

Community-based crime prevention programs for Aboriginal young people

Final evaluation (extract for Community Crime Prevention)

November 2019

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Acronyms

DJCS Department of Justice and Community Safety

KESO Koori Education Support Officer

KJU Koori Justice Unit

KYCPG Koori Youth Crime Prevention Grants

KYJW Koori Youth Justice Worker

RAJAC Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee

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**A note on terminology**

The term ‘Aboriginal’ is used throughout this report to refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Victoria. Where the original data, program title or direct quote refers to this population as ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Koori’, these terms have been kept for the sake of consistency.

**1.** **Koori youth crime prevention program**

## Crime prevention programs for Aboriginal young people in Victoria

The YCPG allocated $1.5 million in grants to programs that empower and re-engage Koori youth aged 8–24 years old, as well as their families, with the aim of preventing or reducing negative contact with the criminal justice system. The Koorie Youth Council provided clear advice regarding the needs of Koori youth in Victoria, which informed the design of the Koori Youth Crime Prevention Grants (KYCPG). This advice recommended the provision of: ongoing opportunities for local youth to gather; youth focused cultural strengthening programs; family focused programs; and regional youth gatherings.

The KYCPG were designed to support Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to provide early intervention activities that target at-risk youth and provide a pre-charge diversion option for police and courts. Each of DJCS’s nine Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees (RAJACs) invited, reviewed and endorsed applications from local community organisations, which were then reviewed by KJU and CCPU. Across Victoria, 25 community-based partnership projects were funded with an average grant amount of around $56,400 (not including one project that was funded $147,900).

## Evaluation methodology

The KYCPG evaluation, conducted over a two-year period, sought to understand how well this grant program worked for Aboriginal young people and what lessons could be learned around how to better design and deliver crime prevention projects for Aboriginal young people in future. The following objectives were therefore developed to guide the evaluation:

* Understand the ways in which the KYCPG has strengthened the capacity of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to provide effective crime prevention initiatives for young people at risk of offending;
* Determine the extent to which the design and delivery of the projects align with the evidence base of ‘what works’ as identified in past research and evaluations of Indigenous-specific crime prevention initiatives;
* Determine whether there has been an increase in protective factors for Aboriginal young people involved in the initiatives;
* Formulate recommendations and provide advice about future design and delivery of crime prevention initiatives to best meet the needs of Aboriginal young people.

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach consisting of stakeholder interviews, a review of project-related information, and a literature review. It was conducted with consideration of the limitations inherent in evaluating projects funded through the KYCPG, which were comparatively small in scale and often built on existing initiatives. The KYCPG activities were primarily non-intensive interventions that focused on increasing protective factors of youth. These activities were not targeted to specific individual needs and did not include individualised risk assessment or service programming. For these reasons, project outcomes could not be evaluated in the same way as for the directed and competitive streams under the YCPG program.

Careful consideration was given to ensure the evaluation activities are consistent with accepted guidelines for conducting ethical research and respectful of Aboriginal cultural values. An ethics application outlining the evaluation methodology was approved by the Justice Human Research Ethics Committee. While the evaluation was covered by ethics to interview Aboriginal young people, the KJU expressly chose not to pursue this option. Given there was concurrent work occurring across government during the evaluation period that involved significant consultation with Aboriginal young people, the KJU was cognisant of the increased risks of over-research and consultation fatigue for this cohort.

## **Evaluation findings**

### Project design and delivery

The literature review identified a number of ‘best practice’ characteristics that, if put in place, would likely enhance the effectiveness of crime prevention strategies for Aboriginal young people:

* Community ownership over project design and delivery
* Adequate and stable funding
* High quality staff and mentors
* Frequent and ongoing contact with young people
* A focus on high-risk young people
* A focus on young people at an early age
* Addressing multiple protective factors in a single program
* Embedding culture in programs in a way that builds positive identity and self-esteem

This section provides a summary of the existing evidence (that is, what past research and evaluations have found to be effective for Aboriginal crime prevention programs) and discusses the extent to which the design and delivery of the projects included in this evaluation reflects each of these ‘best practice’ characteristics.

#### Community ownership over project design and delivery

**What past research has found to be effective**

Past research and evaluations emphasised the importance of Aboriginal involvement in the design and delivery of programs to foster genuine community ownership. [[1]](#endnote-1) [[2]](#endnote-2) Programs that had not been developed in conjunction with Aboriginal communities were, overall, found to be less successful.[[3]](#endnote-3) [[4]](#endnote-4)

True community ownership ensures that programs are more culturally appropriate and fine-tuned to local priorities. Ensuring sufficient flexibility for project timeframes to fit with community needs and the contextual realities on the ground was consistently found to determine the effectiveness and sustainability of projects.[[5]](#endnote-5) [[6]](#endnote-6)

**Findings from this evaluation: projects are granted adequate design flexibility except for timeframes**

Overall, project workers felt there was a high level of flexibility within the funding agreements for organisations to design their own projects. However, there was mixed awareness among project workers of the ability to make variations to project activities throughout the delivery phase, so long as these changes are communicated back to the KJU.

Where there was awareness, this flexibility had enabled organisations to shape their responses to fit the realities of the local community and meet the evolving needs and interests of the young people participating in the project, who were often encouraged to play an active role in deciding what activities to run. However, some workers who were unaware of the flexibility available to them and would have sought variations in order to improve project outcomes, had they known this was an option.

*“KJU gets it. They have a cultural understanding that different communities have different issues and that one size will not fit all community needs. The KJU trusts us and gives us ownership over the projects, which is wonderful.” (Community organisation)*

*“The great thing about KJU funding is that, while there are some parameters, there is flexibility for the community to shape its own projects around community needs.” (Community organisation)*

Nonetheless, there is scope within the funding arrangements to further enhance community ownership. Organisations consistently discussed the need for longer and more flexible project timeframes:

* A two-year funding period was considered too short for a project to make a meaningful change within the community in relation to crime prevention.
* Timeframes for grant application processes often demand a quick turnaround. The short period of time between the opening date of a funding round and the submission deadline means that organisations are often rushed to undertake research, design projects, estimate costs, reach out to potential partnerships, leverage additional resources, and write up their proposals.
* Slow project application approval processes and subsequent delays in the release of payments can be difficult for community organisations to manage, as the expected deliverables remain the same but there is less time to achieve them. For a two-year project, the impacts of these delays can be significant.
* More time is required for the project establishment phase – that is, between the time in which an organisation is notified its application is successful and the time when project delivery commences. Most organisations experienced some challenges in getting their project ‘off the ground’ and discussed the need for an additional establishment period to allow time to recruit staff, secure venues, develop partnerships, establish governance structures, engage project participants and gain traction in the community.
* The amount of money organisations applied for was sometimes different to the size of the grant they later received. This was challenging for organisations as they were expected to start implementation immediately and had to quickly scale up or cut back on their planned activities.

*“Workers on the ground have great ideas that don’t surface because everybody is in a rush.” (Community organisation)*

*“Two years is not enough. By the time the project is up and running maybe there is no funding in future. You need time to learn and fine-tune it. It’s really great that you can bring the project to the community and then it just suddenly stops and that can be really hard.” (Community Organisation)*

*“Building partnerships and relationships takes a long time. It didn’t make sense to spend time developing this relationship until funding was actually secured. It also takes time to recruit the right people to the roles or to rearrange workplans and make time in the calendars of existing staff in the organisation. Again, you don’t know if you will get the funding so you need time for this.” (Community organisation)*

**Recommendation 1:**

There should be increased flexibility in project timeframes to fit with community needs and ensure organisations are aware of the flexible options available to them:

* Where possible, extend project timeframes to a minimum of three years.
* For new initiatives, consider a standard minimum timeframe of three months for project design and preparation of a grant application, and a further three months for project planning and establishment.
* Improve communication with funded organisations around flexible arrangements in the funding agreements.

#### Adequate and stable funding

**What past research has found to be effective**

A major issue identified in the implementation of programs for Aboriginal people is that they rarely proceed beyond the ‘pilot’ stage and are expected to produce results in unrealistically short timeframes and with a shortage of staff.5 8 [[7]](#endnote-7) Sustainable programs are crucial to maximise long-term crime prevention outcomes in Aboriginal communities and require adequate and stable funding commitments.

**Findings from this evaluation: grant funding is often not adequate or stable enough to achieve desired outcomes**

Many organisations were extremely resourceful in using the small amount of funding they received through the grant to leverage additional resources from other organisations, such as venues or staff, and/or have made significant in-kind contributions. There are numerous examples where organisations, which were previously coordinating activities on a shoe-string budget prior to receiving a grant, were then able to run more structured activities or recruit a paid worker to deliver them. Despite this, in the vast majority of cases, the total resourcing was not sufficient to cover staff salaries, day-to-day running expenses, nor costs for transportation.

Furthermore, there appears to have been challenges for organisations in appropriately budgeting for project delivery given the small amount of funding. Not setting aside adequate funding to cover transportation (such as a bus) or appropriate facilities were repeatedly raised as major barriers to project delivery. Many young people come from low-income families who cannot afford to travel to project activities by car or public transport, may have lost their drivers licence, or live in regional areas not adequately serviced by public transport. Several organisations were forced to use temporary and unsuitable facilities for project activities, or to put young people on waiting lists.

All the organisations spoke about difficulties they faced with securing ongoing funding and the strain of constantly pursuing further funding to support the continued delivery of existing projects. In the absence of a funding model that builds in longer-term sustainability, projects were concerned that progress they had made would be reversed: namely, the time and effort it takes to engage young people and build their trust, the loss of and damage to these relationships when the funding stops, and the loss of momentum and groundwork that has gone into getting to the point of consistent project delivery.

*“Our project provides a backbone of learning for our young people. But then when the money is gone, the children’s journey is chopped. Their attachments are gone, their sense of security. The anchoring and foundations need to be kept engaged over their life journey.” (Community organisation)*

*“Currently, there is such a great need to secure recurring funding that staff spend so much time and energy applying for grants to create a steady income stream that this cuts down on the time they can spend on project delivery.” (Community organisation)*

**Recommendation 2:**

Additional guidance should be provided to organisations around budgeting for project delivery.

#### High quality staff and mentors

**What past research has found to be effective**

In general, programs that were more successful recruited locally knowledgeable, well-trained staff and mentors with an ongoing commitment to the program. The competence and motivation of staff and mentors, in addition to training and supervision, were found to be essential for the delivery of successful projects. The quality and depth of the relationships between staff or mentors and young people highly influences the effectiveness of programs, as strong positive relationships are more likely to contribute to regular attendance, low dropout and a higher level of satisfaction.[[8]](#endnote-8) [[9]](#endnote-9)

In the Aboriginal context, mentoring appears to be a particularly promising initiative as it fits well with Indigenous teaching and learning styles and can help to build strong collective ties within the community.[[10]](#endnote-10) [[11]](#endnote-11) [[12]](#endnote-12) Research has found that mentoring can have positive effects for young people in a number of indirect ways, for example by improving their self-esteem and sense of hope for the future, through to increasing their engagement with school, family and community.[[13]](#endnote-13)

**Findings from this evaluation: quality staff/mentors are key to project success but are difficult to recruit and retain**

During interviews, the perceived success of the projects was frequently attributed to the strengths of individual project workers who are highly motivated and work tirelessly to engage young people, creatively leverage resources, and build relationships. Organisations highlighted the importance of recruiting project workers who are connected into and respected by the local community, have strong cultural knowledge, and are experienced community service workers.

While some organisations sought external volunteer mentors to be involved in the project, mentoring was commonly viewed as being embedded within the roles of project workers. Some felt that the responsibilities attached to a mentor role are beyond what can be expected of an unpaid volunteer or that there can be a lack of oversight when using external mentors around the quality of their interactions with young people. Embedding mentoring within the role of project workers provides young people with consistent and reliable support, with a worker being better placed to link young people with the services they may require.

It was emphasised that project workers often go ‘above and beyond’ their paid role by being available to provide support and mentoring outside of designated hours, using their own car to transport young people, addressing the needs of participants by covering multiple small costs (such as food and transport) or taking young people and their families to services in their own time. Community organisations felt this unpaid labour, which stems from a worker’s deep sense of responsibility and care for their community, was crucial in supporting young people but often unrecognised by funding agencies as a significant input.

However, the evaluation also identified a series of challenges in relation to staff resourcing and capacity:

*“The key to a successful crime prevention project is having a facilitator and role model who believes in a young person. Having a caring and supportive relationship is essential for the young person to build their resilience.” (Community organisation)*

*“Project staff have to make time to speak to kids after hours, as you can’t say to a kid “no, I can’t help you right now”. It’s your own community you are looking after. When you work in community, the hours aren’t nine to five. You have deeper cultural responsibilities.” (Community organisation)*

*“Workers put in unpaid overtime all the time and do so much off their own back because they care, but there’s no financial compensation for this. If government put a dollar figure on all the in-kind, they’d be out of pocket.” (Community organisation)*

* Many projects reported being impacted by serious constraints on staffing resources and high staff turnover, which was found to limit the capacity of the projects to run their activities.
* Difficulties in recruiting to project worker roles has resulted in delays and disruptions in the delivery of activities. Many project workers are employed on part-time and short-term contracts. According to several organisations, it was hard to compete with mainstream services that offer higher salaries. In this highly competitive environment, it is crucial to invest in workforce development to increase the pool of qualified talent and to strengthen employment pathways within the Aboriginal community-controlled sector.
* To fill recruitment gaps, there is a heavy reliance on unpaid volunteers who are hard to recruit and retain.
* To fill recruitment gaps, in some cases, administrative staff with no previous project management experience were transferred across from other parts of the organisation to coordinate and run the project activities. In other cases, projects ‘borrowed’ workers from other services in the local area. This was not, however, a reliable arrangement since these external workers were often overstretched, as they had competing responsibilities and priorities.
* Projects emphasised the importance of having two or more project staff in attendance at any given time to ensure the smooth implementation of project activities, as well as the safety of participants:
	+ After a series of incidents that posed a threat to staff safety, several projects realised they were not appropriately equipped to work with young people with behavioural issues as they require additional staff and training.
	+ While one project worker sets up, runs and packs up the activities, there often needs to be a second project worker to drive young people to and from the venue.
	+ Having at least one male and one female worker is important to ensure that the young people attending the project activities receive culturally appropriate support.
* Several organisations also raised staff ‘burn out’ as a serious risk for their project workers, particularly given the personal commitment that many workers bring to the role as outlined above, but often did not have a formalised strategy for managing this risk.
* Some organisations needed to ‘hire in’ Elders or Respected Persons with appropriate local cultural knowledge due to being unable to source this within community through volunteering, which was often not accounted for in initial budgeting.

*“Staffing has been the biggest issue for us. There really needs to be someone full-time to coordinate and run the activities. The project delivery was a bit quiet for a while without a dedicated role attached to the project to keep it going.” (Community organisation)*

*“It’s especially necessary to have additional staff for young people who have been in residential care or come through the courts and muck up a lot. They have serious behavioural issues as they are not used to socialising, which can make it difficult for the other kids and detracts from staff time. They need intensive one-on-one support.” (Community organisation)*

**Recommendation 3:**

Additional guidance should be provided to organisations around suggested human resources requirements to successfully implement potential projects, based on lessons learnt to date.

#### **Frequent, consistent and ongoing interactions with young** people

**What past research has found to be effective**

The literature highlights the importance of engaging young people in projects through frequent and sustained interactions, particularly where the goal is to reduce delinquency.12 13 Regular and ongoing participation in program activities means the young person has time to develop close interpersonal relationships and consolidate the new skills they have learned. For instance, evidence suggests that recreation activities have greater benefits when run for 10-20 weeks minimum and projects with mentoring components require a minimum of 12-18 months. 14 [[14]](#endnote-14) [[15]](#endnote-15)

**Findings from this evaluation: consistency when interacting with young people is key to project success**

Most project workers emphasised the importance of running activities on a frequent and ongoing basis, as it takes time to build relationships and gain the trust of disengaged young people. Building a sense of continuity through holding activities in the same time, place and with the same staff each week was seen as an important part of maintaining engagement with young people who may otherwise ‘fall off the radar’. The KYCPG projects offered young people support in varied manners:

* Most of the projects offered weekly activities, for the same group of young people, over the full duration of the funding period with some offering additional one-off events or camps as well.
* Some projects offered activities that were structured around set timeframes (e.g. school terms or sporting timetables), for the same group of young people, over the full duration of the funding period.
* Some projects ran a series of short-term activities, events or camps during the funding period that did not appear to link in with more consistent, ongoing programs.

It was seen as particularly important to maintain consistency in the project staff running the activities given the mentoring relationships they form with the young people. Many of the young people engaging in project activities may not have had the opportunity to form supportive, stable and ongoing relationships with adult role models in their lives. Challenges with recruitment and staff turnover can reinforce the sense of abandonment that young people may have previously experienced many times before in their relationships with adults.

Some projects reported that funding constraints prevented them from running consistent activities for young people despite the desire to do so, as they could not afford to run both a youth group and camp simultaneously or to employ enough staff to run activities. Others struggled to provide consistent support due to issues such as staff absences or having to turn away young people due to waiting lists, lack of transport, or venue capacity constraints.

*“It’s really important to give young people consistent and reliable support. These kids have had a lot of instability in their lives. They need ongoing reassurance, motivation and contact, so we’re working on creating greater stability across the activities. All our workers keep in regular contact with the kids and if they don’t show up someone will call them up and ask “How are you? What’s going on? You coming next week?” (Community organisation)*

 *“One-off camps and things like that only work if they build on a more stable, ongoing program” (Community organisation)*

**Recommendation 4:**

Community organisations should be encouraged to design projects that engage young people through frequent and ongoing interactions, with the aim of ensuring:

* Short-term activities, events and camps build upon or link to consistent, ongoing programs.
* Projects are run for a minimum of 12-18 months to mitigate the potentially harmful psychological impacts that can arise from short-term mentoring relationships.

#### A focus on high-risk young people

**What past research has found to be effective**

Previous research demonstrates that programs which target their approach towards specific groups of young people who are most at-risk, or in greatest need of services and support, tend to be more effective than programs which are generalised to a broader population.12 13 [[16]](#endnote-16)

While concentrating efforts primarily on engaging young people at greatest risk, in some cases programs may benefit from a mix of high-risk and low-risk young people to provide opportunities for pro-social peer role modelling. However, careful management of these mixed programs is required to ensure that the young people considered to be low-risk are not negatively influenced by antisocial peer role modelling.18 19

**Findings from this evaluation: there is a lack of clarity around who crime prevention should target**

There appeared to be a lack of clarity among community organisations as to who should be the target cohort for their project. This could potentially stem from the general consensus across stakeholder groups that prevention (universal) and early intervention (targeted) activities are equally important and cannot be easily separated:

* Young people who are at risk of contact with the justice system do not like to be singled out as the ‘bad kids’ and therefore it is important to adopt a gentle and inclusive approach in which all young people in the community are invited to participate.
* Engaging all young people in the community to attend crime prevention projects was seen to create opportunities for prosocial peer-to-peer role-modelling, whereby young people who are in a more vulnerable state spend time with and are influenced by young people who are doing well.
* Young people who are at risk of contact with the justice system often show up to project activities along with their friends or younger siblings. These other young people may not yet be at-risk but are often in a vulnerable space and would benefit from support.
* It is important to invest in projects for all young people to ensure that those who are doing well continue to do well. If projects are taken away from young people who are doing comparatively better, justice indicators in these locations may worsen.
* Projects need to be careful not to reward only young people who engage in antisocial behaviour as this might encourage young people who well-behaved to ‘act up’ so they are able to participate in activities.

Most projects were therefore open to all young people in the community within the project’s specified age range, and reportedly did not actively target ‘at-risk’ young people. However, the young people engaging with projects were often still disconnected from their culture, family and community, and had limited engagement with school or employment. Most had not yet become involved in the criminal justice system but some displayed behaviours that project workers felt put them at risk of coming to police attention.

*“Currently because of limited resources, we are using a deficit approach, not enough of a strengths-based approach. Only the squeaky wheel gets the oil. Our project already recognises the importance of increasing the strengths of all young people, but the lack of money means the hard kids get it all.” (Community organisation)*

*“We need to provide support at all levels, that is, from prevention to early intervention. Low level kids may move to middle tier and then move up to top tier” (Community organisation)*

While it was seen to be important for all young people to have access to support, interviewees were concerned that higher risk young people, who have already been involved with the criminal justice system, are potentially ‘slipping through the cracks’:

* Several projects tried to establish formal referral pathways through the police and courts as a cautioning or pre-diversion option but found this challenging in terms of gaining ‘buy-in’ from external stakeholders.
* Some projects were working together with local Koori Youth Justice Workers (KYJWs) or Koori Education Support Officers (KESOs) to identify higher risk young people who would benefit from the project activities, however this was successful to varying degrees. There is an opportunity for organisations to work more closely with existing Aboriginal-specific funded positions in the regions to support high risk young people.
* Project workers noted that higher risk young people are the hardest to engage in prevention and early intervention activities given the complexity and compounding nature of risk factors in their lives. They often require a much more intensive intervention than can be provided through broad-based activities.
* Projects who had engaged high risk young people in their activities found it challenging to manage their behavioural issues without appropriately trained staff. In some instances, projects were able to recruit additional support but, in other cases, being unable to adequately support the young person meant they disengaged from the project.
* None of the projects were able to provide intensive case-management or wraparound support to high risk young people due to financial and staffing constraints, although many project workers made effort above and beyond their role to link these young people and/or their carers into other appropriate supports.

**Recommendation 5:**

Community organisations should be encouraged to design projects that engage young people across the prevention and early intervention spectrum, with a greater focus on engaging high-risk young people. For example:

* Work closely with KYJWs in the region to identify and support at-risk and high-risk young people.
* Include links with police cautioning and/or court diversion processes where appropriate.
* Develop partnerships that can enhance an organisation’s capability in working with young people who have complex needs.

#### A focus on young people at an early age

**What past research has found to be effective**

Providing programs for at-risk infants, young children and their families has been found to be a particularly effective crime prevention strategy.[[17]](#endnote-17) [[18]](#endnote-18) [[19]](#endnote-19) There is considerable evidence to demonstrate that parenting skills and preschool programs for high-risk families can reduce the likelihood of criminal behaviour later in life.

Additionally, the evidence suggests that there should be more programs targeting children of primary school age before the onset of negative peer influences and antisocial behaviour. 14 [[20]](#endnote-20) [[21]](#endnote-21) Attempting to deliver an intervention once young people have already disengaged from school or have become part of a problematic peer group during adolescence is likely to be more difficult.5

Focussing on Aboriginal young people at an early age is especially important considering that, on average, Aboriginal young people in Victoria come into contact with the juvenile justice system at a younger age than non-Aboriginal young people.[[22]](#endnote-22)

**Findings from this evaluation: there needs to be greater tailoring of project activities to age groups**

Most projects spoke about the difficulties they faced in recruiting young people, of all ages, to attend project activities. Many projects relied solely on word of mouth to promote the project in the local community, with some also using local media (e.g. radio and newsletters). This meant that, for many projects, the majority of young people attending project activities were already engaged with the funded organisations in some way. Organisations reflected that, in future, they would dedicate more effort towards recruitment and promotion to ensure they reach a wider audience of potential participants.

The majority of projects selected for this evaluation reported predominantly engaging adolescents aged between 10 and 16 years in project activities, while a small number of projects focused on a younger cohort of children aged under 10 years. However, even where the focus has not been on engaging a younger cohort of children (aged 0 – 9 years), it appears some projects are having unintended benefits for this cohort who often attend project activities with their older siblings, cousins or friends.

Based on discussion with interviewees, it appears the projects that had the most impact on increasing protective factors and/or reducing risk factors for the younger cohort of children (aged 0 – 10 years) were those which engaged children in successive activities across their childhood and adolescent life. A handful of organisations delivered several projects each aimed at a different age group, with some offering structured progression between these activities from early childhood through to adulthood.

Only a few projects reported having engaged an older cohort of people aged 17 and over (with one project expanding their age range to include people aged 18 to 65 years due to demand in the community). Young people aged 17 to 25 years were considered a particularly difficult cohort to engage in project activities as they feel ‘too cool’ to hang around with the younger children or require more intensive intervention given their level of disengagement. This was considered a significant gap as this age group is more likely to be ‘mucking up’ in a way that could result in criminal justice system involvement.

A key learning for many organisations on this front has been the need to tailor prevention and early intervention activities to specific age groups, rather than have a broad-based program aimed at young people aged 8 to 24 years. The three key age groups (under 10 years, 10 to 16 years, and 17 to 24 years) need information and activities delivered to them in an age appropriate format to promote continued engagement engage and ensure the greatest potential for positive impact.

**Recommendation 6:**

Community organisations should be supported to consider the target age group/s for their project and how they will appropriately tailor project activities to, and recruit participants from, these age group/s.

#### Addressing multiple protective factors in a single project

**What past research has found to be effective**

Protective factors mitigate against or decrease the likelihood of young people engaging in criminal activities or anti-social behaviours. The research suggests that having or being exposed to multiple protective factors is generally better than having or being exposed to a few.[[23]](#endnote-23) In particular, previous research and evaluations highlight the importance of enhancing the protective factors for Aboriginal young people that relate to:

1. close and supportive social relationships[[24]](#endnote-24) [[25]](#endnote-25) [[26]](#endnote-26) [[27]](#endnote-27)

 2. continuous engagement with school/education and employment 15 [[28]](#endnote-28) [[29]](#endnote-29) [[30]](#endnote-30) [[31]](#endnote-31)

 3. accessing appropriate support services 13 18 19 [[32]](#endnote-32) [[33]](#endnote-33)

While the introduction of sports, arts or recreation activities alone is unlikely to achieve a reduction in antisocial behaviour and crime, these types of activities can be used as a powerful ‘hook’ or incentive for engaging at-risk young people and linking them into a range of other programs and support services that address underlying causes of offending behaviour.[[34]](#endnote-34) There are numerous examples of projects which have successfully linked sports, arts and recreation activities with education and employment activities. 8 14 18 20 38 [[35]](#endnote-35) The benefits of linking these types of activities with ongoing intensive mentoring programs has also been widely documented.14 15 19

**Findings from this evaluation: projects are designed to increase protective factors although there could be greater emphasis on education and/or employment**

All projects included in the evaluation supported young people to develop close and supportive relationships with each other, their families, mentors, and Elders and Respected Persons in community:

* Many of the projects connected young people with adult role models in the community through structured mentoring, community events, or inviting them to participate in project activities. Most frequently, project staff themselves provide young people with these close, supportive and ongoing relationships.
* Several projects sought to involve the broader family and/or caregiver network of participants in activities, either as active participants themselves or volunteer helpers, to strengthen family relationships. For some young people, project activities provided an informal way for them to socialise with siblings or other family members who they may no longer live with.
* Several projects had formal or informal opportunities for older participants to ‘step up’ and become mentors to the younger participants.

Most projects acted as a ‘gateway’ through which young people were linked with appropriate support services:

* Many project workers talked about the importance of pro-social activities as a platform for ‘getting young people through the front door’ to connect them to other programs and services. In light of this approach, they had established or strengthened their existing relationships with a wide range of services that address issues such as drug and alcohol, mental health, and family violence. Service representatives were invited to casually ‘drop in’ to youth groups or events to hang out and chat with young people attending on the day.
* While some projects had built relationships and referral pathways with mainstream services, many preferred to refer their participants to internal services within the organisation or to other Aboriginal-specific services, as they felt the mainstream services were not culturally safe or competent.
* In a small number of cases, projects did not aim to connect young people to services. These projects were designed with the intention of alleviating boredom by ‘giving young people something positive to do’.

Only a few projects focused on actively supporting young people to engage with education and/or employment, with there being an opportunity for projects to strengthen this as a protective factor:

* A small number of projects sought to re-engage young people in some form of education, provide additional tutoring support, or enhance their employment prospects through job skills training. For example, one project worked with KESOs and local schools to identify disengaged Aboriginal young people and run a group session with them once per week to support their continued engagement with school.
* There was a concern that actively pushing an education or employment agenda would result in young people disengaging from the project. Therefore, many projects instead included fun activities to build ‘life skills’ that could assist young people with their education or employment, such as barista courses.
* Some projects sought to show participants a variety of employment options in life to help them develop future aspirations. This included inviting a range of different people to project activities to talk about their job or developing partnerships with local businesses to showcase potential employment opportunities.
* As education and employment are significant protective factors, there are opportunities to increase the focus on education and/or employment across the programs.

*“I touch on how important education is and so on but there’s no point telling kids “go to school” because they won’t listen and they think they know everything. You have to take them on that learning journey to build an internal appreciation for the opportunities they have.” (Community organisation)*

*“We try to create a safe space that’s holistic in the approach to getting people into education or employment… It’s about building up the resilience and the self-confidence to say to people ‘Open up that door. Don’t be afraid to open a door. You’ve got it all going on.’” (Community organisation)*

**Recommendation 7:**

Community organisations should be encouraged to include a focus on one or more of the following protective factors when designing a project: (i) close and supportive social relationships with mentors, (ii) engagement with education and/or employment, or (iii) access to appropriate support services.

#### Embedding culture in projects in a way that builds positive identity and self-esteem

**What past research has found to be effective**

The literature highlights the importance of embedding cultural strengthening elements within program activities in a way that builds positive cultural identity, promotes Aboriginal pride and acceptance, improves self-esteem, and strengthens relationships within the community so that the young person feels safe and supported.5

A strong Aboriginal cultural identity had been associated with better outcomes on a range of indictors of wellbeing, including education, employment, health, substance abuse and the incidence of arrest. 7 [[36]](#endnote-36) [[37]](#endnote-37) A positive cultural identity can help a young person understand their place in the world, through a sense of belonging and membership within a group of people, and a sense of moral responsibility to others.[[38]](#endnote-38)

**Findings from this evaluation: embedding culture is seen as key to project success but could be strengthened for young women**

All the projects included in the evaluation embedded cultural strengthening elements in their activities with the aim of developing a young person’s positive cultural identity and building their connections to family, community and country. Project workers consistently emphasised the importance of cultural strengthening, particularly given many of the young people attending activities are highly disconnected from their culture prior to entering the project.

Embedding the philosophies of Aboriginal lore into project activities was commonly described as being foundational to effective crime prevention as it teaches young people about cultural responsibility, accountability and respect for others. Accordingly, many projects have developed ‘rules of engagement’ or a ‘code of conduct’ in partnership with participants which they must then abide by when attending project activities. If a young person does not abide by these rules of the project, and instead engages in antisocial behaviours, they may be told, for example, to think about their actions and make some changes or they’ll have to ‘take a week or two off’.

It was also frequently explained in the interviews that when a young person ‘feels good about themselves’, they are less likely to engage in antisocial behaviour and end up in contact with the justice system. This strong sense of self and higher self-esteem was seen to stem from learning about their shared cultural history and identity, which instils a sense of belonging and pride in their culture and community. Developing these personal traits in turn places young people in a better position to make positive life choices, reinforced through project activities that show them opportunities and positive pathways in life and support them to develop aspirations for the future.

One challenge consistently raised across projects was ensuring there are appropriate and adequate cultural activities for young women. Several projects reported that it was more difficult to engage young women in activities than young men and this may be due to the limited nature of cultural activities on offer for them. Activities for young men included traditional dance, making and playing didgeridoos, spear throwing, making boomerangs, shields and clap sticks. Young women on the other hand were often restricted to a few offerings such as basket weaving and jewellery making.

“*It’s about building kids’ protective factors to help them make better decisions by building their cultural identity, their connections, their place within society, knowing their worth. The more they are involved with and engage with community, the more they know about their culture and identity, the more they know about leadership and all that, the more long-lasting and sustainable the results and outcomes are going to be.” (RAJAC EO)*

*“The kids have an insatiable thirst for cultural knowledge. They just love it.” (Community organisation)*

*“The youth are aware of and developed ‘the rules’ for the [project] and if there are any breaches of their ‘rules’ they are accepting of the consequences e.g. being sent home from camp/not being able to attend…for a week. All of the youth who have been delivered a consequence have been accepting of the consequence and have re-engaged again.” (Community organisation)*

### Impacts of funded projects

#### Impacts for Aboriginal young people

As discussed in Section 1.2, this evaluation has not sought to evaluate the impact of individual projects funded under the KYCPG for Aboriginal young people. Instead, it examines high-level evidence about whether and how project activities are contributing to short-term outcomes (positive changes in attitudes and behaviours) by increasing young peoples’ protective factors. An increase in protective factors was chosen based on previous literature, which found that this is a key contributor in reducing negative contact with the criminal justice system.

Research has shown that cultural strength can act as an important protective factor that is closely linked to the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of Aboriginal people. The literature suggests there is a pathway between strengthening culture and positive changes in a person’s decision making, which the KJU has sought to document through the outcomes hierarchy outlined in Figure 1 (over page).

As such, this evaluation has sought to understand whether there has been an increase in protective factors for Aboriginal young people involved in the funded projects in the following key domains of cultural strengthening:

* **Facilitating connection** – connecting or reconnecting people to culture, land, and community is critically important for redressing the disconnection caused by colonial policies and practices of the past.
* **Imparting knowledge** – the imparting of traditional and contemporary knowledge is expected to build peoples understanding of the distinctive Aboriginal community and culture and how they fit into it.
* **Encouraging expression** – active participation in traditional cultural activities and ways of life, as well contemporary cultural activities, is seen as an important method of cultural expression

Figure . Outcomes hierarchy for cultural strengthening

Project workers noted that many of the young people who engaged with their project were initially disconnected from culture, and often from family and community as well. They highlighted how government systems have fractured Aboriginal communities, both historically and in the present, with young people often having their connection severed through involvement in the Child Protection and Youth Justice systems. These young people often could not identify their mob, understood very little about their culture and history, were no longer residing where they were born, or were living in out of home care arrangements where their carers were non-Aboriginal and/or they were separated from siblings and cousins.

The behaviours project workers observed when young people first started attending project activities often reflected the impacts of this disconnection from culture, family and community. This included being disrespectful and disruptive, having no regard for authority or rules, and being unable to communicate their emotions without resorting to conflict or aggressive behaviours. Many participants were also disengaged from education, employment and general life goals. A key concern for project workers was that, in lieu of any other form of connection, ‘the easiest way to fit in is through the criminal justice way’.

As such, all organisations had seen it as crucial that their project activities include cultural strengthening (as explored in Table 1 below) in order to address the issues stemming from disconnection.

Table . Evidence of funded projects strengthening culture of participants

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Element of cultural strengthening**  | **Evidence** |
| **Facilitating connection** | * Formed connections with prosocial role models, mentors, and peers who they can draw on for support
* Connected with Elders and Respected Persons through mentoring, cultural activities, or knowledge exchange activities
* Strengthened connection to country by going out on and learning about country
* Connected to other services that will support their health and wellbeing (e.g. mental health or family violence services)
* Feel connected to a safe community space (usually hosted by an organisation) where they can casually drop in or hang out
 |
| **Imparting knowledge** | * Learned about their shared history, community, and personal identity
* Developed pride in their culture
* Created a sense of belonging, particularly for young people who did not know their mob or felt they did not ‘fit’ anywhere
* Learned the importance of respecting and caring for others, particularly for Elders
* Linked in to other cultural programs or activities through initial engagement
* Provided opportunities to start becoming cultural leaders in their community through teaching others
 |
| **Encouraging expression** | * Participated in traditional cultural activities such as dance, arts, playing didgeridoo, making clap sticks and shields
* Participated in contemporary cultural activities such as camps or other outdoor activities, sports, making hip hop music videos
* Involved in helping out with and attending community cultural events such as NAIDOC week activities, community days
* Took pride in making and/or wearing traditional and contemporary Aboriginal clothing
 |

Project workers felt that the changes they saw over time in the behaviour of participants, as a result of cultural strengthening, reflected the penultimate outcomes that inform positive decision-making (as seen in Figure 1):

* **Increased sense of belonging –** participants forged strong connections with peers and older roles models, which has provided them with a larger network to draw on as a source of strength and support during challenging times. They showed greater care and respect for others, including a willingness to share their experiences in solidarity with others facing similar challenges.
* **Positive self-identity and self-esteem –** participants displayed increased confidence, self-esteem, and resilience that in turn led to greater independence, particularly in being away from family. They were better able to communicate their emotions and needs in a socially acceptable way and had learned appropriate methods for overcoming fear and managing anxiety.
* **Increased responsibility for actions –** participants showed improved understanding of consequences for their actions, both in terms of reward and punishment, and held each other to account against agreed codes of conduct. They were motivated to take greater responsibility in helping out at home, at community events, or with project activities.

Projects workers reflected that some young people, particularly those who had been engaged with the organisation prior to the evaluated funding period, already showed signs of improved decision-making. This was evidenced through re-engagement with school (including flexible or alternative education options), enrolling in TAFE courses and university studies in employable areas (e.g. food handling, makeup artistry, horticulture), and seeking out work experience opportunities. While many young people had not quite reached the point of committed decision-making yet, project workers emphasised that they were increasingly considering their life goals and had a greater awareness and appreciation of the different education and employment opportunities available to them.

“*It’s about building kids’ protective factors to help them make better decisions by building their cultural identity, their connections, their place within society, knowing their worth. The more they are involved with and engage with community, the more they know about their culture and identity, the more they know about leadership and all that, the more long-lasting and sustainable the results and outcomes are going to be.” (RAJAC EO)*

*“We don’t know if maybe these kids would’ve ended up in the justice system but what we do know if we’ve kept them safe for this period of time and empowered them with good ideas, good people to talk to, they know this service now…it’s all about options.” (Community organisation)*

**Case studies**

There were many stories that project workers shared about the positive journey of particular individuals throughout their engagement with the project. A few case studies, drawn from interviews and monitoring reports, have been selected to illustrate how projects have changed young people’s lives on an individual level. Please note that specific project, location, and other sensitive details have been redacted to preserve confidentiality.

 *“A 15 year old female student had been disengaged from school for over two years. Presented to [the project] as homeless and in crisis. Student was supported to secure housing with family member followed by continued support provided to manage positive living arrangement. Student was attending [project] on a daily basis and receiving intensive literacy support, Cultural support and Drug and Alcohol counselling. Student eventually transitioned into FLO Connect as a full-time student and decided to pursue her aspirations to becoming a beautician.*

*Due to ongoing family pressures, the young person returned to…live with her Grandmother. The [project] team maintained contact with the student while she was [there] and were shocked to hear that she had been using ICE. The team continued to encourage the student to return…and reengage with [the project]. After a few months the student returned. On her return, the [project] team supported her with housing and referred her to Drug and Alcohol Counselling. Eventually she was able to reengage with FLO Connect as a full-time student. This young person…is quoted as saying that [the project] ‘changed her life’.” (Community organisation)*

*“One of our [participants] had been absent for school for more than 20 months due to the loss of his father in late 2016. Initially he did not attend school due to mourning and the grief that he was experiencing, but over a period of time his anxiety had become a social phobia where he could not attend school. We tried with the school and other services, several ideas to help him return to school with little success. After completing a year at the [project] and having support around him, the young man decided to return to school in the 2019 year.*

*In the last session of the year I was queried to find out what was the catalyst that made him reconsider returning to school. The response was that he now understood how important education is, and that he also felt out of place, when all the other group members attended [the project] were in their school uniforms and it made him feel out of place. This young man is attending secondary school this year and with the help of the school and the program he will continue to be supported in completing his studies.*

*Another participant, who was a concern, as he was wavering in terms of future direction, and not engaging in any study and/or employment since finishing school. I have been working with him, and with vocational guidance, encouragement and support, he is now happily undertaking a course in Certificate 2 Tourism…where he is gaining skills and knowledge that will lead to either further training and or employment. He also has taken up the option of acting as a mentor to the younger boy in [the project]. This is a great outcome for this young man as he now can see options for his future as opposed to languishing with no direction.” (Community organisation)*

*Had a 16-year-old boy who was very disengaged from school, “going off the rails”, and got suspended for fighting with others. He had no regard or respect for authority and, when he joined the project, was very obviously the dominant one. The project worker found this young man was really interested in and proud of his culture, so used that as the hook for engaging him in the project. After attending for 10 weeks, this young person has learnt so much more about his culture and really changed his attitude. He’s stepping up to help facilitate project activities and learning about his culture in his own time, which he then brings back to the group.*

*There was a recent situation where two younger boys were fighting and this young man took it upon himself to step in, settle them down, and have a talk about how this is not part of their culture, that their culture is about respect and looking after each other and that the project is a safe space. The project worker was so impressed with him taking on that leadership role and handling it so well. This young person is also now back in school and has decided he wants to be a mechanic, so has taken on an after-school job one day a week at a mechanic shop. (Community organisation, paraphrased from interview)*

#### The ‘ripple effect’ impacts of projects

Project workers discussed the ‘ripple effect’ impacts of their projects, emphasising that evaluators need to consider the value of projects to families/caregivers and the broader community. Most projects took a holistic approach to working with young people, meaning that they sought to involve families/caregivers and community members in a range of ways, such as being involved as mentors, volunteering with project activities, or simply coming along for a cup of tea and chat. Even when families/caregivers and community members were not actively involved in the project, workers highlighted the flow on effects to these parties from the changes in behaviour of young people involved (as discussed above). Figure 2 seeks to capture the impacts of the broader ‘ripple effect’, flowing from young people outwards to families/caregivers and community.

Figure . Impacts of the 'ripple effect' as outlined by funded projects

The involvement of families/caregivers in projects was used as an opportunity for project workers to build rapport and to understand more about participants’ home life, including any issues that the family may be facing. Project workers often went above and beyond to provide support to families as a whole:

* Organising and attending appointments with parents/caregivers in order to help break down the barriers and stigma associated with accessing support services.
* Supporting parents/caregivers to access employment or education opportunities.
* Building the confidence of parents/caregivers through providing advice, information, and opportunities to develop skills (e.g. time keeping as part of basketball).

The projects also presented the opportunity to strengthen relationships and knowledge sharing at both the family and community levels. Parents/caregivers attending project activities formed relationships and shared stories with other parents/caregivers, as well as with involved community members and respected Elders. The topics that young people were learning about through projects, particularly around culture and history, opened up conversations with parents, grandparents and Elders that may not have happened before. This provided a gateway for young people to build stronger relationships with these people, as well as for the adults to share knowledge or learn more about their culture from young people. This was viewed as crucial to strengthening the community as a whole, as well as the young people and families who are part of it.

The changes in behaviour of the young people involved in project activities was also seen to contribute to a stronger family and community. Project workers highlighted that there is great potential of young people, particularly when several siblings or cousins are involved in a project, to change the dynamic of their household through upholding and modelling prosocial behaviours to their parents/caregivers. They also suggested that young people are less likely to vandalise, steal and antagonise, and instead contribute to a safer and happier community, when they have been taught to respect country and community.

#### Impact of ceasing funding for crime prevention

When discussing how projects have increased protective factors for young people involved, project workers inevitably expressed their concerns about the increase in risk factors that was likely to occur for these same young people when project funding ceased. While some projects had plans in place to continue running project activities beyond the funding period, many were unsure how they would secure the necessary funds to do this and were in the process of exploring different avenues at the time of the final evaluation.

Several workers highlighted how their project was the only available local and culturally appropriate option for young people in that area. As such, if the project ceased, it was likely these young people would be back out on the street after school, on weekends, or on school holidays with no activities to keep them entertained and engaged with prosocial role models. There was a concern that the resulting boredom and disconnection would increase the likelihood of young people engaging in antisocial activities and behaviours, which would then bring them to the attention of police. This concern was shared by parents/caregivers, as evidenced by one project which asked them to reflect on what their children would be otherwise doing if the project did not exist. Many of their answers, recorded in feedback forms, were along the same themes:

* ‘Getting into trouble’
* ‘Nothing except drinking and smoking’
* ‘Sit at home on games or getting in trouble in town’
* ‘They would be bored, and they muck up’

## **Summary and recommendations**

#### What has worked well

The following points summarise what the evaluation found to working well about the KYCPG in supporting community organisations to design and deliver crime prevention initiatives for Aboriginal young people:

* The **flexibility** afforded to community organisations to design projects, and adapt these during delivery, that are appropriately tailored to the local community’s needs.
* Where community organisations have been able to **recruit the right people** to run project activities, this has contributed strongly to the project’s overall success.
* Projects that have created **consistency** through holding activities in the same time, place and with the same staff each week have been more successful in engaging young people and their families/caregivers.
* Projects that have appropriately **tailored activities to specific age groups** have been more successful in engaging young people.
* **Embedding culture strengthening** as a protective factor in project activities has successfully created behaviour and knowledge change in young people that appears to lead to improved decision-making.
* Projects that have actively sought to involve or support families/caregivers and the broader community have had greater impacts through **the ‘ripple effect’**.

#### **What could be improved**

There have been many lessons learned through the evaluation of the KYCPG around how to better design and deliver early intervention and crime prevention projects for Aboriginal young people in future:

**Recommendation 1:**

There should be increased flexibility in project timeframes to fit with community needs and ensure organisations are aware of the flexible options available to them:

* Where possible, extend project timeframes to a minimum of three years.
* For new initiatives, consider a standard minimum timeframe of three months for project design and preparation of a grant application, and a further three months for project planning and establishment.
* Improve communication with funded organisations around flexible arrangements in the funding agreements.

**Recommendation 2:**

Additional guidance should be provided to organisations around budgeting for project delivery.

**Recommendation 3:**

Additional guidance should be provided to organisations around suggested human resources requirements to successfully implement potential projects, based on lessons learnt to date.

**Recommendation 4:**

Community organisations should be encouraged to design projects that engage young people through frequent and ongoing interactions, with the aim of ensuring:

* Short-term activities, events and camps build upon or link to consistent, ongoing programs.
* Projects are run for a minimum of 12-18 months to mitigate the potentially harmful psychological impacts that can arise from short-term mentoring relationships.

**Recommendation 5:**

Community organisations should be encouraged to design projects that engage young people across the prevention and early intervention spectrum, with a greater focus on engaging high-risk young people. For example:

* Work closely with KYJWs in the region to identify and support at-risk and high-risk young people.
* Include links with police cautioning and/or court diversion processes where appropriate.
* Develop partnerships that can enhance an organisation’s capability in working with young people who have complex needs.

**Recommendation 6:**

Community organisations should be supported to consider the target age group/s for their project and how they will appropriately tailor project activities to, and recruit participants from, these age group/s.

**Recommendation 7:**

Community organisations should be encouraged to include a focus on one or more of the following protective factors when designing a project: (i) close and supportive social relationships with mentors, (ii) engagement with education and/or employment, or (iii) access to appropriate support services.

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