



# The voices of young people in NSW on sexual violence

Commissioned by Women, Family and Community  
Safety at the Department of Communities and Justice

September 2023



# Acknowledgment of Country

Youth Action acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We understand that sovereignty was never ceded and recognise their continuing connection to lands, languages, waters, and cultures.

Our office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people. We recognise their traditional and ongoing Custodianship, and pay our respects to Elders past and present.



# About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and the services that support them in NSW. We work towards a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged, valued, and have their rights realised. We represent over 150 Member organisations and regularly engage with young people and youth workers from all over the state, as we have for over 30 years.

We give a particular focus to young people who are regional, First Nations, LGBTIQ+, with disability, from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants and refugees, and doing it tough. We use a rights-based lens to focus on programs, policy and advocacy that achieve meaningful outcomes, embed strengths-based approaches, and are informed by data and evidence. We are an ally to the self-determination of First Nations communities, are led by the expertise of young people and the Sector, and work to be a trust-worthy partner and collaborator.

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# About Women, Family and Community Safety

The Women, Family and Community Safety (WFCS) Directorate at the Department of Communities and Justice is responsible for women's and community safety policy development, reforms and programs to reduce the impact of domestic, family and sexual violence, and to promote and enhance community safety. The Sexual Violence team within WFCS is responsible for monitoring and implementing whole-of-government work to improve prevention and response to sexual violence in NSW.

<https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/children-and-families/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/sexual-violence.html>

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# Table of contents

Executive Summary .....	8
Opportunities and Further Considerations .....	10
Methodology .....	15
Demographic information .....	19
Why young people decided to take part in these consultations .....	21
Survey response overview .....	24
Young People’s Definition of Sexual Violence .....	26
The Current Situation for Young People .....	31
Societal attitudes.....	32
School-based and Community Awareness Education .....	34
Reporting processes .....	36
Access to support.....	37
Trauma informed and culturally safe support and education.....	40
Online Safety .....	42
Legislation.....	44
Offender rehabilitation .....	44
Additional Roundtable Discussion Topics.....	46
Make No Doubt Campaign .....	46
Consent Laws .....	47
Best way to get information to young people.....	48
Opportunities for Government to address issues and gaps .....	51
Inclusion of Young People’s Voice.....	51
Public Awareness and School-based Education .....	52
Better responses to incidences of sexual violence, victim-survivor support, and improved service delivery .....	54
Legislation and offender rehabilitation .....	56

# Trigger Warning

This paper includes content about Sexual Violence.

If you are currently experiencing any form of violence or need someone to turn to, help is available from the following services.

- Full Stop Australia: 1800 FULL STOP (1800 385 578)
- NSW Sexual Violence Helpline: 1800 424 017
- 13 YARN: 13 92 76 | 24/7 Crisis support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Domestic Violence Line: 1800 65 64 63
- Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800
- 1800 RESPECT: 1800 737 732
- Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service: 1800 938 227
- Men's Referral Service: 1300 766 491
- Lifeline (24 hour crisis line): 131 114
- For further organisations who offer specialised services in NSW, go to: [fullstop.org.au](https://fullstop.org.au) > Get Help > Find Services



# Executive Summary

In May 2022 Youth Action was contracted by the Department of Communities and Justice to undertake engagement with young people 16 – 24 years about sexual violence prevention and response with young people across NSW. The aim was to identify information and evidence about young people’s priority issues, needs, gaps and opportunities for enhancing sexual violence prevention and response in NSW, as part of the development and implementation of the next NSW Sexual Violence Plan. This report and its findings will also inform the implementation of actions in the NSW Sexual Violence Plan 2022-2027 as they relate to young people.

Young people were invited to submit an expression of interest (EOI) to attend one of two roundtables. Both the EOI and the roundtables asked questions to establish young people’s definition of sexual violence and draw out their views and opinions about key issues and strategies to address these.

Young people were clear that the definition of sexual violence is complex and describes a broad range of actions and happens in many different settings. They spoke about physical, sexual, emotional, and verbal violence. They said that sexual violence happens to people of all genders, sexualities, and ages. They spoke about it occurring in the public arena, in intimate relationships, within family and friendship groups as well as between strangers. They discussed experiences of sexual violence in both real life and online contexts.

Not surprisingly the opportunities they identified covered the full spectrum of sexual violence prevention and responses from prevention and early intervention such as education and awareness raising initiatives through to



service delivery and legislation reform. They identified 28 opportunities and considerations that could improve the Government response under the following themes: inclusion of young people's voices, culturally safe and trauma informed supports and services, awareness raising and community education, communication and messaging for young people, school-based educational programs, youth-focused sexual violence training, reporting, support services, and legislation.

Young people have strong views about how outcomes can be improved for themselves and their peers and want to be included in the development of strategies addressing sexual violence prevention and responses by the NSW Government. There are significant opportunities for many of these ideas to be further explored in partnership with young people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences to co-design solutions.

# Opportunities and Further Considerations

## Inclusion of youth voice

- Establishment of on-going mechanism for the input from young people into policy and programs
- The mechanism needs to have a particular focus on the inclusion of voices and experiences of young people from socially excluded groups whose experiences are not always highlighted in policy-making such as First Nations young people, young people from culturally diverse communities, young people from regional communities, young people with disability, LGBTQIA+ young people, and young people doing it tough.

## Culturally safe and trauma informed supports and services

- All support services and responses to sexual violence need to be culturally safe, trauma informed, and inclusive of the needs of young people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences
- Resources should be designed with input from young people from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences and the services who support them
- Information and counselling services need to be provided in community languages and ensure availability of translators
- First Nations young people should have access to support and services provided by community-controlled organisations.

## Awareness Raising and Community Education Campaigns

- Develop a campaign to raise awareness about violence against young people which addresses the culture of victim-survivor blaming and stigma about sexual violence in society
- Increased promotion targeted to young people about the existence of the various kinds of support available including victim-survivors' compensation, counselling, and confidential reporting options
- Better education on online safety, developed in consultation with young people, about image-based abuse that recognises young people's use of online platforms within their relationship contexts. This could be undertaken in partnership with the e-Safety Commission
- Develop education programs about supporting victim-survivors of sexual violence as well as bystander resources aimed at parents/families and community members which would be inclusive of socially excluded communities
- Public awareness campaign providing education to both young people and the broader community about consent, respectful relationships, what constitutes sexual violence, what actions to take, and where to seek support. The Make No Doubt Campaign is a great example of this kind of public awareness campaign and young people feel this campaign could be broadened to direct messaging to young people from diverse backgrounds and experiences and well as messaging for people supporting victim-survivors.

## Communication and messaging for young people

- Greater use of social media channels to get information about sexual violence and support services across to young people in the first instance
- The use of influencers from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences to ensure messages are culturally relevant and safe
- Depictions of victim-survivors as resilient and empowered on social media or in traditional media.

## School-Based Education Programs

- Compulsory education in schools for all young people about what sexual violence is and what help is available
- Recognise the importance of early education that is embedded in the school curriculum by starting in primary school and progressing through high school and be offered as part of regular ongoing learning in schools rather than a one off, irregular add-on subject

## Education Programs in other Contexts

- Extend education programs into tertiary institutions such as TAFEs and Universities for young people who have left school
- Increased promotion and funding of peer-to-peer and youth-led educational and awareness programs including those already happening in schools such as those offered by Love bites, Consent Labs, Polished Man, and What Were You Wearing.

## Youth-Focused Sexual Violence Training

- Improve and expand training for first responders such as police, hospital staff, as well as other professions who work with young people in relation to sexual violence, like courts health, and legal professionals to include modules on “working with young people” and “trauma-informed practice”
- Develop rights education for young people and the services that support them.

## Reporting

- Whilst young people felt access to confidential reporting options, such as the Sexual Assault Reporting Option (SARO), through NSW Police is extremely helpful for encouraging those over 18 years of age they recommended a youth specific mechanism be established with a focus on young people under 18 years of age, which should include, in the first instance, some form of anonymity
- Increase in the oversight processes of institutions such as schools, universities, and workplaces and how they deal with reports of sexual violence.

## Support services

- Greater access to support services before the age of 16
- Increase the number of free counselling sessions provided by Victims Services from the current amount of 22 hours in recognition that individual young people may need more time to come to terms with an experience of sexual violence

- Services need to continue to have a physical presence to create safe spaces to effectively engage with young people in addition to telehealth options. Young people stated that they find it difficult to speak about sexual violence and that building rapport and trust over the phone was not appropriate for all young people
- Increase resourcing to youth and community services to offer targeted support to young people across the full spectrum of support from public awareness and education programs through to victim-survivor services. This should prioritise youth services working with young people from socially excluded groups and should include building the professional capacity of those working with young people to address sexual violence and its impact on young people with whom they work
- Increase investment in supports and services for perpetrators, especially younger perpetrators, to receive support and treatment to have the best chance of being able to change their behaviours and reduce occurrence of sexual violence within society.

## Legislation

- Clearer messaging targeting young people about the changes to the laws such as the criminalisation of coercive control and changes to sexual consent laws focusing on the need for affirmative consent
- Implementation of the recommendations from inquiries such as the Jenkins Report addressing sexual violence in the workplace.

# Methodology

In May 2022 Youth Action was contracted by the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) to undertake stakeholder engagement about sexual violence prevention and response with young people across NSW via two roundtable discussions.

The aim of the roundtable discussions was to identify information and evidence about young people's priority issues, needs, gaps and opportunities for enhancing sexual violence prevention and response in NSW, as part of the development of the next NSW Sexual Violence Plan. The roundtables sought to obtain the perspectives and experiences of young people across NSW on the following:

- Understanding young people's views of the current strengths and gaps in preventing and responding to sexual violence in NSW
- Opportunities and models for strengthening co-ordinated responses and approaches to young people in rural and remote areas of NSW and metropolitan NSW
- Specific experiences of diverse groups and strengths, gaps and opportunities for improving co-ordinated responses to sexual violence
- Emerging issues in relation to young people and sexual violence in NSW.

To recruit for the roundtables, we circulated an Expression of Interest (EOI) through our state-wide young people and youth sector networks. Our aim was to be representative of the diversity of young people within NSW – this includes young people from regional NSW, LGBTQIA+ young people, young



people with disability, young people from culturally diverse communities, First Nations young people, and young people doing it tough.

In addition to demographic information, the EOI asked young people the following questions:

1. What do you think the term “sexual violence” means to young people?
2. What do you think should be the priorities for the NSW Government to address the issue of sexual violence for young people
3. Why would you like to be part of a discussion to inform the NSW Government’s plan on “sexual violence”?

We then undertook two online roundtable forums about sexual violence prevention and responses, one for young people in regional NSW, and the second for young people in the Sydney metropolitan area. At the roundtables, participants discussed the questions below:

1. What do you think the term “sexual violence” means to you people?
2. What is currently working well for young people in relation to responses to sexual violence?
3. What is currently not working well for young people in relation to responses to sexual violence?
4. What do you think should be the priorities for the NSW Government to address the issue of sexual violence for young people?
5. Are you aware of the Make No Doubt campaign, and what do you think works or does not work?
6. Have you heard about or been taught the new consent laws, and what do you think works or does not work?
7. What is the best way to get information and resources to young people?

We made the decision to limit the age range of the consultations to 16 – 24 years of age rather than use broader group of young people between 12 – 24 years. This was due to both the sensitive nature of the subject material and duty of care, consent, and mandatory reporting requirements in relation to disclosures made by young people under 16 years.

We received 65 responses to the EOI with 25 young people able to participate in the two online Roundtables. Young people who responded to the EOI but were unavailable to attend the Roundtable expressed a strong desire to have their views and thoughts included in the consultation. The findings outlined in this report are collated from both the EOI responses and discussions with attendees at the Roundtables.

The safety and welfare of the participants was paramount during this process. At the entry point of the EOI we provided the following numbers of support: with the text, “help is available from the following services”: [NSW Sexual Violence Helpline](#): 1800 424 017, [13 YARN](#): 13 92 76, 24/7 Crisis support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, [Domestic Violence Line](#): 1800 65 64 63, [Kids Helpline](#): 1800 55 1800, [1800 RESPECT](#): 1800 737 732, [Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service](#): 1800 938 227, [Men's Referral Service](#): 1300 766 491, [Lifeline](#) (24 hour crisis line): 131 114. Further, we contracted Full Stop Australia for counselling support to be present during the consultations with young people if any issues arose for them. We also provided the details of Full Stop Australia if any participants wanted to follow up after the session.

We would like to thank DCJ for their recognition that young people are experts in their own lives and for their commitment to ensuring the inclusion

of young people's voices in their policy-making. Draft findings of this Report have informed the development of the NSW Sexual Violence Plan 2022-2027 and the Final report will continue to inform the Department's implementation of the Plan and ongoing policy prioritisation and planning as it relates to sexual violence and young people.

We were aware that this is a sensitive and often difficult topic to discuss. Through the EOI process young people described a range of lived experiences in relation to sexual violence and its impacts including being victim-survivors. We would like to thank Full Stop Australia for assisting us to create a safe space for the young people involved by providing counselling support at both roundtables.

Most importantly we would like to thank the brave, articulate, and passionate young people who so generously and openly shared their views and experiences in the EOIs and at the roundtables. Your lived expertise and desire to see the system change to better support young people like yourselves is truly admirable.

# Demographic information

The demographic data below is taken from the 65 responses received from the EOI young people submitted to attend the Roundtable.

## Gender identity

Response	Percent
Female	69.23%
Male	16.92%
Non-Binary	9.23%
Transgender	0.00%
I prefer not to specify	3.08%
I prefer to specify	1.54%

## Age

Response	Percent
18-24	63.08%
16-17	30.77%

## Location

Response	Percent
Greater Sydney	44.62%
Greater Western Sydney	30.77%
Regional or Rural NSW	24.62%

## Young people identified as

Response	Percent
LGBTIQA+	41.94%
CALD	22.58%
Young person with disability	14.52%
First Nations	11.29%
Migrant or refugee	9.68%

Note: Participants were able to select multiple demographics.

# Why young people decided to take part in these consultations

We asked young people completing the EOI to tell us about why they wanted to contribute to this discussion. Their statements told a powerful and often personal story about the deep commitment young people have to wanting to see change on the issue of sexual violence. We thought it was important to include some of what they told us about their motivations in this report to ensure their experiences stay front and centre in informing the development and implementation of the NSW Government's Sexual Violence Plan 2022-2027. All young people had a personal connection to the issue of sexual violence. Some had supported victim-survivors amongst their friendship, family, or community groups and wanted to see more positive outcomes for them.

*"I have seen many of my friends go through sexual abuse"*

*"I see and hear about young people being victims of sexual violence in my region too often"*

*"I think as a First Nations man I have a strong sense of community and I do anything I can to inject positive change into the area I live."*

*"To represent my community, regional youth and queer youth. This topic is so vital to have a healthy community and allow people to develop in a safe environment. I have many close friends and family who have experienced sexual violence, some who still are."*

While sadly a number of the young people were victim-survivors themselves, they hoped that by participating they could contribute to seeing better responses for young people like them.

*"As a victim myself I feel I could really contribute"*

*"When I was 15 I was raped at a party by a boy that I thought was one of my best friends. My friends told me I was lying, the school said they couldn't do anything and my mum said he was being a boy. Then I was touched inappropriately in O week at college. This happened to 3 other girls but because it wasn't rape it took over 3 months to get him removed from college."*

*"As someone who has been through multiple cases of sexual violence it's important to me to be able to say my piece and make sure my experiences are taken into consideration when making plans on how to support me and countless others better."*

*"I have been in a situation where I was sexually assaulted on school grounds in high school. I have reason to believe the school's response was inadequate and fuelled by a desire to get over with the situation before it could become an issue for their public face."*

*"Because my story shines a light on what makes people uncomfortable. And we need to talk about it publicly and openly to inspire change within our attitudes so we can stop these atrocities from occurring."*

*"As a survivor of sexual assault during my HSC and gang rape my first year of university, I certainly believe and know firsthand from experiences there's a lot of work to be done especially cultural issues and barriers that aren't*



*being addressed that prevent proper support to those who've experienced sexual violence coming from a culturally and linguistically diverse background."*

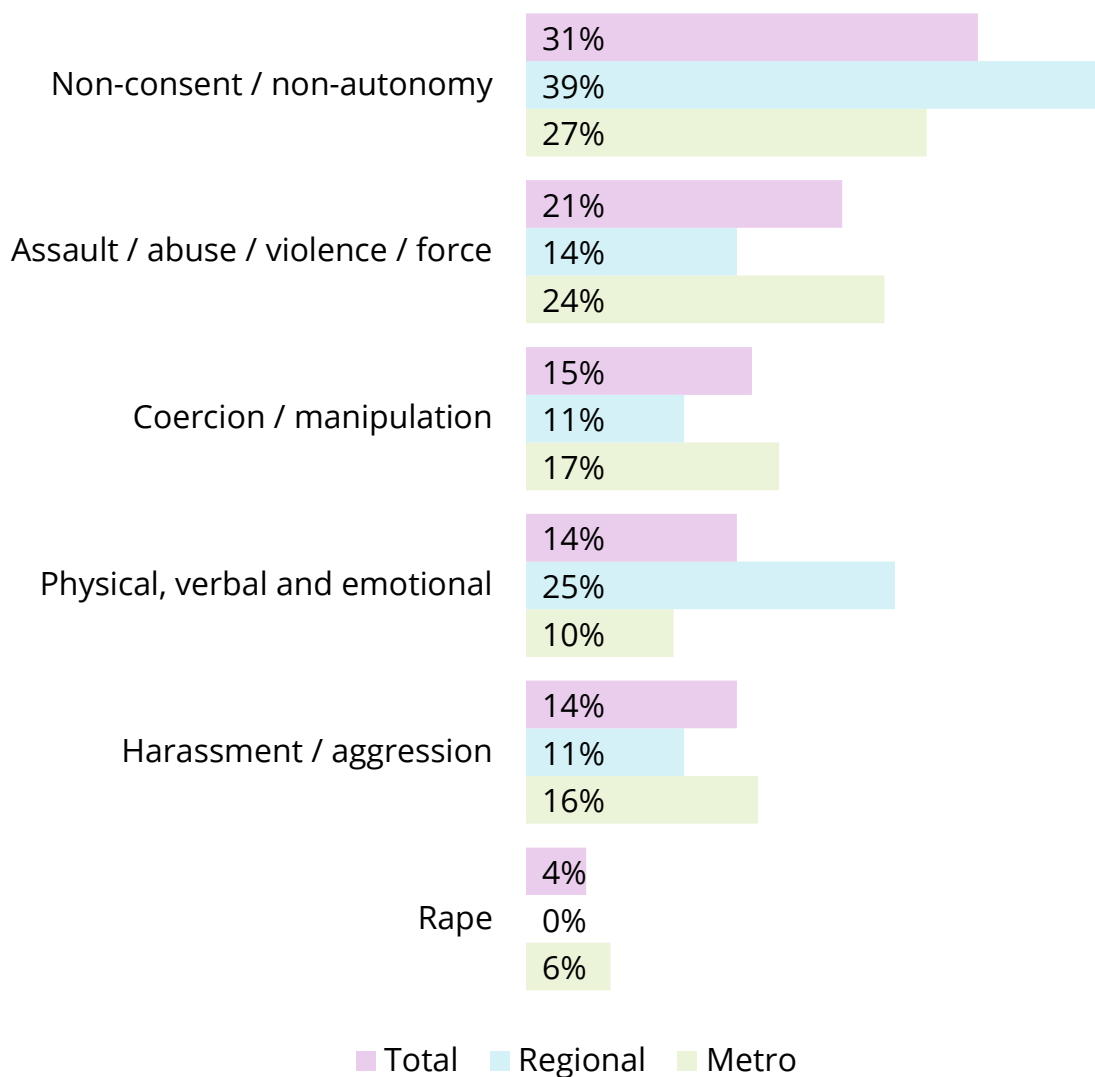
*"Because it's something that needs to be talked about more (in Aboriginal communities), I think that if talking about it is more normalised then more people would find the strength to open up."*

*"So that others don't have to experience the same that I did."*

# Survey response overview

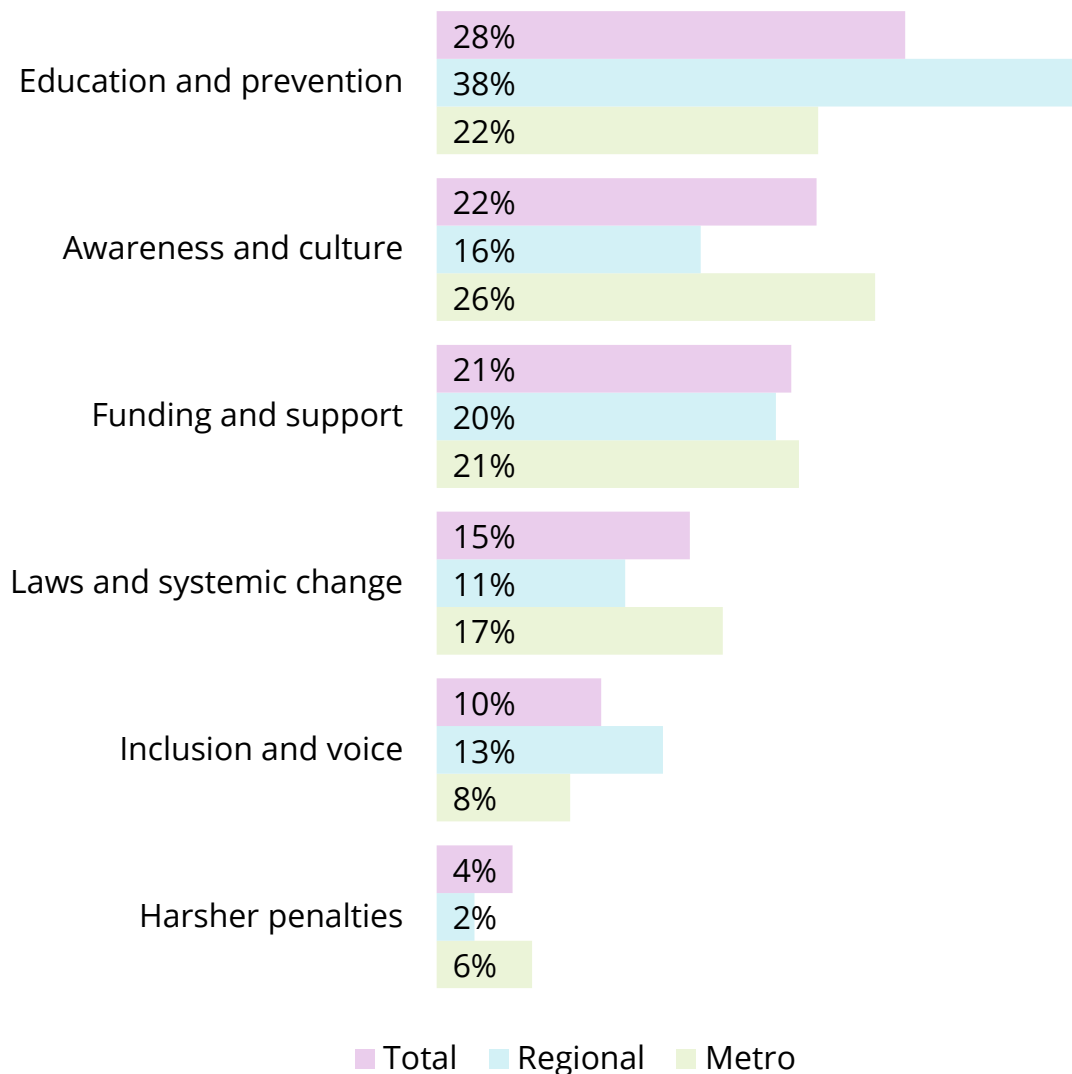
## What do you think the term “sexual violence” means to young people?

In response to this question, young people wanted to make it clear that society should understand that "sexual violence" is more nuanced and complex than obvious concepts like "rape", as reflected in the graph below.



## What do you think should be the priorities for the NSW Government to address the issue of sexual violence for young people?

The priorities young people described in the survey showed they have a strong understanding of how complex systems and institutional culture affect their lives. As shown below, young people wanted government to prioritise the curriculum, cultural change, and services.



# Young People's Definition of Sexual Violence

Young people were clear that sexual violence describes a broad range of actions and happens in many different settings. They spoke about physical, sexual, emotional, and verbal violence. They said that sexual violence happens to people of all genders, sexualities, and ages. They spoke about it occurring in the public arena, in intimate relationships, within family and friendship groups as well as between strangers. They discussed experiences of sexual violence in both real life and online contexts.

*"Sexual violence can be physical, psychological, verbal or cyber. Any behaviour of a sexual nature that causes you distress is considered sexual violence."*

## Culture of disrespect

Young people described sexual violence as a continuum of behaviours that often began with cultures of disrespect and disrespectful actions between individuals, in broader society, right through to instances of specific sexual violence.

*"Sexual violence to myself personally is a range of micro and macro aggressions and attitudes toward sexual health and consent. This ranges from those micro-interactions such as catcalling, slut shaming to the bigger issues of sexual assault and consent."*

## Online Context

Sexual violence in online contexts was an area that young people said was experienced by many of their peers however the impacts were not always fully understood by the adults around them.

*“With the popularity of social media and technology sexual violence extends far beyond the physical and is infiltrating the lives of young people 24/7.”*

## Consent

They all felt the issue of consent and having the power to give or revoke consent were at the heart of the definitions of sexual violence. This includes the need to consider a person’s capacity to give informed consent dependant on their age, intellectual development, or emotional state such as feelings of fear, intimidation, or level of intoxication.

*“Sexual violence to myself is the breach of one’s personal autonomy - being bodily, emotionally, psychologically in a sexual manner (or with sexual intent) - is it non-consensual in nature.”*

## Confusion about the term “sexual violence”

Despite the young people we heard from having comprehensive understandings about the diversity of what constitutes sexual violence, they often expressed concern that many young people still find the term “sexual violence” confusing. They spoke about how societal messages still focus on stranger danger or a need for awareness about characteristics of perpetrators. They said this focus can make it difficult for young people to recognise and speak out against other forms of sexual violence. They discussed the need for better education to help young people understand

that sexual violence describes a range of behaviours beyond the common belief that it is a violent act perpetrated by a stranger.

*“(It’s) not just violence ..I think that we do need to pull away from the fact that sexual violence doesn't mean you know, clear aggression, it doesn't mean someone is being very violent towards you ... we need to consider it as things like grooming they fall into it ... I think we also need to introduce it in a way to explain that, it doesn't mean somebody's going to be hurting you. In that manner. It could be something prolonged over a long period of time.”*

## Impact on helping-seeking

They were also concerned about how confusion about the term impacts young people’s likelihood of seeking support and fosters a culture where perpetrators are not encouraged to address their behaviour.

*“This lack of understanding that sexual violence exists on a continuum of harassment and assault, and not a categorical label harms everyone: victims find it more difficult to recognise their experiences as sexual violence, perpetrators excuse their behaviour as it doesn't fall into the most extreme, and support networks become ineffective and fail to support victims.”*

## Institutional and societal cultural of secrecy and complicity

Young people discussed their views about recent high profile sexual assault cases such as Brittany Higgins, Chanel Contos, Saxon Mullins, and Grace Tame which have been in the media. They felt there can be a culture of secrecy or complicity within institutions that often prevent these situations being addressed appropriately.

*I believe the term 'sexual violence' is a very confusing term for young people due to inadequate education and social stigma. It took me a long time to realise that I had been a survivor of sexual violence because it was not a traditionally 'violent' event. Sexual violence is not always a loud and rough physical altercation - it can and does happen in the presence of other people without them knowing.*

## Generational Differences

Young people said that there are generational differences in the understandings of sexual violence which influence how young people react to sexual violence. They felt older generations often minimised the impact of types of sexual violence.

*“Older generations you’ll see they may prioritise some forms of sexual violence as more serious and others as lesser or not ... you know it’s just catcalling”*

They felt this has implications for both the responses received by young people when they report sexual violence as well as policymaking to address sexual violence because older generations are in positions of authority and power.

## Impact of sexual violence

Lastly, young people’s definition of sexual violence was interlinked with their understanding of the wide-ranging and lasting impacts both on the individual and those connected to them.



*"I think sexual violence are all the ways that sexualisation impacts young people. This includes direct impacts as well as how sexualisation impacts the decisions young people make about their bodies."*

*"There's more than one victim ... especially for young people...when you see someone being sexually harassed, you don't have to be the firsthand victim of sexual violence to like understand the impact it has on one's mind and one soul... I think it's important to understand that we should also like take in consideration that sexual violence is something that that goes through people from the victim to the victim's family members."*

# The Current Situation for Young People

One worrying aspect was the prevalence of experiences of sexual violence amongst young people that became apparent as the discussion about the definition of sexual violence unfolded. All young people we heard from had a personal connection whether through direct lived experience as a survivor or through supporting a friend or family member.

*“To me it’s very upsetting and it’s something I think unfortunately a lot of people have been through.”*

They spoke with a tone of inevitability about how sexual violence was likely a common occurrence for all young people. Several young people disclosed they had had multiple experiences of sexual violence throughout their lives.

*“Sexual violence is also more prevalent in the lives of young people than ever before, we are demanding changes to our education, to the law, to our social values, because this issue isn’t going away. We see it in our parliaments, in our media, in our schools, and workplaces, and if we haven’t already experienced it ourselves we know from the statistics we will eventually.”*

## Societal attitudes

Young people spoke at length about the impact of societal attitudes in relation to sexual violence on themselves and their peers.

*“A culture of victim-blaming and dismissiveness means that when victims do come forward to try to seek justice, their experiences are invalidated - especially when the victim is a young woman”*

They felt this culture of victim-survivor blaming and stigma about sexual violence in society, especially prevalent in the media, continues to prevent young people from seeking support.

*“Young people feel so much shame people don’t report ... need to look at survivor language ... remove language about offenders than minimises their behaviour by saying things like they had such a bright future”*

Young people in regional NSW described how difficult it can be for a young person who experiences sexual violence to seek confidential support in a small town where everyone knows each other. Some choosing not to disclose to protect their reputation, or sometimes the reputation of the perpetrator. While others had to live with the knowledge that people in the community knew what had happened to them.

Additionally, young people said there are still common misconceptions that need to be challenged about who are victim-survivors of sexual violence. These misconceptions make it difficult for young men or LBGTQIA+ young people to come forward about their experiences.

*“Need to break stigma that is happens to all genders and sexualities not just women in heterosexual relationships”*

Young people described the role older generations such as parents, teachers, and community leaders play in perpetuating this stigma through maintaining outdated gender stereotypes rather than challenging these to create a culture where young people feel supported in relation to sexual violence.

*“I’m in quite a small community I find a lot of young people parrot information that’s been generational and quite negative ... often definitions are warped just by circumstance and living environment”*

However, despite the concern young people have about the culture of sexual violence that has been exposed by high profile media cases mentioned earlier, one consequence that young people felt positive about is the increased attention the topic of sexual violence is getting in public discourse through the collective advocacy work of young women with lived experience like Brittney Higgins, Chantel Contos, Saxon Mullins, and Grace Tame. They saw these young women as inspirational and brave role models for themselves and their peers.

*“It’s becoming something people are less afraid to speak out ... you make friendships and connections ... I think through that you just become a stronger group and you’re like able to advocate for something bigger as a group. That message is so much more powerful than one individual”*

They felt this focus creates opportunities for young people to actively participate and express their views to decision makers through speaking up in settings such as forums, roundtables, or taking part in marches and rallies.

# School-based and Community Awareness Education

Young people saw education as the key to addressing these unhelpful societal attitudes.

*"If the way society perceived males and females were different and children were taught that both girls and boys are equal, then respect will be established between genders and sexual violence can be lowered."*

They highlighted the importance of early education in schools to normalise conversations about healthy relationships, consent, as well as setting and respecting personal boundaries. There was consensus amongst the young people at the roundtable and through the EOI responses that the education young people currently receive in high school is not adequate and is provided too late.

*"Consent in education should be a much bigger topic in the PDHPE system and taught from a young age. Consent in general should have always been a thing like in kindy teaching it's okay to say no to even the teachers and who to go to if you have been a victim."*

They felt this education should start in primary school and develop through high school and university to cover consent education, respectful and positive sexual relationships education, bystander education, information about where victim-survivors can get support.

*"Students should be taught that sexual violence is not acceptable, how to comfort people who have been assaulted as well as how to cope if they have unfortunately been a victim of sexual violence."*

*“Often university students feel least supported or unsure where to turn after an incident of sexual violence.”*

Young people identified great examples of peer-to-peer and youth-led educational and awareness programs that are already happening in schools that they thought should be extended such as those offered by Love Bites, Consent Labs, Polished Man, and What Were You Wearing.

*“We need early intervention programs like Love Bites to be funded and available across all schools to ensure we get to young people early enough that we break the cycle.”*

Young people said education and public awareness needs to extend beyond schools to parents, families, and communities to create lasting change in the way victim-survivors are supported and challenge the stigma about sexual violence.

Young people from culturally diverse and First Nations communities highlighted that culturally inclusive education is crucial.

*“Parents need to be educated of the impacts of sexual violence... I believe in many like ethnic communities, like sex is still a taboo ... So education that can like teach parents that it wasn't the child's fault that he or she was abused is vital for the victim to like, tackle with the situation, especially like, in a time when they need this, like support from their parents the most.”*

*“More funding to be put into educational programs that will teach people about consent, sexual health and turn it into an open conversation within Aboriginal communities so people don't feel shamed when trying to open up about it.”*

# Reporting processes

The reporting process for young people was identified in both roundtables and EOIs as needing improvement.

The first area of reporting that young people spoke about was the response young victim-survivors received when disclosing sexual violence. They described the way responses from institutions such as schools or universities, which were commonly reported sites of sexual violence, had not validated their experiences or made them feel safe. Some young people spoke about the trauma of having to continue to attend the same educational institution with their offender. The institution's response in some cases left young people feeling the priority was for the institution to protect their reputation rather than support their students.

*"There is a massive issue with organisations - of all kinds but particularly schools - not properly dealing with or even attempting to cover up incidents of sexual violence in order to maintain their reputation."*

They also spoke about the need for training for first responders such as police, hospital staff and other people such as court staff, and legal professionals in working with young people and trauma informed practice. Those with experience in these systems gave mixed feedback often highlighting the retraumatising nature of these interactions.

Young people felt access to confidential reporting options such as the Sexual Assault Reporting Option (SARO) through NSW Police is extremely helpful for encouraging those over 18 years to report instances of sexual violence which they might not have otherwise done. However, they expressed concern that



there was nothing similar for those under 18 years of age suggesting these young people may be even less likely to report sexual violence.

The challenging nature of the mandatory reporting process for those under 18 years of age was raised during the roundtables and through the EOIs. Young people thought that the fear of triggering a mandatory report was often a disincentive to speak to a school counsellor. They felt there needed to be an option for anonymous reporting by those under 18 years of age to allow them to feel safe to seek support. They felt a secondary consequence of this was that offenders, especially young offenders, were not afforded the opportunity to address their actions.

*“With no option to report anonymously, victims are left with the knowledge that they either have to go through the arduous (police and court) process, or the offender may simply just move onto the next person, with no opportunity for the offender to receive education and support, to prevent re-occurrence.”*

## Access to support

Young people felt that access to government provided victim-survivor support services such as victim-survivor compensation and free counselling services are crucial to helping victim-survivors overcome the impacts of their experience.

*“These structural things that help support survivors, also like sort of validates their experiences as well beyond the fact that they're like getting access to a service that's going to help them with mental health or whatever.”*

*It's sort of like, yeah, for acknowledging that this actually happened to you. And we as like, the state government recognised that this happened."*

A number of young people spoke very positively about their involvement with support services however they felt the number of free counselling sessions offered by Victims Services should be increased beyond the current allocation of 22 hours in recognition that some young people need more time to come to terms with an experience of sexual violence.

There was much discussion about the need for services and programs to be better resourced.

*"There are some great programs out there, but they're not well funded. And they're not able to be taken to other places where they'd be amazing."*

Young people raised the issue of long wait times for counselling or lack of availability of counsellors in their local areas. This was especially true for young people in regional NSW where issues such as transport further compound young people's access to support.

*"Services just aren't available in a small town. If anything was to happen, we are lucky to have someone 45min away but others might be over an hour or more, and what if a young person doesn't have a driver's license and may not be ready to tell their parents ... that will stop them from accessing services."*

Whilst some young people reported supportive experiences through tele-counselling, they did not think this was the answer for all young people, especially in regional areas where it was more prevalent. There was

agreement that services still needed to offer a physical presence to create safe spaces to effectively engage with young people.

*“You can be there physically and feel safe to open up and share their experiences.”*

They felt young people find it difficult to speak about sexual violence and building rapport and trust over the phone was not appropriate for all young people.

*“It can be so daunting to jump on a Zoom counselling sessions and there's so much that is missed.”*

Digital access is also still an issue for a many young people. Young people living in less well-resourced or overcrowded home environments often do not have their own device or a room of their own to access online support.

There was agreement by all young people that there needs to be better promotion targeted to young people about the existence of the various kinds of support available: victim-survivor compensation, counselling, and confidential reporting options. Young people at the roundtable had not heard about some of these options so they thought it was even less likely that their peers had.

*“I think it's so important. Yeah. To reflect and recognise like how far we have and how many incredible services we actually do have. I think it's just tricky because like, not enough people know about it.”*

Several young people spoke about not having been able to access the support they needed until they were over 16 years of age when they could report or seek support without parental permission.

*"I've experienced the inaccessibility of support. Only recently, has an option emerged (as of turning 17), that allows me to potentially apply to Victim's Services for counselling. You're unable to access this support without parental involvement if you're 16 or younger. The form is exhaustive, and it has you recount everything that has happened, in order to confirm your eligibility."*

## Trauma informed and culturally safe support and education

There was much discussion about the need for responses to sexual violence including all support and education from primary prevention through to support services to be trauma informed and culturally safe for young people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. This includes First Nations young people, young people with disability, young people from culturally diverse communities including migrants and refugees, and LGBTQIA+ young people.

Young people from these backgrounds said that it was important that there was availability of education and support services provided by workers from similar backgrounds.

First Nations young people felt there needed to be a better range of support services and resources for victim-survivors as well as educational and public awareness programs within schools and for the broader community about respectful relationships, sexual violence, supporting victim-survivors and bystander resources to help normalise conversations within communities.

*“Have resources available so everyone knows what consent is and the consequences... and more funding to be put into educational programs that will teach people about consent, sexual health and turn it into an open conversation within communities so people don't feel shamed when trying to open up about it.”*

Young people from culturally diverse communities stressed that resources need to recognise that some of these communities have different understandings about sexual violence. Several young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds spoke about intergenerational differences where parents and families responded by victim-survivor blaming.

*“Some religious communities' guilt and trauma prevents people from reporting. There is often a bit of self-hated ... attacking yourself for what happened. But also the education provided by one of our local youth groups is abstinence only and you're not pure, then it's, it's your fault really.”*

All education and resources need to be targeted in a way that communities can engage with, including being provided in community languages. Young people felt education programs and resources need to be co-designed with young people from these communities to ensure they are relevant but also address any misconceptions that communities may hold. Like First Nations young people they felt there needed to be a better range of support services and resources for victim-survivors as well as educational and public awareness programs within schools and for the broader community about respectful relationships, sexual violence, supporting victim-survivors and bystander resources.

There was strong agreement that the voices of young people from socially excluded and marginalised groups need to be actively involved in developing the solutions about how to address the impacts of sexual violence in their communities.

*"I believe LGBTQIA+, disability sector, and First Nations ...are communities dominantly affected by sexual violence. I feel like these communities need to be at the forefront of any campaigns because the statistics are showing these are the communities that have been damaged by this issue the most."*

## Online Safety

Online safety and responses to online sexual violence was another area that young people said could be improved. As discussed earlier, young people spoke about the insidious nature of this kind of violence and the way it could infiltrate young people's lives. Making young people feel unsafe in their homes, their schools, universities, or workplaces, both publicly and within their friendship groups. Young people were concerned about the ease of access to pornography and unsafe, unmonitored online sites.

*"Child pornography and how minors are accessing pornography on services like Discord due to poor cyber-education and regulation."*

One issue raised was the need for better online safety education about image-based abuse that recognises young people's use of online platforms within their relationship contexts.

*"(Government needs to) work with survivors of image-based abuse to update the laws and education to reflect how our lives are increasingly moving online... (current education) sexting, just don't do it. ...It's victim blaming."*

Young people spoke about how current education that is provided is not helpful and is framed by outdated concepts that are no longer used in other sexual assault education like suggesting young people should modify their behaviour by not sharing images of themselves, even in consensual circumstances.

*“Simply telling young people not to send nudes, or to get off their phones is not a solution, it’s the same as teaching abstinence only education.”*

## Legislation

Young people welcomed recent changes in legislation such as the criminalisation of coercive control in NSW and changes to the NSW sexual consent laws focusing on the need for affirmative consent. They spoke about the important link between seeing legislation that upholds victim-survivors rights and having their experiences validated.

Young people felt there also needs to be clearer messaging about the changes to the law as this can still be confusing for young people. Young people said there is a risk that if they don't understand what sexual violence is then they do not know what to do when it happens.

Reform in workplaces to ensure sexual violence was addressed as a Work Health and Safety issue was also discussed. Several young people were aware of recommendations of recent workplace inquiries such as the Australian Human Right's Commission's Respect@Work Report which they thought should be implemented.

*“Recommendations of the Jenkins report, which is the one that looked at sexual harassment, sexual discrimination...there were some amazing recommendations particularly around how workplaces can be more safe.”*

## Offender rehabilitation

Addressing the underlying causes of sexual violence offending across the spectrum from education and early intervention through to offender rehabilitation programs was important to the young people we heard from.



*“Offenders programs – education and early intervention as well as rehabilitation like not saying that it just happens to women, but predominantly, it is male violence. Just like shifting again, that, that sort of focus on who needs rehabilitation, although both parties do need rehabilitation, like focusing on the rehabilitation of the perpetrator to do better and to be better, and actually providing them with our support services to be better and get better.”*

Young people wanted perpetrators, especially younger perpetrators, to receive support and treatment to have the best chance of being able to change their behaviours and reduce occurrence of sexual violence within society.

# Additional Roundtable Discussion Topics

Participants at the two roundtables were asked the following additional questions:

- Are you aware of the Make No Doubt campaign, and what do you think works or does not work?
- Have you heard about or been taught the new consent laws, and what do you think works or does not work?
- What is the best way to get information and resources to young people?

## Make No Doubt Campaign

All the young people consulted with had seen the Make No Doubt campaign and provided positive feedback about it. They said this campaign is a great example of how to speak about this complex topic in a way that is informative, non-judgemental, and appealing to young people. Most had seen it on their social media channels with some seeing it on TV.

*"It's not shameful"*

*"It's really relevant. And it doesn't feel like you are being preached to. Like it's not like you are being told what to do or not do."*

Response	Metropolitan	Regional
Yes	73%	100%
No	27%	0%
Not sure	0%	0%

## Consent Laws

Again, young people all knew about the changes to the consent laws. However, they said they did not understand the details. They felt there is a good opportunity for government to help young people better understand the changes, particularly how the legislation works and the consequences for breaking these laws.

*“The laws have changed and they’ve changed for the better for victim-survivors so it’s a great opportunity for us to be making sure people get taught or the messaging gets out.”*

Response	Metropolitan	Regional
Yes, I heard of them	55%	100%
Yes, I have been taught them	0%	0%
Neither	45%	0%
Not sure	0%	0%

# Best way to get information to young people

Social media channels were seen as the best way to get information across to young people in the first instance. The “Make No Doubt” campaign was highlighted as a positive example of this. Participants felt that the use of influencers could be useful if they are from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences to ensure messages are culturally relevant and safe.

*“I think survivors are some of the most diverse group of people other than that, and I'm very proud to be a part of the community. And there's a lot of different people out there. And there's so pockets in the world where people are really doing really good things. And I think we just need to celebrate that and bring that forefront and give it a platform.”*

Depictions of victim-survivors as resilient and empowered on social media or in traditional media were also seen as approaches that young people responded well to.

*“I think just not even campaigns, but rather showing victims empowering themselves through justice in even just, even if it's television shows, it gives someone that sense of support and security that perhaps things won't end as poorly. Yeah. And I think that goes quite a long way. And a good example of that is I remember, there was like a teen TV show that came out. And it really opened up the discussion around sexual violence, because it was on a popular American television show. And people all of a sudden wanted to talk about it.”*

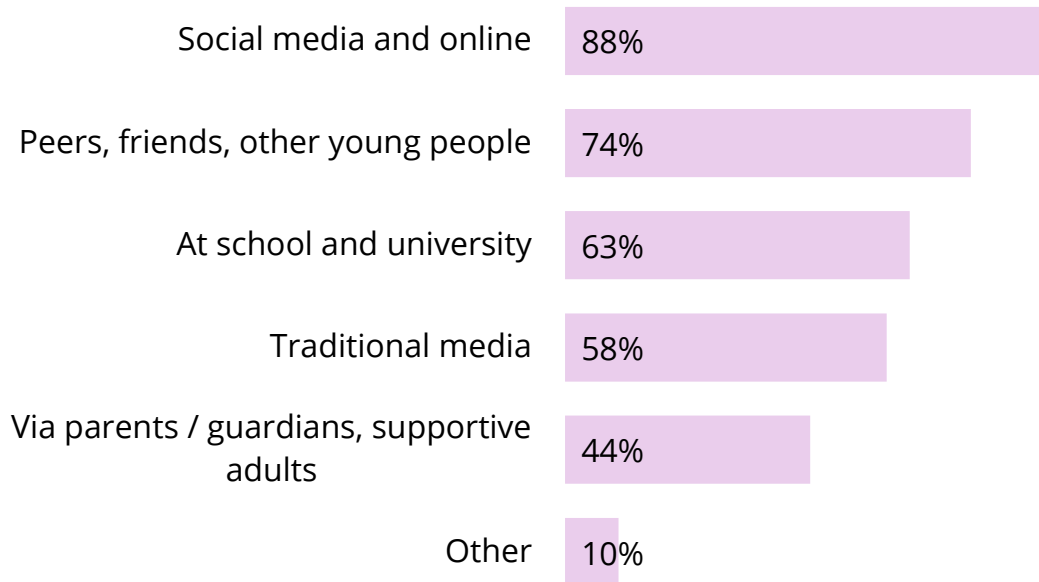
For more in depth discussions young people felt friends, peers, and trusted adults were important sources of information.

*“When we want verified info schools and universities are going to be a key factor and they can go in more depth.”*

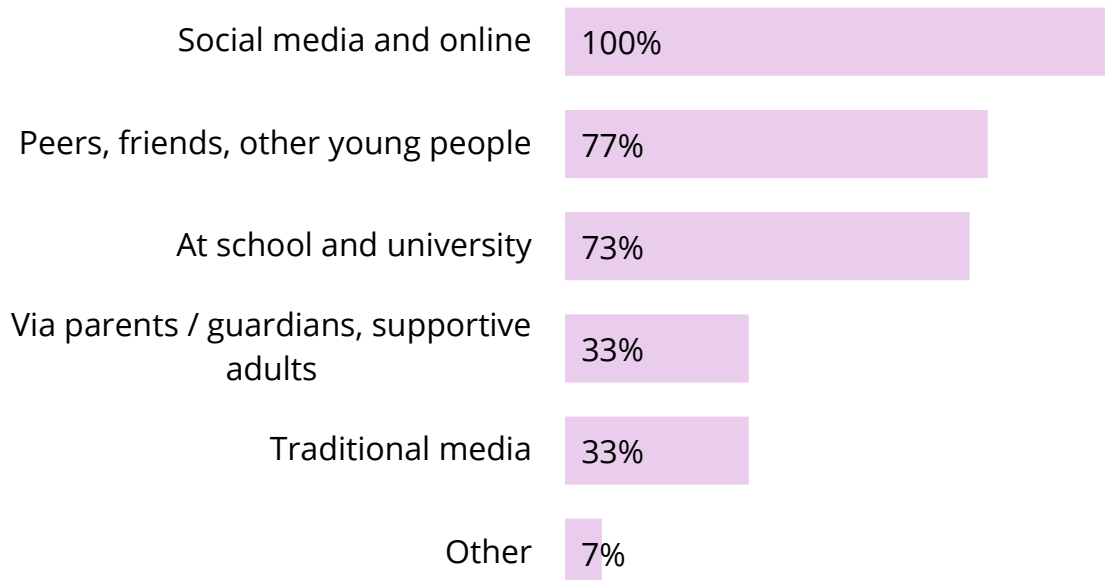
Content co-designed in partnership with young people, again from diverse backgrounds and life experiences, was seen as the best way to develop and provide information.

*“Education delivered for young people by young people, co-designed and facilitated by young people ... you feel like you are talking to peers, you can relate.”*

## Metropolitan session results: What is the best way to get information and research to young people?



## Regional session results



# Opportunities for Government to address issues and gaps

As can be seen from the feedback provided throughout this report, young people feel the response to sexual violence needs to be broad and wide ranging, from education, prevention, and early intervention through to support services, legislation reform, and offender rehabilitation.

## Inclusion of Young People's Voice

Young people's number one priority was the need for inclusion of young people's voices and lived expertise in any work being undertaken in relation to sexual violence.

There needs to be a particular focus on the inclusion of voices and experiences of young people from socially excluded groups whose experiences are not always highlighted in policy-making such as First Nations young people, young people from culturally diverse communities, young people from regional and region communities, young people with disability, LGBTQIA+ young people, and young people doing it tough.

*“Having like a taskforce that is, like, from all cultural backgrounds, and all agendas ... working with the government to, I guess, some sort of like, like policy group that goes directly and is including all of like New South Wales... include people of colour, especially with understanding like, there's more like, a lot of, I guess, barriers for us as well. I think that sort of language needs to be added.”*

Additionally, young people want opportunities to come together with decision makers in government to express their views and outline their ideas for possible solutions.

## Public Awareness and School-based Education

As mentioned above, young people want to contribute their lived expertise to the development of any awareness raising campaigns, including all education and bystander materials.

The importance of early education that is embedded in the school curriculum starting in primary school and progressing through high school was another priority area young people wanted to see government address. Young people saw education as the best way to address societal attitudes that have perpetuated a culture of victim-survivor blaming and stigma about sexual violence.

They wanted to see educational programs offered as part of regular ongoing learning in schools rather than an irregular add on subject. They felt that this helps to normalise conversations between young people about respectful relationships, consent, bystander education, and provide young people with a greater understanding about the nature of sexual violence. This in turn would help young people to recognise unsafe situations for themselves or others, know how to intervene, and learn where to seek assistance and support. Provision of non-judgement online safety education rather than only relying on education based on scare tactics, needs to be included in this learning as well.



Further, they felt government needs to focus on education and public awareness campaigns about sexual violence outside school contexts to ensure young people not in school have access to information about what to do about sexual violence and support available. Universities and workplaces were both identified as places where young people felt vulnerable due to circumstances such as limited experience, power imbalances, and reduced availability of support.

Education and awareness raising for parents and the broader community, including the media, was the other area where young people said they would like to see government attention. They felt that adults such as parents, teachers, community members, and authority figures play an important role in tackling the impacts of sexual violence on young people and ensuring young people feel safe. Members of older generations are frequently the gatekeepers to young people's access to support and legal redress so their attitudes towards young people's experiences strongly influenced whether young people felt safe to take action in response to sexual violence.

Young people believe the key to successful education is co-design with young people, using a youth-led or peer-to-peer education model. They feel there are already great examples of education and awareness programs happening in schools such as Love Bites, Consent Labs, Polished Man, and What Were You Wearing among others that could reach wider audiences with increased resourcing.

However, they stressed that government should not use a one-size-fits all model. All education and resources need to be culturally safe and relevant and again co-designed with young people from these communities.

# Better responses to incidences of sexual violence, victim-survivor support, and improved service delivery

In addition to increased education and awareness, young people wanted to see government improve responses to incidences of sexual violence and support for victim-survivors. In all cases they said there is a need for responses and support to be trauma informed and culturally safe for young people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences.

## Reporting processes

Young people found sexual violence reporting processes traumatising and disempowering. They thought having options such as anonymous reporting can give young people a sense of control in relation to deciding how they wanted to deal with an experience of sexual violence.

*“Give young people an opportunity to talk about what happened but don’t force them. It can be very traumatising to force someone to relive the trauma they had to endure.”*

Whilst they understood the rationale for mandatory reporting processes, they felt young people under 18 years of age were especially disempowered by not having an option for anonymous reporting or to access support without parental consent if under 16 years of age. They would like to see exploration of how to improve the reporting process for these young people in this age group.

## First Responders

- They also wanted to see training for first responders such as police, hospital staff, as well as other professions who work with young people in relation to sexual violence like courts health, and legal professionals, about trauma informed practice with young people so they have a better understanding about how best to support young people as well as systemic reform to address policies and processes within these contexts that are re-traumatising for victim-survivors.

## Institutional Oversight

Young people wanted to see better oversight processes in the way institutions such as schools, Universities, and workplaces deal with reports of sexual violence. As discussed earlier in this report, several young people discussed feeling deep disappointment by institutions they felt had a role in ensuring their safety.

*“Young people are let down by institutions meant to support them.”*

## Access to Support Services

In relation to ongoing support to deal with the impacts of sexual violence, young people said there should be better resourcing to increase the availability of services and that the number of free counselling sessions should be increased to allow young people the time they need to come to terms with what happened to them.

Young people in regional areas said access to tele-counselling is helpful in increasing access to support services however this should not be the solution for everyone. They felt that there needs to be more opportunities for young

people to access face to face support within their local communities for young people who are victims-survivors and those impacted by sexual violence.

Lastly young people felt there needs to be resources targeted specifically to young people about where to seek support and advice if they experience sexual violence. They agreed that there are many good services and programs, but promotion often targets adults so young people still do not know about them.

## Increase capacity of youth and community services

One opportunity to improve young people's access to youth specific services is to increase the capacity of youth and community services to support young people 12 – 24 years old across the full spectrum of service provision from prevention and education through to victim-survivor support. Young people spoke about how local youth services are often their first point of contact when seeking support in relation to sexual violence.

This should be done through increased resourcing to allow services to expand the programs and services they offer as well as through professional development to building the capacity of youth workers to address sexual violence and it's impacts on the young people with whom they work.

## Legislation and offender rehabilitation

The recent changes to coercive control and consent legislation were discussed as positive examples of how government can lead the way in relation to legal reform to improve outcomes for victim-survivors of sexual violence.

Young people saw an opportunity for government to provide clearer messaging, again directed at improving young people's understanding about the details of this new legislation and its implications.

Young people also wanted to see implementation of recommendations from Inquiries such as the Jenkins Report addressing sexual violence in the workplace.

Finally young people spoke about penalties for offenders. Young people who had experiences of court processes felt legal outcomes did not often reflect the extent of the impact that sexual violence had on their lives.

*"The consequences for perpetrators are nowhere near as harsh as they need to be... victims deal with a lifetime of consequence, because these perpetrators' actions, and they get a slap on the wrist compared to what we have to deal with. And it's not fair...I think once, once the government lays down the law and says, this is what you get, and it's harsher, and it's more serious and severe, and it's taken seriously, we'll feel hurt but we'll feel validated in our trauma. And then that's when we can start to heal and move forward."*

In addition to reviewing the appropriateness of penalties, they saw an important role for government investment in offender rehabilitation programs to address the underlying causes of sexual violence offending and to work towards reducing the occurrence of sexual violence in the first place.