



# Building relationships for better outcomes

Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation  
Stage 2 report

**Anna Barrett**

2012

Peninsula Youth Connections is a partnership between the Brotherhood of St Laurence and TaskForce



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Working for an Australia free of poverty

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a non-government, community-based organisation concerned with social justice. Based in Melbourne, but with programs and services throughout Australia, the Brotherhood is working for a better deal for disadvantaged people. It undertakes research, service development and delivery, and advocacy, with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating learning into new policies, programs and practices for implementation by government and others. For more information, visit [www.bsl.org.au](http://www.bsl.org.au).

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This report represents Stage 2 of a three-stage evaluation. Stage 1, *Overcoming barriers to education* (Bond 2011) and Stage 3 (to be published in late 2012) can be found at <http://www.bsl.org.au/Research-reports>.

Cover photo by Ross Bird depicts young people participating in a vocational educational and training activity at the Brotherhood's Frankston High Street Centre. The young people pictured were not involved in this Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation.

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## Abbreviations

CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
FMP	Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region
LGA	Local government area
PYC	Peninsula Youth Connections
SEIFA	Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas
YATMIS	Youth Attainment and Transitions Management Information System
YC	Youth Connections

## Summary

This research constitutes the second part of a three-stage evaluation of the Peninsula Youth Connections (PYC) program. PYC is the local expression of a program funded by the Australian Government to assist young people at risk of disengaging from education and training. Operating in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region south-east of Melbourne, PYC includes intensive case management, outreach and re-engagement activities for young people, and seeks to build the capacity of local youth services.

### Key points

- **Overall, young people’s needs were addressed effectively through the intensive case management approach.** The majority of participants—84.5 per cent—achieved at least one kind of outcome, and at follow-up, 72.5 per cent were engaged in education. The program approach was particularly beneficial for young people facing mental health issues/stressors, interpersonal issues and learning issues. Young people with unstable family and financial contexts and risky behaviours also benefited, but faced greater ongoing challenges. The difficulties faced by young people from unstable contexts were echoed at a broader level by the finding that young people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods were more severely disengaged from education, and achieved fewer outcomes.
- **Complex and intersecting relationships exist between young people’s characteristics, backgrounds, barriers to education, and the outcomes they achieve.** The findings from this research demonstrated the complexity and diversity of issues faced by young people disengaging from education and training. Relationships were found between demographic characteristics (such as age, gender and area socioeconomic disadvantage), barriers faced, and outcomes achieved, illustrating the necessity for programs to provide integrated and holistic services which can be adapted and individualised to fit the needs of young people negotiating varied pathways through education and service structures.
- **Young people particularly valued the relational aspects of the PYC program.** The young people interviewed and surveyed were positive in their assessment of the program and the benefits they derived from participation (Figure 1). They identified the following as strengths of the program: friendliness, personal support, encouragement, informality, flexibility, persistence and enjoyment. By far the most prominent message from young people was that the individualised and personal support they received through the relationship with their case manager was a vital factor in their successful engagement with the program.
- **Gains made from PYC participation appeared to be sustained, in the face of ongoing challenges.** Most of the young people followed up after exit were engaged in work or study. However, they faced ongoing challenges around housing and finances, as well as mental health and self-esteem.
- **Disengagement from school left a powerfully negative impression on young people, and was an experience which in itself formed a barrier to future engagement.** Although PYC had largely positive impacts on participants, a re-engagement program cannot fully mitigate the negative impact of these earlier experiences on young people’s self-esteem and confidence. The systemic issues underlying these experiences will be considered in Stage 3 of the PYC evaluation.

## Background

Peninsula Youth Connections commenced in January 2010, part of a national program funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Operated in partnership by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and TaskForce, PYC provides regular and intensive case management for up to two years for young people, ranging from those who are at high risk of disengaging from school to those who have long been disengaged. Recruitment occurs via direct referral and re-engagement activities, often delivered with other agency partners. Through hosting and participating in events and committees, and conducting research, PYC also seeks to support and build regional youth service capacity.

## The research

This stage of the evaluation focuses on the experience of the program from young people's perspectives, and seeks to answer the following questions:

- What concerns do young people present to PYC with, and how do individual barriers affect their progress through education, their engagement with the service and their outcomes?
- How is the PYC model experienced by young people, and is it successful in meeting their needs?
- How do young people fare after exiting the program? Are outcomes sustainable, and what ongoing challenges do young people face?

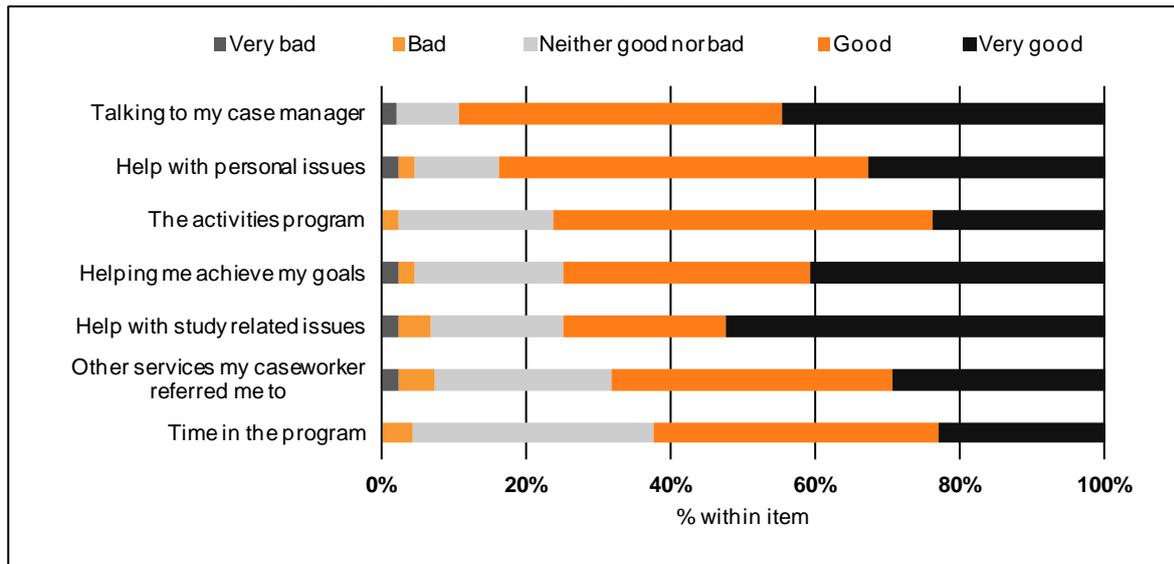
Qualitative data were gathered from consultations with 16 young people who had participated in PYC and 9 PYC staff members. Quantitative data on 228 PYC participants who exited from January 2011 to March 2012 were taken from the program management information system and referrals database. Fifty-two former participants contributed additional quantitative data through a purpose-designed follow-up survey.

There was an almost even split of girls and boys in the participant group, who came largely from suburbs of high socioeconomic disadvantage in the FMP region. The program was seeing an increasing number of Indigenous young people, following the employment of a dedicated Indigenous case manager.

## Positive engagements with young people

Overall, the results of the evaluation indicated that PYC is successfully connecting with young people in the FMP region who are disengaging from education and training. The young people consulted rated the program highly (see Figure 1), spoke positively about their experiences with PYC and placed a particularly high value on the relationships they had formed with their case managers. Participants often framed the positive effects of the program in terms of social reconnection, re-establishment of routine, and building confidence and self-esteem. Analysis of outcome data from the program management information system confirmed the overall achievements of the program's activities, indicating that the majority of participants were benefitting from PYC.

**Figure 1 Former PYC participants' ratings of aspects within the program**



Note:  $n=52$

## Providing individualised support to young people facing multiple intersecting challenges

Looking in more detail at the types of barriers faced by young people entering PYC yielded some contrasts in the ways benefits were achieved by different groups. Five broad groups of barriers were identified: unstable contexts, risky behaviours, learning issues, mental health/stressors and interpersonal issues.

PYC was particularly effective in assisting young people who faced barriers in the form of mental health issues, difficult life events and interpersonal issues, including bullying (Figure 2). Young people with risky behaviours including substance use, juvenile justice infringements and anger management issues, as well as young people from unstable contexts marked by financial and housing instability and family conflict, benefited from the program as well, but also faced considerable continuing challenges. The impacts of family difficulties on engagement with education were particularly evident.

The complex findings which were produced by differentiating between participants based on barriers, engagement and outcomes reflected the highly diverse experiences and needs represented in the PYC caseload, and showed the need for a holistic, integrated and intensive case management approach.

## Addressing a continuum of needs

The Youth Connections model specifies three levels of connection with education and training, and requires that providers enrol a distribution of young people at all three connection levels based on predetermined quotas:

- Type 1: At risk of disengagement (20%)
- Type 2a: Imminent risk or recently disengaged (30%)
- Type 2b: Severely disengaged (50%).

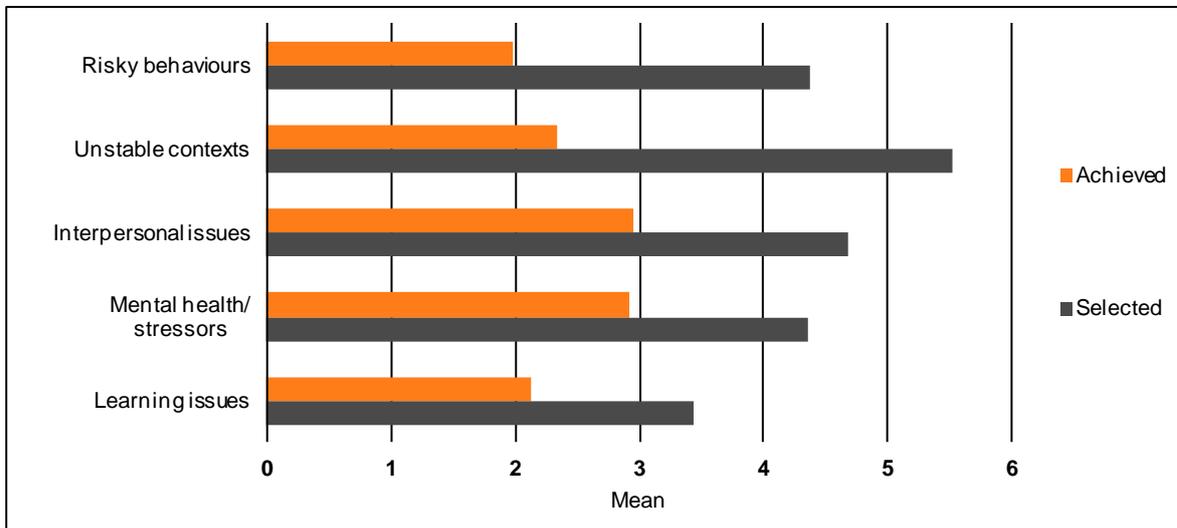
At 14%, PYC was seeing somewhat fewer Type 1 participants than the program guidelines quota. Youth Connections differed from previous similar programs in placing increased emphasis on more severely disengaged young people, and in Victoria, the percentage of funding allocated to Type 1

case management is lower than the standard. PYC staff commented on the high demand for services from severely disengaged young people in the region, but also felt that preventive services for students at risk for engagement were necessary. Outcomes were similar among the three connection levels, indicating that PYC was successfully tailoring services to meet the needs of young people at differing levels of connection with education.

## Engaging young people through informal, flexible modes of service delivery

The young people interviewed spoke favourably about the informality and flexibility of the case management approach. Many referred to their case manager as ‘more like a friend’ and contrasted the comfort with which they were able to interact with case managers with less successful previous interactions in which they had felt constrained or confused by more formality.

**Figure 2 Mean progressive outcomes selected and achieved by young people experiencing different barriers**



Features of the flexible program approach included:

- The ability for young people to contact case managers in person, by phone, email or text, and without a formal appointment
- Case managers’ willingness to meet young people at home, school or a public place
- Enrolment durations long enough to build strong relationships, accommodate young people’s changing needs and readiness to engage, and the opportunity to enrol multiple times.

## Young people’s pathways after PYC

The majority of young people who were followed up three months after exit from PYC had maintained some form of outcome (Table 1).

**Table 1 Former PYC participants’ activities three months after exiting the program**

Activity	%
Currently working	36.5%
Currently studying	72.5%
Either studying or working	78.8%

n=52

These young people were often juggling the demands of multiple roles. They nominated social connections with friends as some of the most satisfying elements in their lives; however they frequently did not have the time or opportunity to participate in many activities other than work and study. Even given the positive outcomes many had achieved, ongoing material hardships were common, as well as continuing difficulties with self-esteem, confidence and mental health.

Speaking to young people about their time in mainstream school, it was evident that disengagement had left a powerfully negative impression on many, and was an experience which in itself formed a barrier to future engagement. Although PYC had largely positive impacts on participants, a re-engagement program cannot fully mitigate the negative impact of these experiences on young people's self-esteem and confidence. The underlying systemic issues that this highlights will be considered in the next stage of this evaluation.

## Next steps

Overall, the evaluation results affirmed the appropriateness and effectiveness of PYC's service delivery in meeting the needs of young people in the FMP region at risk of disengagement from education. However, Stage 2 relied on information collected from PYC staff members and from those former participants who were contactable and who volunteered to participate. A broader perspective on the function of PYC in the region is required to formulate recommendations and policy implications, and this will be achieved by the third stage of evaluation.

Stage 3 of the evaluation is currently underway, and includes assessment of PYC's efforts to strengthen community partnerships to respond to the needs of young people who have disengaged from education or are at risk of doing so. The key content areas are:

- young people's experiences interacting with mainstream schools and with other services
- PYC's method of delivering Type 3 (outreach and re-engagement) and Type 4 (strengthening services) activities
- the alignment of PYC with other services in the region, including schools and the national Partnership Brokers
- potential gaps or areas of duplication in the regional services environment.

Data from interviews and focus groups with PYC staff and external stakeholders will be analysed to yield a report focusing on the broader systemic and policy implications of the combined PYC evaluation findings.

# 1 Introduction to Youth Connections

Youth Connections (YC) is an Australian Government funded program designed to address disengagement from education and training by young people through intensive case management, outreach and re-engagement services, and activities aimed to strengthen the capacity of other services and structures to meet young people's needs. Program goals include mitigating the barriers young people face by pursuing progressive outcomes such as building self-esteem, as well as aiming for final outcomes such as re-engagement with education. The overall objective is to support young people to attain Year 12 or equivalent, and make a successful transition through school and into further education, training or employment. The three broad program outcomes are:

- **personal development:** Young people develop personal skills and attributes that promote wellbeing, resilience and support positive life choices
- **connection and progression:** Young people engage with education, family and community and have successful education and transition outcomes
- **relationships:** There are strong, collaborative relationships in the region that strengthen service delivery outcomes for young people (DEEWR 2011).

The core program elements are:

**Individual support services (Types 1 and 2):** Youth Connections providers deliver flexible and individualised case management to assist young people to overcome barriers and remain engaged or re-engage with education and/or further training, with the eventual aim of achieving a Year 12 or equivalent qualification.

**Outreach and re-engagement services (Type 3):** Outreach and re-engagement activities are targeted towards finding severely disengaged young people (those not connected to other services or family and community) and connecting these young people with activities that support their engagement with learning, family and community, with the aim of connecting them into Youth Connections case management.

Re-engagement activities may also provide an avenue for fostering participation in individual support services. They include programs and group activities that increase young people's skills, confidence and ability to participate in cultural, social, education and economic opportunities; examples include community recreational activities and short training courses.

**Strengthening services within the region (Type 4):** Activities to strengthen services in the region focus on capacity building among relevant education providers and stakeholders, to put in place whole-of-community mechanisms that identify and respond more effectively to provide appropriate support for young people to prevent disengagement (DEEWR 2011).

In Victoria, participants aged 13–19 years are assigned into three connection levels. Youth Connections providers are expected to enrol a distribution of young people at all three connection levels, in the percentages given below:

- Type 1: At risk of disengagement, but still attending school (20% of intake)
- Type 2a: At imminent risk of disengaging, or recently disengaged (30% of intake)
- Type 2b: Disengaged for more than three months (50% of intake)

Further details are available in the *Youth Connections program guidelines* (DEEWR 2011).

Youth Connections is delivered by contracted providers across Australia and funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). This report is the second stage of an evaluation examining the Peninsula Youth Connections (PYC) program, which operates in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula (FMP) region of Victoria, and is provided by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and TaskForce. PYC is contracted to assist 201–250 young people per year, and is staffed by seven case managers, a re-engagement coordinator, a program coordinator and an administrative assistant.

A detailed description of the policy context for Youth Connections can be found in Stage 1 of the PYC evaluation (Bond 2011, pp. 1–4). Briefly, Youth Connections is one of a suite of programs under the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions which was agreed by the Council of Australian Governments under the Federal Financial Relations Framework in July 2009. Youth Connections commenced in January 2010 and runs for four years to December 2013.

The National Partnership has five elements:

- Maximising Engagement, Attainment and Successful Transitions
- School Business Community Partnership Brokers
- Youth Connections
- National Career Development
- the Compact with Young Australians

Youth Connections represents a consolidation of four federally funded programs and one Victorian state-funded program which had operated for varying periods until December 2009. Youth Connections was developed to build on the best elements of these programs, remove duplication, better integrate Commonwealth programs with similar state and territory programs, and align geographic service delivery regions (DEEWR 2009).

## Monitoring and evaluation context

Nationally, Youth Connections is monitored according to the Youth Connections Reporting and Outcomes Framework (DEEWR 2010). Providers submit yearly service plans and evaluative reports, conduct program monitoring meetings with the department, and enter participant and activity data to the central online Youth Attainment and Transitions Management Information System (YATMIS).

A three-year evaluation of the National Partnership for Youth Attainment and Transitions (which encompasses Youth Connections) is being undertaken by dandolopartners. In the first stage of the evaluation, the authors concluded that:

Youth Connections has effectively broadened the support available to disengaged and at risk young people across the country. The range of services delivered under Youth Connections appears to be effective in supporting disengaged young people and transitioning them back in to education and training. However, the scale of demand for these services is large and exceeds the Youth Connections program providers' funded capacity (dandolopartners 2012).

The three-year evaluation project considers the National Partnership as a whole and does not include detailed assessment of individual programs and activities.

## Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation

PYC is the only Youth Connections service conducting its own formal evaluation. This regional case study supplements the national evaluation, providing deeper understanding regarding the needs of young people, the medium-term impacts of the program, and the ability of the service to improve levels of engagement. The PYC evaluation is being conducted in three stages:

### Stage 1

Stage 1, published in 2011, used data gathered from interviews with PYC staff members and other regional service providers to examine three areas:

- unmet needs which act as barriers to young people's participation in education
- broader systemic factors which impede young people's learning
- PYC as a case study to reflect on the Youth Connections model's advantages, constraints and opportunities for development (Bond 2011).

Information about the policy background and development of Youth Connections and the FMP context, and a literature review on disengagement with education and training can be found in the Stage 1 report.

### Stage 2

Stage 2 (this report) focuses on the experience of the program from young people's perspectives, and seeks to answer the following questions:

- What concerns are young people presenting to PYC with, and how do these concerns affect young people's progress through education, their engagement with the service and their outcomes?
- How is the PYC service model experienced by young people, and is it successful in meeting their needs?
- How do young people fare after exiting the program? Are outcomes sustainable, and what ongoing challenges do young people face?

### Stage 3

Stage 3 is currently underway, and is designed to evaluate the program's operation within the broader regional services landscape, including PYC's capacity to strengthen community partnerships to respond to the needs of young people who have disengaged from education or are at risk of doing so. The key content areas for Stage 3 are:

- young people's experiences with mainstream schools and with other services
- PYC's method of delivering Type 3 (re-engagement) and Type 4 (strengthening services) activities
- the alignment of PYC with other key services in the region, including schools and the Partnership Brokers (in Victoria, the Local Learning and Employment Networks)
- potential gaps or areas of duplication in the regional services environment.

Data will be collected from interviews and focus groups with PYC staff and external stakeholders and fed into a document tailored for policy makers.

## 2 Methodology

Data for Stage 2 of the evaluation included:

- qualitative data from interviews with 12 former participants and 9 PYC staff members, and a focus group with 4 former participants
- quantitative data entered by case managers in the Youth Attainment and Transitions Management Information System (YATMIS) about participants who completed PYC between January 2011 and March 2012, and about re-engagement (Type 3) activities
- quantitative data from the PYC referrals database maintained by PYC administrative staff
- quantitative data from a survey purpose-designed for Stage 2 of the evaluation and sent to participants three months after exit from the program (52 surveys returned).

The participant data were collected from a relatively small pool of young people who are known to live in the FMP region. Therefore, to protect interviewees' confidentiality, detailed case studies of individuals are not presented here. Rather, composite case studies have been constructed according to the patterns gathered from the quantitative data on participant barriers, engagements and outcomes, and filled out using amalgamated details from several young people. These case studies describe four broad participant typologies, named to reflect the types of disadvantage faced by each group:

- unstable contexts
- mental health and stressors
- risky behaviours
- interpersonal issues.

These typologies emerged from data analysis and are used as a structure to organise findings throughout the report. A fifth typology, dealing with learning issues, was identified but is not dealt with in detail due to a relative lack of data. Further discussion of data analysis and methods for constructing these typologies begins in Chapter 5. Where appropriate, bivariate data analysis techniques were applied to test for significant differences between groups. Results of significance tests are reported where  $p \leq .10$ .

### Limitations

Contacting young people for interviews and follow-up surveys required that former PYC participants had maintained a stable phone contact and/or physical address since exit from the program. It is therefore likely that participants experiencing the most unstable living arrangements were underrepresented in the survey and interview data. Since participants were invited to opt in to the research, it is also possible that those who had a more positive experience with the program were more likely to volunteer.

It should also be noted that data analysis could not include the young people who were referred to PYC but did not enrol in case management, and therefore this evaluation cannot comment conclusively on the level of unmet demand in the region, or on the experiences of young people not engaged by PYC.

### 3 Sample profile

This section provides an overview of the sample of young people whose data were analysed, in terms of demographic information as reported in the program management information system (YATMIS). Analysis of young people's outcomes and experiences in relation to selected themes occurs in subsequent sections.

#### Demographic characteristics of young people referred to PYC

In 2010, PYC received 403 referrals, and 132 young people completed their enrolments with the program. In 2011, the program received a further 490 referrals and the number of young people who completed their enrolment rose to 222.<sup>1</sup> Data from 2010 were analysed in Stage 1 of the evaluation, and were excluded from Stage 2 in order to gain a picture of PYC's function as an established program. The information analysed was obtained by merging data from YATMIS with additional information from PYC's referrals database. The final dataset comprised 228 young people whose records contained adequate information for analysis and who completed their enrolment in PYC between January 2011 and March 2012.

In this 2011–2012 group of young people, the average age at enrolment in PYC was 15.8 years, with the majority aged 14–16 years. At 53.5 per cent, there was a slight overrepresentation of females in the participant group, particularly given that broader evidence suggests males are more likely to disengage from secondary schooling (refer to Stage 1; Bond 2011, p. 7). This also represented a slight change from the group of young people seen in 2010, 51.1 per cent of whom were male. Of the participants who exited in January–March 2012, 62.9 per cent were females. At March 2012, the slight predominance of females was not statistically significant, however.

**Table 3.1 Summary of sample demographics from evaluation Stages 1 and 2**

	Stage 1 (2010)	Stage 2 (2011–2012)
<i>n</i>	139	228
Age (years)	16.3	15.8
% females	48.9%	53.5%
% Indigenous background	-	3.9%
% CALD background	2.2%	2.2%
% refugee background	-	1.3%
% Type 1	20.9%	14%
% Type 2a	34.5%	35.5%
% Type 2b	44.6%	50.4%
Mean number of barriers	4.3	5.3

<sup>1</sup> Note that 'referrals' includes all young people referred to the program, 'enrolments' refers to those who were offered (and accepted) case management, and 'completion' refers to young people who engaged in case management and then exited the program; see Glossary p. 55.

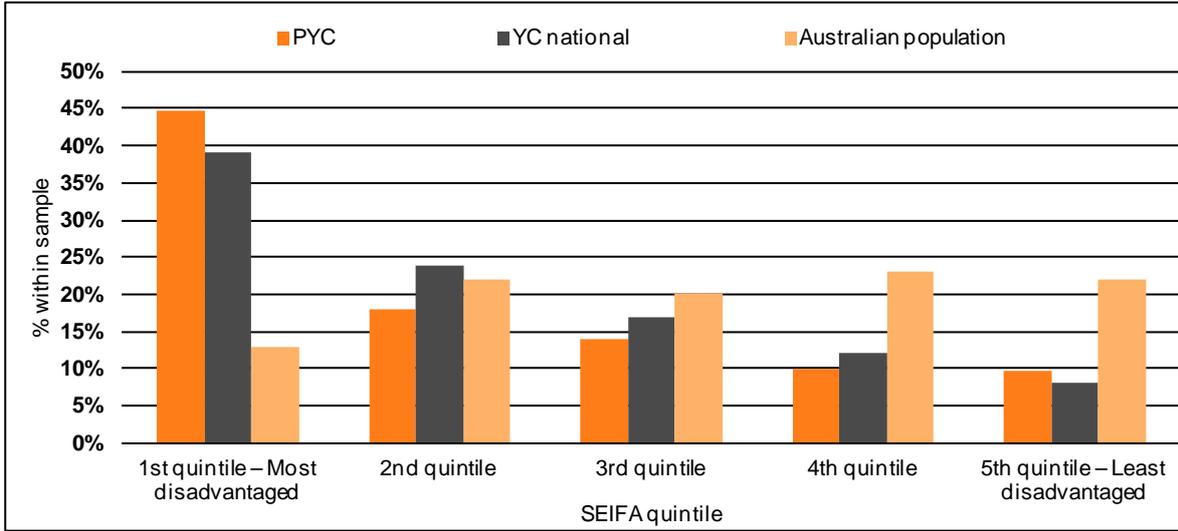
### Area socioeconomic characteristics

Half of the sample were living in the Mornington Peninsula local government area (LGA), with the other half largely residing in the Frankston and Kingston LGAs.

Stage 2 of the evaluation was in part intended as a regional case study of Youth Connections implementation. Therefore, in order to investigate the effects of the socioeconomic aspects of the region on engagement with Youth Connections, additional data analysis using the SEIFA Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage (ABS 2006) was conducted. It should be noted however that the SEIFA Index refers to the average socioeconomic characteristics of the suburb in which the young person lives, not to the individual socioeconomic status of that person. Furthermore, the PYC sample is by nature non-random and the results of statistical analyses applied throughout this document should be interpreted with this in mind.

Figure 3.1 shows the percentage of participants residing in suburbs categorised in quintiles according to socioeconomic disadvantage.

**Figure 3.1 Peninsula Youth Connections participants by socioeconomic disadvantage of home suburb, compared with national Youth Connections participants and Australian population**

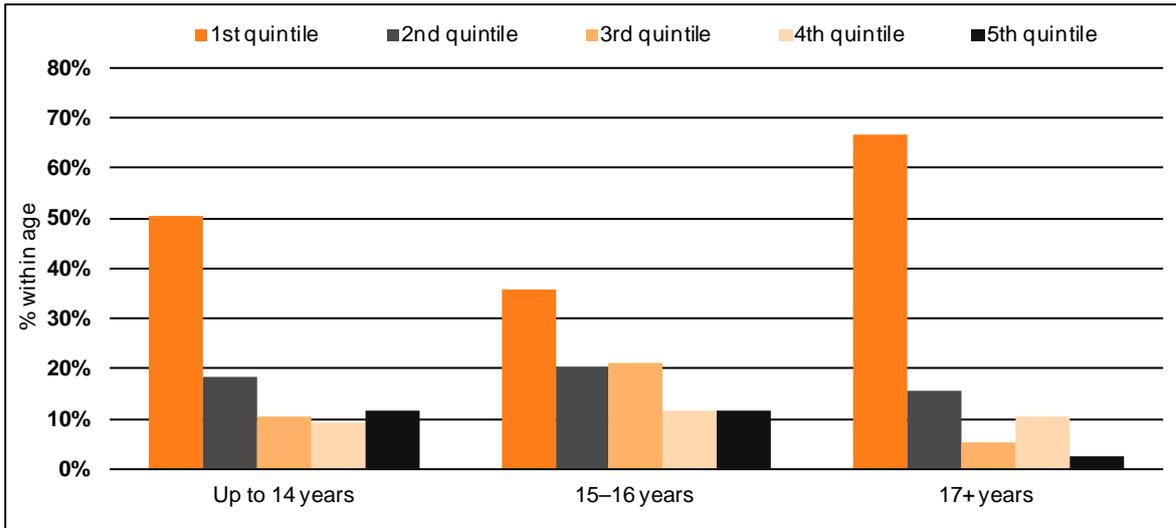


The majority of participants lived in suburbs falling in the most disadvantaged quintile. This corresponded well with the national pattern for participant distribution (described in the national evaluation, and shown for comparison; dandolopartners 2012) and suggests that PYC is successfully engaging young people from contexts of socioeconomic disadvantage.

As can be seen in Figure 3.2, both older and younger participants tended to reside in more disadvantaged suburbs than the middle age range (15–16 year olds)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Chi-square test of association:  $\chi^2(8)=16.04, p=.04$

**Figure 3.2 Participant age groups by socioeconomic disadvantage of home suburb**



It was interesting that the younger participants (12–14 years) tended to come from more disadvantaged suburbs. This could indicate that young people from more disadvantaged areas are disengaging (and therefore presenting at services) earlier than those from advantaged areas. It could also reflect less successful assistance of these younger students by school welfare teams in these areas, potentially flagging issues around the resourcing and capacity of welfare teams in schools with a higher proportion of students facing socioeconomic disadvantage. Alternatively it could indicate greater sensitivity in terms of referral and acceptance of young people from disadvantaged areas by referrers or PYC. The high percentage of older participants from disadvantaged suburbs may in part reflect the fact that these young people are more likely to be living outside the family home, on limited incomes.

### Referral sources

As indicated in Table 3.2, the largest number of young people were referred by schools, followed by agencies and Centrelink.

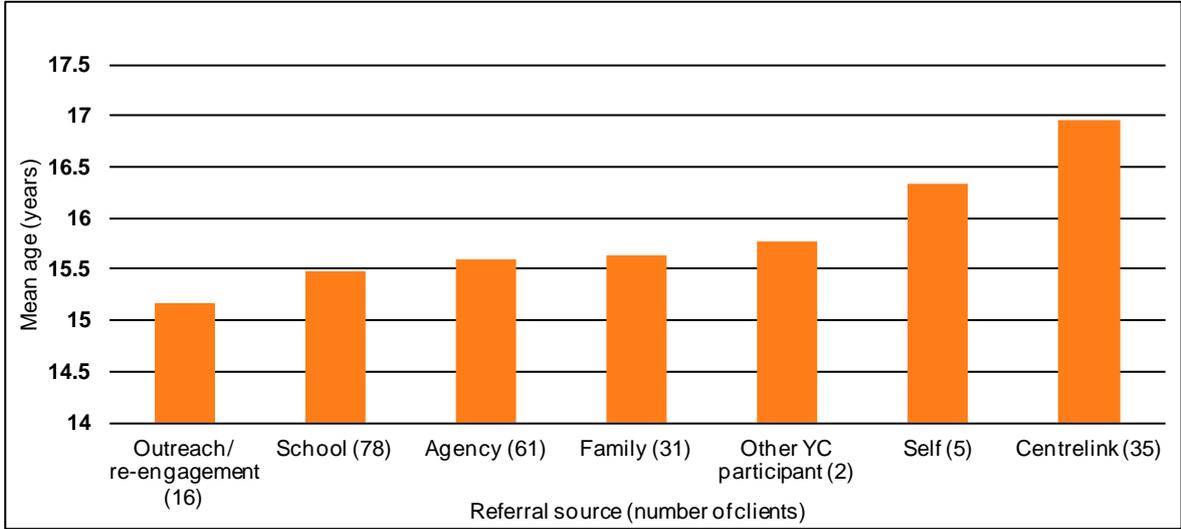
**Table 3.2 Sources of referrals to PYC**

Referral source	<i>n</i>	%
School	78	34.2%
Agency	61	26.8%
Centrelink	35	15.4%
Family	31	13.6%
Outreach and re-engagement activity	16	7.0%
Self	5	2.2%
Other Youth Connections participant	2	0.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>100%</b>

Based on visual comparison with the data provided in the evaluation of the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions, PYC appeared to receive more referrals from agencies, and fewer referrals from schools than the national average (dandolopartners 2012). There were no

significant differences in patterns of referral between genders within the PYC sample. The young people referred by Centrelink were significantly older than those referred by other sources<sup>3</sup>, as would be expected, given the age requirements for assistance through Centrelink (see Figure 3.3).

**Figure 3.3 Mean age by referral source**



### Indigenous engagement

The FMP region was flagged in the program guidelines as an Indigenous region and data from the 2006 census indicate that 0.9 per cent of young people aged 10–19 in the FMP region have Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (FMPLLEN 2011). PYC has employed a dedicated Indigenous case manager and drafted an Indigenous Engagement Plan which was circulated to relevant local Indigenous organisations. From January 2011 to March 2012, 3.9 per cent of young people who completed PYC were from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Data indicated that the proportion of Indigenous participants was increasing—while four of the nine completed Indigenous participants were from 2011, the other five were from the first three months of 2012. Furthermore, as at March 2012, 8.1 per cent of currently enrolled and active participants were Indigenous, suggesting that these young people are being increasingly effectively targeted by the PYC program, and indicating the advantage conferred by having a specialised worker dedicated to this engagement. This will be further explored in the third stage of evaluation.

### Engaging with CALD communities

There were surprisingly few participants from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) or refugee backgrounds. The Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region contains fewer people from CALD backgrounds than do other areas in Melbourne and surrounds. In the overall Melbourne Statistical Division, 22 per cent of people are from a non-English speaking background; in Frankston this figure is 8.9 per cent, and in Mornington Peninsula 5.6 per cent (FMPLLEN 2011). However, the 2.2 per cent of PYC participants characterised as CALD still appears to be an underrepresentation of the community make-up. Further, the active participants as at March 2012 included only 1 per cent from CALD backgrounds.

Staff members were unsure how much need existed in this region, but identified a wish to engage with CALD communities. One relevant community linkage is the Homework Club, which is a re-

<sup>3</sup> One-way ANOVA:  $F(5,219)=7.9, p<.01$

engagement (Type 3) activity run in conjunction with the New Hope Foundation and caters largely for students from Sudanese backgrounds to provide support with literacy and numeracy. However, many attendees at Homework Club are primary-age students, and while there has been some attempt to involve the older attendees in case management, this does not seem to have often eventuated. Most of the young people with refugee and CALD backgrounds on the YATMIS database were identified through Homework Club but either were assessed as not requiring case management or declined to participate. This may indicate a lack of need in this cohort—one case manager reflected that one of the local schools has a strong suite of academic assessment and support services available for humanitarian entrants. However, given that refugee status in particular can be a risk factor for disengagement with education, and the barriers to social inclusion and community engagement that can face young people from these backgrounds (VFST 2007), it is important that the program continues to monitor whether a need is emerging in this area.

### Connection levels: Types 1, 2a and 2b

On entry to PYC, young people are categorised into service Types 1, 2a or 2b based on their level of connection with education and training. Youth Connections providers are expected to enrol a distribution of young people at all three connection levels based on quotas specified in the program guidelines. Table 3.3 gives the percentage of young people at each level in PYC, with program guidelines quotas for comparison.

**Table 3.3 Number and percentage of young people at each connection level**

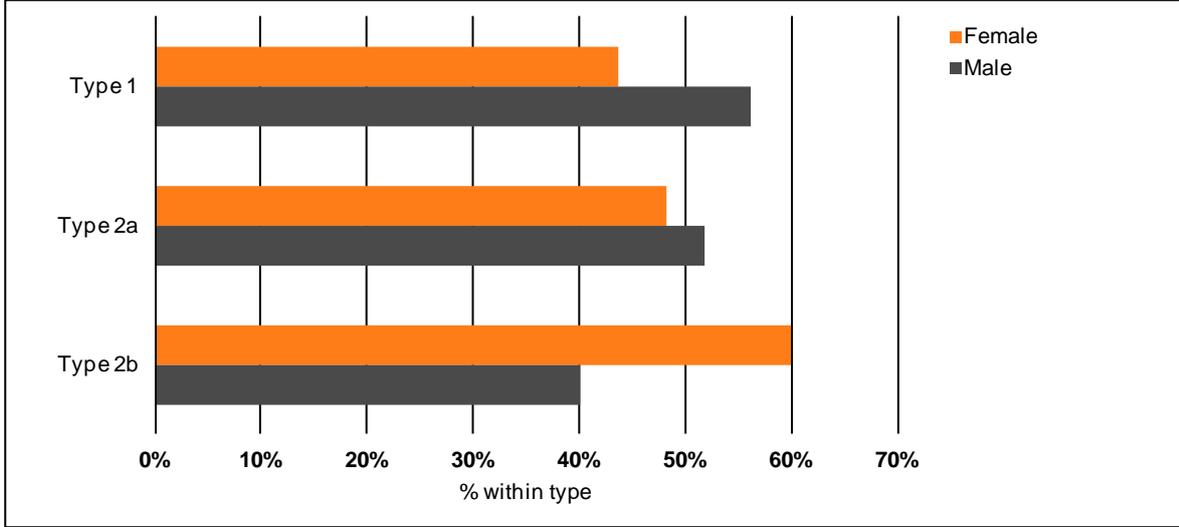
Connection level (quota)	<i>n</i>	%
Type 1: At risk of disengagement, but still attending school (20%)	32	14.0%
Type 2a: At imminent risk of disengaging or recently disengaged (30%)	81	35.6%
Type 2b: Disengaged for more than three months (50%)	115	50.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

PYC was seeing more Type 2a participants and fewer Type 1 participants than the percentages recommended in the program guidelines. PYC was also seeing fewer Type 1 participants and more Type 2b participants than the national average (dandolopartners 2012). Issues around targeting particular participant types were discussed in Stage 1 (Bond 2011, p. 42) and are further considered on page 24.

Not surprisingly, the mean age of young people in the program increased with their level of disengagement, so that those in Type 2b were significantly older (16.1 years) than those in Types 1 (15.2 years) and 2a<sup>4</sup> (15.5 years). As can be seen in Figure 3.4, more females were categorised as Type 2b (severely disengaged), and more males as Type 1 (at risk of disengaging); however, these differences did not reach statistical significance.

<sup>4</sup> One-way ANOVA:  $F(2,225)=8.07, p<.01$

**Figure 3.4 Participant connection level (Type 1, 2a or 2b) by gender**



Young people considered to be more severely disengaged (Type 2b) spent longer enrolled in PYC, on average, than those considered at risk (Type 1) or more recently disengaged (Type 2a) (Table 3.4).

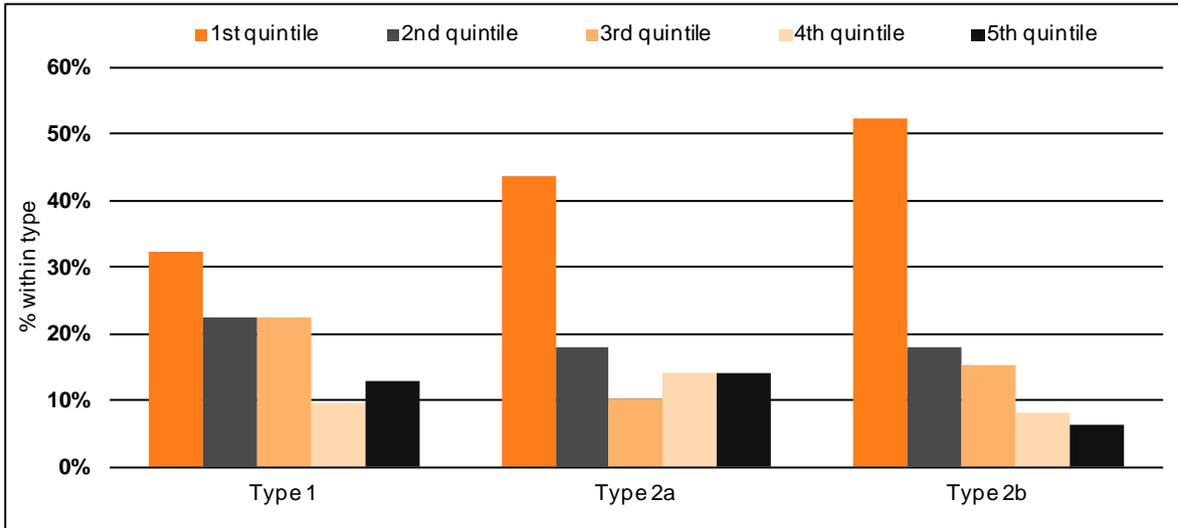
**Table 3.4 Length of enrolment (days) in PYC by connection level**

	Days enrolled		
	Median	Mean	Standard deviation
Type 1: At risk of disengagement, but still attending school	125	175.3	106.5
Type 2a: At imminent risk of disengaging or recently disengaged	189	218.6	118.4
Type 2b: Disengaged for more than three months	226	236.8	130.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>221.7</b>	<b>124.5</b>

As illustrated in Figure 3.5, young people already severely disengaged from education (Type 2b) tended to come from more disadvantaged areas than those at risk of disengaging or more recently disengaged (Types 1 and 2a), although due to constraints of sample size, this finding should be interpreted with caution<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Due to small cell sizes, chi-square test of association used a median split for SEIFA score.  $\chi^2(2)=4.96, p=.08$

**Figure 3.5 Participant connection level by socioeconomic disadvantage of home suburb**

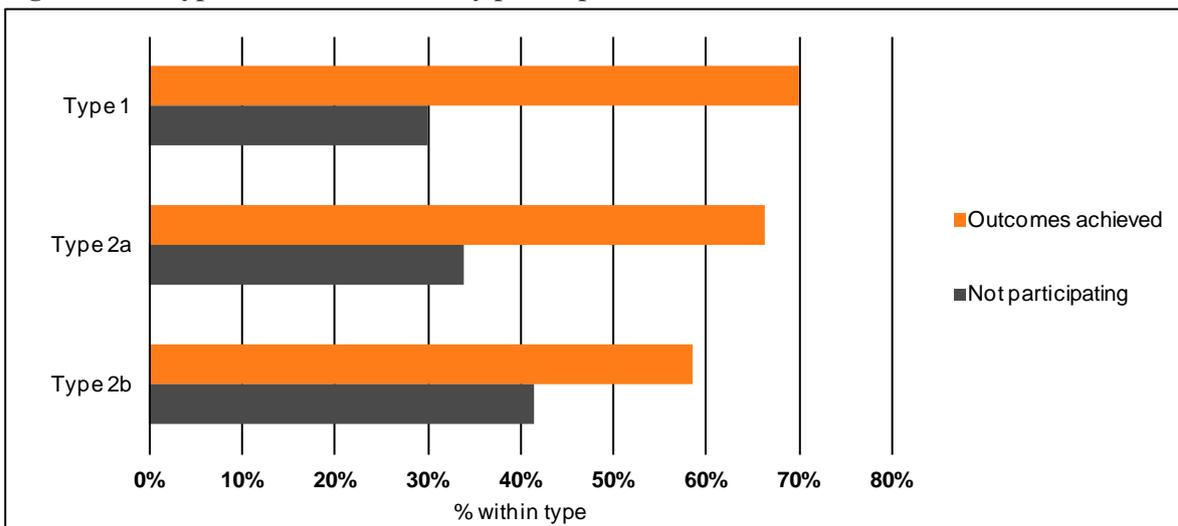


A summary of demographic characteristics and achievement of outcomes for young people at the three connection levels can be found in Chapter 6, p.24.

### Reason for exit from PYC

Young people can exit PYC for various reasons. The exiters fall broadly into two categories: those who achieve the intended outcomes and those who are no longer participating (for example due to loss of contact, or unwillingness to continue). Figure 3.6 shows the percentage of young people from each connection level who exited due to achievement of outcomes or to non-participation. Although it appears that the more severely disengaged young people were slightly more likely to exit due to non-participation, this did not reach statistical significance, suggesting that PYC is able to tailor program activities to engage young people at different stages of disengagement.

**Figure 3.6 Type of exit from PYC by participant connection level**



### Outreach and re-engagement activities

Data were analysed from 25 outreach and re-engagement (also known as Type 3) activities conducted from January 2011 to March 2012. According to YATMIS, 655 people participated in

these activities, 21.8 per cent of them PYC participants (this included existing participants and those who connected with PYC as a result of the activity; 6.6 per cent of PYC participants were recruited through re-engagement activities). Of the participants in Type 3 activities who were (or became) enrolled in PYC, 56 per cent were female.

As part of standard reporting, PYC staff are asked to identify aims for each re-engagement activity and to rate the success of the activity in achieving these aims. Table 3.5 shows how often each potential aim for outreach and re-engagement activities was selected, as well as the average of the success ratings for each aim on a scale from 1 (least successful) to 5 (most successful).

**Table 3.5 Aims of outreach and re-engagement (Type 3) activities, and ratings of success**

<b>Aim</b>	<b>How often selected</b>	<b>Average of ratings*</b>
Activities supported by regional services and community stakeholders	92%	3.9
Increased young people’s resilience, social skills and self-esteem	88%	4.2
Connected with young people severely disengaged from education/family/community	88%	4.3
Young people moved from Type 3 activities to individual case managed support	68%	3.2
Engaged families of severely disengaged young people	24%	2.8
Reconnected with severely disengaged young people identified in previous activities	12%	3.0

\*Ratings were from 1 (least successful) to 5 (most successful)

The success ratings indicate that the Type 3 activities have particular strengths in connecting with disengaged young people and contributing to progressive outcomes such as strengthened self-esteem. That the most frequent (and third most successful) aim concerned support from regional services and community stakeholders is a promising finding, suggesting that Type 3 activities play an important part in building regional services and community linkages. This and other aspects of Type 3 service provision will be discussed in more detail in Stage 3 of the PYC evaluation.

## 4 Intersecting barriers to education

The following three chapters aim to answer the first research question:

**What concerns do young people present to PYC with, and how do individual barriers affect their progress through education, their engagement with the service and their outcomes?**

This section examines the barriers faced by young people presenting at PYC, and then describes the method used to cluster these barriers into five groups. These groups were developed to help characterise similarities and differences among the challenges young people faced at entry into PYC, and to organise further data analysis in ways which elucidate the interactions between young people's particular circumstances, and their pathways through the education and services landscape.

### Barriers

The PYC central management information system (YATMIS) allows case managers to record information about young people's characteristics and barriers to engagement. Table 4.1 gives the percentage of young people facing various barriers, as selected by their case managers.

**Table 4.1 Number and percentage of young people classed as facing barriers to engagement**

Barrier	<i>n</i>	%
Low self-esteem	163	71.5%
Low literacy/numeracy	141	61.8%
Financial distress	117	51.3%
Socialisation issues	113	49.6%
Inadequate family support	96	42.1%
Mental health issues	95	41.7%
Behavioural problems	89	39.0%
Bullying	65	28.5%
Anger management	61	26.8%
Critical life event	49	21.5%
Unstable living arrangements	47	20.6%
Alcohol or drug misuse	39	17.1%
Abuse / domestic violence	21	9.2%
Juvenile justice orders	18	7.9%
Learning difficulty	15	6.6%
Young carer	13	5.7%
Disability	12	5.3%
Medical	10	4.4%
Parenthood	7	3.1%
Homelessness	7	3.1%
Giftedness	7	3.1%
Out-of-home care	6	2.6%
Disconnection from cultural heritage	4	1.8%
Volatile substance misuse	1	0.4%

Note: Case managers could select multiple barriers for each young person, *n*=228

The mean number of barriers per participant recorded for 2011–2012 was higher than that recorded for 2010 participants<sup>6</sup>. In the 2010 sample, 55 per cent of participants faced four or more barriers, compared with 77.7 per cent of the 2011–2012 sample. Whether this reflects program targeting of young people facing more complex sources of disadvantage, or a greater sensitisation of case managers and referrers to detecting and recording these barriers is unclear.

The term ‘barrier’ is used throughout this report, and is in common usage for discussing the various aspects of young people’s lives and the structures they operate within, which may hinder engagement with education. However it is important to recognise that such terminology is shorthand which, if over-used, obscures the complex, multidirectional and dynamic relationships between individual, relational and structural challenges to strong engagement with education. The word ‘barrier’ may suggest a static, standalone obstruction located between the young person and education, the existence of which precedes disengagement from education, and exerts a clearly one-directional causal influence on that disengagement. In fact, the influences we term as barriers usually intersect and interact, both with one another and with structures of education and training, and change over time. For example, the two most prevalent barriers for PYC participants—low self-esteem and low literacy/numeracy—may be outcomes of disengagement, as well as barriers to engagement.

Examination of the frequency of barriers should also not be taken to imply that prevalence of a barrier equates to importance. For example, while abuse and critical life events are comparatively less prevalent than other barriers in this sample, their effects on young people’s lives are powerful and came through very strongly in the interviews as key influencers of engagement with education.

## Using barrier groups to map participant typologies

This report was designed to integrate quantitative data from the program management information system with qualitative data from in-depth interviews with young people and PYC staff members. Rather than reporting fragments of young people’s stories in combination with quantitative data on a large number of separate variables, the information has been organised into broad typologies which emerged from a synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative data available. These typologies illustrate common themes in terms of barriers faced, engagement with PYC, and outcomes.

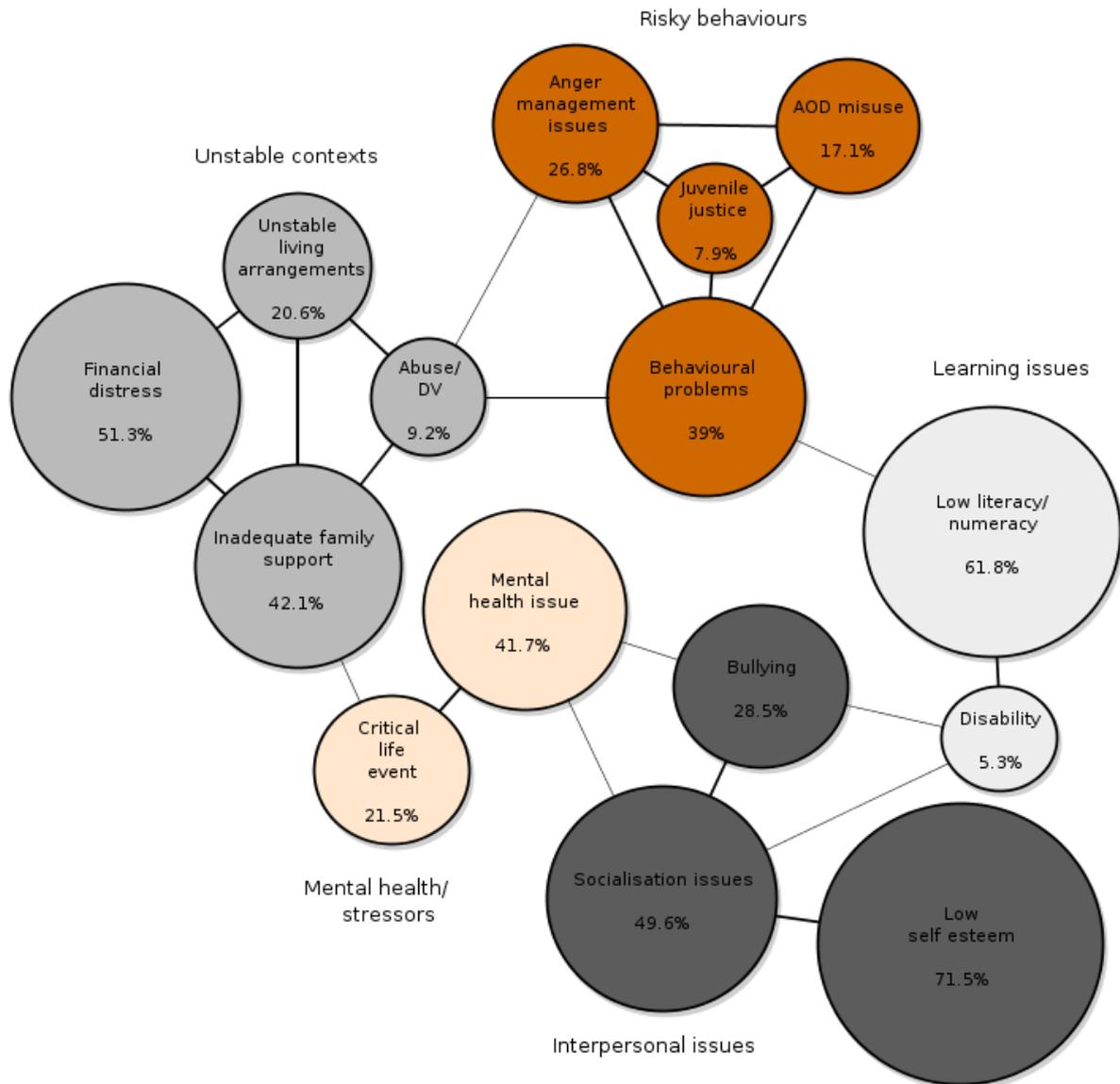
The seed for each typology was created by applying exploratory factor analysis to the YATMIS data on barriers. Factor analysis is a statistical method for organising data into groups, which are interpreted to reflect underlying higher-order constructs. Five groups of barriers emerged<sup>7</sup>, as illustrated in Figure 4.1.

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<sup>6</sup> One-way ANOVA:  $F(2,364) = 9.31, p < .01$

<sup>7</sup> Principal axis factoring, using varimax rotation with Kaiser normalisation  
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy = .6  
Bartlett’s test of sphericity  $\chi^2(105) = 378.24, p < .01$

**Figure 4.1 Groups of co-occurring barriers**



Notes: DV = domestic violence; AOD = alcohol and other drugs

Circles of the same shade indicate which barriers tended to group together. For example, juvenile justice orders, anger management issues, behavioural problems, and alcohol or substance misuse tended to co-occur for young people. The size of the circles indicates the prevalence of the barrier within the sample (also reflected in the percentages—for example, 28.5 per cent of participants had experienced bullying). Finally, lines in between circles represent a positive correlation between two barriers—this indicates that these barriers are likely to go together. For the sake of clarity and ease of interpretation, not all barriers classified in YATMIS are included in the model.

The five groups of barriers can be conceptualised in the following way:

**Unstable contexts:** Inadequate family support, unstable living arrangements, financial distress, and abuse / domestic violence

**Risky behaviours:** Behavioural problems, anger management issues, alcohol and drug misuse, and past or current juvenile justice orders

**Interpersonal issues:** Low self-esteem, experience of bullying, and socialisation issues

**Mental health and stressors:** Suspected or diagnosed mental health issues, and critical life events

**Learning issues:** Low literacy/numeracy, and disability (in the case managers' notes, most disabilities referred to were intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, and developmental disorders)

The classification of barriers into groups does not signify that the groups themselves do not intersect. The correlations between individual barriers show that while there are five groups of barriers that tended to cluster together, many barriers were also related to those in other groups. Such observations demonstrate the interrelated nature of multiple sources of disadvantage and the intersectionality of risk for educational disengagement and hence the need for integrated and holistic services to address disengagement. For example, while the experience of abuse or family violence clustered with other contextual barriers such as financial distress, inadequate family support and unstable living arrangements, abuse was also associated with behavioural problems and anger management issues. Likewise, bullying and socialisation problems were grouped together under interpersonal issues; however both were also associated with mental health issues and disability.

In order to create typologies, each young person was classified<sup>8</sup> into one of these five barrier groups, and further data analysis on program engagement and outcomes was structured to allow the detection of any differences in the pathways for each group. The data on barrier groupings, and the engagements and outcomes associated with these groups, were then used to construct the composite case studies given throughout this report. While quantitative data provided the framework for the typologies, the qualitative data collected from young people and case managers provided the narrative content of each case study. There was a strong fit between the actual experiences related by young people in interviews and the patterns that observed in the quantitative data. The case stories therefore provide a descriptive illustration of the findings of the data analysis and are used throughout the remainder of the report to reflect on different aspects of the program for young people. Following is an overview of some characteristics and outcomes associated with membership in each of the five barrier groups.

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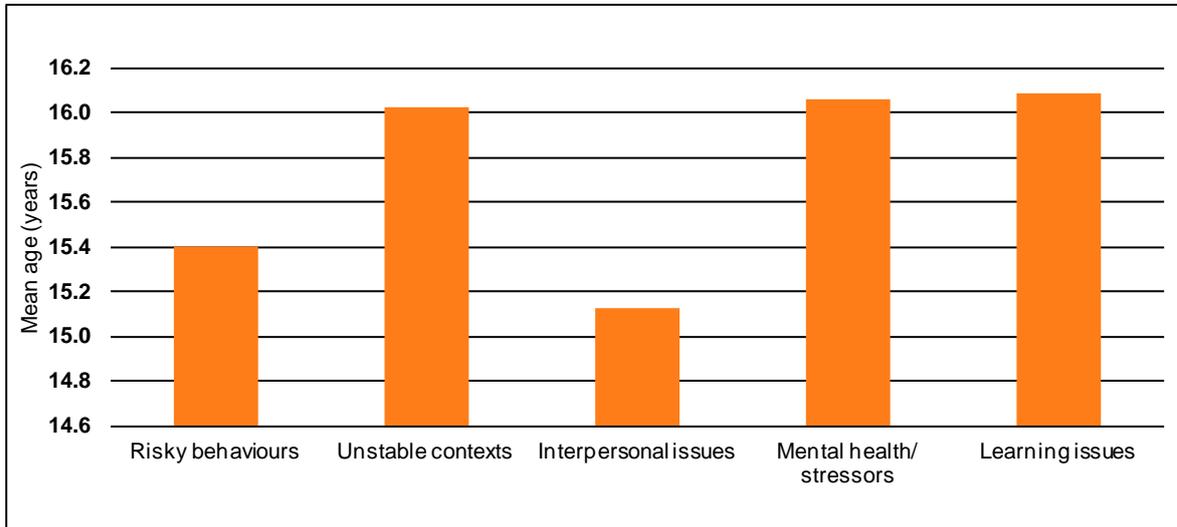
<sup>8</sup> Young people were categorised into barrier groups on the basis of factor scores

## Relationships between barrier groups and participant characteristics

### Age

Young people facing interpersonal issues were significantly younger than those in the other barrier groups<sup>9</sup> (see Figure 4.2).

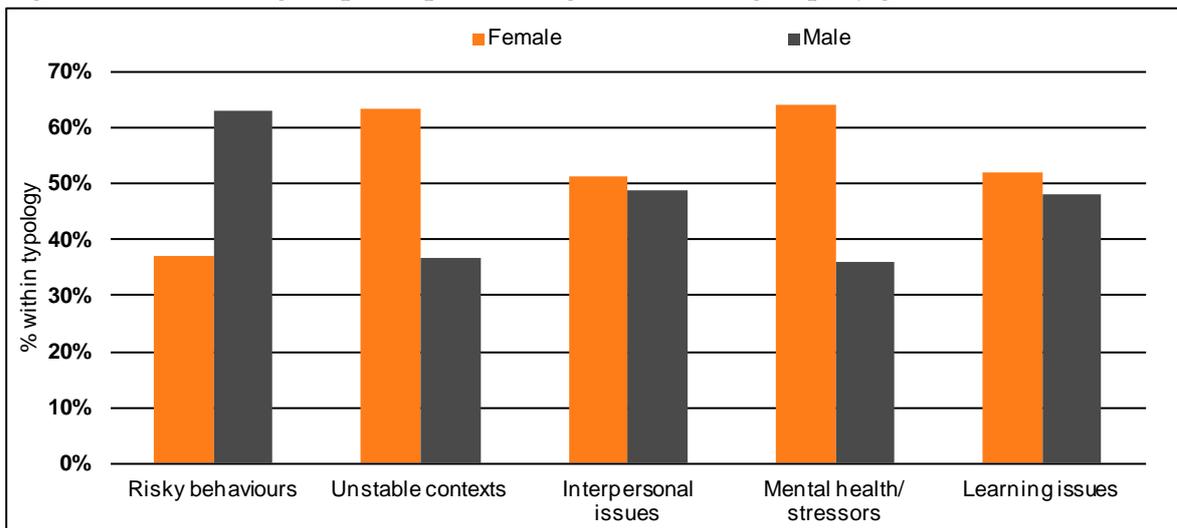
**Figure 4.2 Mean age by barrier group**



### Gender

While males and females were evenly balanced in the learning and interpersonal issues groups, females were categorised as facing mental health/stressor issues and unstable contexts more often, while males were categorised as facing more difficulties around risky behaviours<sup>10</sup>, as illustrated in Figure 4.3.

**Figure 4.3 Percentage of participants fitting each barrier group, by gender**



<sup>9</sup> One-way ANOVA:  $F(4,223)=5.02, p<.01$

<sup>10</sup> Chi-square test of association:  $\chi^2(4)=9.03, p=.06$

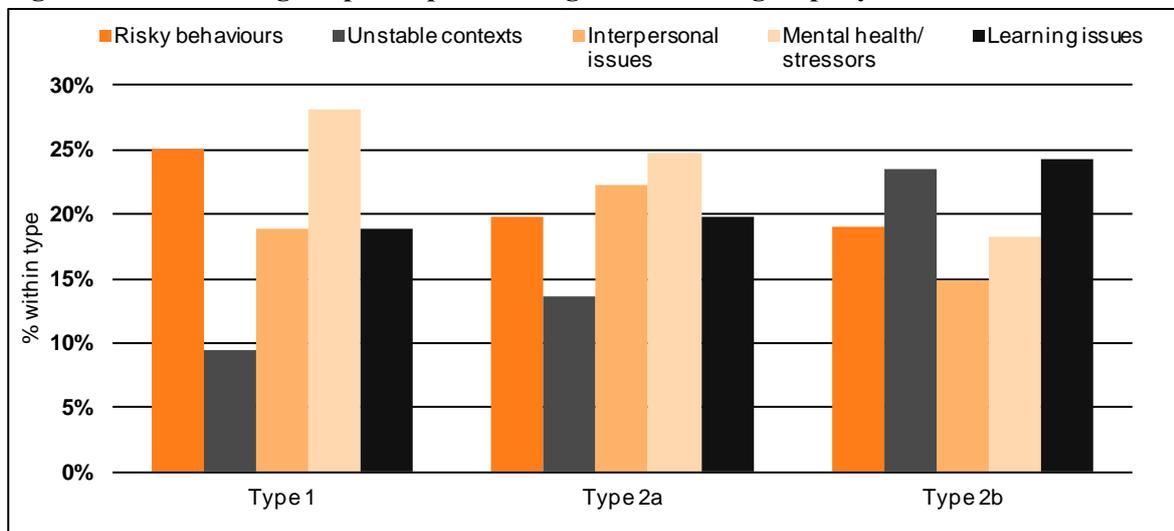
### Referral sources

Each referral source had a different profile of participants. While schools referred relatively even numbers of students across the range of barrier groups, agencies referred more young people from unstable contexts, Centrelink referred more young people with learning issues, and other parties (family, self-referral, Type 3, other YC participants) were referral sources for more young people with mental health issues and critical life events.

### Connection level (participant Types 1, 2a, 2b)

As Figure 4.4 shows, the young people still at school but at risk of disengagement (Type 1) were more likely to be facing barriers associated with risky behaviours and mental health and stressors. Those at imminent risk or recently disengaged (Type 2a) tended to be facing interpersonal and mental health and stressor barriers, while those severely disengaged (Type 2b) tended to face barriers around learning and unstable contexts (note, however, that these differences did not reach statistical significance).

**Figure 4.4 Percentage of participants fitting each barrier group, by connection level**



### Length of enrolment

The time from entry to exit was highly variable, with a median of 6.5 months (196 days). Young people in the interpersonal issues group tended to be enrolled for the longest period, while those categorised as facing mental health/stressor barriers had the shortest enrolments<sup>11</sup>; see Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2 Mean days enrolled at PYC, by participant barrier group**

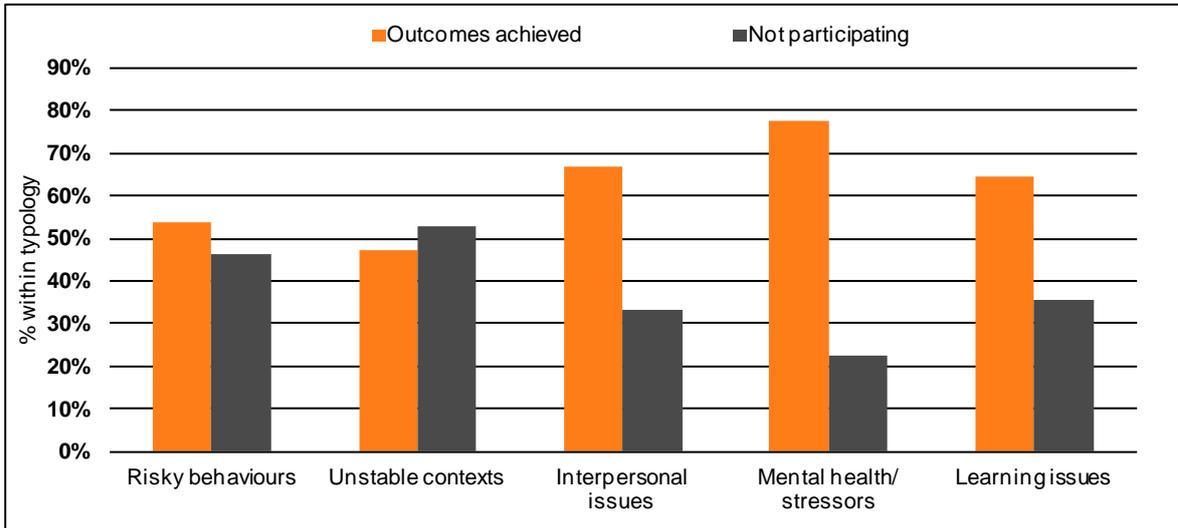
	Median days enrolled	Mean days enrolled	Standard deviation
Interpersonal issues	253.0	258.9	122.6
Learning issues	245.0	241.8	124.5
Unstable contexts	174.0	214.9	131.7
Risky behaviours	172.5	207.8	119.7
Mental health and stressors	135.5	189.6	117.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>196.0</b>	<b>221.7</b>	<b>124.5</b>

<sup>11</sup> One-way ANOVA:  $F(4,223)=2.3, p=.06$

### Reason for exit

Figure 4.5 illustrates that young people characterised as struggling with risky behaviours and unstable contexts were more likely to exit PYC due to lack of participation, whereas those with mental health and stressors and interpersonal barriers were particularly likely to exit due to achievement of outcomes<sup>12</sup>.

**Figure 4.5 Percentage of young people exiting PYC due to non-participation or achievement of outcomes, by barrier group**



<sup>12</sup>Chi-square test of association:  $\chi^2(4)=10.1, p=.04$

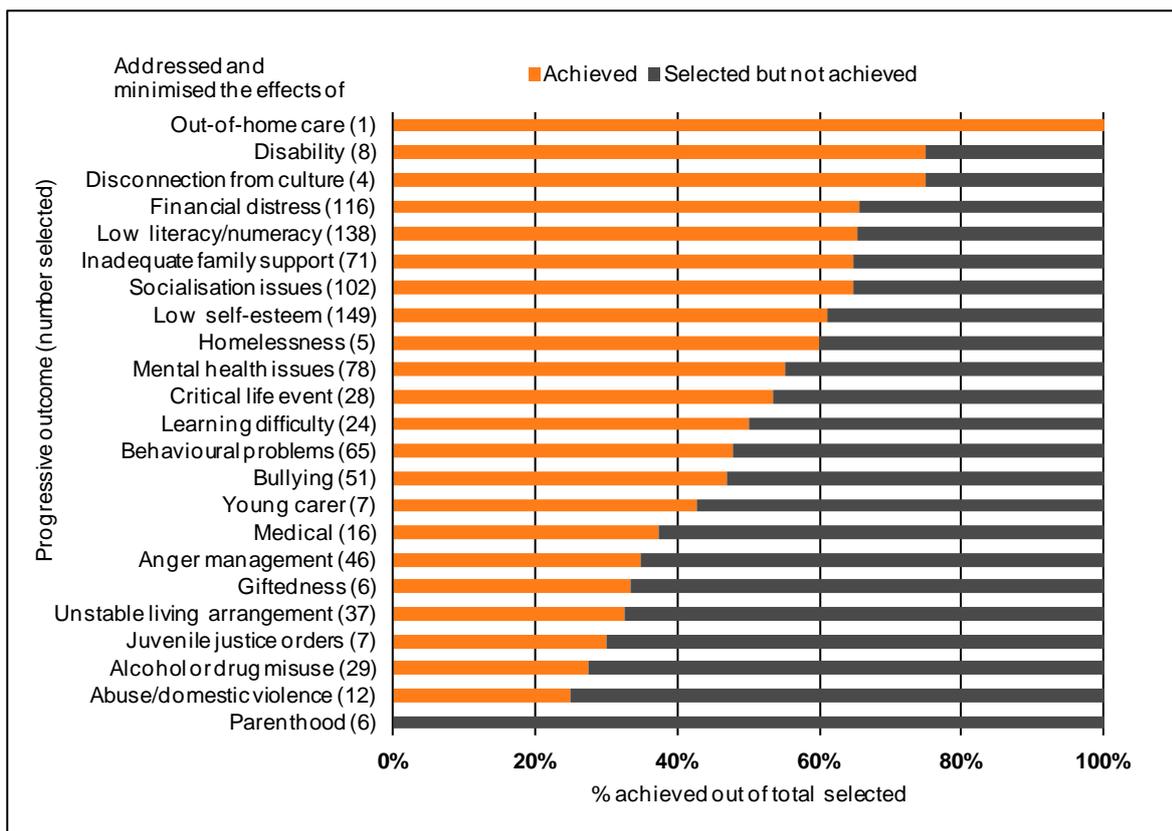
## 5 Relationships between demographic characteristics, barriers and outcomes

### Program outcomes

During each young person’s enrolment with PYC, case managers select a range of outcomes to be aimed for. The program guidelines divide these outcomes into progressive and final types. Upon the young person’s exit, achievement of those outcomes is recorded on YATMIS. The majority (84.5 per cent) of PYC participants achieved at least one progressive or final outcome.

Progressive outcomes refer to when PYC enrolment addressed and minimised the effects of the barriers recorded for each participant, and therefore have the same names as the barriers. Most young people who participated in PYC (78.5 per cent) achieved at least one progressive outcome. Figure 5.1 shows the percentage of young people who achieved each progressive outcome, out of the total number for whom that outcome was selected as relevant. Next to the name of each outcome is noted the number of young people for whom this was selected.

**Figure 5.1 Percentage who achieved each progressive outcome, among the young people for whom that outcome was selected**

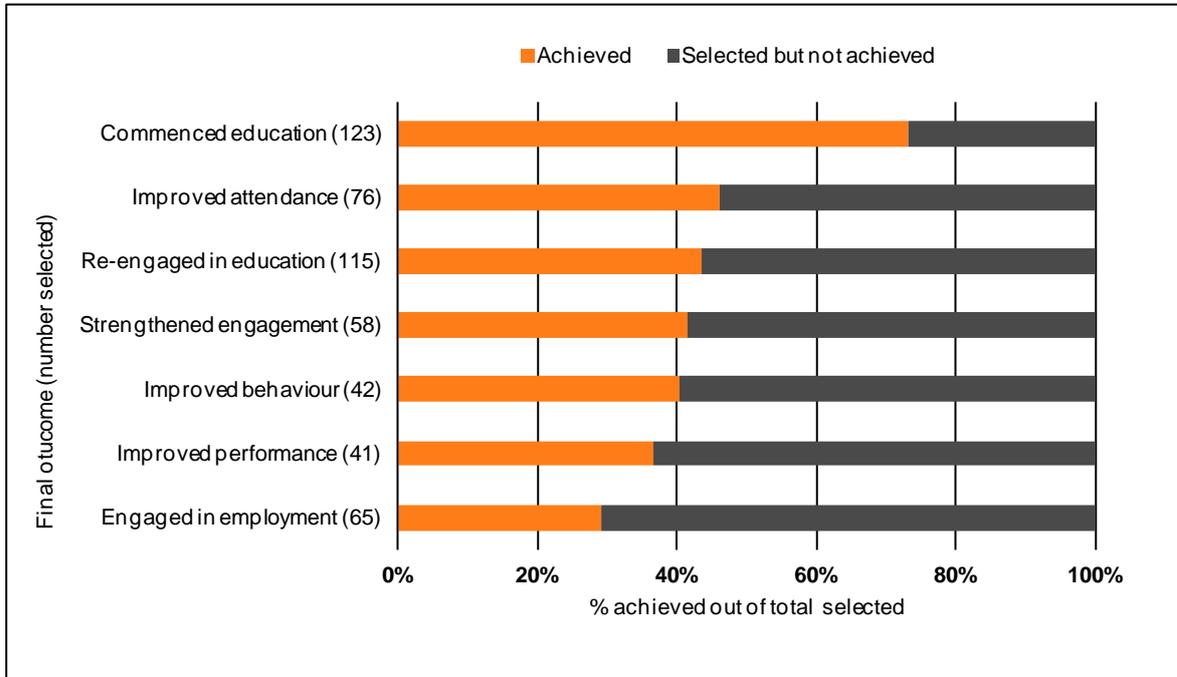


Note: Progressive outcomes are expressed in terms of barriers addressed and minimised

Final outcomes relate to the overall goals of re-engaging young people with education and training. Of the participant sample, 66.7 per cent achieved at least one final outcome. Figure 5.2 shows the percentage of young people who achieved each outcome, out of the number for whom that outcome was selected. It should be noted that, while the high achievement rate (73.2 per cent) for ‘commenced education’ is encouraging, this outcome does not necessarily indicate a long-term

engagement. The outcomes ‘re-engaged in education’ and ‘strengthened engagement’ provide more solid evidence of program benefit, as they require the engagement to be verified for at least 13 weeks. The criteria for final outcomes are described in the Glossary, on p. 55.

**Figure 5.2 Percentage who achieved each final outcome, of the young people for whom that outcome was selected**



Note: More than one outcome was usually selected for each participant,  $n=228$

It is difficult to interpret the overall rate of outcome achievement, given the lack of data for comparison. Rather than comment on the achievement rates of each outcome for the whole sample, the focus here was to compare the patterns of achievement of different groups of young people and to find out which young people are gaining the most, or least, benefit from participation in the program. For this reason, more detailed analysis was conducted to compare achievement of outcomes between different age groups, connection levels represented by the three participant types (Types 1, 2a and 2b), and groupings of barriers (unstable contexts, mental health and stressors, risky behaviours, learning issues, and interpersonal issues).

### Relationships between participant characteristics and outcomes

Different numbers of outcomes could be selected for individual participants. Therefore, in order to meaningfully compare attainment across groups, the *ratio* of outcomes achieved to outcomes aimed for was analysed in each of the sections below.<sup>13</sup> To allow detailed interpretation of findings, graphs show the mean numbers of both selected and achieved outcomes for each group.

#### Age

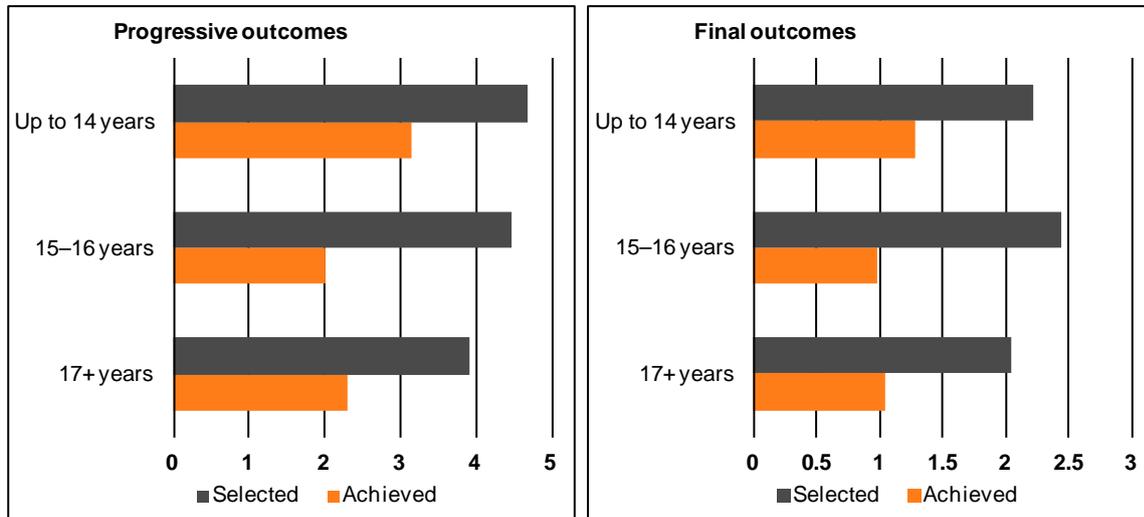
There were significant differences in the ratios of outcomes achieved between age groups in the sample. For both progressive<sup>14</sup> and final<sup>15</sup> outcomes, the 15–16 year old participants achieved a

<sup>13</sup> For some participants, there were either no final outcomes or no progressive outcomes selected, so ratios could not be calculated. Therefore in these analyses, for progressive outcomes  $n=219$  and for final outcomes  $n=220$ .

<sup>14</sup> One-way ANOVA:  $F(2,216)=5.91, p<.01$

lower ratio of outcomes than both the younger and older participants. Figure 5.3 shows the mean number of outcomes selected (that is, aimed for) and the mean number achieved for young people from three age groups.

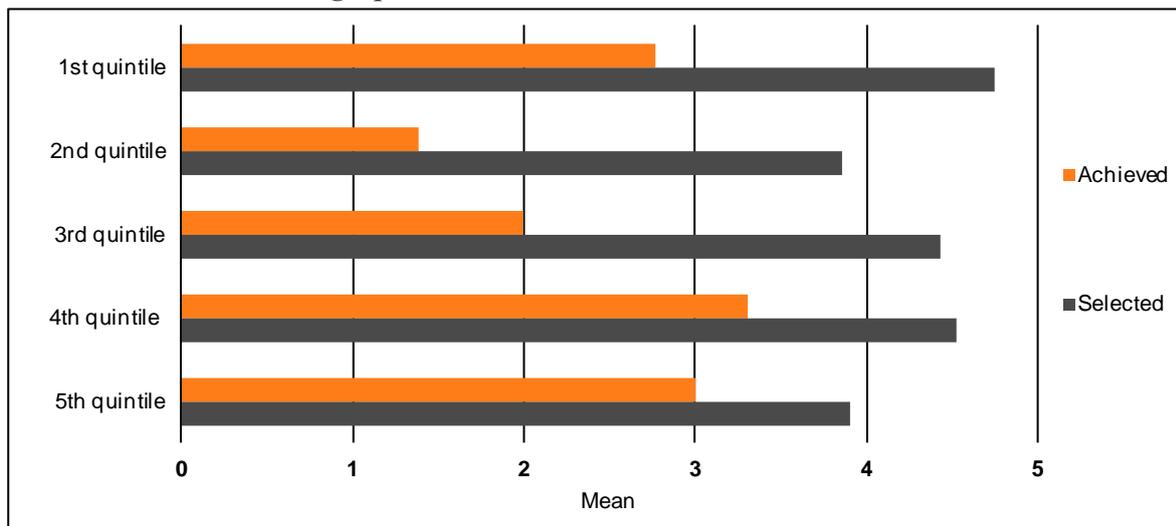
**Figure 5.3 Mean number of outcomes selected and achieved, by age group**



#### Area socioeconomic characteristics

Figure 5.4 and Figure 5.5 show the mean number of outcomes selected and the mean number achieved for young people from the most to least disadvantaged suburbs (again measured by quintile of socioeconomic disadvantage). While the number of outcomes aimed for is similar for young people in all areas, the number achieved tends to be lower in the more disadvantaged suburbs. This is particularly the case for young people living in suburbs in the second and third most disadvantaged quintiles.

**Figure 5.4 Mean number of progressive outcomes selected and achieved, by area socioeconomic disadvantage quintile**



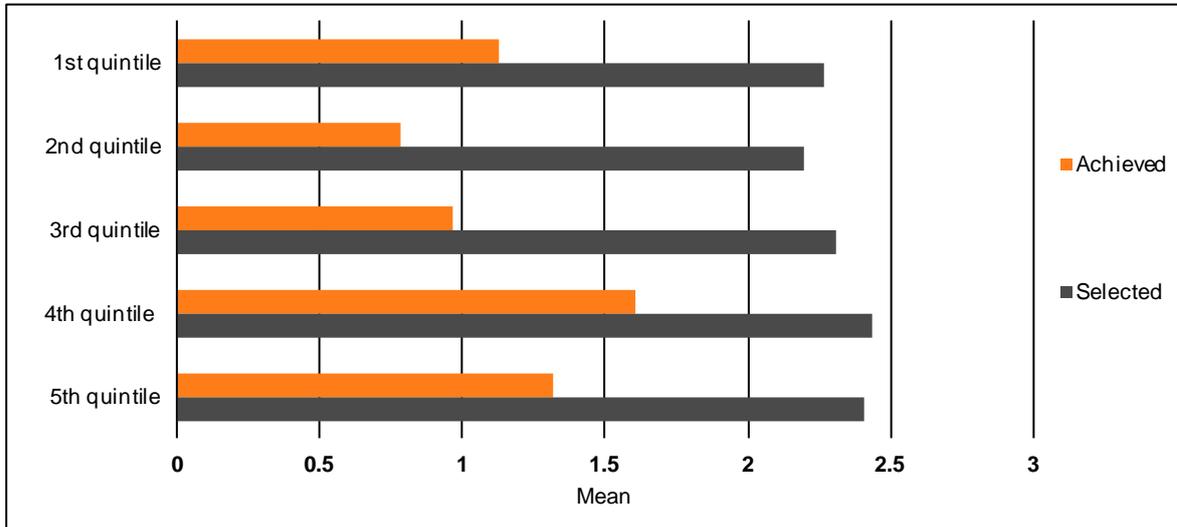
Significant differences were found between quintiles in the ratio of progressive and final outcomes achieved, although the pattern was stronger for progressive outcomes<sup>16</sup>. This is an interesting

<sup>15</sup> One-way ANOVA:  $F(2,217)=3.3, p=.04$

<sup>16</sup> Progressive outcomes:  $F(4,206)=4.96, p<.01$ . Final outcomes:  $F(4,207)=2.02, p=.09$

pattern, suggesting that perhaps, while young people from the most disadvantaged areas are recognised as requiring intensive support, those young people living in moderately disadvantaged suburbs may be falling through the cracks.

**Figure 5.5 Mean number of final outcomes selected and achieved, by area socioeconomic disadvantage quintile**



Note: As fewer final outcomes than progressive outcomes were available for selection, the mean numbers achieved were lower.

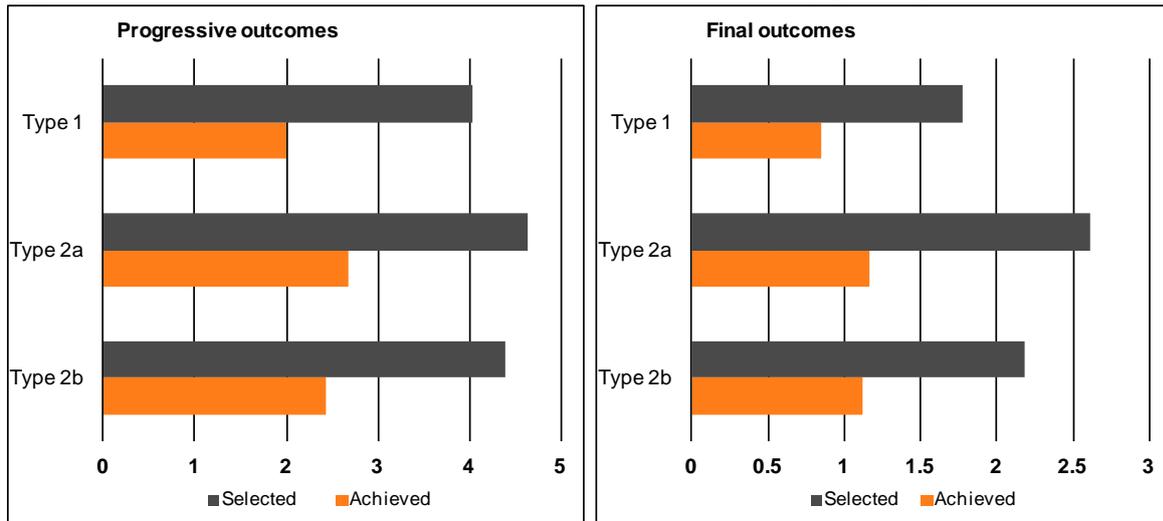
It is encouraging to note, however, that young people from more disadvantaged areas were likely to be seen more frequently (weekly or fortnightly) at PYC as opposed to monthly, indicating that more intensive support was offered to mitigate the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage<sup>17</sup>.

### Connection levels (Type 1, 2a, or 2b)

Achievement of progressive and final outcomes was examined between the different connection levels of young people (Types 1, 2a and 2b). There was a pattern for young people categorised as Type 1 to have slightly poorer rates of progressive outcome achievement and for Type 2a participants to show poorer achievement of final outcomes; however these differences were not statistically significant, again indicating that PYC was able to tailor program activities to meet the needs of young people experiencing various levels of disengagement from education and training.

<sup>17</sup> Due to small cell sizes, chi-square test of association used a median split for SEIFA score.  $\chi^2(2)=6.75, p=.03$

**Figure 5.6 Mean number of outcomes selected and achieved, by participant connection level**



Note: As fewer final outcomes than progressive outcomes were available for selection, the mean numbers of final outcomes achieved were lower.

Table 5.1 provides a summary of quantitative data on participant characteristics and outcomes by connection level.

**Table 5.1 Summary of characteristics and outcomes by connection level**

	Type 1	Type 2a	Type 2b
% of sample	14.0%	35.6%	50.4%
Mean age (years)	15.2	15.5	16.1
% females	44.0%	48.0%	60.0%
% from SEIFA quintile 1*	32.3%	43.6%	52.3%
Median days enrolled in PYC	125	189	226
Achieved at least one progressive outcome	75.0%	85.2%	74.8%
Achieved at least one final outcome	56.3%	64.2%	71.3%
Achieved at least one outcome of either type	84.4%	85.2%	84.3%

\*Indicating residence in a suburb from the most socioeconomically disadvantaged quintile

As noted earlier, PYC saw a lower percentage of Type 1 participants in 2011 and early 2012 than it had in 2010. The percentage of Type 1 clients was also lower than that specified in program guidelines (20%) and the national average for YC providers (26%; dandolopartners 2012). This may in part reflect the relatively lower percentage of funding allocated to Type 1 services in Victoria as compared with other states and territories (DEEWR 2011). In interviews with PYC staff members, discussion of Type 1 clients yielded less clarity than discussion of other connection levels on the most appropriate approach towards eliciting referrals and managing participants, and case managers identified this as a comparatively challenging area of their work. Issues associated with client targeting were raised in Stage 1 of the evaluation (Bond 2011, p. 42).

As reflected in the Stage 1 evaluation, some staff felt that the need to match predetermined quotas raised equity issues. A tension remained around the potential for young people who have already disengaged (Types 2a and 2b) and are facing multiple barriers to be denied access to the program in favour of young people who are still at school (Type 1) in order to balance the quotas. However, it

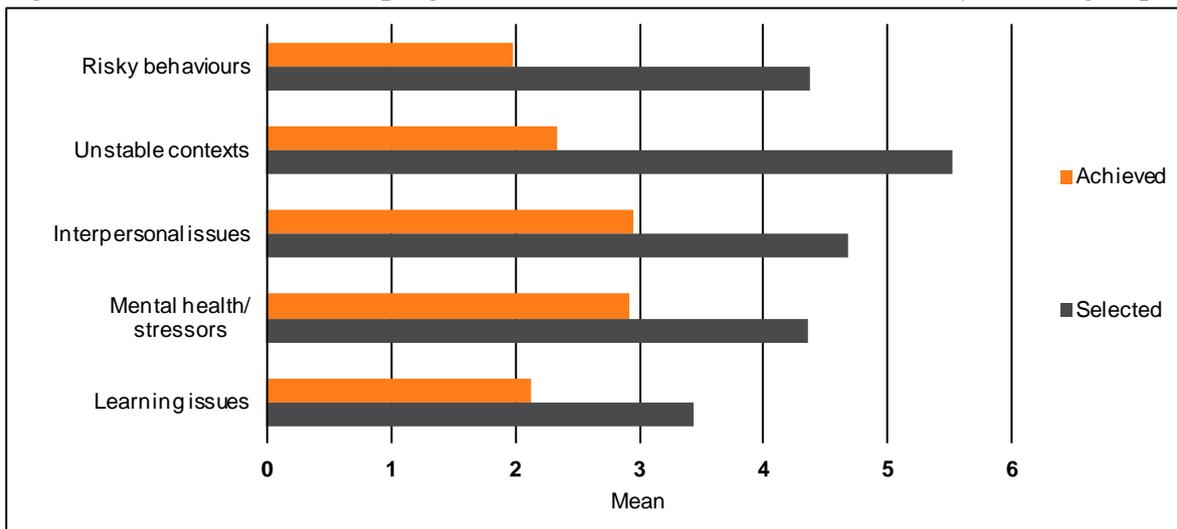
was also recognised that *prevention* of disengagement was a necessary program objective, and therefore case managers stated that seeing Type 1 participants should continue to be a part of their role, despite the attendant challenges. These challenges were both in encouraging schools to identify and refer students before disengagement was imminent, and in working with the participants themselves, who were younger and perceived to be less goal-directed than Type 2b participants. The goals of working with Type 1 participants are also more nebulous—strengthening engagement, for example, is less easily measured than recommencement of training. Some Type 3 activities had been designed to accommodate the needs of Type 1 participants, and given the issues cited above, this seems to be a promising approach.

Type 3 activities allow case managers to interact with Type 1 participants in a way that is developmentally appropriate and will be considered relevant and enjoyable by the young people, will focus on achievement of progressive outcomes, and will be efficient in allowing more Type 1 participants to be seen without exceeding the capacity of the program by adding too much intensive case management. Further consideration of the role of Type 3 activities, and linkages between PYC and schools (as well as other local services) will be contained in Stage 3 of the evaluation.

### Barrier groups

There were significant differences between the barrier groups in the ratio of progressive outcomes achieved to outcomes selected (Figure 5.7)<sup>18</sup>. The highest numbers of progressive outcomes achieved tended to be by young people facing interpersonal and mental health/stressor barriers, and the lowest by young people with risky behaviours. Young people from unstable contexts achieved a moderate number of outcomes, but there was a marked discrepancy between the high number of progressive outcomes aimed for and the number achieved indicating that these young people were still facing multiple barriers.

**Figure 5.7 Mean number of progressive outcomes selected and achieved, by barrier group**

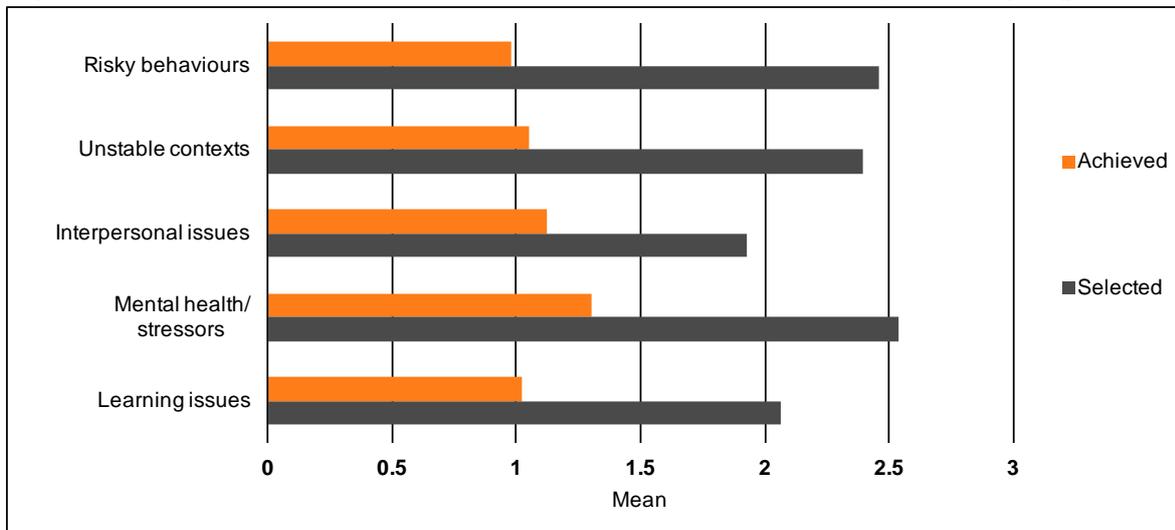


As with the progressive outcomes, final outcomes were analysed according to achievement by each of the five barrier groups. Figure 5.8 shows the average number of final outcomes aimed for and achieved by young people within each barrier group. This shows a similar pattern of achievement to the progressive outcomes: young people facing mental health/stressor barriers achieved the highest number of final outcomes, while those with risky behaviours achieved the fewest.

<sup>18</sup> One-way ANOVA:  $F(4,214)=2.63, p=.04$

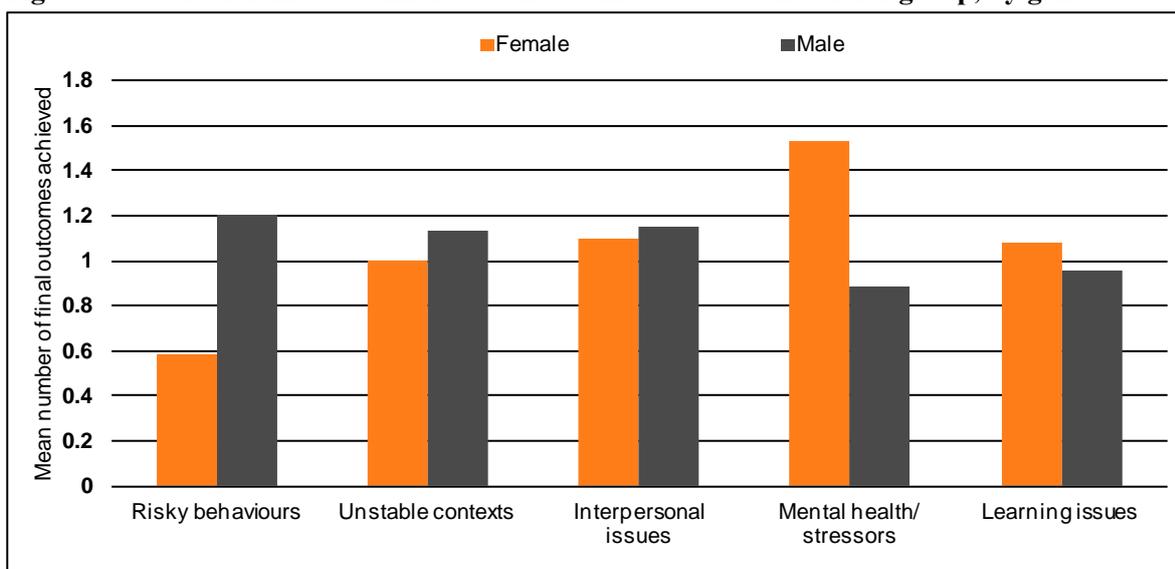
However, achievement of final outcomes overall was similar across groups, and differences were not statistically significant.

**Figure 5.8 Mean number of final outcomes selected and achieved, by barrier group**



It was interesting that while a low number of outcomes were achieved by the risky behaviours group (which contained more males than females) and a high number of outcomes were attained by the mental health and stressors group (more females than males), overall, females did not attain more outcomes than males. To investigate this further, achievement of final outcomes for each group was divided by gender. In terms of final outcomes, the ‘minority’ gender in each group appeared to fare worse, as illustrated in Figure 5.9, although it should be noted that small sample sizes meant this could not be tested for statistical significance. Females in the risky behaviours group achieved less than half the outcomes that males did. Conversely, the high outcome achievement for mental health appears to be driven by the strong benefits derived by females, compared with a more modest attainment of outcomes for males. Possible explanations for this are discussed in the individual sections on mental health and stressors (p. 30) and risky behaviours (p. 33).

**Figure 5.9 Mean number of final outcomes achieved for each barrier group, by gender**



## 6 Five typologies to describe PYC participants

This section synthesises the quantitative findings (including the broad patterns associated with each barrier group) with qualitative data gathered through interviews to present five typologies of young people interacting with PYC. These typologies are intended to elucidate some of the patterns of barriers young people faced, and the ways in which these barriers intersected with demographic factors to impact on young people’s engagement with PYC and the benefits the program provided them.

Patterns observed in the quantitative data were used to construct composite case studies, which are supplied as illustrations of the experiences of young people in each typology. All the quotes given are based on statements made by the 16 young people consulted; however to protect the identity of individuals, some content has been altered to remove identifying details, some quotes are composites, and each quote has been named for the composite case study rather than an individual.

The starting point for each typology was membership in one of the five barrier groups, and therefore the typologies are named for these groups: unstable contexts, mental health and stressors, risky behaviours, interpersonal issues and learning issues.

As the strongest typologies to emerge, unstable contexts and mental health and stressors are given the most attention below. There was a lack of data on learning issues, which was also the weakest factor, and this is therefore given relatively little attention. Risky behaviours presented particular challenges for interpretation, and this typology is flagged as an area for further investigation. Table 6.1 provides a summary of the quantitative findings for each barrier group, which were used to structure the composite case studies given in the following chapter.

**Table 6.1 Summary of characteristics and outcomes by barrier group**

	<b>Risky behaviours</b>	<b>Unstable contexts</b>	<b>Interpersonal issues</b>	<b>Mental health and stressors</b>	<b>Learning issues</b>
<i>n</i>	46	41	41	50	50
Mean no. of barriers	5.7	6.6	5.3	4.9	4.1
Mean age	15.4	16	15.1	16.1	16.1
% females	37%	63.4%	51.2%	64%	52%
% Type 1	17.4%	7.3%	14.6%	18%	12%
% Type 2a	34.8%	26.8%	43.9%	40%	32%
% Type 2b	47.8%	65.9%	41.5%	42%	56%
Median days enrolled	172.5	174	253	135	245
% exited due to outcomes achieved	53.8%	47.4%	66.7%	77.6%	65.3%
% progressive outcomes achieved*	48.2%	43%	60.9%	62.8%	61.2%
% final outcomes achieved*	41.8%	47.7%	58.3%	51.8%	56%

\*Percentage of outcomes achieved out of total number aimed for

## Young people living in unstable contexts

### **Box 6.2 Case study on unstable contexts: Tracy**

Tracy was 16 when she first came into contact with PYC. She had left school six months ago, and was engaged with a family services agency, which was running a girls' social and self-esteem building group in partnership with PYC. At the group Tracy met Kate, who was a PYC case manager. Kate got to know Tracy and her situation during the activity, and offered individual case management support to help Tracy explore her options to return to education.

Tracy was having a difficult time at home. Her parents had recently separated, and her father was ill due to a substance use problem. She lived mainly with her mother, but the two frequently had verbal and physical fights. At school, she had struggled with the work and had been asked to leave due to underperformance and low attendance. She had often skipped the classes she found the most difficult, feeling discouraged about her ability, and was frequently absent altogether, as she periodically left home to couch surf at friends' places.

When she met Kate, Tracy did not feel confident to try going back to a mainstream school and had little idea what she could do next. Kate suggested she enrol in a Certificate of General Education for Adults to complete Year 10 and explained that Youth Connections could supply some financial aid for supplies and fees. She went with Tracy to the TAFE interview and with Tracy's permission, explained the circumstances affecting her learning.

After Tracy enrolled, Kate left PYC. Her replacement, Mary, tried to keep in touch with both Tracy and her new teachers to see how things were going, but Tracy did not talk with her as freely as she had with Kate. At the time of research interview, Tracy had just passed Year 10. She had very much enjoyed the TAFE learning environment, and was looking forward to entering a VCAL program in Year 11. However, her home situation was still extremely difficult, and she had taken on part-time work in order to save enough money to move out. She had already struggled to work and finish Year 10 simultaneously, and was worried about how she would manage Year 11 under the same circumstances.

Unstable contexts emerged most strongly as a barrier group from the factor analysis. Compared to other barrier groups, young people categorised under the unstable contexts typology:

- faced the highest number of barriers
- were in the middle age range
- were more likely to be females
- were more likely to be connection level Type 2b
- were enrolled in PYC for relatively short periods
- were the most likely to exit from PYC due to lack of participation
- achieved a lower proportion of progressive and final outcomes.

The barriers that made up the unstable contexts typology largely concern material issues (finance and living arrangements) and familial issues (family support and abuse / domestic violence). The detrimental effects of financial instability on young people's ability to engage with education are well understood, and were discussed in Stage 1 of the evaluation (pp. 18–19), and the relationships between neighbourhood disadvantage and outcomes for PYC participants are discussed in Chapter 5 of this report. The following section focuses on particular challenges to engagement with

education and training faced by young people negotiating difficult family circumstances, as well as the effects this had on their engagement with PYC.

### Family issues

The importance of family support was highlighted in Stage 1 (Bond 2011, pp. 17–18) and was raised by many of the case managers interviewed for Stage 2. Inadequate family support was cited as one of the main contributors to unsuccessful engagements with PYC:

PYC staff: I think the ones that are the most difficult to work with are the ones that have inadequate family support. Parents that may have substance abuse issues, there's abuse that goes on, no food in the house ... Because they just don't trust people, so they're probably the most difficult ones. They'll start off really well ... and then it completely drops off, and they stop taking phone calls, stop going to school, stop engaging completely ... I think it's because they stop caring, going to school's not safe or happy, going home's not safe or happy, there's so much going on at home that they don't really care about everything else.

This quote also illustrates a case manager's experience of the clustering of risks reflected in the unstable contexts typology, in this case inadequate family support, parental drug use, abuse, and material distress.

Many of the young people interviewed came from family contexts marked by some kind of conflict or instability—parental break-up had often occurred around the time of school disengagement, and fights with parents were common, as well as difficulties negotiating shared custody and blended family arrangements. However it was striking how many of the young people did not consider their family difficulties to be central to difficulties at school—they tended to see the two as co-occurring but essentially separate problems and often did not mention the issues with family until prompted.

Interviewer: Did the break-up of your parents affect school?

Tracy: It was sort of a separate thing. I knew it was coming, I knew they'd leave each other eventually. I didn't know who was going to do it, but I wasn't surprised.

Case managers were well aware of the impacts of family context on the young people they worked with and stated that they felt that schools and training organisations sometimes did not take these factors enough into account. The data on outcomes showed how strong the relationship between family context and educational engagement was. There was a 65 per cent achievement rate in terms of the progressive outcome of overcoming inadequate family support, making this one of the more frequently achieved progressive outcomes. However, overall, young people from the unstable contexts group, which included inadequate family support, tended to be less likely than other groups to achieve strong progressive and final outcomes. More specifically, young people with 'inadequate family support' as a barrier were half as likely to achieve the final outcome of 're-engagement with education', compared to young people without this barrier (27.8 per cent compared to 57.4 per cent)<sup>19</sup>.

It was also evident from the interviews with young people that many found pathways into work and training through family members or family friends. Given that this still seems to be a common avenue to engagement with work and learning, weaker familial and social networks, in combination with the emotional, relational and self-esteem aspects of an unstable family context, place these young people in a position of compounded disadvantage and social exclusion.

<sup>19</sup> Chi-square test of association:  $\chi^2(1)=10.21, p<.01$

One of the potential aims for outreach and re-engagement (Type 3) activities is to engage families of severely disengaged young people. However this was the second least frequently endorsed aim of activities, and received the lowest rating in terms of success (see Table 3.5). It is possible that the quantitative data do not accurately measure the level of engagement with family: when asked how well YATMIS data represented the scope of their work, one case manager commented that there were a lot of interactions with family members which did not seem adequately reflected. However in the descriptions of case management activities given by both the young people and the case managers, strengthening family engagement was not frequently emphasised (although mediating between family and school was mentioned as an activity for younger participants and those still engaged with school). On the one hand, this may be a positive—young people responded well to the independence of PYC from other structures in their lives, had the sense that they were being seen as individuals, and felt empowered to make their own decisions. Additionally, family engagement is complex, may seem beyond the scope of the program and may not match the expectations of family members who bring young people to the program. As one case manager stated:

It's hard to articulate to parents, 'Your relationships are a lot of what's making school difficult'.

On the other hand, the data point to family context as a contributor to difficulties at school (Bond 2011, p.8) and difficulties achieving outcomes. Given this, it may be worth further strengthening engagement with family agencies in the region, encouraging referrals to help young people address family issues, and increasing the proportion of re-engagement (Type 3) activities with a family component (perhaps capitalising on informal routes to education and training). More broadly, these issues highlight the importance of strategies throughout the learning years to address and strengthen family support, and the necessity of strong coordination between education and community services systems to assist young people in these circumstances.

## Young people experiencing mental health issues and stressful life events

### **Box 6.3 Case study on mental health and stressors: Charlie**

Charlie was 15 when her mum contacted PYC. Ever since the death of a family friend, Charlie had been withdrawing from friends and teachers, rarely attending school, and spending her days at home sleeping. Her mum and friends were concerned about her, but she was adamant that she did not want to talk to anyone and did not need any help, and became angry when anyone tried to encourage her to get out of the house. This was causing tension between her and her mum, and communication had broken down between them.

Charlie got up in the afternoon one day to find Lisa, a PYC case manager, in her living room chatting with her mum. Lisa took her out for a hot chocolate and they talked a bit about how things were going. Lisa had some suggestions for groups and activities Charlie could go to. Charlie wasn't keen, but she did agree to meet with Lisa again the next week in the local cafe. Over the following months, they built a friendly relationship, and Charlie opened up about some of the things that were bothering her. Eventually, Lisa persuaded Charlie to see a psychologist and helped her mother to organise the referral.

After a few months, Charlie was going to school more regularly and was seeing the psychologist weekly, so Lisa exited her from the program. When she was interviewed four months later, Charlie still experienced some mental health issues but was making progress with her psychologist, was attending school more regularly, and was feeling happier and more confident.

The high levels of mental health issues (41.7 per cent) are particularly notable, given that the National Evaluation data placed the proportion of Youth Connections participants with mental health issues at 20 per cent (dandolopartners 2012). As a point of comparison, the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that 13.4 per cent of males and 12.8 per cent of females aged 13–17 years had mental health problems (Sawyer et al. 2000).

Compared to the other barrier groups, young people categorised as facing mental health issues and stressors:

- had relatively few barriers recorded
- were somewhat older
- were more likely to be females
- were more likely to be connection level Types 1 and 2a
- were enrolled in PYC for shorter periods
- were most likely to exit due to achievement of outcomes
- achieved high percentages of progressive outcomes and moderate percentages of final outcomes (particularly females).

This is a striking contrast with those from unstable contexts, who came from disadvantaged suburbs, faced more barriers, had relatively lower achievement of outcomes and were most likely to exit due to non-participation.

There was a noticeable disparity between the quantitative data on outcomes and the case managers' impressions of their ability to assist young people with mental health issues. When asked about the participant presentations they found most challenging, several case managers mentioned mental health issues, particularly in younger participants. Some case managers emphasised that they did not feel qualified to provide counselling for mental health issues and were sometimes unsure whether they were achieving strong outcomes. One case manager described the young people she found most challenging to assist as:

... generally a bit younger and a lot of behavioural issues and mental health issues. Which you can't really fix overnight, it's just managing them, and usually just liaising between the parent and the school to keep them in school, and giving them another chance and another chance ... It's hard to get your outcomes with them.

This concern was echoed by another case manager who did not feel confident about the sustainability of gains made with young people who experienced anxiety:

I find the hardest ones are with school anxiety. Ones previously where I've had to exit them and you know you've got them more engaged for a little bit, but when they've got severe anxiety they might fail again, things might go wrong again. One in particular, she re-engaged but I know she's dropped off again.

However, both the outcome data and the information gained from young people indicated that case managers exhibited a real strength in engaging with young people with mental health issues.

Young people's reports on their case managers' responses to mental health issues were largely positive. Some young people described PYC as an alternative source of personal support when it seemed that counselling or psychological services were too confronting: PYC provided an opportunity to talk in a less formal setting and acted as a gateway to services which the young

person might previously not have felt confident engaging with. Charlie, who was referred to and engaged with a psychologist through PYC, said:

[PYC] made me more comfortable talking to people about it. Before that I didn't really talk to anyone, now I'm more open to talk about my feelings. I just used to sit there and say nothing.

Charlie's case manager gave a similar account:

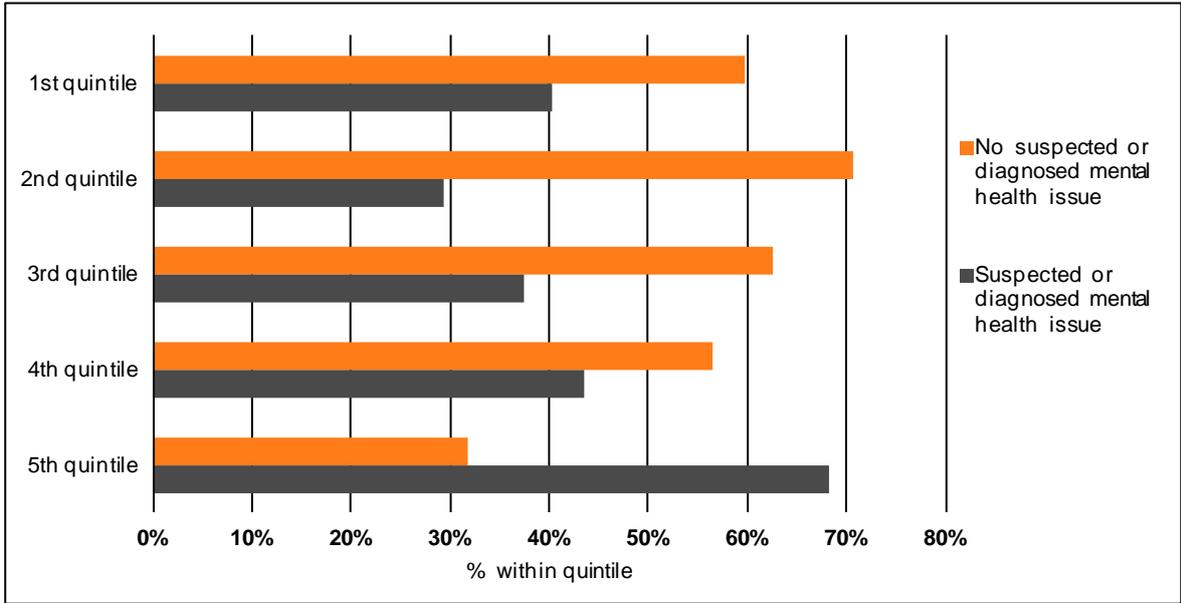
I think before Charlie met with me she was like, 'No psychologists. I don't want to do anything about this'. But I was like dipping her toe in. Seeing me was ok, so maybe seeing a psychologist won't be so bad.

Given the high prevalence of suspected and diagnosed mental health issues in the PYC participant base, this represents a valuable facet of the program, which is highly responsive to the specific needs of young people in the region. This also highlights one of PYC's key roles as a broker between regional services, parents, and young people.

**A note on how mental health is conceptualised**

In characterising mental health as a separate group, there is a danger of losing sight of the interrelationships between mental health, drug and alcohol issues, behavioural issues and socioeconomic issues. For example, it is well established that adolescents living in low socioeconomic status (SES) contexts are at greater risk of poor mental health than those living in higher SES families. The National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (Sawyer et al. 2000) found that the rates of mental health problems increased markedly for children living in low income families, as well as in blended or sole parent families. In direct contrast, in this sample those with a suspected or diagnosed mental health condition came from more advantaged suburbs than those without<sup>20</sup> (Figure 6.2).

**Figure 6.2 Percentage of PYC participants living in the five SEIFA quintiles of area socioeconomic disadvantage, by presence of mental health issue**



<sup>20</sup>Chi-square test of association:  $\chi^2(4)=9.31, p=.05$

This points to several possibilities:

- Mental health issues in young people coming from more advantaged suburbs were better recognised by those supporting them.
- Mental health issues in young people coming from disadvantaged suburbs were overshadowed by their more immediate material needs.
- The behaviours displayed by young people with mental health issues differed in some way in response to their context and were more easily recognisable as mental health-related in those from less disadvantaged areas.

It is also interesting to note a gender difference in the prevalence of suspected mental health issues. The individual barrier ‘suspected or diagnosed mental health issue’ was endorsed for 45.9 per cent of females, compared with 36.8 percent of males—a contrast with national prevalence figures which suggest that the rates of mental health problems are similar for adolescent males and females (Sawyer et al. 2000). It is important to recall that the data used to classify the PYC participants into typologies relies on others’ perception of these young people, rather than indexing some inherent truth about them. The barrier is phrased as ‘suspected or diagnosed’ mental health issue and therefore does not necessarily indicate a diagnosed case level psychological disorder. Rather, the possibility of a mental health issue may be flagged by one of a range of potential sources of information such as referrers, family members, service providers, or the young person or case manager themselves. It is possible that gender plays into the explanations and labels others give to young people’s behaviour. While traditionally feminised expressions of emotional distress (depressive and anxious behaviour) tend to be more easily categorised as mental health issues, more ‘masculine’ expressions of distress may be more often characterised as behavioural and disciplinary issues, or socialisation issues.

## Young people and risky behaviours

### **Box 6.4 Case study on risky behaviours: Jordan**

Jordan was 14 when he was referred by his school to PYC. He was still attending school, but was in frequent conflict with his teachers, who expressed frustration with his behaviour, such as swearing at teachers, fighting with other students, and smoking marijuana at school.

He was enrolled in PYC as a Type 1 participant, and assigned a case manager, Joanne. After a brief initial meeting with Jordan and his mother, Joanne made multiple efforts to contact Jordan and visited his school to meet with him there. However, they did not form much of a relationship—Jordan did not seem interested in discussing the difficulties he was having with Joanne, and did not attend meetings or answer his phone. Jordan’s family were also experiencing relationship difficulties, and Joanne did not find it easy to engage with them. After several months, Jordan was exited from PYC due to non-participation.

When he was interviewed, six months later, his situation was poor—his relationships with teachers had deteriorated, and he had been asked to leave his school. However, he and his family were actively looking for ways to get him back into schooling and, after attending the research interview, Jordan reconnected with PYC and was again accepted for individual case management.

Compared to those in other barrier groups, young people presenting with risky behaviours:

- had relatively high numbers of barriers
- were younger
- were more likely to be males
- were slightly more likely to be in connection level Type 1
- had relatively short enrolments in PYC
- were somewhat more likely to exit due to non-participation
- achieved lower percentages of progressive and final outcomes (with better achievement by males than females).

Young people with risky behaviours seemed to present considerable challenges for engagement with case managers and the program. They were also underrepresented among the young people interviewed (echoing the general pattern of reduced engagement with PYC) and so it is difficult to make strong interpretations for this group.

Although young people with risky behaviours were the most likely to be assigned as Type 1 (at risk of disengagement), case managers commented that they felt they were not receiving referrals for this group early enough, and often first came in contact with such participants when relationships with school had reached crisis point. Case managers often referred to mediating between young people, families and schools to try and keep the student enrolled, as well as the providing the personal support and individual engagement which was at the core of interactions with many other participants.

An interesting finding with regard to this typology was that the males with risky behaviours were achieving similar levels of outcomes to other groups, but the females were achieving a lower number of outcomes. As discussed in the previous section, there is a common perception that females are more likely to experience mental health concerns, and males are more likely to experience behavioural problems. For example, one case manager reported:

Sometimes with girls it's more the anxiety and depression and bullying. Sometimes with the boys it's more behaviour and anger management.

However, the Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (Sawyer et al. 2000) found very little difference between adolescent males and females on prevalence of either internalising issues (such as depressive and anxious symptoms) and externalising issues (such as behavioural problems). Thus it is possible that the prevalence of females in the mental health typology, and males in the risky behaviours typology, is influenced by the emphasis placed on different aspects of each young person's presentation. The poorer outcomes by the minority gender in each group (females, in the case of risky behaviours) may reflect less experience or training available to services assisting these individuals, and/or a pattern that in order for their difficulties to be recognised, those difficulties may need to be more severe (and therefore harder to overcome). So, for example, for a female to be categorised as having behavioural problems, as opposed to emotional difficulties, her behaviours may have to be more extreme. However, as the data collected for this stage of the evaluation provided limited insight on young people with risky behaviours, these are speculations only and this is a topic which would benefit from further investigation.

The flexibility of the program was a key strength in providing support to young people with risky behaviours. These participants often presented a sporadic pattern of engagement, particularly when substance use was involved, and case managers reflected that to support these young people

sometimes they needed to wait until a window of opportunity opened, in terms of the young person's readiness to engage. The service model accommodates this, in allowing prolonged or repeated enrolments, and different levels of engagement with young people depending on their needs and wishes. This was reflected in Jordan's case—although his initial engagement with PYC had not led to outcomes, he was able to reconnect with the program at a later time when he was feeling eager to re-engage with school.

## Young people facing interpersonal issues

### **Box 6.5 Case study on interpersonal issues: Sam**

Sam was 14 when his school referred him to PYC. He had been attending less and less often, and though he had been engaged with the school welfare program, he had not wanted to talk to them much. Two weeks ago, he had told his mum that he was not going to go to school anymore.

A PYC case manager, Alex, came to his house to visit him. After chatting with his mum for a while, Alex and Sam went for a walk and talked about what had been going on at school. Sam had been experiencing bullying, but had not wanted to discuss it with his teachers or welfare, fearing that if the other students found out, the bullying would get worse. By the time he spoke with Alex, he was sure he did not want to go back to his school. He did not know what else he could do, and was mainly feeling relieved that he would not have to face the other students any more.

Alex invited him to attend some courses and social activities that PYC was running. Sam didn't think he would be able to do any of the things in the courses, but Alex kept coming back with suggestions; and after some encouragement from his mum and Alex, he went along to one. He enjoyed the course, and felt encouraged that he'd been able to connect with some of the other young people there, who had also experienced bullying at school. He enrolled at PYC near the end of the school year, so he was encouraged to continue participating in activities until the new year, when he enrolled in a different mainstream school. At the time of interview, Sam was attending school, had made some new friends, and said he was hoping to be an engineer when he was older.

Young people categorised in the interpersonal issues typology:

- faced moderate numbers of barriers
- were younger
- were equally likely to be males or females
- were more likely to be in connection level Type 2a
- had the longest enrolments in PYC
- were more likely to exit the program due to achievement of outcomes
- achieved high percentages of progressive and final outcomes.

Young people facing interpersonal issues tended to fare well within the PYC program. The relative success was reflected in the comments of one case manager, who stated that while there were some challenges associated with engaging with young people with interpersonal problems, once a relationship was formed they tended to have good outcomes:

[Initially] some don't want to engage at all, that are just home and they don't have socialisation skills and don't want to get out and meet young people. Just want to be at home. The ones that do progress seem to do well, and get into some form of education and move forward.

This group were the most likely typology to achieve the 're-engaged with education' final outcome, which requires sustained participation in education or training. This was an encouraging finding, given how often bullying and conflict with peers were cited by young people as contributors to their disengagement from school.

For these young people, the flexibility of the program in allowing for outreach and detached work was a key to forming engagements:

PYC staff: We can meet them at home, because we are outreach and flexible, so we can go into the home and meet them there ... In the first instance, getting them out of the house, talking to them about things, going for a walk, getting them involved in some form of activity. Just small steps. Letting them know someone's there for them. Seeing if they would talk to you, trying to find out what's really behind it, why they don't want to be out in the community.

This group also demonstrates the value in assessing and aiming for progressive outcomes by individual case management and by planning re-engagement activities which develop social skills and self-esteem. Young people with interpersonal difficulties are also particularly likely to benefit from the strong relationship building emphasis in the PYC approach.

Sam described his initial reluctance to enter a re-engagement activity suggested by his case manager:

Sam: I wasn't into it at the start but I was that desperate ... that was like the first human contact I had in so long. I'm not really into that sort of stuff, but I was just that desperate to do anything and yeah, it felt ... it's a strange feeling, how good it was. So that really helped.

Sam had lost confidence in himself and his ability to successfully engage in social activities through his experiences of bullying at school. However, he remembered his case manager persisting with suggestions and encouragement to engage in out-of-home activities.

Interview: So you had to be talked into a few things?

Sam: Yeah. But it helped. I couldn't see it until a few months ago. Took a while for me to see why they were being so pushy, but it helped a lot.

For young people who had experienced interpersonal issues, the flexibility of the case management approach allowed case managers to persist with relationship building long enough to overcome some diffidence from more withdrawn participants.

## Learning issues for young people

Learning issues was the weakest factor to emerge, and consisted of only two barriers: low literacy/numeracy, and disability. For these reasons, a case study was not drawn up for this typology.

Young people fitting this typology:

- faced low numbers of barriers
- were older
- were equally likely to be males or females
- were somewhat more likely to be in connection level Type 2b
- had relatively long enrolments in PYC

- were a little more likely to exit due to achievement of outcomes
- achieved relatively high percentages of progressive and final outcomes.

Learning issues did not arise often in the discussions with case managers. One interpretation of this is that, since difficulties with literacy and numeracy were so common within the sample, case managers may have considered them one of the defining features of young people presenting at PYC. It is also difficult to disentangle the causality and temporal relationship between low literacy/numeracy and weak engagement with education, as each can both influence and be influenced by the other. Finally, case managers may simply not have had access to enough information on these issues. Several young people interviewed mentioned that they, or someone else, had thought they had a learning difficulty, but only one thought she may have been assessed, and she did not know the result. Others mentioned that they had wanted an assessment and were unsure why they had not had one. This may highlight a systemic issue about the accessibility of educational and learning assessments for students.

## 7 The PYC case management and re-engagement approach

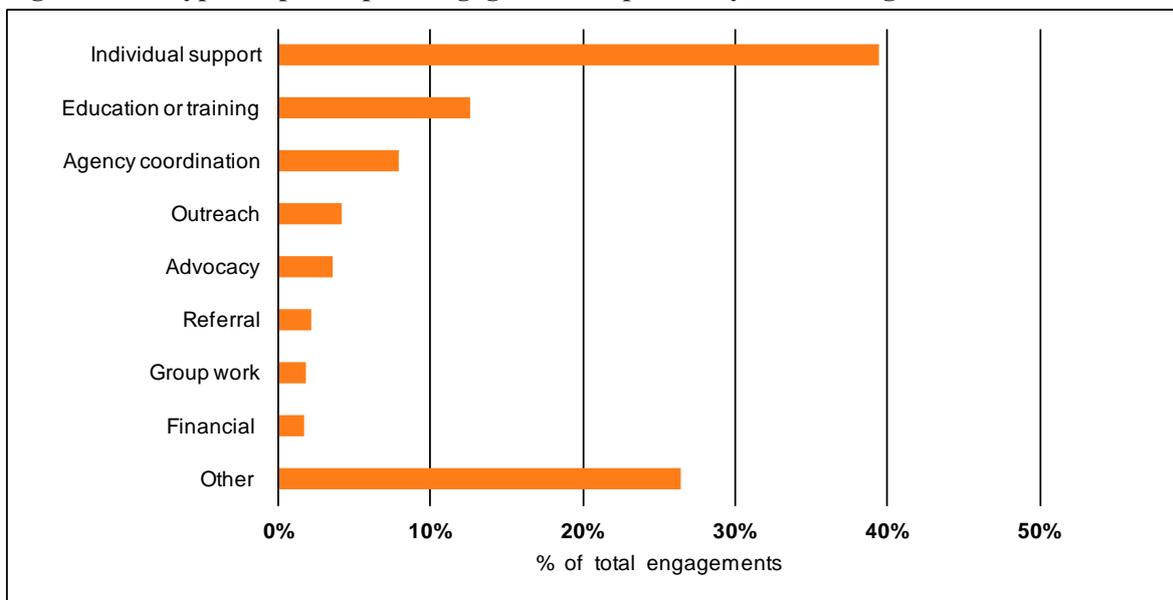
This section outlines the aspects of the case management and re-engagement activities which young people commented on, and discusses the ways in which they contributed to the outcomes attained, as well as some of the challenges to engagement described. It addresses the second research question:

**How is the PYC service model experienced by young people, and is it successful in meeting their needs?**

### Case management activities

Case management is undertaken by seven PYC staff, one of whom specialises in Indigenous case management. The case managers are place-based, each assigned to a specific sub-region of FMP to ensure that young people in all areas can access the service. The case management approach was highly flexible, allowing young people and case managers to meet in homes, schools or public places, and case managers to undertake a range of activities with participants. For example, while several young people remembered mainly sitting and talking to their case managers and valued the personal support, others recalled case managers helping them get to medical appointments, going with them to interviews or showing them how to write résumés. Case managers record the number and the content of engagements with participants in YATMIS. Figure 7.1 shows that ‘individual support’ was by far the most prevalent type of engagement recorded. The mean number of engagements was 28.5 ( $SD = 18.3$ ). Note that ‘engagements’ does not only refer to client appointments—it can also refer to phone calls, meetings, contact attempts, and other actions which concern the client.

**Figure 7.1** Types of participant engagements reported by case managers



## Strengths

The strongest impressions which emerged from young people's comments were that they appreciated the flexibility, informality and friendliness of the service and valued the personal support and positive interactions they experienced with their case managers.

The model of service provision for PYC is highly flexible, in that:

- Young people experiencing a broad range of issues can access the service. This is exemplified by the diversity of barriers represented in the typologies in Chapter 6.
- Young people have multiple ways to contact their case managers, including text messages. This was an important factor for the young people interviewed, who often commented that they enjoyed the informal styles of communication and the regular but non-intrusive 'check-ins'. For example, young people commented favourably on receiving texts asking how they were going, on case managers dropping in to see them while they were doing re-engagement activities or other programs located nearby, and on being able to drop in to see case managers casually and without appointments. This is an example of the developmental sensitivity of PYC's service delivery, in fitting communication styles and expectations to young people's norms.
- Case managers can travel to meet young people and can join them in activities. This was often particularly beneficial to young people who were more reticent to engage with the program, for example those with interpersonal issues who lacked confidence in forming new relationships, or those from unstable contexts, who (as one case manager reflected) needed more encouragement to develop trust before engaging with a new adult.
- Young people can stay enrolled for considerable periods of time, and can re-enrol if they need additional help. This allows case managers to build solid relationships with participants and to wait for windows of opportunity to work with young people when they are ready.

As one case manager stated:

You don't say, 'That's it, you didn't engage with us'. If they've come and haven't engaged, and maybe we've linked them with another service, maybe they've just dropped off, but then ... turn up at reception six months down the line after you've exited them because they weren't engaging at all, saying 'Do you know how I can get into TAFE?' Never say never! That's the beautiful nature of working with young people.

It was interesting to note the variation between young people's perceptions of the role of the case managers, even when different young people were talking about the same case manager. This partly reflected the program's adaptability to meet young people's differing needs. For example, many young people perceived the primary benefit of case management as personal support. However others specifically mentioned that they didn't feel pressured to talk, that case managers respected their privacy, and were grateful for practical support.

The personal support provided by case managers was mentioned repeatedly by young people, and created a relational environment within which they were able to progress towards addressing difficulties at their own pace and in their own style.

Many young people reflected on a sense of genuineness and personal connection in interactions with case managers. This was particularly important to Charlie, who had previously been reluctant to discuss her difficulties with mental health professionals.

Interviewer: So your case manager was different to the psychiatrist you saw?

Charlie: Oh yeah, she's human. Which is what I want to see. In a human. She seemed like she wanted to help rather than some other people who just wanted to do their job.

Several young people expressed an appreciation of the friendliness and informality of case managers' styles of interacting. Tracy, who represents the unstable contexts typology, said:

Tracy: She was just nice. Not one of those people who just rush you along and check their watch—that really annoys me. She didn't do that ever. She was pretty down with it too ... I was like, 'Really, you're in a job doing this? You're pretty cool'. And we became more like mates, that's why I was so cool talking to her instead of just, 'You're my little Youth Connections person'.

Encouragement and confidence building were particularly valued by young people, who often felt that within mainstream schools they had largely encountered strategies based on warnings rather than encouragement:

Interviewer: Were there people around who understood what was going on for you?

Sam: Only one I can think of was [PYC case manager] was really nice. I spoke to a counsellor at school but he didn't really help me at all. He just made me more upset. He kept saying stuff like, 'If you don't do your work, you're going to become a janitor', to try and scare me into doing my work. I just didn't come back after that.

Interviewer: What would your case manager do?

Sam: Just encourage you, like, gave you the confidence, you knew you could do it, and said ... 'Let me know tomorrow how you go' and everyday you'd come back and tell her how you went, and she'd just encourage you again and again. And that worked.

For young people like Sam, such encouragement ran counter to their discouraging experiences at school, and provided an alternative model for friendly and respectful engagements based on mutual participation and a strengths-based rather than deficits-based attitude to young people.

While some challenging experiences like Sam's were reported, in general school welfare staff were not perceived negatively by young people or PYC staff. Case managers noted receiving far fewer referrals from schools with strongly resourced welfare teams and reflected that many school welfare teams were simply unable to meet the demand presented by the number of students they served:

The school kids, do they have welfare officers or guidance officers there? They probably do but they're pretty stretched thin. They don't have the luxury of having a case worker work with 25 or 30 people solely.

The participant data are all from students who had been either disengaging or at risk of disengaging from school and therefore comprises a specific sample of young people for whom engagement with school welfare had not resolved their difficulties. Despite this, the majority of young people interviewed had had contact with school welfare and most felt that the welfare staff had tried to help. However a common comment was that while the welfare staff were sympathetic, they had not had the leverage within the school to help the student in a substantive way:

Interviewer: Was there a counsellor or a welfare officer?

Tracy (unstable context): I spoke to her a lot ... She was really good, I spoke to her about a lot of things.

Interviewer: Was she able to do anything to help you?

Tracy: Not really, she didn't really have that right.

A case manager reflected similarly that a strength of the PYC case management approach was its independence from the school structure:

I think it works because we come in unbiased and we're not caught up in the school politics. I know [the welfare coordinator] would love to do more but she can't ... So she knows if she refers to me that I can step outside that.

The experience of disengagement was often accompanied by a loss of other social connections. Tracy remembered this occurring during a period of homelessness, saying, 'Once I was out of home I lost all my friends. I was just that friend they didn't want to deal with'. Tracy's comment highlights the ripple effects of an unstable family and living environment in terms of broader social and community connection. PYC activities provided an opportunity for young people to re-establish a sense of connectedness. This was particularly important for those experiencing interpersonal issues, as represented by Sam:

Sam: Coming here and everything made me confident in myself individually. To go out there and do something. I also went to the groups and I got to socialise with people. I wasn't really talking to anyone at the time. When I stopped going to school everyone stopped talking to me.

Attending the service and particularly the re-engagement activities were important in helping young people regain a sense of routine, engagement and social connectedness. The YC program guidelines describe two kinds of Type 3 activities: outreach and re-engagement. Outreach activities are aimed at finding severely disengaged young people, while re-engagement activities aim to connect these young people with activities to support their connection with learning, family and community.

Type 3 activities provided at PYC included one-off recreational events such as barbeques, but more often were multi-occasion activities such as short courses, ongoing recreational activities and support groups. In this sense, there was a greater focus on re-engagement than outreach in the design of activities. Most of the activities were conducted in collaboration with at least one other local service and were attended and supported by PYC case managers. Some were initiated by PYC in response to identified needs; others were existing activities which PYC case managers assisted with.

There was considerable crossover between re-engagement activities and case management. One-fifth of the young people attending re-engagement activities were PYC participants, the majority existing participants who were referred by case managers. As case managers also attend the activities, this enabled them to interact with these young people in less formal ways, which were often beneficial in encouraging engagement and the trust required for disclosure of difficulties and challenges. Many of the activities also provided substantive progress towards achieving progressive and final outcomes (for example, activities included a self-esteem building group, and a trades training program). The activities were therefore less strongly aligned with goal to identify potential participants within the community; (only 6.6 per cent of PYC's participants were referred through Type 3 activities) and more aligned with supporting and strengthening re-engagement in accompaniment with individual case management. Given the benefits young people gained from Type 3 activities in their current form, the already high demand for services from participants who are demonstrably experiencing significant disadvantage, and the considerable efficiencies represented by the merging of case management, and community outreach and re-engagement services, this appeared to be an effective way of designing and implementing Type 3 services.

## Challenges

It was difficult to gain much information from young people about factors associated with the program which were not conducive to strong engagements. The young people who volunteered for the research tended to be those who had had reasonably positive engagements with case managers, even though outcomes varied. Responses to the follow-up survey suggested a high level of satisfaction with case managers: of the 47 young people who responded to the question, 42 rated 'talking to my case manager' as 'good' or 'very good' and this item received the most positive responses out of all features participants were asked to rate. In the few instances where young people reported not particularly connecting with the program, they tended to frame the reasons as relating to their own circumstances and motivations at the time, rather than the behaviour of the case manager. This contrasted with their descriptions of failed engagements with school staff, where the responsibility was often placed at least partially upon others. Some young people reported that they had not been at a stage in their lives where they felt ready to engage with the program: 'She did as much as she could to help me. I was just a pain because I didn't know what I wanted'. Others mentioned that they had not really wanted to engage with any service and did not feel as if services were relevant to them.

Jordan: Every time she rang me I was always busy. So it wasn't really a long conversation. I was actually doing stuff. And she was just like 'How's school going, how's life?' And then I'd kind of told her I had to go. And that was it.

Interviewer: Did you want some help?

Jordan: Nah. I just want to live normally and just live my own life like everyone else does ... My friends just live normally, with their parents and stuff ... like just going to school, not having arguments every day and stuff ... I still want to go to school and stuff, get my education up, then I just want to find a job, do like everyone else does.

Jordan, who represents the risky behaviours typology, exemplifies some of the challenges in engaging with these young people, and the confusion and difficulty with communication that sometimes characterise interactions. There were often seeming contradictions between these young people's wishes and their actions—for example, Jordan stated that he disliked living in Frankston due to the 'idiots' around who were likely to start fights, but himself had a history of aggressive behaviour. Likewise, Jordan wished he could just go to school like 'normal' people, but resisted efforts by the case manager and others to help him do so. This may relate to a sense of unfairness and distrust of authority figures often held by young people categorised in the risky behaviours typology.

Jordan: The teachers used to favour all the good kids. If we did one thing wrong, they'd send us home. If another person did the exact same thing wrong, they'd just get a warning. They picked out people who were wrong all the time and got them for every little thing. Me and couple of my friends just left because we were so over it.

If these young people do not experience case managers as 'on their side', they are unlikely to engage with them. However, it is difficult to know how the program delivery can be altered to improve engagement, as feedback from other young people indicated that they perceived case managers to be positive, encouraging and motivated by a genuine wish to help the young person.

## 8 After PYC: Sustainability of outcomes, and ongoing challenges

This section uses data gathered from young people at the end of their enrolment with PYC, as well as from responses to a follow-up survey sent to young people three months after they exited the program. These data were combined with the outcomes and continuing challenges described by interviewees, all of whom had completed PYC at least three months ago, to answer the third research question:

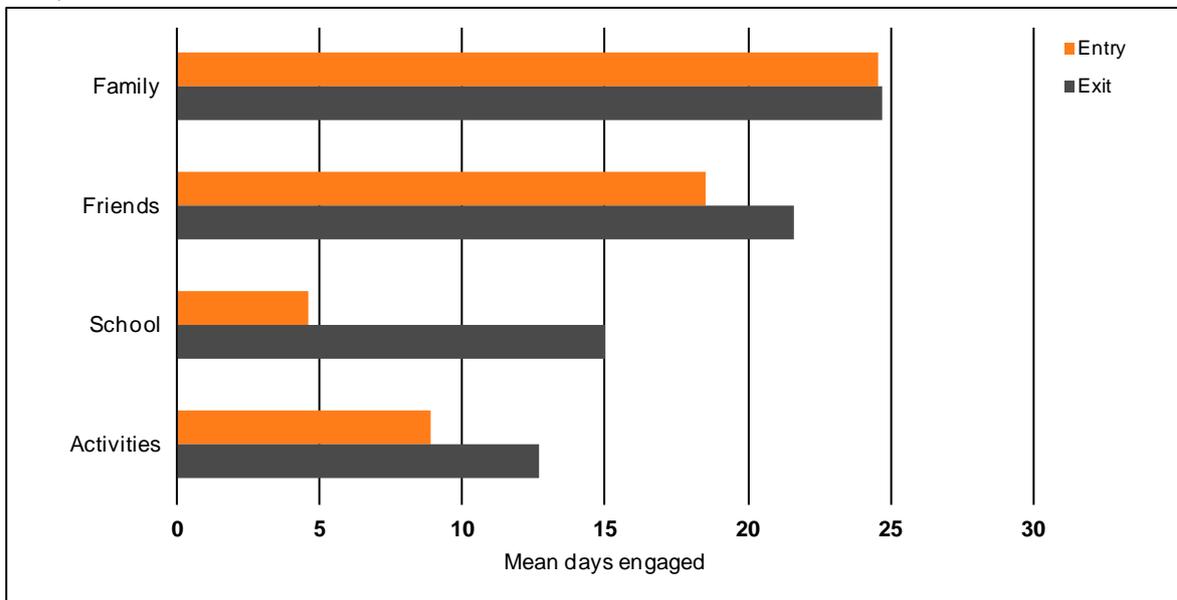
**How do young people fare after exiting the program? Are outcomes sustainable, and what ongoing challenges do young people face?**

### Engagement and wellbeing measures

Tools to measure participants' subjective wellbeing and level of engagement were added to the YATMIS reporting system as part of a 2011 research partnership between DEEWR and Melbourne's RMIT University. The Level of Engagement measure is administered to young people at the beginning and end of their enrolment and measures the number of days the young person was in contact with different domains of their life in the month before entry to YC, and again in the month before exit from YC.

Due to the late addition of these indexes to YATMIS, only a limited number of participants had completed the measures both at entry to and exit from PYC. There were 39 completed responses to the Engagement Index available on YATMIS, allowing some simple data analysis.

**Figure 8.1 Days in contact with school, family, friends and activities in the months before entry to and exit from PYC**



The data showed that, on exit from PYC, young people were in more frequent contact with school<sup>21</sup>, friends<sup>22</sup>, and activities outside the home<sup>23</sup> than they had been initially. Young people

<sup>21</sup> Paired samples t-test:  $t(37)=6.22, p<.01$

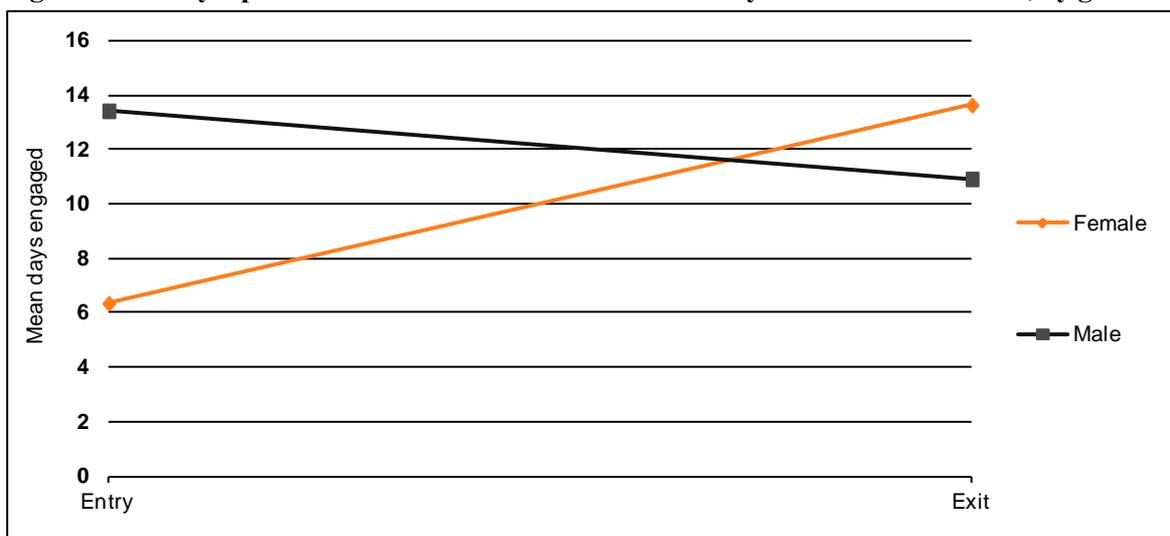
<sup>22</sup> Paired samples t-test:  $t(38)=2.03, p=.05$

<sup>23</sup> Paired samples t-test:  $t(38)=1.91, p=.06$

spent on average ten more days at school and three more days with friends in the month before their exit from PYC than they did in the month before their entry to the program.

There was a significant difference in the change in time spent on activities between males and females<sup>24</sup>. Prior to entry to PYC, males were more engaged in other activities than females; however by the time they exited PYC the females’ participation in activities had risen to slightly exceed that of the males. This may in part reflect the higher prevalence of mental health issues among the females, often associated with withdrawal from activities, and some improvement during the program. However, it would be interesting to gain more information on the types of activities the males and females in the sample were participating in, as the gender disparity on entry to PYC may also reflect an imbalance in the *opportunity* for participation. For example, males may perceive more opportunities and be more encouraged to be involved in sporting activities than females.

**Figure 8.2 Days spent on activities in the month before entry to and exit from PYC, by gender**



The Wellbeing Index measures young people’s sense of satisfaction with various domains in their lives, on a scale from 1 to 10. Only nine completed responses to the Wellbeing Index were available, so data analysis was not possible. Based on visual inspection, in all domains except ‘doing things’, young people’s satisfaction had increased by the end of the PYC program. Increased satisfaction with school was particularly evident, although the rating remained lower than other domains.

<sup>24</sup> Independent samples t-test on difference scores:  $t(37)=2.55, p=.02$

**Figure 8.3 Young people’s mean satisfaction ratings at entry to and exit from PYC**



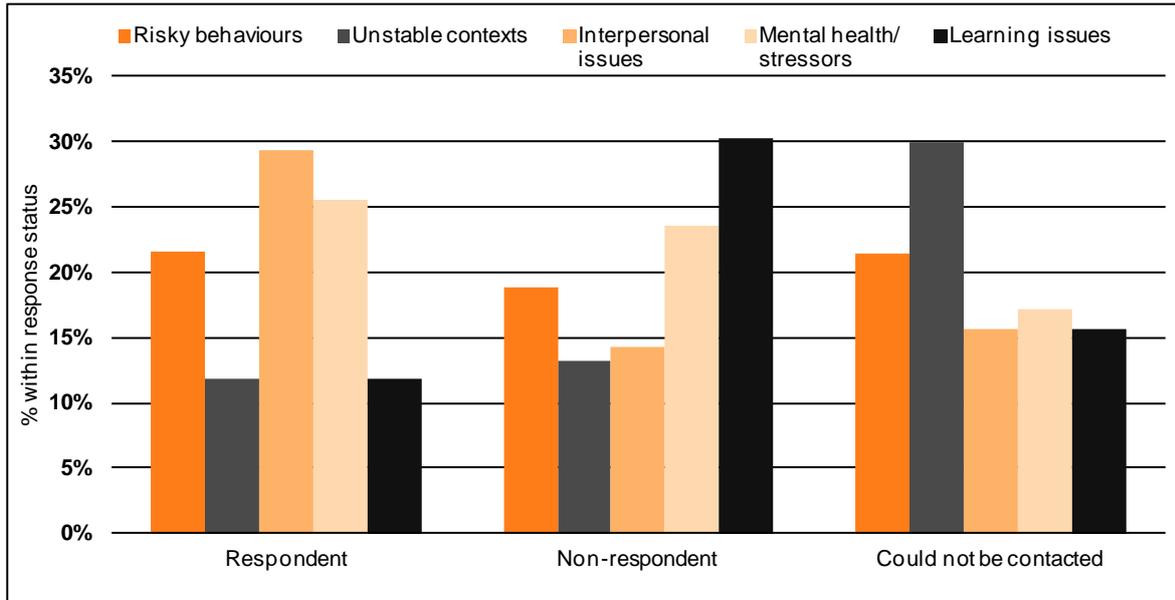
The slight drop in satisfaction with ‘doing things’ might reflect an impression gained from interviews, that while young people were successfully engaged with various activities, they were struggling under the pressure of multiple roles and obligations and often did not feel they had the time or energy for extra activities. It is possible that engagement with activities may not be as sustainable an outcome as engagement with school and work.

### Follow-up survey three months after exit from PYC

Three months after exiting PYC, young people were mailed a follow-up survey which asked them about their current activities, use of services, satisfaction with aspects of their lives, ongoing barriers and ratings of their interaction with PYC. The response rate was low: one-third of young people returned the survey ( $n=52$ ). The barrier groupings were unevenly represented among the survey respondents. Young people from the interpersonal barriers group were more likely to respond, whereas fewer surveys were received from young people from unstable contexts (often because surveys could not be sent to them due to lack of up-to-date contact details) and young people with learning issues<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Chi-square test of association  $\chi^2(8)=20.5, p<.01$

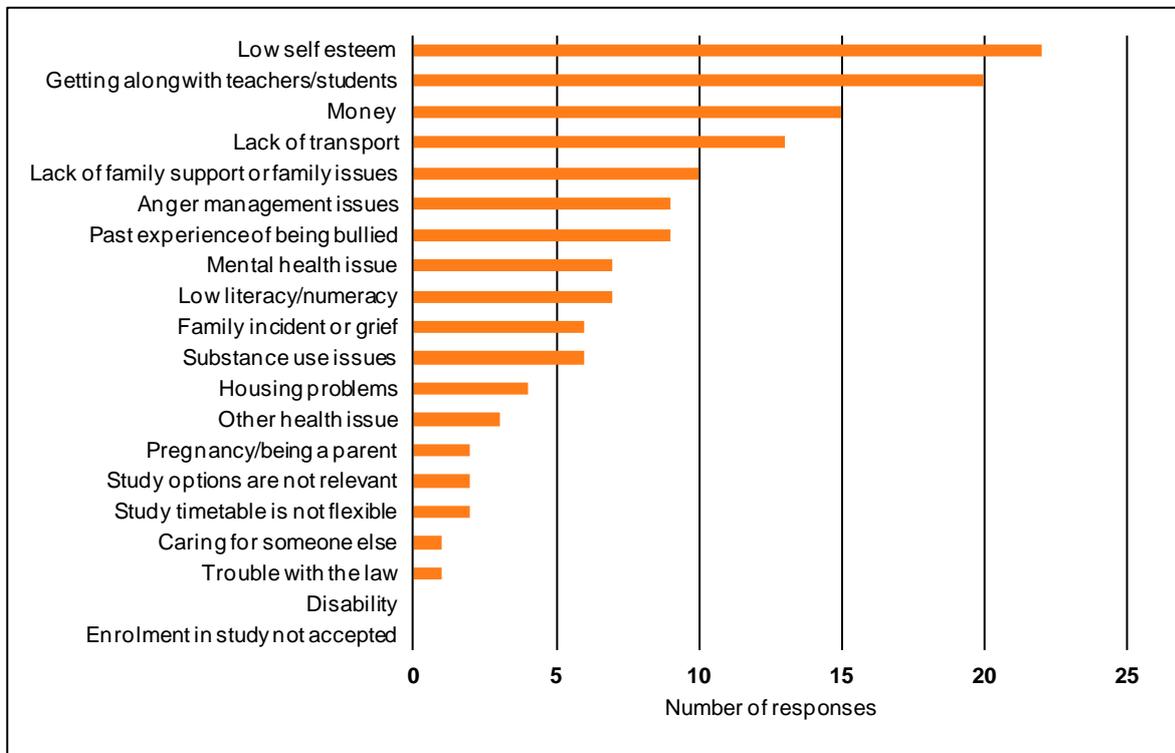
**Figure 8.4 Survey response rate by barrier group**



Most respondents reported that they were currently studying (72.5 per cent) and some were working (36.5 per cent). However, 21.2 per cent were neither studying nor working.

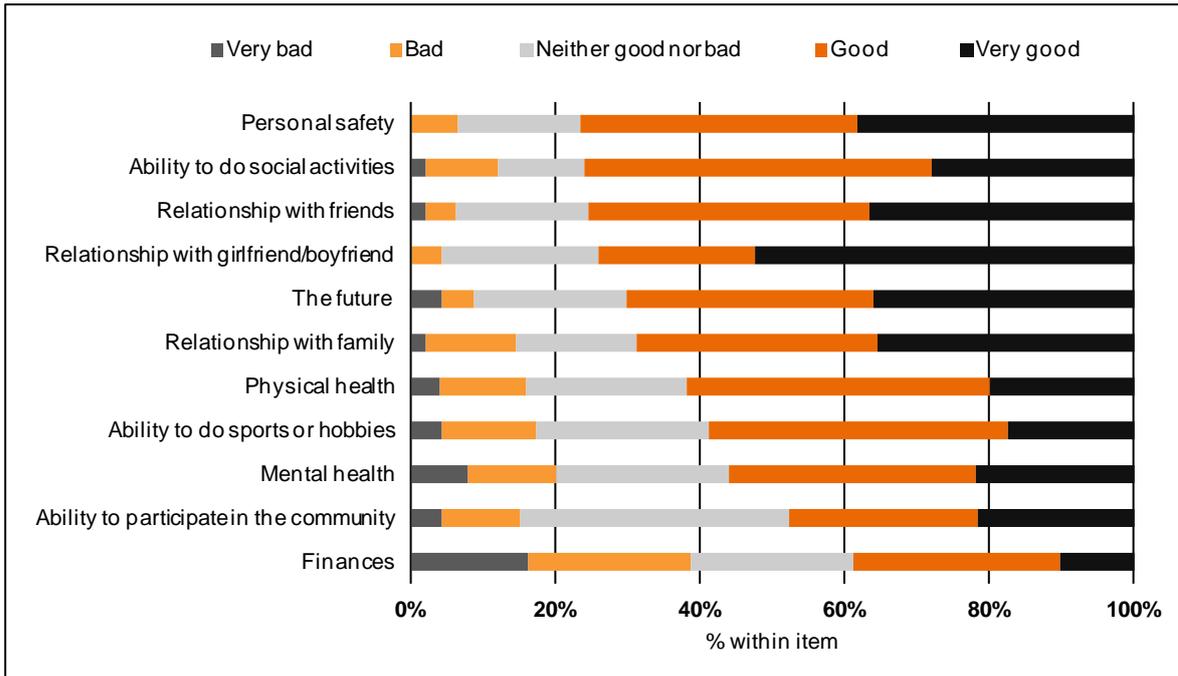
Asked about the barriers to education and training they felt they faced, former participants highlighted continuing issues of low self-esteem, concerns about whether they could get along with teachers and other students, as well as limited finances and transport (Figure 8.5).

**Figure 8.5 Follow-up survey responses on barriers to education and learning**



Young people were asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of their lives. Figure 8.6 shows the percentage of different satisfaction ratings among the valid responses to each question.

**Figure 8.6 Level of satisfaction with various aspects of life**



Young people reported the greatest satisfaction with their personal safety and with social aspects of their lives, and the least satisfaction with their financial circumstances, ability to participate in the community, and mental health. The relatively low satisfaction with ability to participate in both community activities and sport and hobbies echoes the impression gained from young people’s responses to the wellbeing survey and the interviews—that their lives held little room or opportunity for hobbies and non-educational activities. The high satisfaction with social aspects of life was echoed in the premium young people interviewed placed on their friends as a support network.

Interviewer: What are the good things in your life?

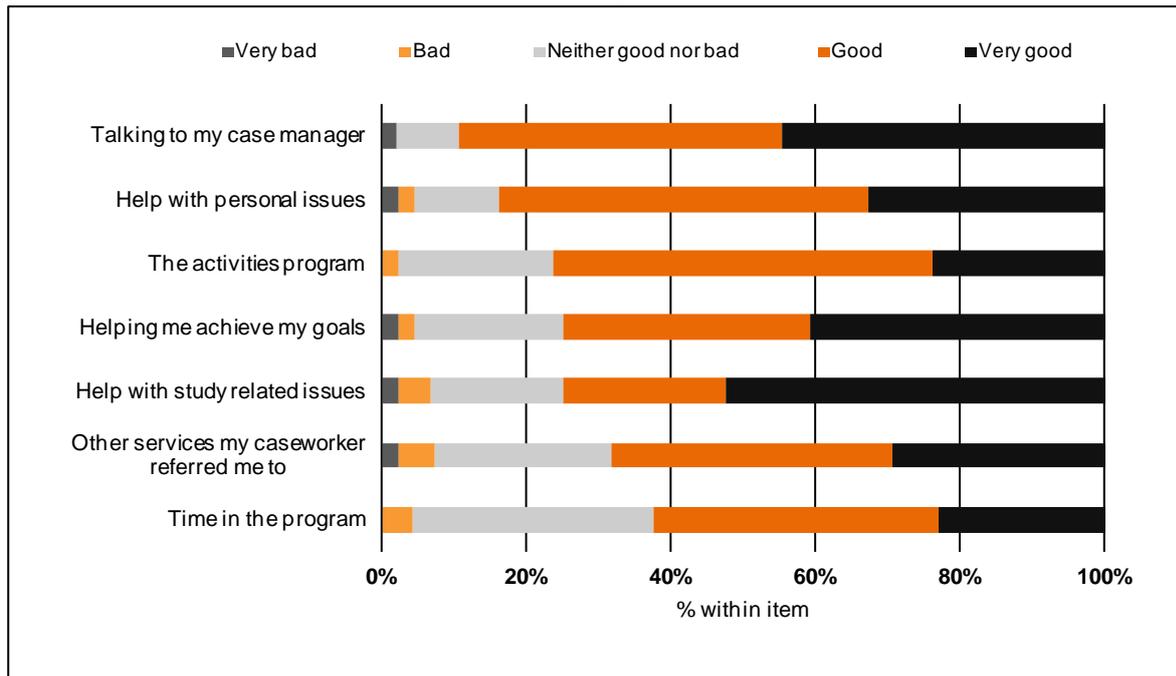
Jordan: Just my mates. They’re the one thing that’s doing me good at the moment, that I can actually cope with. The best.

The comparatively low satisfaction with mental health may reflect the ongoing nature of many mental health issues faced by young people. While the YATMIS data indicated a strong record of successful engagement by young people with mental health concerns, and of outcomes achieved, it is unrealistic to expect mental health problems to have resolved in the space of months.

Some case managers expressed concern about the sustainability of gains made with young participants who presented with mental health issues. It may be worthwhile considering a slightly longer follow-up period for these young people, given that the mental health/stressor group had the shortest average length of case management. However, it is recognised that case managers need to balance the length of engagement with each young person against the need to enrol new participants.

The survey also asked young people to rate their satisfaction with various elements of the program (Figure 8.7). In general, ratings were positive: 75.7 per cent of valid responses across questions were ‘good’ or ‘very good’. Of the remaining responses, 19.7 per cent were ‘neither good nor bad’ and only 4.5 per cent of responses across all items were ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’.

**Figure 8.7 Level of satisfaction with various aspects of PYC**



The pattern of responses by item reflected the same content as the interviews—that the relationship with the case manager, and the personal support provided, were core elements of interaction with the program, and were highly valued by young people. Help with study issues received the largest percentage of ‘very good’ responses, but was in the middle range in terms of less positive responses. The most ambivalent responses were made to the item ‘time in the program’. The young people interviewed were often hazy about how long they had spent in the program, and some were unsure when, or indeed whether, they had in fact exited. While some recalled a structured exit meeting, others reported that the engagement had petered out or had been concluded by the case manager for reasons which were not clear to the young person.

Interviewer: What led up to you leaving Youth Connections?

Sam: I don’t know why I left. I don’t think I actually left, I think it was like my case manager had ended doing something. I’m not sure. I don’t think it was because I left. I’m not really sure what happened.

Interviewer: Would you like to have continued on for longer?

Sam: Yeah, probably.

Interviewer: Do you remember when you left, did you have a meeting?

Sam: Yeah, I think we did have a final meeting type thing. She said if I ever needed her I could just like text her.

These responses are difficult to interpret, as case managers reported often exiting young people because contact had tailed off after certain outcomes were achieved, indicating that at that time, the young people were not showing interest in continuing with the program. It is possible that young people were more aware in hindsight of the program’s positive impacts in their lives than they had been at the time. For example, one young woman had not engaged strongly with the program and had not achieved the outcomes hoped for. However, her case manager reported that after the research interview, the young person had recontacted her asking about pursuing alternative education options:

Case manager: She rang me up and said, 'When I met with the researcher, I said that Youth Connections were there to help me and I really didn't take advantage of the help you had to offer'. Now she wants to link in with an alternative education program so I've just sent her some information.

Most of the young people interviewed reported that their case manager had encouraged them to get back in touch if they wanted further support, and several mentioned occasional contact with case managers after exiting, for example through 'bumping into them' around the neighbourhood or exchanging the odd text. In light of this gradual disconnection from case management, it is possible to interpret young people's lack of clarity about their exit in a positive light, as reflecting a smooth transition into training or other services, rather than an abrupt break, and indicating the perceived accessibility of PYC for young people, who felt free to drop in or get in touch without being constrained by administrative formalities.

The less positive accounts of exiting came from young people who, after a change of case manager late in their engagement, had not developed a strong relationship with the second case manager:

Tracy: After she left, everything just kind of like went really dodgy. I just stopped seeing people here and stopped talking and stuff. And then I got referred to someone else here. And I got transferred, or whatever. But I only saw here twice and that was it. That kinda sucked.

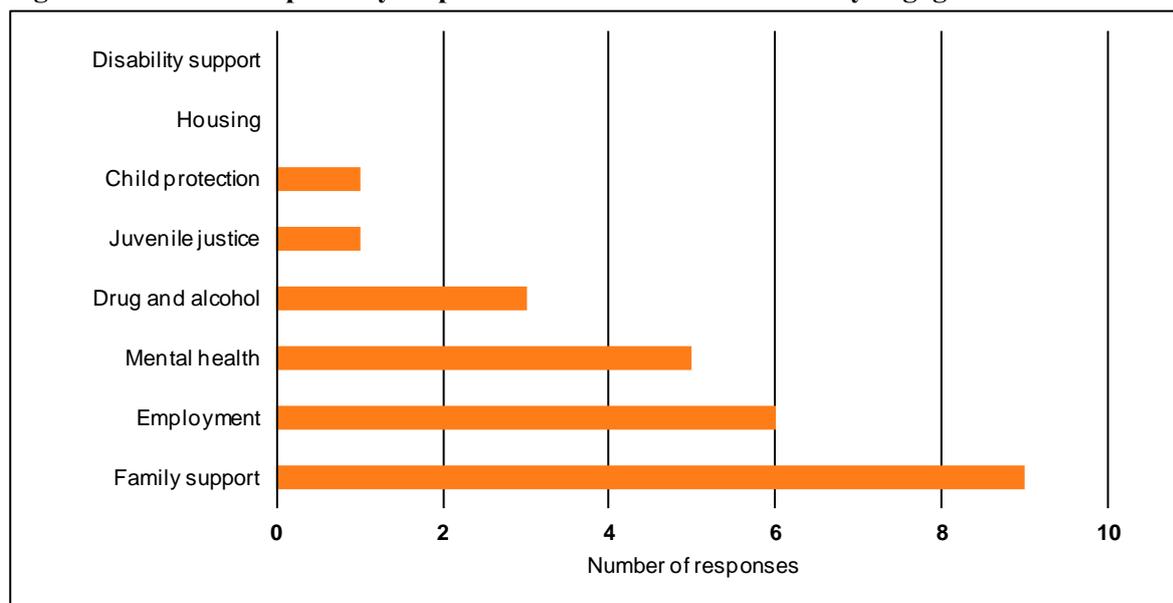
Issues with program sustainability and stability, including staff turnover, were discussed from service providers' perspectives in Stage 1 (pp. 49–50). It was interesting to hear young people spontaneously comment on related issues. This highlights the effects of frequent changes to services on the young people trying to form relationships within them. Tracy described this well in a story about another service:

Interviewer: Do you have any suggestions to improve services for young people?

Tracy: Not really. Don't change much. I had this social worker, Peter, I really liked but then they said I had to change. I was just like, 'What?' and they were like, 'Don't worry, you'll see this really cool lady.' But then I walked in and she'd completely changed the room around. I was like, 'No!' It was like she didn't respect Peter's room. And then my youth worker left around the same time. Too much of a change! I was already going through enough change—little things can put you off, and that really did.

This shows that staff turnover (often due to short contracts, re-tendering and employment uncertainty) has an adverse effect not only on relationship-building between local services (as will be discussed in Stage 3), but also on relationship-building between young people and staff. Given the importance of these relationships highlighted in both the interviews and the survey data, this has strong potential to hinder effective service provision. This has particular resonance for young people such as Tracy, dealing with unstable contexts. When difficult, insecure and fragmented relationships at home are mirrored by a fragmentation and insecurity of relationships with services with which the young person is expected to develop significant trust, this may almost be viewed as setting young people up for disengagement. The policy implications which arise from feedback such as this will be further discussed in Stage 3.

Young people reported still being in contact with a range of other services (Figure 8.8):

**Figure 8.8 Follow-up survey responses on other services currently engaged with**

Note:  $n=52$ . Survey respondents could choose multiple services

It is encouraging, in light of the strong findings on the role of family context, that so many young people were engaged with family support services. On the other hand, the fact that none was engaged with housing services may reflect a gap in this region, as discussed in Stage 1. Not many young people self-selected housing as a barrier to engagement. However it was mentioned in several interviews as a recurrent concern; and in the follow-up survey, nearly half of the young people reported having moved at least once in the past two years, and six (11.5 per cent) reported not always having a place to live.

## Ongoing challenges for young people

While many positive outcomes were recorded, ongoing issues associated with disengagement cannot entirely be mitigated by a program such as PYC. Young people spoke in great depth about their disengagement from school, and often still felt very strongly discouraged by it. Experiences at school will be described in Stage 3 of this evaluation, but it is worth noting here that the very experience of disengagement forms a barrier to future engagements. This was reflected in the responses to the follow-up survey—the second most common barrier faced was difficulty getting along with teachers and students in the past. This speaks of the loss of confidence in the ability to form positive relationships, which Sam described when talking about leaving school:

Sam: The teachers didn't really like me too much I guess ... because I got bullied I didn't really want to show up that much, and when I did show up I didn't do any work, so my reports were pretty bad. So that just took away any confidence that I had, so I didn't really think I'd be able to do anything.

Sam's comments reflect the negative tone that many young people felt characterised their school's conceptualisation of students facing difficulties. For students like Sam, who faced interpersonal difficulties, these experiences are likely to reinforce a perception of themselves as unable to cope.

Many of the young people interviewed had good outcomes in terms of re-engagement with education and expressed heightened confidence and self-esteem gained through these experiences.

Tracy, on entering alternative education: It was good because even though I went really bad in school I'm not dumb. I do my work and I have a brain, so I was capable ... A lot of these people, they weren't good in schools but they actually do their work, like they're really good because they have the motivation to do it, because they're treated really well, which is a change for them.

However, underlying the confidence conferred by success in alternative education programs there was often an assumed identity as someone who could not cope with the mainstream. When discussing her career ambitions, Tracy expressed a lack of confidence about moving into further education:

Interviewer: How do you feel about going on to further education?

Tracy: Nervous. Because here is really easy, I just think I'm not going to be used to it. I have a feeling I'll just do bad ... because a lot of things go in one ear and out the other.

Interviewer: Even at [current school]?

Tracy: No, not really there, because everything there's really easy ... My teacher said to me, 'I taught you, I think you can do it'. So that made me feel better. But I guess if I expect the worst I can't really be disappointed.

On one hand Tracy felt that she had proved she was capable of doing well at school under the right circumstances, but on the other she had a strong sense that her schooling was not up to a 'mainstream' standard, and that her pathway would not converge again with those of students coming through mainstream pathways.

Few young people who had already left were re-engaged through PYC with mainstream school. This raises questions about the ideal outcome for disengaging students. While alternative education pathways are undoubtedly preferable to no engagement, this should not be considered a panacea for all young people disengaging. More information is required on the outcomes for students engaging in alternative education; however there is a potential risk that, once channelled into these education options, young people's pathways become increasingly fixed, and the expectations for their futures and the range of education, work and life options open to them may be constrained in a way which does not apply to those who remain in mainstream schooling. These issues will be further considered in Stage 3 of the evaluation.

## 9 Key findings and implications

### Positive engagements with young people

Overall, the results of this evaluation indicate that PYC is successfully connecting with young people in the FMP region who are disengaging from education and training. The young people consulted rated the program highly, spoke positively about their experiences with PYC and placed a particularly high value on the relationships they had formed with their case managers.

Participants often framed the positive effects of the program in terms that reflected progressive outcomes, referring to benefits of social reconnection, re-established routine, and confidence and self-esteem. Analysis of the outcome data confirmed the program's achievements, indicating that the majority of participants were benefitting from PYC.

### Providing individualised support to young people facing multiple intersecting challenges

Looking in more detail at the types of barriers faced by young people entering PYC yielded some contrasts in the benefits achieved by different groups. Five broad groups of barriers were identified: unstable contexts, risky behaviours, learning issues, mental health and stressors, and interpersonal issues.

PYC was particularly effective in assisting young people who faced barriers related to mental health issues and life events, learning and literacy/numeracy issues, and interpersonal issues, including bullying. Young people facing issues to do with risky behaviours including substance use, juvenile justice and anger management issues, as well as young people from unstable contexts marked by financial and housing instability and family conflict, benefitted from the program as well, but also faced considerable continuing challenges. The impacts of family difficulties on engagement with education were particularly evident.

The complexity of findings which were produced by differentiating between participants based on barriers and other characteristics reflected the highly diverse experiences and needs represented in the PYC caseload, showing the need for a holistic, integrated and intensive case management approach.

### Engaging young people through informal, flexible service delivery

The young people interviewed spoke favourably about the informality and flexibility of the case management. Many referred to their case manager as 'more like a friend' and contrasted the comfort with which they were able to interact with case managers with less successful previous interactions in which they had felt constrained or confused by more formality. Features of the flexible approach included:

- the ability for young people to contact case managers in person, by phone, email, or text, and without a formal appointment
- case managers' willingness to meet young people where they were, be that homes, schools, or public places
- enrolment durations long enough to build strong relationships, accommodate young people's changing needs and levels of readiness to engage, and the opportunity for young people to enrol multiple times.

## Addressing a continuum of needs: Types 1, 2a and 2b

PYC involved young people at various levels of connection with education and training, as characterised through the three participant categories, Types 1, 2a and 2b. Attainment of outcomes was relatively similar between these groups, indicating that PYC staff were able to tailor program activities to meet their varying needs. PYC had a slightly lower percentage of Type 1 participants than that specified in program guidelines, and than the national average for YC providers, possibly reflecting the lower percentage of funding dedicated to Type 1 services in Victoria. Case managers identified this as a comparatively challenging area of their work but acknowledged the value of including these young people in the program in order to prevent disengagement. The value of re-engagement (Type 3) activities to engage this group of participants was emphasised.

The lower representation of Type 1 participants in the PYC program may reflect the pressing need to address more severe disengagement, as highlighted nationally by the dandolopartners evaluation, which stated that, ‘the scale of demand for these services is large and exceeds the Youth Connections program providers’ funded capacity’ (dandolopartners 2012). A tension remains around the potential for young people who have already disengaged being denied access to the program in favour of young people who are still at school, in order to meet predetermined connection level quotas.

## Young people’s pathways after PYC

Most young people who were followed up after exit from PYC had maintained some form of outcome—many were studying, and several were concurrently working and studying. Many were juggling the demands of multiple roles. They nominated social connections with friends as some of the most satisfying elements in their lives, but they frequently did not have the time or opportunity to engage in many activities other than work and study. Even given the positive outcomes many had achieved, ongoing financial hardships were common, as well as continuing difficulties with self-esteem, confidence and mental health.

Disengagement from school left a powerfully negative impression on young people and itself formed a barrier to future engagement. Although PYC had largely positive impacts on participants, a re-engagement program cannot fully mitigate the negative impact of these experiences on young people’s self-esteem and confidence. The underlying systemic issues will be considered in the next stage of this evaluation.

## 10 Next steps

Overall, the results of the evaluation affirmed the appropriateness and effectiveness of PYC's service delivery in meeting the needs of young people in the FMP region at risk of disengagement from education. However, this stage of the evaluation relied on information collected from PYC staff members and from those former participants who were contactable and who volunteered to participate. A broader perspective on the function of PYC in the region is required to formulate recommendations and policy implications, and this will be achieved by the third stage of evaluation.

Stage 3 of the PYC evaluation is currently underway, and includes assessment of PYC's efforts to strengthen community partnerships to respond to the needs of young people who have disengaged from education or are at risk of doing so. The key content areas for Stage 3 are:

- young people's experiences interacting with mainstream schools and with other services
- PYC's method of delivering Type 3 (outreach and re-engagement) and Type 4 (strengthening services) activities
- the alignment of PYC with other services in the region, including schools and the Partnership Brokers (in Victoria these are the Local Learning and Employment Networks)
- potential gaps or areas of duplication in the regional services environment.

Data will be collected from interviews and focus groups with PYC staff and external stakeholders and analysed to produce a report focusing on the systemic and policy implications of the combined PYC evaluation findings.

# Glossary

## Stages of involvement

- **Referral:** Any young person referred to the program
- **Enrolment:** A young person who was offered, and accepted, individual case management
- **Completion:** A young person who received individual case management, and then exited the program. Note that ‘completion’ does indicate whether outcomes were achieved.
- **Active:** A young person who was currently enrolled in PYC as at March 2012. These young people were not included in most of the data analysis, but are occasionally commented upon separately.

## Connection levels and service types

- **Type 1:** Young people at risk of disengagement, but still attending school (20% of intake)
- **Type 2a:** Young people at imminent risk of disengaging, or recently disengaged (30% of intake)
- **Type 2b:** Young people disengaged for more than three months (50% of intake)
- **Type 3:** Outreach and re-engagement activities
- **Type 4:** Strengthening services in the region activities

## Typologies

- **Unstable contexts:** Typology representing young people facing one or several barriers including inadequate family support, unstable living arrangements, financial distress, and abuse/domestic violence. (Composite case study: Tracy)
- **Risky behaviours:** Typology representing young people facing one or several barriers including behavioural problems, anger management issues, alcohol and drug misuse, past or current juvenile justice orders. (Composite case study: Jordan)
- **Interpersonal issues:** Typology representing young people facing one or several barriers including low self-esteem, experience of bullying, and socialisation issues. (Composite case study: Sam)
- **Mental health and stressors:** Typology representing young people facing one or several barriers including suspected or diagnosed mental health issue and critical life events. (Composite case study: Charlie)
- **Learning issues:** Typology representing young people facing one or several barriers including low literacy/numeracy and disability.

## Final outcomes

- **Commenced in education:** The young person commenced in education.
- **Re-engaged in education:** The young person re-engaged in education and sustained that engagement for 13 weeks.
- **Attendance:** The young person’s attendance in education improved consistently over the whole school term or for 13 weeks.

- **Behaviour:** The young person's behaviour in an educational setting improved consistently over the whole school term or for 13 weeks.
- **Educational performance:** The young person's educational performance improved consistently over the whole school term or for 13 weeks.
- **Strengthened engagement:** The young person's engagement was strengthened and they remained engaged in education over the whole school term or for 13 weeks.
- **Engaged in employment:** The young person started employment and remained in that employment for 13 weeks.

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