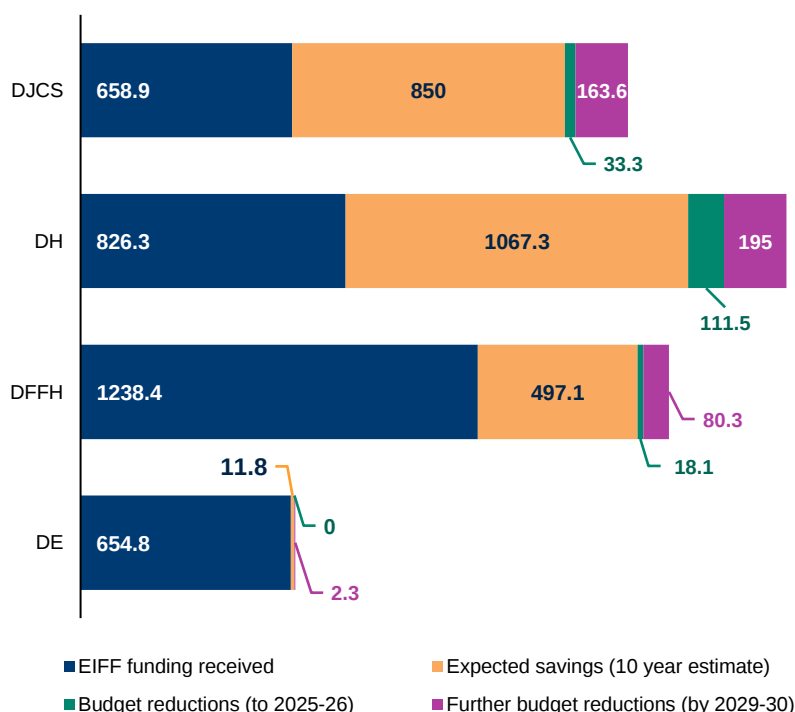
Victorian Auditor-General's Office. (2026). *Investing in Early Intervention Initiatives* (Independent assurance report to Parliament 2025–26: 29). Victorian Government. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2026-06/apo-nid335078.pdf>

About the study: This performance audit was conducted by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) and tabled in June 2026. Its objective was to assess whether the implementation of the Early Intervention Investment Framework (EIIF) supports the Victorian Government to make evidence-based funding decisions. The EIIF, introduced in 2021–22, aims to improve outcomes for Victorians and reduce the growth of government spending by decreasing demand for acute services. The audit examined the Department of Treasury and Finance (DTF) alongside four primary delivery departments: the Department of Education (DE), the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH), the Department of Health (DH), and the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS). Together, these four departments received 95% of the \$3.46 billion in EIIF funding distributed across 105 initiatives between 2021–22 and 2025–26.

Key findings:

- **Inconsistent service demand measurement:** While departments collect useful performance information, they do not consistently measure or report on whether demand for acute services has actually decreased. Ten of the 57 initiatives required to report in 2024–25 (representing \$106.9 million in estimated savings) had no savings outcome measures.
- **Actual savings are not calculated:** Despite reducing departments' budgets based on estimated cost savings, DTF does not require departments to calculate actual savings and lacks a framework to do so. No routine verification exists to ensure the estimated savings are being achieved.
- **Mismatched budget impacts:** In 2025–26, more than half (54.9%) of EIIF budget reductions applied to departments that did not design or deliver the initiatives (such as Victoria Police and Court Services Victoria), leaving them with limited ability to influence the outcomes.
- **DTF assessment process limitations:** Submissions can receive a 'high' rating from DTF without meeting core EIIF requirements like having outcome measures linked to savings, baselines, or targets. Additionally, "medium" default ratings have been applied to late-entry initiatives, which can obscure evidence gaps and risks from the government.
- **Incomplete outcomes reporting:** Reporting is uneven; across four reporting cycles, only 25.8 per cent of outcome measures contained all three essential components: a baseline, target, and results.

EIIF funding, expected savings, and budget reductions by department (\$ million)



- The chart highlights the substantial funding delivered to DFFH (\$1,238.4M) and DH (\$826.3M). It clearly maps out the impending budget pressures on DH and DJCS. While DH received \$826.3 million in funding, it faces the largest cumulative budget reductions, escalating from \$111.5 million in 2025–26 to an additional \$195.0 million by 2029–30. Similarly, DJCS faces total budget reductions of \$196.9 million (\$33.3M to 2025–26 and \$163.6M by 2029–30) against \$658.9 million in received funding.

Conclusion: The EIIF is designed to embed early intervention into state budget decisions. However, the audit found that current monitoring and reporting do not demonstrate whether the framework is reducing demand for acute services or achieving the estimated savings. Because ongoing budget reductions are based on projected ten-year savings, departments may face increasing financial pressure where those savings are not realised. The audit recommends that DTF and delivery departments strengthen how they measure changes in service demand, calculate realised savings and adjust budget reductions based on demonstrated results.

Title	Type and matter	Summary
Constructing child abuse and child psychological abuse: Social representations and the lifecycle of a social problem	Qualitative Child abuse Child safety practice	- Grounded in Social Representation Theory, this study proposes a four-stage model: emergence, problematisation, communication, and resolution, to analyse how child abuse was constructed as a naturalised social problem in Quebec. It utilises a theoretical re-reading of diverse materials, including a decade of media coverage, parliamentary debates from a 2006 legislative reform, and contemporary interviews with practitioners. - The research demonstrates that "child abuse" became a self-evident public problem through emotional anchoring in fear and moral indignation, often creating a "us-them" narrative that distances "abusive" families from the broader community. This established representational framework now shapes and constrains how institutions recognise and respond to newer categories, such as psychological abuse. - The authors conclude that stabilised social representations deeply influence professional practice, justificatory logic, and thresholds for state intervention. They recommend that social workers use this model as a reflexive tool to identify how collective emotions and media narratives may inadvertently lead to stigmatisation or the uneven treatment of families.
The psychopathy substance abuse nexus in justice-involved youth and its implications for risk, need, and responsivity	Quantitative Youth justice Recidivism	- This study examined the relationship between psychopathic traits and substance abuse among 420 diverse, justice-involved youth in Canada. It aimed to determine how these factors intersect to predict violent and general recidivism across different gender and ethnoracial groups. - High psychopathy scores, specifically the lifestyle (e.g., impulsivity, irresponsibility) and antisocial (e.g., poor behaviour controls, criminal versatility) facet, showed strong convergence with clinical and criminogenic substance abuse indicators. Youth who scored high in both domains experienced significantly steeper and faster recidivism trajectories than those with lower scores, regardless of gender or Indigenous heritage. - Researchers conclude that substance abuse is a critical, dynamic risk factor that incrementally increases the hazard of future offending beyond personality traits alone. They recommend adopting a forensic substance management approach that uses multimodal, culturally responsive interventions to address both clinical needs and risk-reducing goals.
The overlap of child abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence in court-involved children with a history of maltreatment: Frequency and correlates	Quantitative Child maltreatment Domestic and family violence	- This retrospective study analysed the case records of 279 children in Victoria, Australia, who were referred for expert psychological assessment by the Children's Court due to maltreatment concerns. It aimed to identify the frequency of co-occurring child abuse and neglect (CAN) and exposure to domestic violence (EDV), alongside associated risk factors. - Nearly two-thirds (63.44%) of the children experienced both CAN and EDV, with over 77 per cent experiencing two or more distinct types of maltreatment. Significant risk factors associated with this co-occurrence included serious child behaviour problems, parental substance use, and severe family or socioeconomic stress. - The authors conclude that court-involved families face a high burden of cumulative harm, requiring assessments that consider multiple forms of maltreatment together rather than in isolation. They recommend implementing shared risk assessment frameworks and inter-agency collaboration to prioritise these high-acuity families for holistic, trauma-informed support.
*Please note, in Victoria, the correct name is <i>Children's Court</i>.		
Evaluating disability bias in the Allegheny Family Screening Tool: implications for child welfare decisions	Quantitative Child protection Children with disability	- This study investigates whether the Allegheny Family Screening Tool (AFST) used to screen child welfare referrals in Pennsylvania, unfairly penalises parents and children with disabilities. - They found that although the AFST contains no explicit disability measures, it effectively "encodes" disability status through proxy variables like public benefit participation and high healthcare utilisation. Families with disabilities are significantly more likely to be flagged for intervention. - It concludes that the tool reinforces structural ableism by treating the use of essential supports, such as Medicaid or SSI, as indicators of risk. The authors recommend rigorous audit to prevent disability bias and ensure families have the right to contest automated decisions.

Title	Type and matter	Summary
The relationship between food security with diet quality and dental caries experience among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children	Quantitative Indigenous health Food insecurity	- This study investigated the relationships between food security, diet quality, and dental health among 219 children in South Australia. It highlights how the historical disruption of traditional food systems through colonisation has contributed to enduring socioeconomic disadvantage and health disparities. - Nearly half of the surveyed families experienced food insecurity, and 55.7% of the children suffered from dental caries. Severe food insecurity was associated with a higher prevalence of caries and poorer diet quality, primarily driven by a significant reduction in vegetable intake. - The authors recommend recognising access to nutritious food as a basic human right and developing new food security measurement tools co-designed with Indigenous Communities. They call for systemic, community-led interventions to address the intersecting challenges of nutritional scarcity and oral disease.
Rural secondary school teachers' knowledge of adolescent suicide risk factors	Quantitative Rural and remote Suicide prevention School-based support	- This study surveyed 277 secondary school teachers in rural Victoria, to assess their foundational knowledge of adolescent suicide risk factors. It highlights that in rural settings, where youth suicide rates are higher and specialist services are scarce, teachers are vital frontline observers for early identification. - While teachers demonstrated a moderate overall knowledge level (70.4%), significant gaps remain regarding psychiatric disorders, warning signs, and the significance of previous suicide attempts. Furthermore, 27% of teachers reported avoiding engagement with students they suspected were experiencing mental ill health, suggesting that knowledge does not always translate into action. - The researchers conclude that suicide literacy is necessary but insufficient on its own to support effective prevention within school settings. They recommend that future professional development move beyond basic knowledge to provide practical skill-building and clear, system-level referral pathways to support teachers in rural communities.
Footprints in Time: Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children – social and emotional wellbeing research report	Mixed methods Indigenous health Cultural safety	- This report analyses over 13 years of data from the "Footprints in Time" longitudinal study of Indigenous Children to understand what helps Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children "grow up strong". It utilises a holistic First Nations framework to explore how various interconnected domains, such as connection to culture, family, and country, influence long-term wellbeing outcomes. - The research identifies deep connections to family and culture as the most powerful protective factors for positive wellbeing, independent of a child's socioeconomic status. However, negative school experiences like bullying and racism were found to be critical risk factors that significantly increase the likelihood of self-harm and suicidal thoughts among youth. - The authors recommend that policy must shift toward community-led, strengths-based models that prioritise self-determination and ensure children remain connected to their kin and culture. They also call for urgent systemic action to create safe, racism-free school environments and for national wellbeing targets to be broadened to reflect holistic Indigenous perspectives.
Healthy Starts -The state of Australia's child and family health service system	Policy Report Maternal and child health Health inequities	- This report by the Centre for Policy Development maps the health and development journeys of children and families from conception through to school entry at age five. It evaluates the effectiveness of the public health system across three critical transition points: pregnancy recognition, support through birth, and early childhood development, to identify where service coordination succeeds or fails. - The research identifies ten systemic barriers, including critical workforce shortages, high out-of-pocket costs, and a lack of cultural safety that often deters Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families from engaging with mainstream services. Significant "postcode lotteries" exist for access to essential supports like home visiting, and participation in vital developmental checks is found to drop sharply after a child's first birthday. - Continued next page

Title	Type and matter	Summary
Healthy Starts -The state of Australia's child and family health service system	Continued.	The study recommends a shift toward progressive universalism, where high-quality services are available to all families but can flex in intensity according to specific levels of need. It calls for national oversight to ensure consistent quality standards and a move toward community-led, trauma-informed models that integrate health, education, and social support into a seamless pathway.
Built environment vocational training for justice-involved youth in Australia: a systematic review of recidivism and workforce outcomes	Review Youth justice Over-representation	- This systematic review synthesises 34 studies to evaluate whether vocational training in the built environment sector can reduce recidivism among justice-involved youth aged 12–24,. It focuses on addressing the intersection of youth justice rehabilitation and persistent industry skills shortages in Australia. - The most successful programs align training with regional labour market demands and provide culturally responsive, wraparound throughcare support. However, a significant equity gap remains, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth account for 63 per cent of the detained population but represent only 24 per cent of vocational program participants. - The study concludes that technical training alone is insufficient without addressing systemic barriers like employer bias and lack of post-release support. Researchers recommend integrating correctional education with national workforce development and utilising social procurement requirements to ensure stable employment opportunities.
The co-design of an Indigenous and community-led culturally responsive prevention framework to reduce the incarceration of children	Qualitative Youth justice Over-representation System reform	- This study addresses the extreme overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Australian youth justice system. It utilises an iterative, community-led co-design process grounded in decolonising methodologies to develop a culturally responsive prevention framework aimed at disrupting cycles of incarceration. - The research identified critical colonial drivers of incarceration such as systemic racism and intergenerational trauma, that must be dismantled. It established a multi-level framework that prioritises universal outcomes for thriving children, rights-based systemic reforms, and culturally grounded programs like therapeutic healing centres and Indigenous-led crisis housing. - The authors recommend that Australia must shift from punitive carceral models to holistic, justice-reinvestment strategies that empower Indigenous families, and calls for systemic investment in community-led, trauma-informed solutions that prioritise self-determination, cultural continuity, and the voices of Indigenous children.
Priced out of your future? How housing hardship increases adolescents' exposure to police-initiated contacts. Evidence from the United Kingdom	Quantitative Housing Youth justice	- This longitudinal study analysed data from 10,608 participants in the United Kingdom Millennium Cohort Study to investigate how childhood housing tenure instability and residential mobility affect police encounters by age 14. It moves beyond simple move frequency to examine the qualitative, socioeconomic conditions under which families relocate. - Adolescents experiencing downward tenure mobility (losing homeownership) or living in unstable rental housing are significantly more likely to experience police-initiated contact than their residentially stable peers. This risk is partially driven by childhood externalising behaviours and social severance—the erosion of supportive family and community networks. Furthermore, these destabilising effects are strongly amplified in highly deprived neighbourhoods characterised by heightened police presence. - The authors conclude that early youth-police encounters are structurally embedded within housing insecurity rather than simply reflecting individual criminal propensity. They recommend policy interventions that expand access to secure rental contracts, protect against forced displacement, and facilitate sustainable homeownership to prevent early legal system exposure.