

# Youth Work in Victoria

Findings from the Youth Sector  
Workforce Surveys

September 2022





**YACVic works across the entire state of Victoria.** YACVic's head office is based on the lands of the Kulin Nation in Naarm (Melbourne). We also have offices based on the lands of the Gunitjmarra Nation in Warrnambool, and on the lands of the Wemba Wemba, Wadi Wadi and Weki Weki Nations in Swan Hill.

YACVic gives our deepest respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present for their wisdom, strength, support and leadership.

We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria, and stand in solidarity to pay respect to the ongoing

**Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body and leading advocate for young people aged 12–25, and youth workers in Victoria.**

Our vision is that the rights of young people in Victoria are respected, and they are active, visible and valued in their communities.

We lead policy responses to issues affecting young people, represent the youth sector to government, resource high quality youth work practice, research and advocate on youth issues. We value our members and prioritise their needs.

We provide additional targeted advocacy through our key services, **YACVic Rural** and **Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS)**,



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## Introduction

### Background

Youth work is a profession that places young people and their interests first<sup>i</sup>. It supports young people aged 12-25 years to engage with their community and develop skills and capabilities to achieve their goals<sup>ii</sup>. Youth work is holistic in nature and uses strengths-based care to support young people to achieve their full potential. Investing in youth work is crucial to ensure that all young people have access to the support they need.

In November 2021, YACVic released a paper entitled *Youth Work Matters: Why Youth Work is Important, Valuable and Unique*. This outlines the crucial work that makes youth work an invaluable profession, and highlighted six case studies to demonstrate the impact of youth work in practice.

Following on from that, YACVic released two surveys. One, aimed at youth workers, was designed to gain an understanding of the different contexts and environments in which youth workers operate, the diversity of programs and initiatives they deliver, and the diversity of the young people with whom they work. The second was aimed at employers of youth workers in Victoria, to understand what they look for when recruiting youth workers, the barriers and opportunities present within the youth sector, and the professional development needs of youth workers.

This report outlines the findings of those surveys, demonstrating the scope of youth work, and the need within the youth sector.



## Key Findings

1. Youth workers work with young people with a wide diversity of identities and life experiences, and significant intersectionality.
2. Youth workers operate across a wide spectrum of prevention and/or early intervention (40%), specialist services (25%), and crisis support (20%).
3. A majority of youth workers bring relevant lived experience and diverse identities to their work with young people.
4. Only 34% of youth workers have specific youth work qualifications, yet 70% of those who do find the skills and knowledge acquired from their qualifications help them significantly to do their job effectively.
5. 64% of all youth workers believe that their job performance would benefit from greater skills and knowledge in youth work.
6. Managers rate 'experience working with young people', 'relevant qualifications', and 'commitment to improving the lives of young people' as the most important characteristics they look for when recruiting.
7. A large majority of youth workers have completed short course training such as trauma informed practice, cultural awareness, and suicide prevention. They also demonstrate a desire to undertake further professional development to enhance their skills and expertise.
8. Worryingly, 28% of youth workers had not received child safe training (but would like to).
9. Youth workers and managers believe the most impactful change for their work would be greater and more secure funding, allowing flexibility, innovation and better engagement.
10. Youth workers and managers see great opportunity to do more for young people, especially in the areas of mental health, housing and healthy relationships, if resources and systems allowed.



## Methodology

YACVic released two surveys via SurveyMonkey – one for youth workers (youth worker’s survey), and the other for employers of youth workers (manager’s survey). This did not include teaching, social work or psychology, which are their own distinct professions, but did include professions under the youth work umbrella such as sport coaches, youth justice workers, and anyone who delivers a youth targeted program or service. The surveys received responses from August to October of 2021. The youth worker’s survey received 756 responses in total, and the manager’s survey received 198 responses.

Both surveys focused on youth workers and managers who deliver services in Victoria and who work with young people aged 12-25 years. Respondents were not required to answer every question and could choose to skip questions; however, in both surveys, the large majority answered every question.

## Demographics

Youth workers work with young people in many different age groups, with 97% of respondents saying that they work with young people aged 12-25 inclusive. Most youth workers work with young people aged 15-17 years, with 85% of respondents indicating that they work in this age range. The least common age group for youth workers to work with was 21-25 year-olds, with only 55% of respondents indicating they work with this specific age-group.

Most youth workers themselves are relatively young, with the largest percentage (36%) aged between 26-34 years, and the second-largest percentage (23.5%) aged between 35-44 years. Youth workers are significantly more likely to be women, with 77% of respondents being women, 20% being men, and 3% being non-binary.

These surveys were Victorian-based and looked at workers and managers who operate and deliver services in Victoria. Fifty-four per cent of respondents reported that their service or programs are predominantly delivered in metropolitan Melbourne, while 36% indicated that their services or programs are predominantly delivered in rural or regional Victoria. A total of 8.7% of respondents indicated that they deliver services across Victoria, nationally, or online.

Youth workers respondents reported that 63% of the young people they work with live in metropolitan areas, 46% live in regional areas, and 28% live in rural and/or remote locations. The survey of managers similarly indicated that many organisations work with cohorts of young people across multiple geographical areas, with 73% in metropolitan areas, 45% in regional areas, and 31% in rural and/or remote areas.



Some youth worker respondents are trained and funded to work with specific groups of young people. For this reason, some only work with young people with certain identities and/or lived experiences. However, 76% of the youth worker respondents work with all young people. The most common lived experiences they reported the young people they work with having are:

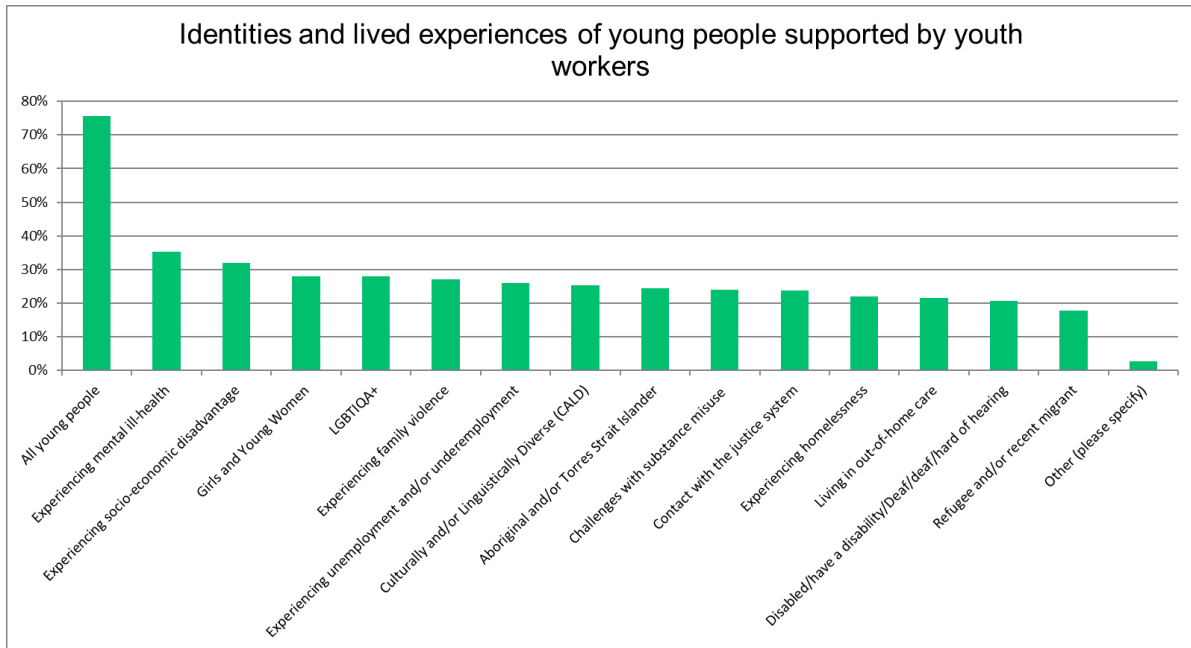
- Mental ill-health (35%), and
- Socioeconomic disadvantage (32%).

Other lived experience and identities of young people they work with include:

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (24%),
- Culturally and/or Linguistically Diverse (25%),
- Girls and young women (28%),
- LGBTIQ+ (28%),
- Refugee and/or recent migrant (18%),
- Disabled / have a disability / Deaf / deaf / hard of hearing (21%),
- Experiencing family violence (27%),
- Experiencing homelessness (22%),
- Experiencing unemployment and/or underemployment (26%),
- Challenges with substance misuse such as alcohol and other drugs (24%),
- Contact with the justice system (24%), and
- Living in out-of-home care (21%),
- with a further 3% of respondents answering 'other' with responses such as young parents, and disengagement from education.

Understanding this allows us to see the broad skills and coverage of youth workers, and the intersectionality of young people's lives and challenges.





The survey of managers indicated that the largest groups of young people their organisations worked with were from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds (29%) or are LGBTIQ+ (29%). They also identified socioeconomic disadvantage (31%) as the most common lived experience affecting the young people they work with.





## Programs, Projects and Services

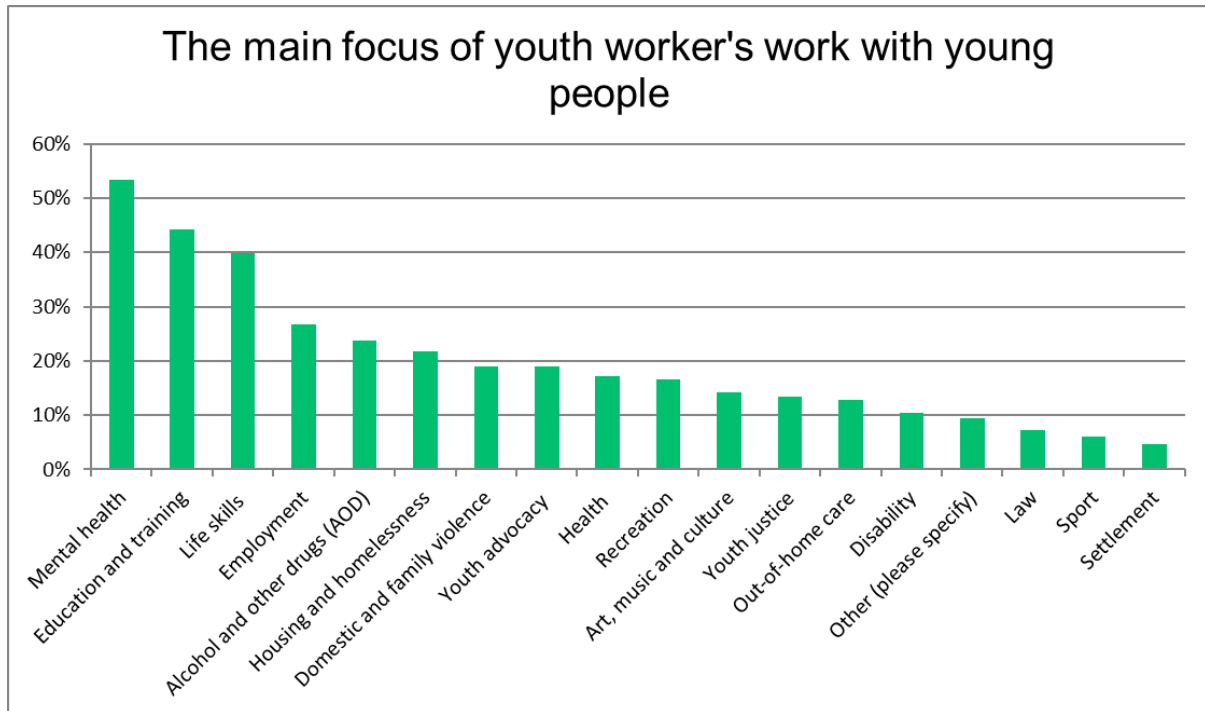
Youth workers operate in a variety of settings and with different specialisations.

The vast majority of youth worker respondents (64%) are employed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) / not-for-profit organisations (NFPs), with the next most common employer being local government (15%), followed by state government (10%). The youth work respondents' work occurs mostly in the community sector (56%), with significantly smaller percentages of workers in the education (16%) and health (11%) sectors. The manager's survey demonstrated similar results, with 64% identifying their organisation as an NGO/NFP, and 19% as local government.

A majority of youth workers reported that the primary focus of their work overall is generalist youth work/community programs (53%), followed closely by advocacy/self-advocacy on young people's issues (50%). The main intervention point of their work varied, amongst prevention and/or early intervention (40%), specialist services (25%), crisis support (20%) and team/organisation management (13%). Each of these areas of focus addresses a different area of need; however, the prominence of generalist youth work demonstrates the versatility of youth work as a profession.

Regardless of program requirements and objectives, youth workers reported often providing support across a range of areas to target the needs of the individual. This results in youth workers providing multi-faceted support, with the most common being mental health (53%), followed by education and training (44%), and life skills (39%).





Answering the same question, managers reported that the focus of their programs, projects and/or services were education and training (55%), followed by mental health (43%) and life skills (43%).

Highlighting the immense coverage youth work has, the manager's survey found that 38% of organisations work with 100-500 young people on average per year, 16% work with between 501-1,000, 21% work with between 1,001-5,000, and 6% with more than 5,000 young people per year.

Managers reported that the type of work their youth worker employees do with young people is most likely to be group activities (69%), closely followed by targeted one-on-one support and/or case management (64%) and outreach (41%). This shows that young people have the option to engage with services in a variety of ways, depending on what suits their needs.



## Youth Workers

### Background

While youth work is incredibly important, it is not widely understood or recognised. Only 50% of the youth worker's survey respondents said that, when meeting people in work or social situations, they would describe themselves as a youth worker, while the other 50% would not.

Other ways they reported describing themselves were generally more specific to their position, such as community worker, social worker, mental health worker/practitioner, program coordinator, peer worker, or educator. These titles are generally better understood by young people and the broader community, highlighting the need to promote youth work as a unique and distinct profession offering skilled services to young people in the community.

The largest group of youth workers (34%) reported having worked with young people for 4-10 years, with 28% reporting being in the profession for 1-3 years, and 20% for less than a year.



Youth workers' own lived experience can be highly valuable to ensuring young people's needs are addressed in ways that are appropriate to their needs. The youth workers surveyed bring a range of lived experiences to their work with young people, with:

- 50% identifying they have lived experience of mental ill-health, and
- 25% identifying they have lived experience of unemployment or underemployment.

The respondents also reported other relevant lived experiences such as being:

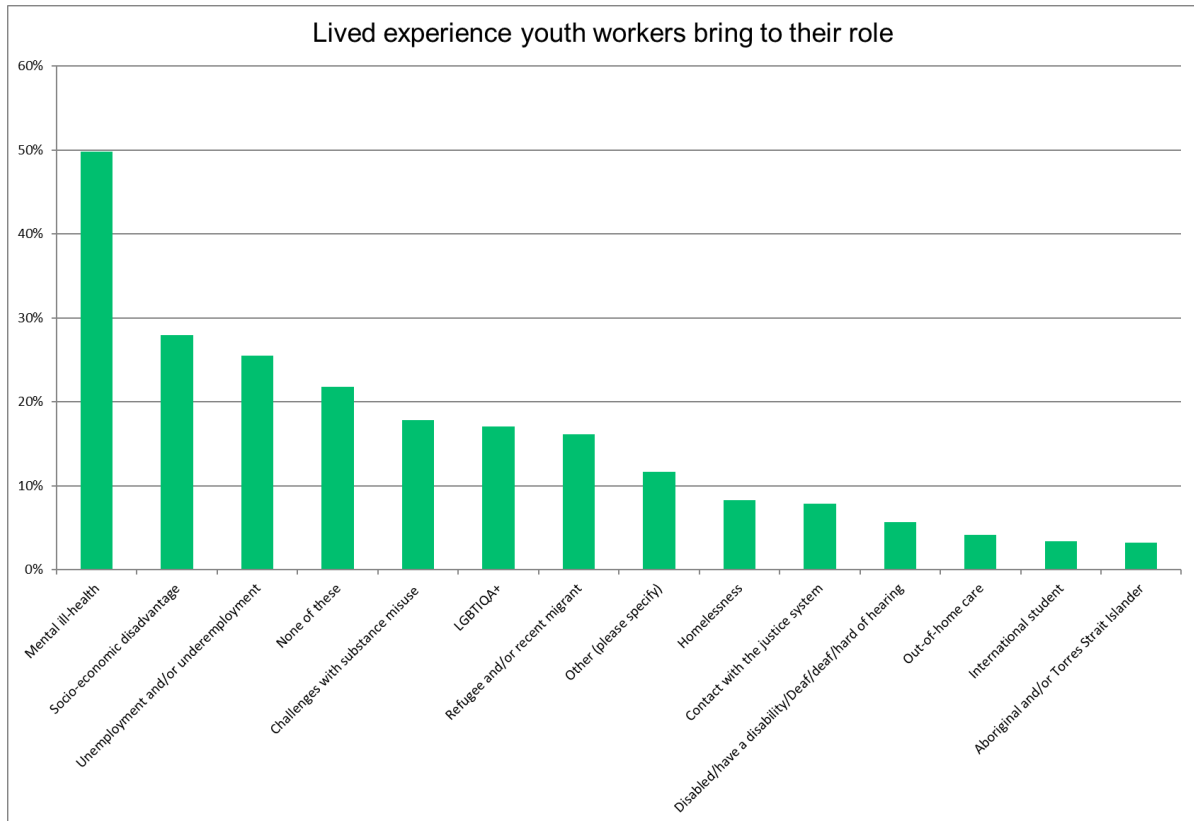
- LGBTIQA+ (17%),
- Culturally and/or linguistically diverse and/or refugee and/or recent migrant (16%)
- Disabled/ have a disability / Deaf/ deaf/ hard of hearing (6%)
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (3%),
- An international student (3%),

or experiencing:

- Socioeconomic disadvantage (28%),
- Homelessness (8%),
- Out-of-home care (4%),
- Unemployment or underemployment (25%)
- Challenges with substance misuse such as alcohol and other drugs (18%),
- Contact with the justice system (8%).

Of those who answered 'other', some recurring answers included experiences of family violence, being parents or carers, and experiencing teenage pregnancies.





## Motivations, Experience & Qualifications

### Motivation

Respondents to the youth worker survey reported being motivated to work with young people for a variety of reasons:

- 85% are passionate about young people's wellbeing, development and rights,
- 68% stated they want to work in a job that gives back to the community,
- 62% are passionate about the area they work in,
- 30% have lived experience that puts them in a unique position to make a meaningful change,
- 24% have lived experience which helps them relate to and support young people, and
- 20% came into youth work by accident, without having planned to be a youth worker.

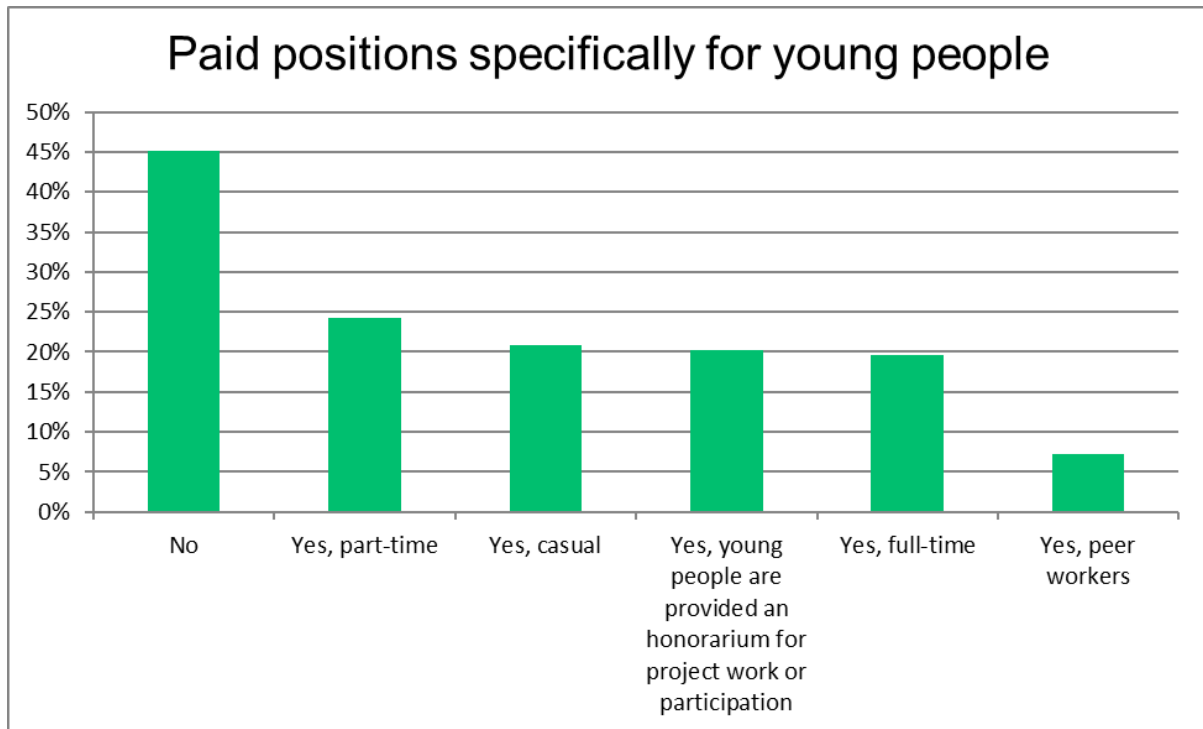
### Experience

While a variety of factors pull people to a career in youth work, there are certain skills, experiences and qualifications that managers reported looking for in their recruitment of youth workers. Managers rated 'experience working with young



people’, ‘relevant qualifications’, and ‘commitment to improving the lives of young people’ among the most important characteristics they look for when recruiting.

A majority (59%) of managers reported their program or service having paid employees with similar lived experience to the young people, with 14% actively recruiting for that. Relevant lived experience can build understanding, reduce stigma and discrimination, and improve the quality and relevance of all youth services and programs.



Forty-five per cent of managers responded that they did not have any paid positions specifically for young people; however, of those who did, the young people were most likely to be employed on a part-time (24.18%) or casual basis (20.92%) or paid an honorarium (20.26%).

### Qualifications

Managers are most likely to look for the following qualifications when recruiting staff who work directly with young people:

- a Bachelor or Master’s Degree in Youth Work (48%),
- Community Services, or Community Development Certificate or Diploma (47%),
- Bachelor or Master of Social Work (44%), or
- Youth Work Certificate or Diploma (44%).





This is also in line with the qualifications most of their staff who directly work with young people hold, with:

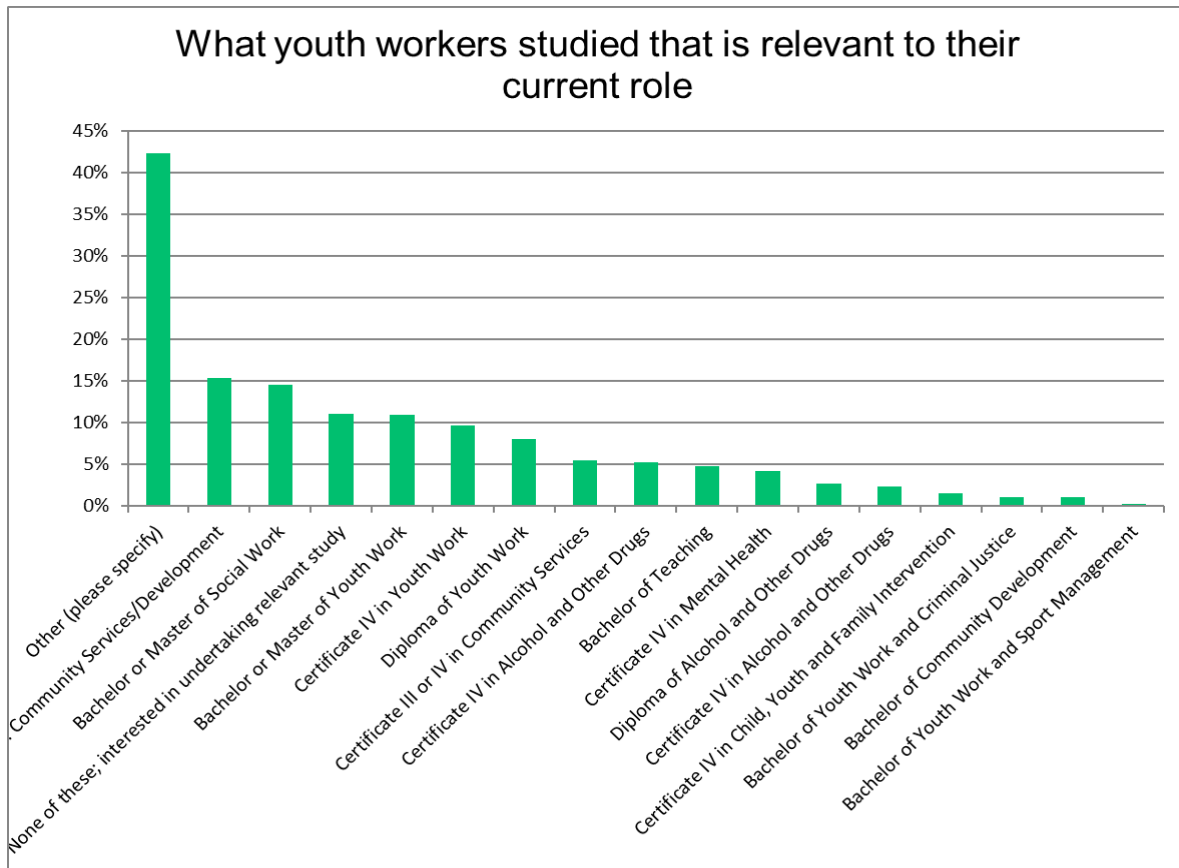
- 15% of respondents holding a Bachelor or Master of Social Work
- 15% holding a Community Services, or Community Development Diploma, and 6% holding a Certificate in the same area.
- 11% hold a Bachelor or Master's degree in Youth Work
- 10% hold a Youth Work Certificate, and
- 9% hold a Youth Work Diploma.

Some youth workers also highlighted a range of degrees and qualifications that have led to their current role outside of the more streamlined options. These included

- Bachelor of Arts (9%),
- Bachelor of Psychology/Counselling (13%),
- Nursing (4%)
- Diploma of Counselling (5%), and
- a variety of Certificates or Diplomas (32%) such as a Certificate IV in Disability (1%).

The generalist nature of some youth work means that people with a variety of different skills and educational backgrounds may be well suited to the roles.

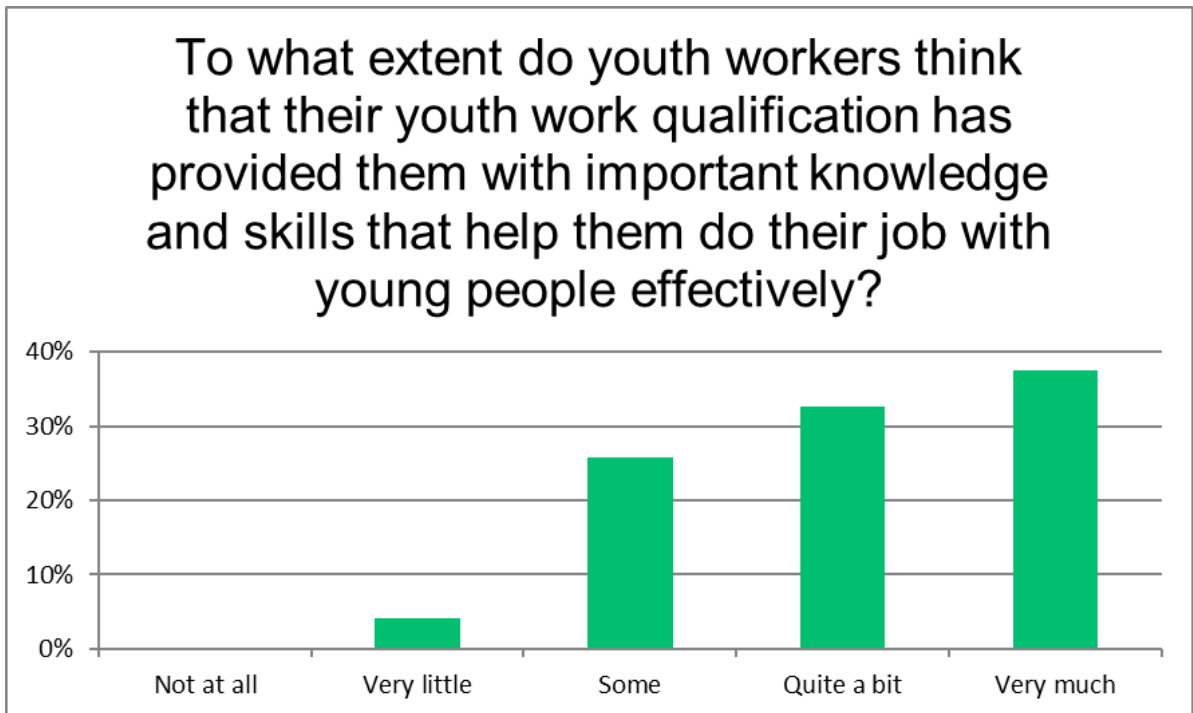
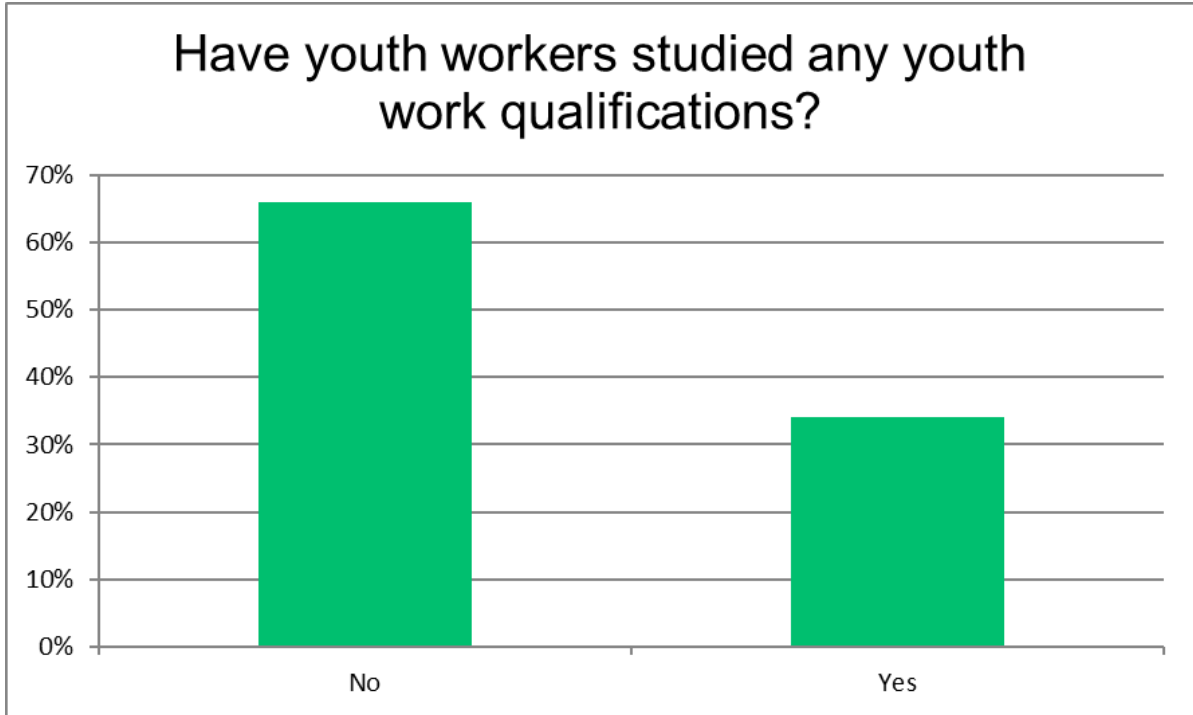




Of those who studied a specific youth work qualification, 70% responded that they found it had provided them with either “quite a bit” or “very much” important knowledge and skills to help them do their job with young people effectively. A further 25% responded that it had helped them with “some” important knowledge and skills, and only 4% answered that it had not helped them at all.

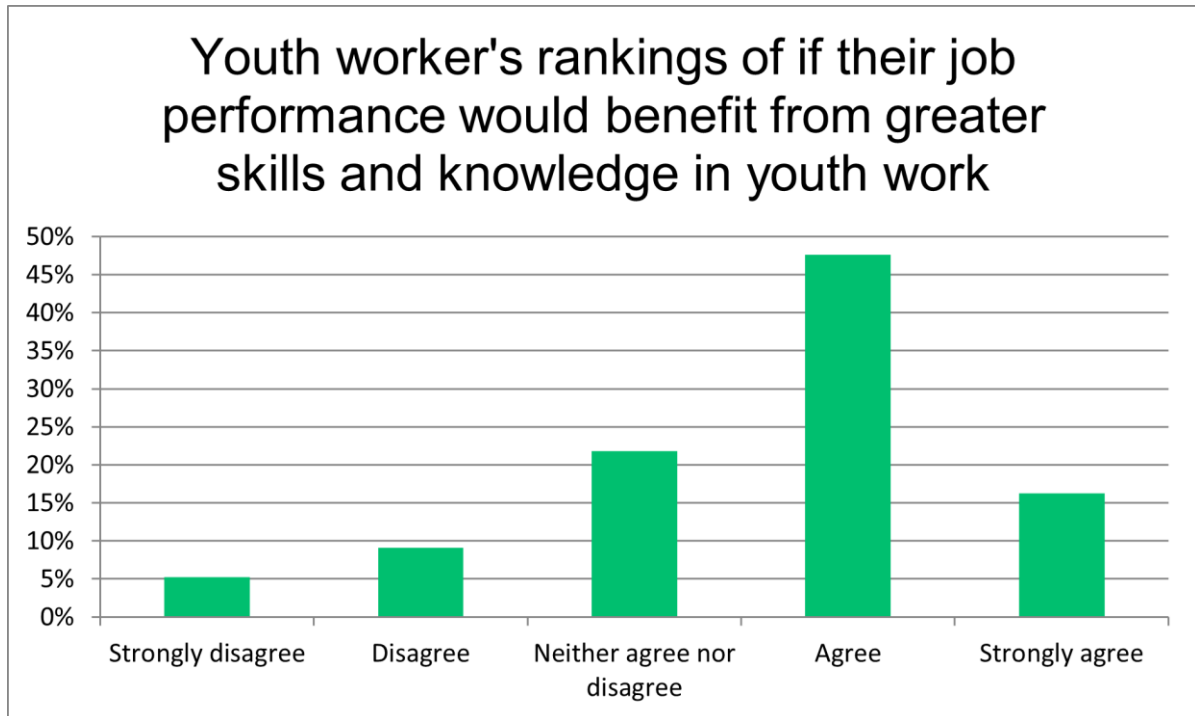






Sixty-four per cent of youth workers either agreed or strongly agreed that their job performance would benefit from greater skills and knowledge in youth work, while 14% disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating that while youth work specific learning is deemed very beneficial by most youth workers, some see their other skills and education as sufficient to allow them to do their job well.





## Professional Development

Regarding continuing professional development, the youth workers responded:

- 61% would consider a short youth work online course
- 20% would consider a master's degree
- 20% would consider a Certificate IV in Youth Work
- 16% would consider a Diploma in Youth Work
- 9% would consider a Bachelor of Youth Work.

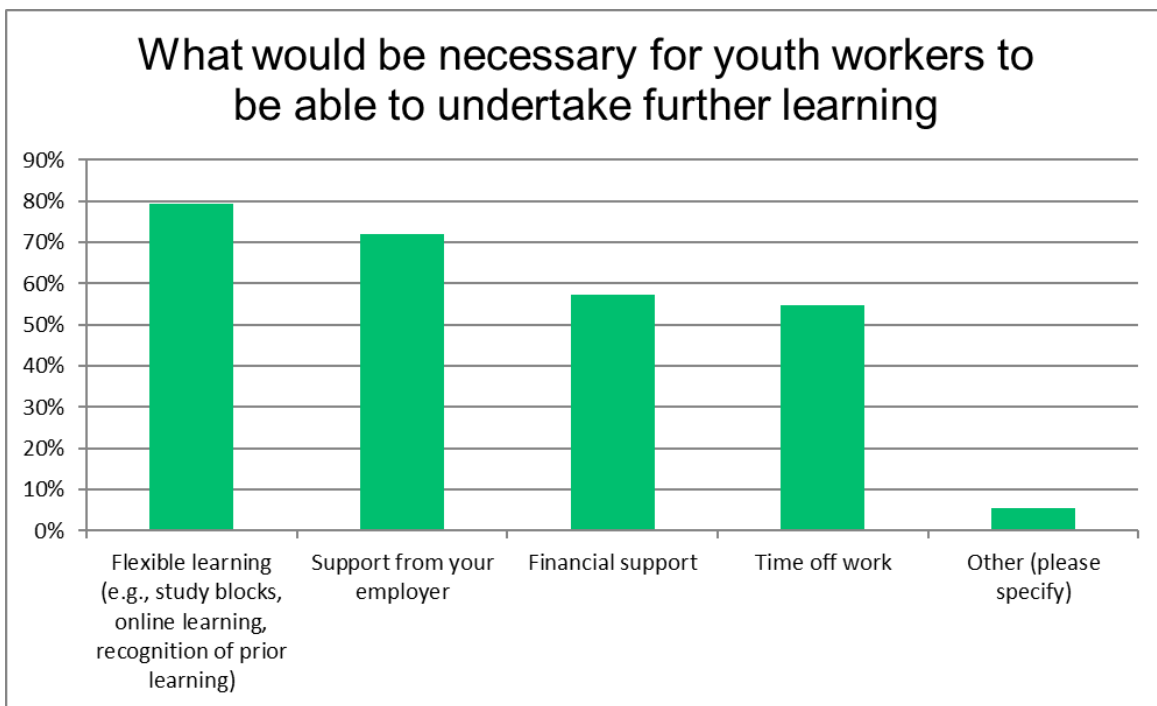
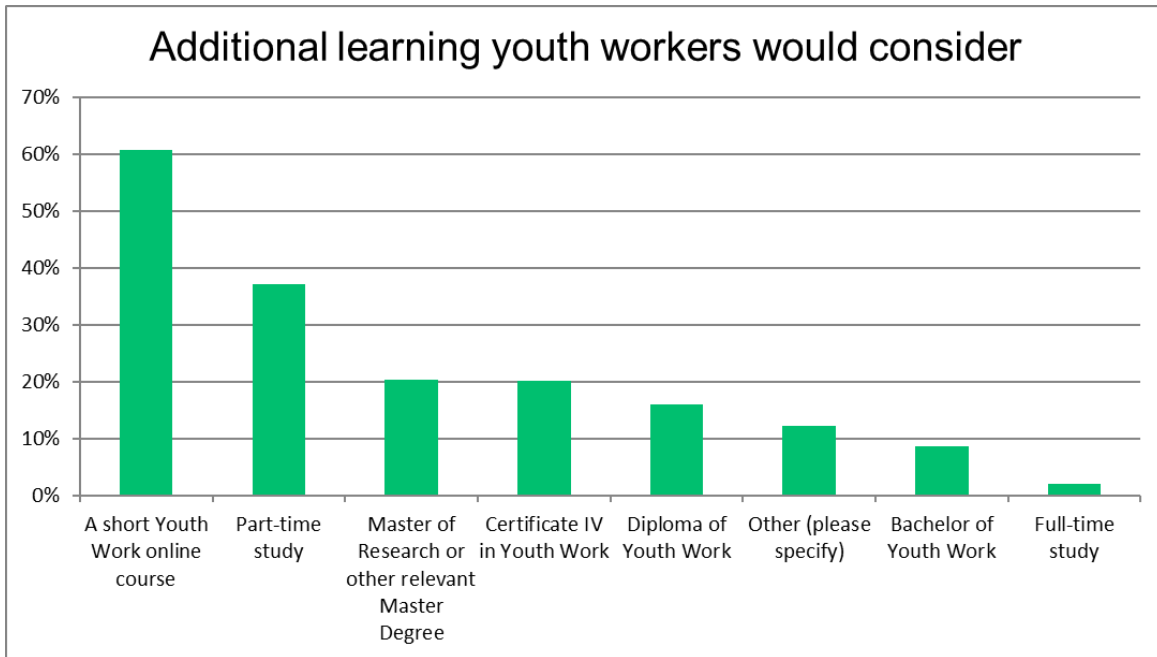
Part-time options were by far the most popular, with 37% stating that they would consider part-time study, while only 2% would consider full-time study.

Considering the cost and time associated with full-time study, taking this on while already working as a youth worker, and with financial and family obligations, would be understandably unappealing to many.

When surveyed youth workers were asked what would be required to support them to undertake further study:

- 79% responded they would need flexible learning options
- 72% would need support from their employers,
- 57% would need financial support, and
- 55% would require time off work.



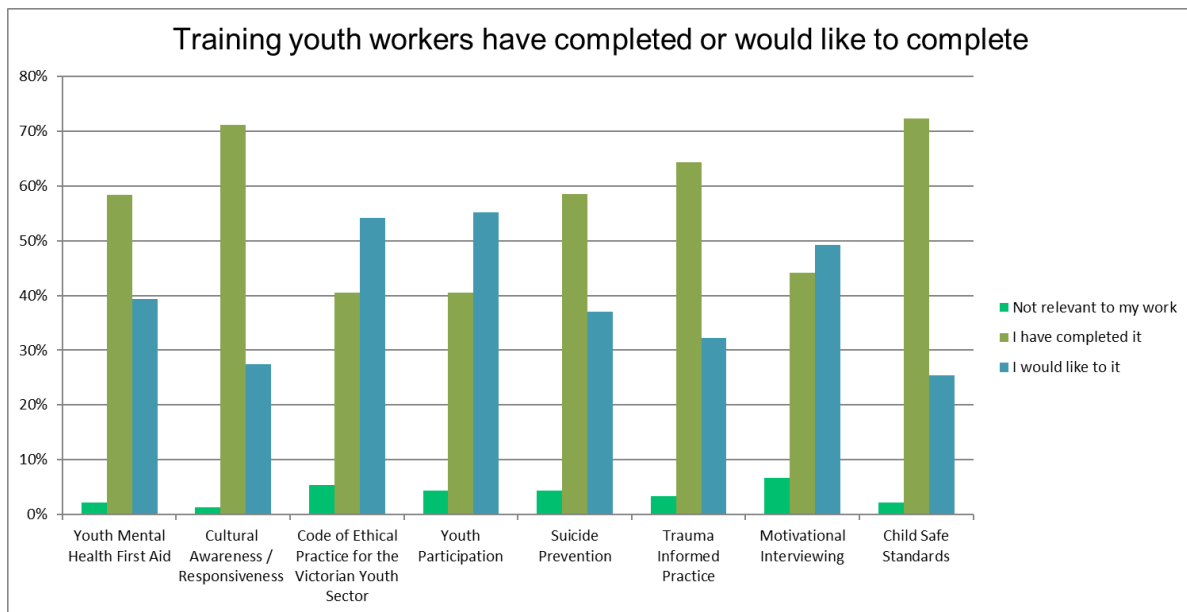


Many youth workers who completed the survey stated that, to learn appropriate skills and enhance the work they are able to do, they had completed other types of informal training and professional development:

- 72% had completed training on Child Safe Standards,
- 71% had completed cultural awareness/responsiveness training,
- 65% had completed trauma-informed practice training,
- 59% had completed suicide prevention training, and
- 58% had completed Youth Mental Health First Aid training.



In addition to the training youth workers had already undertaken, many indicated that they would like to complete further training in a range of areas. Twenty-five per cent of respondents stated they would like to complete training on the Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian youth sector, 55% would like to complete youth participation training, and 49% would like to complete motivational interviewing training, demonstrating a desire from many youth workers to undertake further professional development to enhance their skills and expertise.



Managers of youth workers indicated that they provide staff with a variety of professional development and training opportunities. The most common support provided by managers was regular management supervision (83%), followed by in-house training and development (80%), Enterprise Assistance Programs (79%), and external training such as short courses and conferences (74%). Encouragingly, 25% provided financial assistance for TAFE/university training.

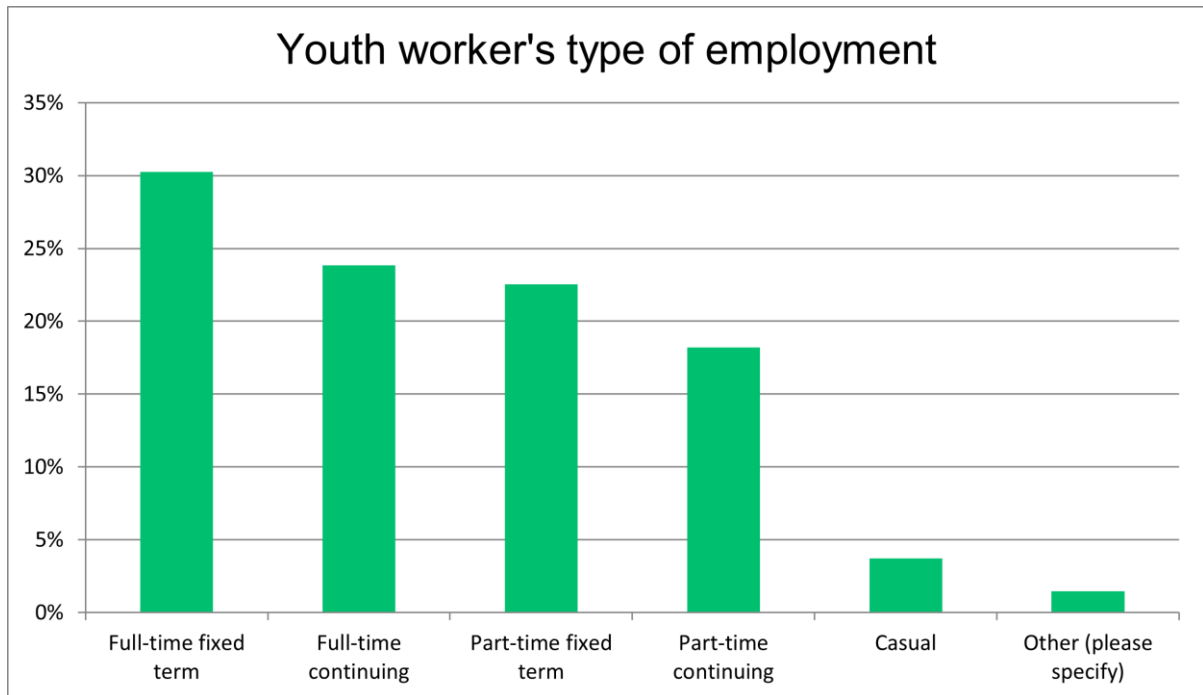
### Professional Networks

Twenty-three per cent of youth workers are already part of a professional association or practitioner network, while 52% stated that it would be beneficial to join, 15% were unsure if it would be beneficial, and 9% didn't think it would be beneficial.



## Type of Employment

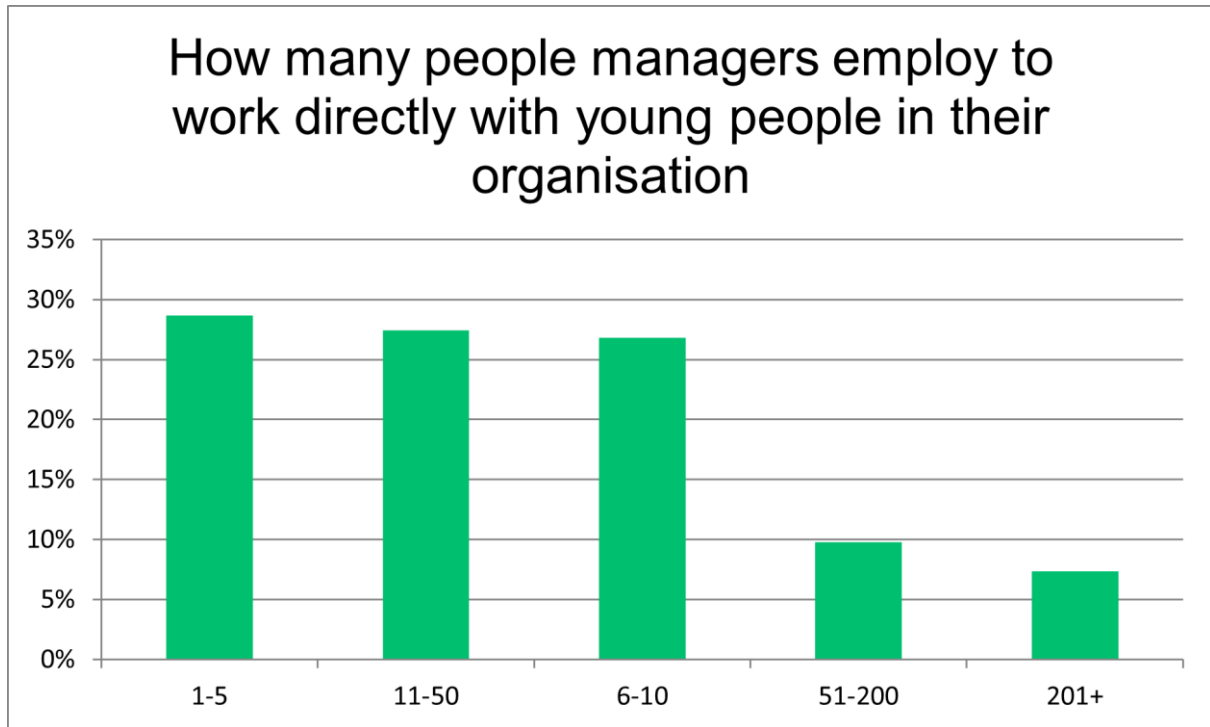
Fifty-four per cent of youth worker respondents were on full-time contracts (fixed-term or continuing), while 41% were on a part-time contracts, and 4% were on casual contracts.



Many organisations hiring youth workers experience short-term or cyclical funding arrangements for programs and services, which creates difficulties in hiring people in ongoing roles. Many roles in these industries are therefore relatively insecure or short-term, and talent is regularly lost.

Managers responded with a variety of answers on how many people they employ to work directly with young people, with the majority hiring between 1-5 (29%), closely followed by 11-50 (27%) and 6-10 (27%). Less common was hiring over 51-200 (10%) or 201+ (7%) staff to work directly with young people.





Twenty per cent of managers reported that they hired more than 51% of their team in unpaid positions such as volunteers, student placements and interns. Fifty-eight per cent of managers reported that they did not rely on unpaid positions and 52% of managers had less than 10% of their team in unpaid positions. Unpaid workers are most likely to be employed in program and/or service delivery (71%), with the rest in administrative support or specialised support.

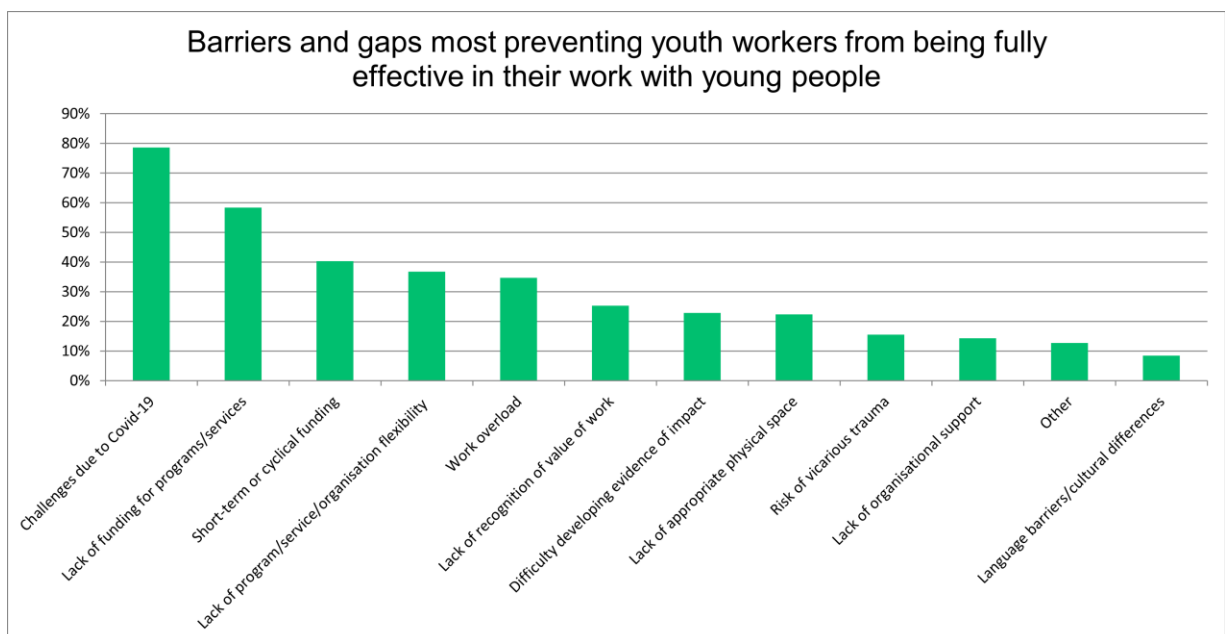
Of those who rely on workers in unpaid positions, 78% answered that they could not effectively deliver the program, project, or service without this additional support. This is an identified phenomenon within the often-under-resourced NFP/NGO sectors, where reliance on volunteers is necessary to deliver programs and services.



## Resourcing

Youth workers reported that the main barriers and gaps preventing them from being fully effective in their work with young people were challenges due to COVID-19 (79%)\*, lack of funding for programs/services (58%), and short-term or cyclical funding for programs and services (40%). COVID-19 has exacerbated existing issues for young people, and ongoing issues such as lack of funding and short-term funding in the youth sector have not been addressed.

\* The surveys were completed in late 2021, after Victoria had experienced nearly two years of COVID-10 related lockdowns and restrictions.



### Most significant change

Youth workers were asked what one change or investment they think would have the most significant positive impact on their work with young people. Some of the recurring themes were:

- *Long-term funding commitments & program security (21%)*

Ongoing, long-term funding ensures youth services and programs are adequately resourced and can dedicate more time to program/service delivery, with a focus on achieving longer-term outcomes for young people. Short-term funding often results in youth workers spending a lot of time applying for additional funding and advocating for ongoing investment, which takes time away from the young people they work with.

*“Long term funding commitments that encouraged innovation without demanding set outcomes and which allowed for staff to be paid at higher levels”*

*“Continued funding for programs and services that benefit young people”*

*“Long term funding that allows us to continue supporting the young people”*

- Engagement (7%)

The importance of engagement was noted by many respondents as key to supporting young people effectively. Some respondents noted that contract and funding agreements often restrain how services are able to engage with young people, and the lack of flexibility can mean that many young people are turned away from programs or services due to their needs being outside of the scope of a particular program. It was also acknowledged that genuine youth participation practice would improve engagement of young people across all programs and services, and more support and training for youth workers on how to embed youth participation in their services would go a long way to improving engagement with young people generally.

*“Flexibility and making things fun, rather than clinical, to genuinely engage young people”*

*“Training for staff on youth participation”*

*“Lack of flexibility of program/service/organisation, preventing young people’s access / participation”*

- Housing (5%)

Many survey respondents identified the lack of secure and affordable housing for young people as a key priority that would aid young people in improving their lives.

*“Investment in social housing for young people”*

*“Availability of affordable housing”*

*“More medium term and long-term housing resources (housing stock) to be able to provide a suitable housing response for young people”*





## Wishlist

When asked about priorities for a theoretical one-off investment of \$1 million, the themes that arose included:

- *Programs (10%)*

Youth Workers highlighted the need to offer more diverse programs that target specific groups of young people. These services could act as community hubs or safe spaces and provide young people with support and early intervention approaches where needed.

- *Mental health (10%)*

Mental health was highlighted as an area needing a more holistic approach which include more preventative programs and outreach services.

- *Workforce capacity (5%)*

It was identified that an investment of more training for youth workers, as well as more long-term contracts to ensure stability, would improve the working environment for youth workers and ultimately result in more young people being able to access support when they need it.

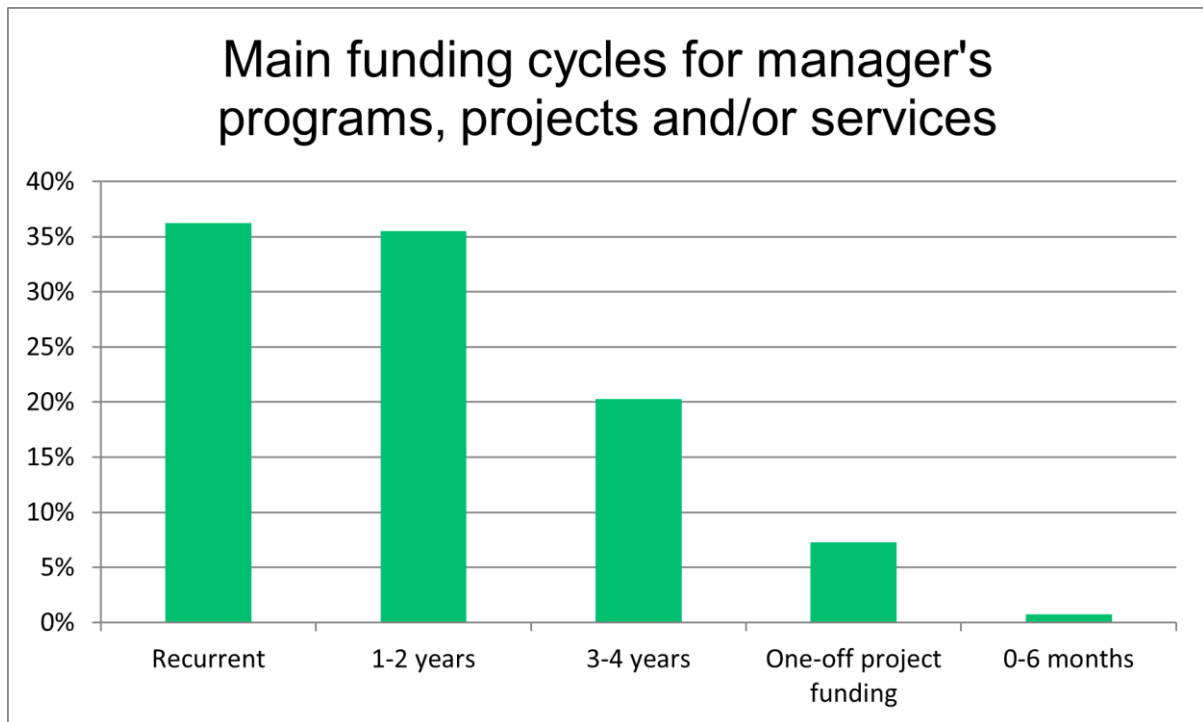
## Funding adequacy

Only 39% of managers surveyed felt that the funding they had for their program, project and/or service was adequate to meet basic delivery costs.

Program, project and service funding for organisations come from a variety of sources, however 32% of respondents stated they are wholly funded by just one source with 57% of those being funded by the Victorian State Government. The other 68% of respondents answered that their funding came from multiple sources, the most common sources being state, local government, and federal government funding. Other funding sources such as philanthropic, social enterprise, fundraising and organisational corpus were relied on the least. Fifty-five per cent of respondents used no social enterprise or fee-for-service funding, and 53% used no organisational corpus funding for their programs, projects and services.

Funding cycles for programs, projects, and/or services are most often recurrent (36%) or for 1-2 years (36%). 3-4-year funding cycles are the next most common (20%).





The barriers and gaps identified by managers which prevent their youth programs, projects and/or services from being fully effective were very similar to the answers given by youth workers.

When asked what one change or investment they think would have the most significant positive impact on their organisation's work with young people, the main theme that emerged was the need for ongoing funding, specifically funding for staff and more generalist youth workers (15%).

Managers raised the need for funding for more staff to provide support to young people. This would help to achieve higher levels of training for staff and providing support to young people by actively addressing their needs holistically. To achieve the same goals, there is also a need for more specialised roles for youth workers. Upping payrates to increase the attractiveness of youth worker roles and attract more skilled staff is necessary to ensure young people are being properly supported.

*“More funding to employ more staff so young people can be fully supported and have their needs addressed – workers are always stretched, there's way too many waiting lists!”*

*“Funding to employ more staff to reduce burnout and provide the services and responsiveness needed to YP and Families”*



When managers were asked about priorities for a theoretical one-off investment of \$1 million, the themes arising included:

- Programs for disadvantaged young people including more accessible housing (16%)

Providing safe and affordable housing for all young people that is easily accessible was highlighted as a main area that needs addressing for young people to be able to thrive.

*“Safe and affordable housing”*

*“Affordable youth housing options for independent living, and building strong family and community connections”*

*“More youth workers providing intensive long-term support. More supported models of accommodation for young people with complex issues.”*

*“Housing for young people with an intellectual disability.”*

- Staffing and training for staff (12%)

There is a need and desire to hire more young people to be part of youth work teams, and to provide more professional development to staff so they are better able to respond to the needs of young people.

*“I think it should be invested in training and development for staff – getting all workers up to a professional standard. I am finding it difficult to hire people that are both qualified and experienced, due to the org’s minimum requirement. Which makes it difficult for new graduates, or people with quals below a degree to get a role.”*

*“To pay more young people to form part of our staff team.”*


*“Increase in staffing, paid positions for young people to take on more leadership roles.”*

- Mental health (10%)

To address mental health concerns, there needs to be more mental health services opened in key areas that young people can engage in to foster better intervention and prevention care.

*“Mental health prevention and early intervention, particularly to support help seeking behaviour, capacity building for young people and families, and improving coordination/navigation of services.”*

*“Greater investment in training in mental health in the area and employment of people working in youth mental health.”*

- Strategic and collaborative investment (9%)
- 

*“Partly to develop a sustainability plan for our organisation and to set this up, and funds to further develop and expand current programs that are proving to be successful.”*

*“Getting programs and services connected to where young people already are, and with what they specifically need. Funding for organisations to work together to achieve this.”*

- Rural and regional (6%)

Increased funding is necessary to provide regional hubs and increase the number of youth workers in rural and regional areas.

*“Increase the number of youth specific clinicians in the region with appropriate resourcing and training.”*

*“Take a place-based approach (especially in rural areas that have complex needs) that involves young people at the head of the conversation, leading council, DET, DFFH and other services in a joint discussion.”*

- Dedicated youth spaces (4%)

Dedicated youth spaces provide a safe and central space where young people can ‘hang out’ and programs can be delivered.

*“Build another Foyer, build/obtain space for a youth drop-in centre with opportunity to deliver youth programs from this space”*

*“A youth hub in our LGA that provided various support services. Transport to services is a major barrier for our youth.”*

- Healthy Relationships (3%)

Active responses are needed for young people experiencing family or partner violence. Education on respectful relationships and fostering services that embody these values and engage in responses are useful in addressing this issue. Youth workers, when adequately trained and funded, are able to provide early intervention through these services.

*“Responding to young people currently experiencing intimate partner violence. Programs that promote healthy relationships that are accessible outside of traditional cohorts i.e. those attending school, work programs – targeted to residential care. Family therapeutic intervention at point of entry into residential care”*





## Conclusion

Youth workers work to support and empower young people, and provide a highly valuable service to the community. Challenges in the sector have been highlighted through the two surveys of youth workers and managers. Highlighting these challenges provides an opportunity to understand where the need is and take effective action.

Youth workers and managers have both indicated through these surveys that challenges pertaining to their work revolve around a lack of ongoing and sustainable funding to address the challenges and needs of young people in their communities and fields of practice. By ensuring the workforce is well educated, funded and sustained, the effectiveness of youth work in communities throughout Victoria will be increased substantially, achieving better outcomes for young people.





## Citations

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<sup>i</sup> AYAC. (2013, Dec). *The AYAC Definition of Youth Work in Australia*. AYAC. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60948b9e3847ee0caf0e2dd4/t/60ced174beb02125730e6df/1624166774392/National+Definition+of+Youth+Work+2013+-+AYAC.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Youth Work Coalition. (2021, Nov). *Youth Work Matters: Why Youth Work is Important, Valuable and Unique*. YACVic. <https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Documents/YWM-Articulation-Documents-FINAL-web2.pdf>

