



**Save the Children Australia**



# Identity on the Line

AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON ABORIGINAL YOUNG PEOPLE'S  
STREET PRESENCE IN THE SOUTH-EAST CORRIDOR OF PERTH

**Participatory Action Research Report**



**Save the Children**  
Australia



Save the Children Australia acknowledges the traditional owners and custodians of country the Noongar people and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to their Elders both past and present.





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## Disclaimer

*In order to protect children, parents, and service providers who agreed to be interviewed by Save the Children, names in this report have been changed and exact locations omitted. All testimonies are based on children's experiences living in the South East Corridor of Perth.*

*For the purposes of this report the term Aboriginal will be used generally, as there were no identified Torres Strait Islander participants engaged in the research. We respect and acknowledge that the thoughts, perspectives and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people differ greatly and we know this research highlights only a snapshot in the story of Indigenous Australia.*

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# Executive Summary

Save the Children Australia applies a customised approach to community development, applying a child rights lens, which holds powerful people and political institutions accountable for their responsibilities to those with less power. Underpinning Save the Children's philosophy and practice of child-rights programing are four key components of Child Rights, namely: Right to Non-Discrimination, Right to Survival and Development, Right to Participation; and looking after the Best Interests of the Child.

In late 2012, Save the Children Australia undertook a Participatory Action Research project to identify the reasons behind, and understand the lived experience of, 'street-present' Aboriginal young people in the South East Corridor of Perth, Western Australia. The research engaged 120 Aboriginal young people through semi-structured interviews and 20 young people through a Photovoice project, along with more than 50 adults and service providers from the region. The research aimed to explore why young people, in particular Aboriginal young people, spend time on the streets and trains, and to identify the differing perspectives and the perceived and real risks that these young people face.

The focus of the research was to provide an alternative perspective to the dominant popular discourse regarding young people's street presence, which tends to portray them as engaging in anti-social and criminal behaviour. The language used by the sector, policies put out by the Government, and actions taken by service providers which frame young people's problems and solutions as solely crime based are limited in their interpretation of street behaviour and thus in their ability to identify a positive path forward for youth development.

This study found that street and train presence is primarily a response to complexities of young people's social, cultural and physical environments. By examining the factors, which lead to young people spending time on the streets and trains this report aims to provide a better understanding of the causes of street presence, and provides an alternative lens to viewing and responding to young people's street presence.

The research identified both 'push' and 'pull' factors that contribute to young people 'hanging out' on the streets and trains. Push factors include a desire to escape an unsafe home or community environment; pull factors include a desire to be with peers, to feel a sense of belonging with others, and to enjoy a feeling of independence away from parents and other adults. Cultural identity and socio-economic status were also identified as significant contributing factors to the choices young people make, including the spaces they choose to 'hang out' in.

The phrase or idea of 'nowhere else to go' was repeatedly used by young people and adults to explain why young people 'hung out' on the train or streets. The streets and trains are a free space, which were more often seen as a safe space for young people to explore and connect with friends in ways they themselves decide. If youth programs want to emulate this or vie for the attention of these young people, they must connect with them in the same way, or provide them with the same opportunities.

As a result of this research Save the Children Australia makes the following recommendations for consideration by all stakeholders including Government, non-Government, private and community sectors who are working to support the development of Aboriginal young people in Australia:

- That governments, service providers, and the wider community avoid the discriminatory practice of unfairly framing street-present young people as criminals and delinquents.
- That more attention and research needs to be focused on how the current punitive approaches, racist ideologies, and systemic lack of culturally appropriate support are prohibiting young people to achieve and realise their aspirations.
- That governments and service providers prioritise early intervention initiatives, which support the development of Aboriginal children from earlier ages through their teenage years.
- That governments and service providers take into account the underlying causes of young peoples' street-presence by working with care-givers, families and wider kinship networks.
- That government and service providers prioritise culturally appropriate youth development, diversion, and leadership programs, which engage young people in pro-social activities that foster empowerment, positive peer culture, and participation in society.
- That youth development programs at all levels, from schools and diversionary programs to tertiary interventions, need to be designed with young people, not for them
- That governments and service providers prioritise opportunities and activities that foster the wider community's voice such as action research projects.
- That all services should work closely with their local Aboriginal communities, including young people, families, and community Elders, to develop culturally appropriate programs, which are tailored to look after the best interests and needs of children in ways that those communities see fit.
- That government funding for youth services need to be responsive to the differing needs and best interests of children in each community, broadened to encompass children of younger ages, and focused on youth development outcomes to be able to achieve lasting impacts for children, young people, families, and the community.

# Prologue

*Our vision is a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation.*

Save the Children Australia's approach to community development applies a child rights lens, which holds powerful people and political institutions accountable for their responsibilities to those with less power. Child rights programming supports children, especially those who are disadvantaged, disempowered and discriminated against, to claim their rights. The aim of this approach is to increase the impact of programs and strengthen the sustainability of strong communities by addressing the underlying causes of violations to children's rights, and bringing about policy and practice changes to make a sustained difference to the lives of children, both now, and into the future.

Underpinning Save the Children's philosophy and practice of child-rights programming are four key components which draw upon the general principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, namely (1) ensuring no child suffers from discrimination irrespective of the child's, or his or her parents or legal guardians, ethnicity, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status; (2) putting the best interests of the child at the forefront of all decisions made, which could affect them; (3) upholding the child's rights to life, survival, and development to enable them to reach their full potential and play their part in a peaceful, tolerant society; and (4) ensuring children have the right to participation, as children have the capability of forming their own views and deserve the right to be heard in all decisions, which affect them.

We know that every child has their own individual needs, vulnerabilities, and aspirations; development organisations and government agencies working with children should ensure that the voices of children, their families and community are heard when, in particular, developing services and responses to their needs.



## Introduction

In response to the growing phenomenon of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) and non-Aboriginal young people's street presence late at night in Perth, Western Australia, particularly in the suburbs along the Armadale-Perth train line, Save the Children Australia, in partnership with local agencies, began to deliver night-time engagement programs. These programs aimed to engage street-present young people to divert them away from what was perceived as unsafe environments and potential anti-social and criminal activity.

What became clear was that diversionary programs, although effective, do not fully address the underlying causes of street presence. We needed to broaden our knowledge and understanding of the reasons behind young people riding on the trains and 'hanging out' on the streets late at night; to ensure services are providing appropriate, respectful and sustainable support for young people's development.

We know that children and young people are often prohibited from full participation in their communities because they are considered the spectators of society, rather than the social actors. The primary intention of this project was to listen to the voices of those young people who are often excluded from decision-making and whose voices often go unheard (Cooper et al., 2002; Bessant et al, 1998).

In late 2012, Save the Children Australia undertook a Participatory Action Research project to identify the reasons behind, and understand the lived experience of, 'street-present' Aboriginal young people in the South East Corridor of Perth. The research explored why young people, especially Aboriginal young people, spend time on the streets and trains, the differing perspectives regarding the situations of these young people, and the perceived and real risks they face.

To date, the dominant societal view of young people's street presence tends to portray young people engaging in anti-social and criminal behaviour. Young people are perceived to be 'up to no good' and causing a public nuisance when hanging out on the streets or on the trains. By framing this behaviour from a perspective of criminality, it is easy to generalise that these young people are aspiring criminals and a menace to society.

Corresponding strategies to address this behaviour focus on the negative and often perpetuate discriminatory perceptions of young people, particularly Aboriginal young people. Examples of this include the Northbridge Curfew and stop and search policies. Such strategies are largely ineffective over the long-term and only serve to reinforce negative stereotypes of young people and in effect do little to promote positive and constructive approaches to youth development.

By exploring the factors which lead to young people spending time on the streets and trains, this report aims to provide a snapshot of how young people feel they are perceived by society, share their views, aspirations, and challenges and unpack some of the causes of young people's street presence. This report will take a rights-based perspective, highlighting identified violations to young people's rights and provide recommendations on how these rights could be more adequately upheld. The report will also propose an alternative perspective to how we view, work with, and support the development of young people.



## Data Collection Methodology

The findings in this report are based on surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions with young people, service providers and parents who live and work in the South East Corridor of Perth.

Researchers engaged 452 young people and 52 adults through local schools, community events, local youth services, and a series of research trips on the Armadale-Perth train line.

The research was conducted between August 2012 and January 2013 and predominantly used semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Questions covered participants' perceptions of a range of issues including the reasons why young people spend time on the street or the Armadale-Perth train line, the experiences of these young people, and the risks and challenges their street or train presence may cause. Research was predominantly conducted in schools, on the streets, on the trains and at public events.

The research was supported by a Photovoice project, which gave cameras to twenty Aboriginal young people from a local primary school. This element of the research enabled these young people to visually record and reflect upon their daily experiences.

Out of the 452 young people engaged in this project fourteen per cent identified as Aboriginal, and a further twelve per cent stated it was 'too complicated' to identify as either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. The 'it's complicated' option was included based on consultation with the project's Young People's Aboriginal Advisory Group, which highlighted that issues of cultural identity are complicated for many young people. It was hoped that this option would therefore incorporate a wider sense of identity and allow for more flexibility for participants. For the purposes of this report – the results have focused on the responses given by 120 young people who identified as Aboriginal and those who felt it was too complicated to identify exclusively with one heritage.



## Basic Demographics

Out of the 120 Aboriginal young people surveyed, 44 per cent were aged between 11 - 12 and 37 per cent were between 13 - 14. Six per cent of respondents were under the age of 10.

There was a fairly even split in gender, with 49 per cent being female and 51 per cent being male.

A large percentage of participants had a strong connection to their language, with 39 per cent of Aboriginal young people stating they spoke a language other than English at home.



## Project Governance

For the purposes of this project, Save the Children Australia established a Project Management and Aboriginal Advisory Group (AAG) to provide primary oversight of the project and make key decisions.

This group was convened by Save the Children Australia and included local Aboriginal elders and other Aboriginal stakeholders, as recommended by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) Guidelines "Working and Walking Together".

In addition to the AAG, Save the Children Australia established the Young People's Aboriginal Advisory Group (YPAAG) to provide feedback on research processes and tools, assist with cultural guidance on engaging with research participants, and to participate in research processes such as school visits and train trips.

Save the Children Australia sought and gained ethical approval for this research project through the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee (WAAHEC).

# Perspectives and Themes

## Emerging from the Research

Not surprisingly, the research found that there are differing perspectives between how young people view their street and train presence, as compared with how the wider community commonly perceives that same behaviour.

Young people clearly said that street and train presence is primarily a response to the complexities and challenges of their home and community environments, and that street presence is simply part

of their process in seeking out a sense of belonging, safety, excitement, and connection to culture. In fact, this research found that this part of Aboriginal young people's lives is an example of their resilience and ability to respond to life's challenges, and has become a critical part of how many young people are forming their own individual identities.

This perspective of identity formation is counter to the dominant approaches that criminalise young people, which underpins the majority of contemporary policy and practice responses to the presence of young people on the street and trains. This overarching perspective of identity formation is explored in depth throughout this report.

This report explores various areas of young people's lives that influence the development of their identity, briefly unpacking how each of these areas relate to the 'push' and 'pull' factors which lead to Aboriginal young people's street and train presence.





# Criminology Perspective

In order to understand an alternative view of young people's street presence, we must first unpack the issues and child rights violations that occur as a result of the more dominant approaches that tend to criminalise young people.

Media reports and government policies such as the Northbridge Curfew frame young people's behaviour on the streets or at train stations as acting 'in a disorderly manner or in ways that threaten the stability, public order and safety of others' (Office of Crime Prevention: Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2006). Crime based perspectives, policies, and practices can discriminate against young people who live in lower socio-economic areas (Myers, 2012) where in particular, Aboriginal young people who present on the streets are more often marginalised, labelled as aspiring criminals and a problem for society (Head, 2011; Leadbeater, 2003; Morsillo, 2007).

The predominant strategies to address street presence, such as increased policing and disbanding large groups are also framed from this negative crime-based perspective and are limited, at best, in their ability to respond to the underlying causes of young people's street presence.

Viewing the behaviour of young people as acting in criminal ways simply because they are on the streets or at the train station is discriminatory and significantly limits the range of solutions to influence positive youth development. Identifying the young person as the problem, rather than their environment, leads to the stereotyping of these young people as criminals and this research provides evidence that this stereotyping has flow-on effects to that young person's sense of identity and self-worth. In particular, an overemphasis on linking Aboriginal young people with substance use and criminality continues to reinforce the perception that Aboriginal people are intrinsically more irresponsible, criminal, and overcome by alcohol and drugs than other young people (Palmer and Collard, 1994). Such perspectives facilitate further marginalisation and discrimination of Aboriginal communities (Bond, 2005; Lyons & Janca, 2012; Priest, 2011).

This is not to suggest that young people are not ever involved in crime. Rather the language used by the sector, policies put out by the government, and actions taken by service providers which frame young people's problems, and potential solutions to those problems, as crime based (e.g. criminal intent, crime prevention, etc.) are limited in their interpretation of street-present behaviour and thus limited in their ability to identify a positive path forward for youth development. This current approach clearly violates young people's right to non-discrimination and development, which inhibits them from reaching their full potential. It is clear from the research that these young people feel misunderstood, stereotyped, and don't feel that their voices are being heard, which is a further violation on their right to full participation.

Alternative interpretations have the potential to lead to more supportive, sustainable, and positive solutions to young people's development.

'EVERYONE WANTS TO BE TREATED WITH RESPECT; THE POINT IS THAT SOME CHILDREN DO NOTHING TO BE ACCORDED SUCH RESPECT. WHEN THEY ARE SWEARING AND ABUSIVE TOWARDS "AUTHORITY" THEY CAN'T EXPECT TO BE ASKED "HI! HOW ARE YOU?" ETC' (SERVICE PROVIDER).



THIS IS HOW I FEEL WHEN I GET BLAMED FOR SOMETHING I DIDN'T DO (12 YEAR OLD GIRL)

'MANY ARE BROUGHT UP TO STEAL. THEY ARE BROUGHT UP WITH A 'CHIP ON THEIR SHOULDER' (SERVICE PROVIDER).

WE GET LOOKED AT BADLY CAUSE WE'RE ABORIGINAL. JUST YESTERDAY I GOT ON THE TRAIN TO GO TO CAROUSEL THESE PEOPLE START LOOKIN AT ME BADLY, LIKE I WAS GONNA STEAL FROM THEM OR SOMETHIN. I SAT NEXT TO THIS LADY ON THE TRAIN AND SHE GOT UP AND WENT TO SIT SOMEWHERE ELSE. (13 YEAR OLD GIRL).

I WISH THE 'SYSTEMS' AROUND OUR YOUNG PEOPLE WERE SET UP TO SUPPORT THEM AND NOT TO MAKE THEM FAIL. STOP AND SEARCH LAWS, MOVE ON LAWS AND THE NEW SOCIAL GATHERING '12 PEOPLE IS A PARTY' LAWS DON'T WORK. IT'S DISGUSTING AND NEEDS CREATIVE SOLUTIONS, YOUTH FRIENDLY EDUCATION, AND TRAINING TO PEOPLE IN 'POWER POSITIONS', FINANCIAL BACKING AND MORE POSITIVE IMAGES OF YOUNG PEOPLE DOING THE WONDERFUL THINGS THAT THEY ARE CAPABLE OF DOING. (SERVICE PROVIDER).



# Identity Perspective

Taking into account the 'best interests' of children and young people and their right to survival, development, and non-discrimination; a more powerful way of viewing young people's street presence is through exploring and understanding the dynamics of young people's lived experience and how their environment affects the development of their identity over time.

We can interpret the results of this research on street-present young people, as young people simply responding to complex environments and in fact view their street-presence as an indicator of their resilience in responding to life's adversities.

Every human being is subject to rapid psychological growth in their formative years and amidst new cognitive abilities, logical thinking, physiological changes, and social demands, young people move towards new behaviours of self-sufficiency, autonomy, relationships, commitments to peers, and social interactions. All young people develop their sense of 'self' over time, searching for 'what makes them who they are' - their identity (Erikson, 1968). That sense of identity is in-part defined by their environment, such as family, culture, school and peer relationships (Choate, 2007). The other

key factor is that adolescence is the first stage in these young people's lives where they feel they are in control of their own development, decisions and actions. During this period in their lives, all young people struggle to discover their own identity, while negotiating and struggling with social interactions, hardships, the need to 'fit in', and developing a sense of morality and right from wrong. When in crisis or hardship, young people search for people, activities, and places that give them a sense of belonging and security, which in turn helps them, form their sense of identity (Erikson, 1968).

Therefore, strategies to address young people's street presence and potential anti-social activity should be aimed at supporting young people to engage in constructive activities, spaces, and groups, which help them to form their own meaningful and positive identity.


More recent literature on urban studies highlights the pressing desire of young people for spaces 'to hang out', to be with their friends, to feel safe and secure, and to have the chance to meet new people (Thomas, 2005; Gough, 2008; Langevang, 2008; Langevang and Gough, 2009; Porter et al, 2010; Laughlin and Johnson, 2011: as referenced in Skelton, 2013a). What is striking is how few cities actually provide these spaces (Skelton, 2013a). This research highlighted the importance that both street and train presence had in the formation of young people's identities and how the dynamics of their environment influenced their lives.

Taking an identity perspective, the key questions should therefore be: *"What does a secure form of identity mean to a young person?"* and *"How can we support the formation of that identity through changing our policies, practices and approach to young people's development?"*

'UNDERSTAND THAT GATHERING TOGETHER IS A NORMAL THING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE. WE NEED TO INCLUDE YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE LIFE OF OUR CITY WITHOUT DRIVING THEM OUT OF THE AREAS THEY WANT TO GATHER IN. (SERVICE PROVIDER).

'I WISH THAT YOUNG PEOPLE WERE FINALLY UNDERSTOOD AND TREATED WITH THE RESPECT AND HUMAN RIGHTS THAT THEY DESERVE', (SERVICE PROVIDER),

YOUNG PEOPLE REPRESENT FUTURE GENERATION AND NEED TO BE VALUED BOTH AT HOME AND IN THE COMMUNITY. (PARENT).





## Aboriginal Identity

Young people's connection to their Aboriginality is a significant strength and should be celebrated and supported. The connection Aboriginal young people have to their culture and community, in particular, influences their sense of belonging and identity, and in-turn is a significant factor of their resilience.

Most young people spoke positively about their Aboriginality with feelings of pride, respect and happiness about being connected to their culture.

Many also spoke about the inequalities that they experience on a day-to-day basis as a result of their Aboriginality and made connections to historical and contemporary racism, colonisation and oppression by those in power and authority. For young people, the attitudes of discrimination held in the past, and the treatment given to Aboriginal people today, continues to impact on their sense of identity.

Young people spoke about their personal experience of racism, discrimination, rejection and marginalization by mainstream society and how this exclusion from community resulted in feelings of depression, guilt and even anger. Yet, despite these feelings many young people spoke about how their connection to their culture and the support they get from their Elders and family is what gives them a sense of happiness.

The ongoing complex nature of cultural identity was clearly shown by how many participants chose not to identify as Aboriginal when taking part in this research. Fourteen per cent of participants identified as Aboriginal, while a further twelve per cent chose the 'it's complicated' option. This, in itself, highlights the difficulties that some Aboriginal young people had in identifying solely with one cultural heritage.

"I LIKE BEING ABORIGINAL, BUT WHEN I TELL PEOPLE I AM, THEY DON'T BELIEVE ME BECAUSE I AM WHITE. THAT MAKES ME FEEL SAD"

(12 YEAR OLD BOY).



THIS PHOTO REPRESENTS THE DIFFERENT SKIN TONES OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE. I AM ABORIGINAL, BUT I AM WHITE. I OFTEN GET TEASED FOR BEING A WHITE/BLACK. I FELT ASHAMED OF MY SKIN COLOUR, UNTIL I TOOK THIS PHOTO. RACISM HAS TO STOP EVERYWHERE IN AUSTRALIA. (12 YEAR OLD GIRL)



I FEEL THAT PEOPLE OFTEN LOOK DOWN ON ABORIGINAL PEOPLE BECAUSE SOME ABORIGINALS GET DRUNK AND SIT AROUND AT THE PARK YELLING, BUT THERE ARE OTHER ABORIGINALS WHO WORK AND ARE GOOD PEOPLE. I TOOK THIS PHOTO BECAUSE IT REPRESENTS WHO I AM. I FEEL PROUD TO BE ABORIGINAL AND I WISH PEOPLE STOPPED TALKING DOWN TO US. (12 YEAR OLD BOY)



I LIKE GOING BUSH. IT'S WHERE I FEEL GOOD ABOUT LIFE. I AM NOT ALLOWED TO GO UP THERE YET, CAUSE THE ELDERS HAVEN'T TAKEN ME THERE YET. US BOYS, WE GET TAUGHT ABOUT SPIRITUAL THINGS AND IT'S REALLY COOL. (12 YEAR OLD BOY)



I AM ABORIGINAL AND I AM VERY PROUD ABOUT BEING DIFFERENT. THE PEOPLE IN MY FAMILY ALL TELL ME STORIES ABOUT HOW IMPORTANT IT IS TO KNOW OUR TRADITIONS (11 YEAR OLD GIRL)

"SOMETIMES, I FEEL LIKE I AM NOT ACCEPTED ANYWHERE. THE WHITE PEOPLE THAT KNOW I AM ABORIGINAL, CALL ME NAMES, THE BLACK PEOPLE THAT LOOK AT ME DON'T REALLY ACCEPT ME BECAUSE I AM WHITE" (11 YEAR OLD GIRL).

'THE MAIN METHOD OF TRANSPORT FOR OUR YOUNG PEOPLE IS TRAINS AS THEY DON'T HAVE CARS AND BUSES ARE SOMETIMES IRREGULAR: THEREFORE THEY ARE ALWAYS SEEING AND BUMPING INTO FRIENDS AT THE TRAIN STATIONS OR ON THE TRAINS. TRAINS ARE A MEETING POINT FOR GROUPS - PARTICULARLY PERTH TRAIN STATION' (SERVICE PROVIDER).



IT'S ALWAYS GOOD TO HAVE FRIENDS YOU KNOW HAVE YOUR BACK (10 YEAR OLD BOY)

'THE TRAINS HAVE BECOME A SPACE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE IDENTIFY AS A PLACE THAT CAN BE THEIRS. AS OPPOSED TO HOME WHICH MAY BELONG TO THE PARENTS'

(SERVICE PROVIDER).



THIS IS ONE OF MY BEST FRIENDS. WE SHARE EVERYTHING. IT'S GOOD THAT WE LIVE CLOSE TO EACH OTHER. WE SUPPORT EACH OTHER (12 YEAR OLD GIRL)



THIS IS A PHOTO OF MY FRIENDS AND I TOOK IT BECAUSE THEY'RE ALWAYS THERE FOR ME. WE ALL LIVE CLOSE TO EACH OTHER AND WE HANG OUT EVERY DAY (12 YEAR OLD BOY)

## Friends and Influence of Peers



For all Aboriginal young people, who took part in this research, their sense of 'belonging' and 'connection' to their friends and peers was highlighted as a critical aspect in their lives.

Service providers and parents also emphasised the importance of these relationships. One service provider noted that *'young people like to 'belong' and being with other young people 'hanging out' gives them sense of belonging'*.

Peer culture was seen to be more influential than parental values. Relationships within peer groups and social networks play a large role in fulfilling young peoples need to 'connect', receive support and find safety. For young people, public places such as the trains, stations, parks and the streets offer an open meeting place where socialising and connection can take place.

Hanging out on the trains, in particular, was seen as typical of young people's behaviour in that it gave them the chance to get together, catch up with friends, and also formed a style of socialising. This sense of belonging is tied not only to others, but also to the space itself. The streets and trains are a mutual common ground, belonging to young people where they have some level of authority and can negotiate their own reality.

The research found that relationships with peers are the primary motivation for young people to 'hang out' on the streets. It is quite normal for young people to seek membership of a large group as a safe space to negotiate their own identity. One service provider noted that 'spending time with their friends in large groups allows young people to feel anonymous'. Adults who took part in the research recognised the need for young people to identify within their own cultural groups or communities, and that the streets and trains were the places where young people often felt comfortable to bond with others to share and learn from others.

'YOUNG PEOPLE GO ON THE TRAINS BECAUSE IT IS WHERE OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE ARE. IT'S A NEUTRAL PLACE, THAT DOESN'T CLOSE OR SHUT DOWN. THERE ARE NOT ALWAYS AUTHORITY FIGURES AROUND' (SERVICE PROVIDER)

# Family Dynamics

'Hanging out' on the streets or on the trains is often simply a part of young people engaging with their family, both immediate and more often extended family networks. Family relationships were described as a key part of what gave young people their sense of belonging.

Interviews with young people on train trips found that friends and relatives rode trains with them since they had 'nothing better to do'. Being with family can also promote feelings of safety. When asked about what being safe meant, one Aboriginal young girl answered, simply, 'my brother', while another found safety in '...staying with my friends and my mum'.

Grandparents are also viewed as extremely important and highly respected sources for teaching traditional law and culture and, grandmothers in particular, provide a sense of security for Aboriginal children. Eleven per cent of the Aboriginal young people who took part in this study said they spend a lot of time in their grandparents' care.

This echoes the strong values of extended family and kinship networks of Aboriginal communities and is often seen as a protective factor for many children (Daly & Smith, 2005; Morphy, 2006).

Despite this, some service providers interviewed felt that young people who have high levels of street-presence were often under their grandparents' care or the care of other family members, because of either family breakdown or because their parents were away or unable to care for their children.

However, it is unclear if living with certain caregivers makes a young person more likely to spend time on the streets or trains. The research findings suggest that unstable or unhealthy home environments, violence, substance abuse, and a lack of support are more likely to contribute to a young person's street presence than who is providing the care.

What is critical is the need to avoid generalisations about caregivers and what type of 'care' does or does not contribute to street presence. One service provider stated that 'it's dangerous to make assumptions that the children of particular parents will allow their children to be street present- some parents do not 'allow' it'.

'SOMETIMES THE PARENTS HAVE PROBLEMS OR ARE DYSFUNCTIONAL. OTHER TIMES STUDENTS HAVE OK FAMILY SITUATIONS AND PARENTS/GRANDPARENTS WHO REALLY TRY TO DO THINGS FOR THEM AND ARE CONCERNED ABOUT WHERE THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY ARE DOING' (SERVICE PROVIDER).

'MANY PARENTS ARE OFTEN STRUGGLING THEMSELVES WITH ISSUES SUCH AS DRUGS AND ALCOHOL' (SERVICE PROVIDER).

'AT NIGHT IT IS GREAT TO BE ON THE TRAINS MEETING UP WITH EVERYONE, LIKE FRIENDS, COUSINS, FAMILY OR JUST PEOPLE WHO ARE DOING SAME THING' (15 YEAR OLD GIRL).

MY MOTHER IS ABORIGINAL, BUT SHE ABANDONED ME AND LEFT ME WITH MY DAD, BUT BECAUSE BOTH OF THEM WENT TO JAIL, NOW MY GRAN'MA LOOKS AFTER ME. I DON'T KNOW MY MOTHER AND I DON'T WANT TO KNOW HER. SHE LEFT ME, SO I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT MY ABORIGINAL CULTURE. (12 YEAR OLD GIRL)

'[I FIND SAFETY IN]...BEING WITH AN ADULT WHO CAN STAND THEIR GROUND IN BIG CROWDS' (12 YEAR OLD BOY)



CHILDREN AROUND THE WORLD OFTEN GET ABUSED BY THEIR PARENTS BECAUSE IT MAKES THE PARENTS FEEL POWERFUL. I PERSONALLY BELIEVE THAT CHILDREN SHOULD BE TREATED WITH RESPECT. IF PARENTS WANT THEIR CHILDREN TO RESPECT THEM, THEY SHOULD RESPECT THEIR CHILDREN. (12 YEAR OLD GIRL)

## Unsafe

## Home Environments

While family relationships were viewed as supportive in the formation of young people's positive identity, the research also clearly identified that families were often the cause of street presence, with young people stating that they were not always safe, comfortable, or welcome at home.

Service providers, parents, and young people indicated that the main issues at home revolved around violence, overcrowding, drug and alcohol use, lack of involvement or interest by parents, and mental health issues. One service provider argued that the streets and trains were safer than at home as they provide a place where older young people could look after younger children. For many young people, these issues are a daily reality and were often a significant 'push' factor to spend time on the streets and on the trains. The question here is *how do we better support the underlying issues that cause unsafe environments at home?*

Some service providers and parents suggested that negative parenting behaviours influence street presence and that being on the streets and trains is neither a healthy activity nor a positive means to build identity. Fourteen per cent of Aboriginal young people did identified that they felt safe hanging out on the streets and that in some cases, the streets and trains were seen as a space where they seek refuge from troubles at home. This however is not to suggest that the streets or trains are a safe alternative for young people.

When asked about 'family dynamics' seventeen per cent of Aboriginal young people stated that they liked to spend time at home and eight per cent stated that they would limit where they go to where their parents say they can. This could relate back to children's desire for autonomy at this stage in their lives; however it also could potentially reveal a higher level of conflict in the household. Some young people indicated wanting to be anywhere their parents weren't.

Young people can feel disempowered and overwhelmed by 'too much violence' (service provider) in the home. Associated feelings of 'shame' mean that going to the streets or riding on the trains may be used to disengage from this negative environment. In doing so, they are able to connect with friends and peers and potentially build an alternate identity away from the influence of their family. The research found that older children in particular developed this alternative identity by taking on new responsibilities, such as looking after younger children.

In the absence of positive adult role models at home, friendships on the streets can provide protection and alternative support structures, where young people can develop their identities. One service provided termed this their 'Street Family'.

'OVERCROWDING AT HOME, OTHER SIBLINGS, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE IN THE HOME MAKE IT UNPLEASANT FOR MANY STUDENTS TO BE AT HOME'

(SERVICE PROVIDER)



'LOTS OF KIDS HERE RUN AWAY FROM HOME BECAUSE THEIR PARENTS HURT THEM OR ABUSE THEM BECAUSE THEY ARE DRUNK OR ON DRUGS. I KNOW SOME KIDS WHO HID UP THIS AIR-CONDITIONING VENT BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T WANT PEOPLE TO FIND THEM. THEY STAYED UP THERE ALL WEEKEND' (11 YEAR OLD BOY)

'I PREVIOUSLY WORKED WITH A YOUNG PERSON WHO REPORTEDLY CHOSE TO BE STREET PRESENT AS HE FELT SAFER SLEEPING WITH HIS FRIENDS ON THE STREETS THAN HE DID AT HOME'

(SERVICE PROVIDER).

'DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS PREVALENT AND OLDER KIDS WILL TAKE THE YOUNGER KIDS ONTO THE TRAINS AS A SAFETY PLAN'

(SERVICE PROVIDER).

'...IN THE STREETS AND PUBLIC PLACES YOUNG PEOPLE CAN EXHIBIT LEADERSHIP RATHER THAN FEEL POWERLESS, LIKE AT HOME' (SERVICE PROVIDER).



## Poverty and Disadvantage

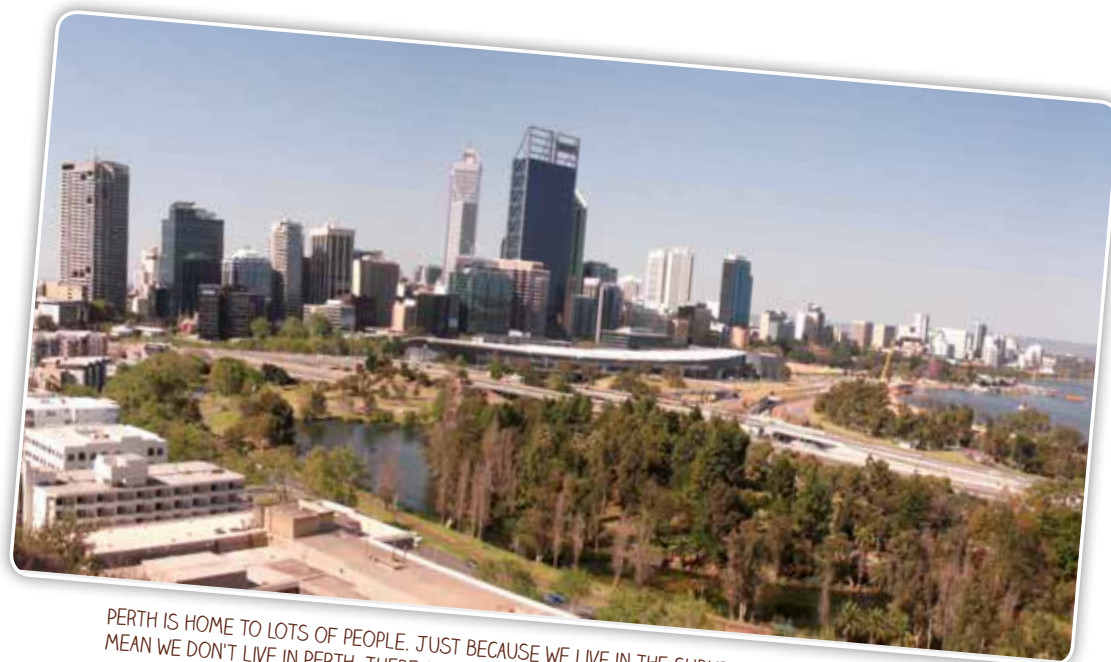
Socioeconomic status has been shown to be influential in the formation of a young person's identity (Skelton, 2013b). Young people are very aware of the wider world they live in; they are also aware of the social differences that often exist between themselves and others.

For the young people surveyed, who they are and their identity, is in-part being defined by where they live and who they hang out with. Perception of how young people view themselves is clearly influenced by their perceived notions of social status and levels of disadvantage. This perception can influence the decisions they make and aspirations they have for themselves.

Young people's street presence can also be influenced by boredom, and many families are unable to afford to provide their children with things that gain their interest and provide entertainment such as the X-Box, PlayStation, computers, or the Internet. One service provider called this, *'teenage currency'*. Without this *'teenage currency'* young people already living in challenging situations with limited protective factors and significant risk factors may seek out alternative means and other avenues to entertain themselves. However, in respect to their limited resources, another service provider stated that if *'young people do not have the money to afford other options or activities they will end up socialising where it is cheaper or free to spend time'*, which is often on the streets or trains.

This is not to say that only those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds 'hang out on the streets'. As one service provider stated, *"Many 'types' of young people enjoy the streets- it's a part of individuation". The difference is that "financially secure young people can afford to, and have power to, choose other venues and activities"*.

CAUSE WE LIVE IN THE GHETTO  
BRO, THAT'S IT, WE NEED TO  
BE STRONG, THAT'S HOW WE  
SURVIVE OUT 'ERE (12 YEAR OLD BOY).



PERTH IS HOME TO LOTS OF PEOPLE. JUST BECAUSE WE LIVE IN THE SUBURBS DOESN'T MEAN WE DON'T LIVE IN PERTH. THERE ARE SOME SUBURBS THAT HAVE VIOLENCE AND OTHERS DON'T. (11 YEAR OLD GIRL)

I JUST GO AND HANG OUT WITH MY FRIENDS. THEY'RE OLDER  
SO WE DO LOTS OF DIFFERENT STUFF. WHAT'S THE POINT OF  
STAYING AROUND HERE, I MAY AS WELL GO OUT. IT'S MORE FUN  
BEING IN THE STREET THAN BEING AT HOME. (12 YEAR OLD BOY)

'STOP FINING KIDS ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT. \$100 FINE DOES NOT  
PREVENT THEM FROM RIDING ON THE TRAINS IT JUST MEANS THEY  
HAVE ALREADY FALLEN IN A HOLE THEY CANNOT GET OUT OF WHICH  
WILL KEEP THEM UNEMPLOYED LONGER, AS NOT BEING ABLE GET  
A DRIVER'S LICENSE MEANS THEY HAVE YET ANOTHER BARRIER TO  
EMPLOYMENT AND INDEPENDENCE' (SERVICE PROVIDER)



'YOUNG PEOPLE LOVE TO FEEL INDEPENDENT AND EXPLORE AND SOCIALISE AND THIS CAN OFTEN MEAN THEY END UP JUST WALKING AROUND THE STREETS OR ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT OR IN PUBLIC PLACES'. (SERVICE PROVIDER).

'LOTS OF PEOPLE RECKON WE ARE GONNA STEAL STUFF. WE GO INTO THE SHOPS AND WE HAVE MONEY TO PAY FOR THINGS, BUT THEN THE SECURITY JUST STARTS FOLLOWING US AROUND. THEN THEY TELL US TO LEAVE. THEY EVEN ASK US TO EMPTY OUR POCKETS. I FEEL LIKE I CAN'T BE TRUSTED' (13 YEAR OLD GIRL).

'YOUNG PEOPLE VALUE THEIR INDEPENDENCE, AND ALSO DON'T WISH TO RELY ON PARENTS TO GET THEM PLACES, OR KNOW WHERE THEY ARE GOING' (SERVICE PROVIDER).

## Challenges to Independence

Becoming independent and self-reliant is a fundamental part of young people growing up and developing their sense of identity (Erikson, 1968). Young people's stories give profound insight into the way they experience discrimination and the sense of negativity they often feel from those in authority, and the general public, who seem to mistrust them.

Young people felt they are often linked to criminal behaviour simply because of their ethnicity, socio-economic status or their age. Young people growing up in these social contexts are all too aware of the assumptions made by others and the way that adults treat them. This experience of discrimination only strengthens the divide, misunderstanding, and mistrust between young people and adults or authority figures.

As an example of this discrimination, only a small percentage of young people indicated that they spent time at the local shops. Aboriginal young people in particular are less likely to spend time at 'the local shops' (4 per cent) than non-Aboriginal young people (19 per cent). At the shops, their presence can be easily observed, targeted and scrutinised. As a result of this discrimination,

the research suggests that the streets and trains are a preferred alternative, a form of safe haven where young people feel a sense of freedom and group safety and where they are less noticeable.

The research showed, however, that discrimination not only encourages feelings of inequality, but can become part of their identity and affect decisions young people make later in life. In particular, as young people begin to exert their desire and need for independence, issues of drug use, alcohol abuse and other 'anti-social' behaviour may become commonplace.

When one fifteen year old girl was asked why she hangs out at the train station, she simply replied *"This is where all the action is. You can't find it anywhere else except the shopping centres, but they are controlled by security guards and too many white people watch you when they walk past. At the stations we meet and get drunk and have lots of fun. The transit officers may come sometimes and get off at the station but they go again and then we are free to do what we want"*

This is not to say that all young people who are out on the streets and trains are engaging in such behaviours; what it does suggest is that continued discrimination of young people by authority figures, coupled with young people's inherent desire for independence, may exacerbate poor decision making and anti-social behaviour, and in turn, young people rebel by acting out the behaviours that are already assumed of them.



'WE LIKE TO RIDE BIKES AND MUCK AROUND, BUT WE'RE ALWAYS GETTING IN TROUBLE FOR IT. LIKE, WE DO WHEELIES AND STUFF AND THEY THINK WE'RE STARTIN TROUBLE OR BREAKING STUFF' (12 YEAR OLD BOY).



# Discrimination in the Community

Young people also indicated that they sometimes do not feel welcome in their communities based on racism, prejudice and discrimination and clearly expressed a desire for change.

Young people feel that they experience discrimination, or negative attitudes towards them, for crimes or behaviours that they have not done; Aboriginal young people in particular encounter further racism and discrimination based on their Aboriginality. These negative attitudes are experienced as labelling by the general public as well as discrimination from those in authority.

Discriminatory or negative attitudes towards young people frame the way they build their identities. Research has found that young people who experience prejudice are more likely to feel that opportunities are not equal and that their identity and culture are not valued. This

may encourage diminished feelings of self-worth, lowered self-esteem and lead them to question the identity they are trying to construct for themselves. This is particularly prominent for Aboriginal young people who experience prejudice through many aspects of their lives (Kickett-Tucker, 2009; Mellor, 2003; Paradies, 2006).

Adults agree that discrimination is a problem for young people. Negative attitudes towards young people perpetuate crime based 'solutions' rather than viewing street presence as a stage in which these young people are developing their identities. Solutions such as the 'stop and search' laws and disbanding groups of 12 people or more, have had limited impact on dealing with the problem of street presence (Save the Children, 2011) or have led to direct discrimination against Aboriginal young people (Russell, 2003). As a result, Aboriginal young people are subject to unfair scrutiny and misunderstandings of how they use public spaces. Despite raising critical questions of the impact of these policies on individual human rights, the opportunity to promote positive youth development is lost.

'OY, WHAT ABOUT THAT TIME WHEN WE WERE AT THE PARK AN' THEM COPPERS CAME AND STARTED ASKIN US QUESTIONS. THEY ALWAYS DO THAT. THEY ALWAYS SEARCH US FOR DRUGS AND STUFF' (12 YEAR OLD BOY).



'WHEN I WAS IN YEAR 2 EVERYONE WAS ASKED TO PUT OUR HANDPRINT ON THE WALL. IT MAKES ME REMEMBER ALL THE KIDS THAT LEFT. IT REMINDS ME OF MY CULTURE AND HOW ABORIGINALS DID THEIR PAINTINGS IN THE PAST. I FEEL THAT LOTS OF PEOPLE THINK THAT ABORIGINALS ARE BAD AND STUFF BECAUSE THEY DRINK' (12 YEAR OLD BOY).



THIS PHOTO OF THE ABORIGINAL FLAG REPRESENTS LOTS OF DIFFERENT ABORIGINAL TRIBES. IT REPRESENTS MY FAMILY, MY CULTURE AND ME. IT REPRESENTS THE RACISM THAT EXISTS IN AUSTRALIA BETWEEN BLACKS AND WHITES AND DIFFERENT SKIN TONES. I FEEL THAT AS ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WE CAN'T BE TRUSTED BECAUSE WE ARE BLACK. WE OFTEN GET BLAMED AND GET RACIST LOOKS AND COMMENTS FOR THINGS THAT ONE PERSON MIGHT DO IN OUR COMMUNITIES. (11 YEAR OLD GIRL)

'I FEEL YOUNG PEOPLE ARE UNFAIRLY TARGETED AND I THINK IT IS AN INFRINGEMENT ON THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS. THEY WERE DOING NO HARM AT ALL' (SERVICE PROVIDER).



'THIS FLAG REPRESENTS OUR STATE. I FEEL THAT THERE IS A LOT OF BAD STUFF THAT HAPPENS IN THIS STATE LIKE DRUGS, ALCOHOL AND CRIME. THE POLICE DON'T REALLY DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT' (9 YEAR OLD BOY).

SOMETIMES WHEN WE WALK FROM SCHOOL, THE POLICE COME UP TO US AND START ASKING QUESTIONS. THEY OFTEN CHASE US FOR NO REASON. THIS MAKES ME FEEL ANGRY. I THINK THEY CHASE US BECAUSE WE ARE ABORIGINAL AND WE ARE A DIFFERENT CULTURE TO THEM (10 YEAR OLD BOY)



'I FEEL THAT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE ARE JUST AS IMPORTANT AS WHITE PEOPLE. WHITE PEOPLE ARE ON ABORIGINAL LAND AND I FEEL THAT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE SHOULD BE RESPECTED IN THE WAY THAT WHITE PEOPLE ARE RESPECTED' (12 YEAR OLD BOY).

# Safety on the Streets and Trains

Safety is an important factor which influences where young people choose to spend their time.

Over half (56 per cent) of Aboriginal young people who took part in this research chose where they spend their time based on three factors: whether it will be exciting, safe, and whether their friends are going. To them, the streets and the trains fulfil these criteria creating a feeling of safety, which may be perceived differently by others. This perception of safety is influenced by their sense of connection to the other people present, rather than the physical space in which they choose to 'hang out'.

One service provider stated that the trains are a 'safe and easy form of transport' and do offer some level of safety for Aboriginal young people since they 'are always well lit with lots of traffic around'. The trains are 'warm and dry in winter and light at night time'. They are an easy meeting place, especially as there is 'nowhere else to go that provides shelter, warmth, cool and provides a variety of human contact' (various service providers). The streets and trains are often the most viable spaces for young people to spend time.

However, while some young people do see the streets and trains as safer than other environments, around one quarter of Aboriginal young people indicated that they did not feel safe on the trains, either because something had happened to make them stay away or because it was unpredictable. Unsafe environments are not always caused by other young people who behave in anti-social ways, but rather other adults and strangers.

There is a possibility that the policies and actions of those in authority may have the potential to worsen the situation, which could potentially make the trains and streets even more unsafe by placing young people at higher risk. One service provider stated that '...transit officers are fining young people with no money for not having a ticket, then kick them off the train in an at-risk environment; this scares the young people I work with'.

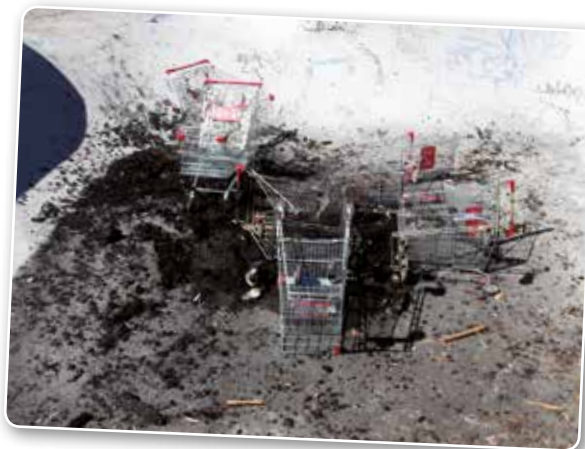
'WHAT IS WRONG WITH OUR PUBLIC OR PRIVATE SPACES IS THAT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE CAN NO LONGER HAVE MEETING PLACES WHERE THEY FEEL SAFE AND CAN ENGAGE IN SAFE ACTIVITIES' (SERVICE PROVIDER).



'THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I'VE SEEN A BOTTLE THAT HASN'T BEEN BROKEN AT THE PARK. ONCE THEY GET DRUNK LOTS OF PEOPLE END UP THROWING BOTTLES AROUND TO BREAK THEM. MOST OF THE TIME THEY END UP THROWING THEM AT EACH OTHER' (11 YEAR OLD GIRL).



'I TOOK THIS PHOTO OF DEAD GRASS. FOR ME THIS SHOWS THAT IF THE GRASS WAS GREENER AT SCHOOL AND IN THE COMMUNITY IT WOULD LOOK BETTER. I FEEL THAT THERE IS TOO MUCH GRAFFITI AND PARKY'S (THE PEOPLE THAT SIT IN THE PARK AND GET DRUNK). THEY OFTEN TRY TO ABUSE PEOPLE THAT WALK PAST AND TRY TO LURE THEM TO GO WITH THEM. THIS MAKES ME FEEL SCARED AND UNSAFE' (GIRL, AGE UNSPECIFIED).



THIS IS A PHOTO OF THE SKATE PARK. THIS IS WHERE PEOPLE FROM MY SCHOOL HANG OUT AND I FEEL SCARED FOR THEM BECAUSE OF ALL THINGS THEY ARE OFTEN EXPOSED TO LIKE DRUGS AND ALCOHOL. I DON'T APPRECIATE THE PUB BEEN SO CLOSE TO A PUBLIC PARK WHERE CHILDREN PLAY. SOME OF THE KIDS AT THE PARK GET ADULTS TO BUY ALCOHOL FOR THEM. (12 YEAR OLD GIRL)

'...AT NIGHT IT [THE TRAIN] CAN BE DANGEROUS FOR GIRLS BECAUSE THERE'S ALL THESE, UM OLD MEN TRYING TO CALL YOU AND THEY SAY STUFF TO YOU' (13 YEAR OLD GIRL).

# Risky Behaviour

It is easy to take the view that the streets and trains are unsafe and full of risk for young people. It is also often viewed that punitive interventions, such as policing and stop-and-search laws are effective ways of mitigating that risk as they prevent young people from engaging in risky behaviour. However, risk can be viewed as a normal part of a young person's development.

The aim of adults should not be to prevent young people taking risks, but to guide them through their risk taking stages of development and create healthy environments in which normal risk taking can occur or alternative optimal decision making can be made. The literature on identity formation indicates that risk-seeking behaviour is healthy and common in adolescence in searching for autonomy, identity and approval from peers. Young people need to take risks in order to develop their resilience or ability to bounce back from adversity (Unger, 2006; Unger et al., 2007; Unger et al, 2008).

The research found that young people are prone to being drawn into risk taking behaviours by others as a normal part of their identity development. Adults identified that young people will want to socialise with others, and often this socialising will take the form of drinking. This is a recognised national problem and common to the Perth metropolitan area.

Risky behaviour is about establishing one's own identity and gaining acceptance among peers. Engaging in risky behaviours is '*exciting*' and '*cool*' and a way to have '*cheap thrills*' (service provider). Some young people may be under peer pressure to prove themselves, while '*those with low self-esteem may engage in risky behaviour to be accepted by their peers*'.

Risk can however become disproportionately attributed to marginalised communities and is undoubtedly influenced by many factors, such as lack of resources and access to relatively secure places to engage in risky activities, such as parent's homes. Aboriginal young people stated that they spend much less time at parties in people's homes (3 per cent) as compared with non-Aboriginal young people (17 per cent).

Partially due to more visible risky behaviour, Aboriginal young people often perceive themselves as singled out and the target of crime prevention interventions. Identifying Aboriginal young people as 'at risk' can further marginalise them; such labels may impact on cultural pride, creativity, and resilience. At the same time, these labels ignore larger societal contexts, which have an impact on disadvantage (Bond, 2005; Martin, 2006; te Riele, 2006).

There is an obvious tension between young people doing activities, which can involve some risk, and a societal response where such behaviour is considered criminal and punitively dealt with.

'STUDENTS CAN GET DRAWN INTO UNDESIRABLE SITUATIONS BECAUSE OF THE FRIENDSHIPS THAT THEY MAKE AT SCHOOL. ALSO THEY SOMETIMES SIMPLY SEEM DRAWN TO RISK TAKING BEHAVIOURS' (SERVICE PROVIDER).



'I TOOK THIS PHOTO BECAUSE THE TRAIN IS GOOD. WHEN WE GO TO PARTIES AND STUFF, IT IS THE EASIEST WAY TO TRAVEL. IT'S EXCITING TO GET ON THE TRAIN' (13 YEAR OLD GIRL).

'WESTERN SUBURB KIDS HANG OUT AT PARTIES, BEHIND CLOSED DOORS; ABORIGINAL KIDS HANG OUT OUTSIDE' (SERVICE PROVIDER).

'VERY FEW YOUNG PEOPLE LIKE TO SPEND THEIR FRIDAY NIGHTS AT HOME WITH MUM AND DAD. WHETHER THE HOME ENVIRONMENT IS SAFE OR NOT, IT IS IN THE YOUTH CULTURE TO GO OUT, PARTY AND DRINK' (SERVICE PROVIDER).

'BOTH [ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL] GROUPS GET INVOLVED IN RISKY BEHAVIOUR AND BOTH SHARE A BINGE DRINKING CULTURE. SOME ARE MORE SEEN THAN OTHERS; SOME HAVE ACCESS TO MORE MONEY THAN OTHERS. THIS DETERMINES WHERE THEY 'HANG OUT', WHAT THEY CONSUME AND WHAT THEY DO' (SERVICE PROVIDER).

'I THINK GIRLS SHOULD STOP GOING TO PARTIES AND GETTING DRUNK AND STUFF, CAUSE THEY ARE TOO YOUNG. THEY ARE LIKE 12, 13 OR 14 AND STUFF'

(11 YEAR OLD GIRL)

'PEOPLE BUY THEIR GOONS AND STUFF AND THEN THEY GO AND SIT AT THE PARK AND ALL THE YOUNGER BOYS WILL GO AND SIT THERE AND HAVE A DRINK WITH THEM' (12 YEAR OLD BOY)

## Normalisation of Sex, Drugs, Alcohol and Violence

The trains and streets offer opportunities for interactions between boys and girls. During these interactions, young people often take risks in order to impress others and, in the process, develop their identity. Through 'hanging out' on the streets, young people are forming their own sense of morality, a key aspect to the development of identity during adolescence (Erikson, 1968).

For some of the girls their physical appearance was extremely important in developing both a personal and a social identity. Two 11 year old girls indicated that a few of their 13 year old peers were already engaging in risky sexual behaviour; they were particularly judgemental that this behaviour was starting at such an early age, however they saw it as a result of peer pressure and something that was not out of the norm.

Young people also identified the influence of drugs and alcohol in their community as a big concern. They linked access to alcohol and drugs as the cause for violence and abuse in homes and the streets. They also made many references to "druggies" and the impact that they have on the lives of children and young people's safety. Out of the young people interviewed, 25 per cent of Aboriginal young people indicated that they often spend their Friday and/or Saturday nights out 'drinking or doing drugs'.

In this context of crime and broken families, the young people said they often struggle with the fact that there are preconceived notions about who they are or who they will become. In most cases, they said that as part of their social identity, they are often blamed for wandering around in their community and taking part in criminal behaviour, such as destroying and vandalising the community, stealing, and selling drugs. This blame is often placed on young people regardless of whether or not they actually participated in these activities.



THIS HOUSE WAS BLOWN UP BECAUSE THE PEOPLE WHO LIVED THERE DID DRUGS AND NEVER PAID WHAT THEY OWED. WHEN I SEE THINGS LIKE THIS, IT MAKES ME FEEL SAD AND I WISH I COULD CHANGE IT. THIS PROVES THAT IF PEOPLE DO DRUGS, IT NEVER ENDS WELL. (11 YEAR OLD GIRL)



'THE OTHER DAY I WENT TO A FRIEND'S HOUSE TO SLEEP OVER AND HIS MUM'S SITTING THERE AND UM, SHE'S LIKE, DO YOU WANT A BONG OR SOMETHING? AND I WAS LIKE, UM NO. HER SON IS ONLY LIKE IN YEAR 4' (12 YEAR OLD BOY).

'YOU SHOULD SEE HOW MANY KIDS GO TO PARTIES THESE DAYS... LOTS OF GIRLS AREN'T VIRGINS ANYMORE AND THEY ARE 13. THAT'S HOW THE GENERATION IS NOW' (11 YEAR OLD GIRL)

'YEH, EVEN LIKE KIDS WHO ARE 8 OR 9 DO IT [SMOKE MARIJUANA] I RECKON THEY DO IT CAUSE THEY SEE THEIR PARENTS SIT AROUND AND DO IT' (12 YEAR OLD BOY)



TOO MANY PEOPLE USE PHYSICAL CONTACT TO SOLVE PROBLEMS AND ALL IT DOES IS MAKE IT WORSE. I THINK WE SHOULD USE WORDS INSTEAD. (11 YEAR OLD GIRL)



## Education and Aspirations

Educational settings play a major role in the development of identity and future possibilities for all young people. A strong outcome of this research is that young people do see some connection with schools as social environments where they can meet up with friends and develop relationships.

However, many young people also discussed the challenges of discipline and being misunderstood in the school environment and clearly indicated that the formal school setting is often at odds with their personal opinions and even culture.

Statistics clearly indicate that Aboriginal young people have lower educational outcomes compared to non-Aboriginal young people; the mean scores for achievement in reading and numeracy of Year 9 Aboriginal students in WA are not only lower than that of their non-Aboriginal classmates, but also lower than that of non-Aboriginal students in Year 7. The reasons for this are often attributed to lower socioeconomic status, family dynamics and substance use. However, literature has also noted that education should be culturally relevant and meaningful to Aboriginal students. Cultural

exclusion, teachers' expectations, and non-inclusion of Aboriginal worldviews in the curriculum may also be related to these statistics. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2012)

When asked whether they felt they had everything needed to achieve their dreams, 27 per cent of Aboriginal young people said 'no'. Many issues may impede Aboriginal young people from reaching their ambitions, including lower engagement in formal education, difficulties accessing career guidance, lack of family support or role models, institutional racism, and culturally inappropriate environments.

We know that young people must negotiate the disadvantages they face in the process of forming their identity and this research indicates that despite certain adversities, young people are still dreaming and planning for the future. A key strength that young people highlighted throughout this research has been the importance of, and connection to, their Aboriginal culture and how it is something they feel proud of, however are also often also discriminated for.

Despite being surrounded by so many challenges in their lives, many young people expressed that they feel good about themselves when they are given opportunities and are treated with respect by others in community and society. Schools will remain a place where these opportunities will derive. Aboriginal young people and the education system must learn and adapt together to identify the best way of engaging and respectfully teaching Aboriginal children.



THIS PHOTO REMINDS ME OF A STORY THAT I HAVEN'T HEARD IN A LONG TIME; THE STORY OF BILLY GOAT'S GRUFF. IT REMINDS ME THAT IF I REALLY WANT SOMETHING I CAN GET IT. (12 YEAR OLD BOY)



'IT'S HARD TO WALK IN OUR SHOES SOMETIMES. FOR US GIRLS, IT'S HARD ANYWAY. YOU HAVE TO LOOK A CERTAIN WAY AND IF YOU DON'T, WE GET CALLED NAMES, AND UM, LOOKED AT FUNNY, AND IT'S EVEN WORSE FOR US BECAUSE WE'RE ABORIGINAL' (13 YEAR OLD GIRL).

'ALL US BOYS GOT CALLED IN TO THE OFFICE ONCE CAUSE SOME PEOPLE BROKE INTO THE SCHOOL ON A WEEKEND AND WE GOT BLAMED FOR IT. IT WASN'T US. THEN THAT TEACHER TOLD US TO GO AND FIND OUT WHO DID IT. HOW ARE WE S'PPOSED KNOW?' (12 YEAR OLD BOY).



# Youth Engagement Programs

The phrase of 'nowhere else to go' was repeatedly used by young people, service providers and parents to explain why young people 'hang out' on the train or streets. This was explored further by identifying ways in which the spaces where young people like to congregate could be developed.

The streets and trains are a free space, where young people can explore their identity through personal interests and connect with friends in ways they themselves decide. If programs want to emulate this or vie for the attention of these young people, they must connect with them in the same way, or provide them with the same opportunities. Aboriginal young people are highly influenced by their personal interests and their friends' interests, and less so by specific events being held. Aboriginal young people stated that they prefer to engage with broader networks of friends in safe places that allow them to express their independence. In this respect, the streets and trains allow them to connect with more friends on a broader scale than other youth activities. Young people supported the idea of organised group activities near train stations, or to rework train stations and use these as alternative spaces to engage. Suggestions included sport, dance parties or discos and utilising the train stations as space that would allow them to exhibit their own talents.

Research has noted that disadvantaged young people are less likely to participate and stay involved in organised programs and found that service providers often try to 'make young people fit their programs', rather than developing programs that meet the needs and interests of young people. Young people's opinions, interests and thoughts should be the driver of program design. The Photovoice project was particularly successful amongst Aboriginal young people who felt it gave them a voice.

When young people do engage in programs, it is often based on whether the program meets their interests, such as sport, music and art, and more importantly it depends on whether their friends are there. The need to connect with culture and spirituality is also particularly strong for Aboriginal young people, such as programs that bring in strong connection to local Aboriginal Elders, community and cultural activities. Adults were similarly aware of the need for young people to develop their cultural identity within a traditional space. The inclusion of Elders, as well as other family and community members, in the formation of cultural spaces where young people can express themselves is particularly important.

The research found that young people are more likely to participate in programs that are respected within the community and their families. To achieve this, families and the community must be given the opportunity to engage in the formulation and design of such programs.

'YOUNG PEOPLE OFTEN DON'T WANT TO BE TOLD WHAT TO DO, ESPECIALLY IF THEY JUST WANT TO HANG OUT - WHICH MAY BE A REASON THEY AVOID YOUTH CENTRES OR COMMUNITY PLACES THAT ARE SPECIFICALLY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE' (SERVICE PROVIDER).

'LOCAL COMMUNITY GROUPS PROVIDING ACTIVITIES. NOT NGO'S BUT THE LOCAL COMMUNITY, FATHERS, UNCLES ETC. IT'S A CLICHÉ BUT IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD' (SERVICE PROVIDER).

'THE YOUNG PEOPLE WILL HAVE FAR MORE COMMITMENT TO THEIR OWN CULTURE THAN THIS WHITE MAN'S INTERVENTION VIA "HIRED NGO'S" THAT ONLY OPERATES AS LONG AS THE FUNDING (AND POLITICAL WILL) IS THERE' (SERVICE PROVIDER).



'THIS IS A PHOTO OF A NETBALL RING. THIS PHOTO IS ABOUT KIDS THAT DON'T PLAY AS MUCH AS OTHER KIDS. THERE ARE QUITE A FEW OUT OF SCHOOL PROGRAMS THAT HELP KIDS PLAY SPORT IN THE COMMUNITY. WE NEED TO GET OUT THERE AND BE MORE ACTIVE' (11 YEAR OLD GIRL)

'ENCOURAGE A COMMUNITY INSPIRED APPROACH THAT CAN INCREASE THE LOCAL COMMUNITY'S CAPACITY TO ENGAGE THE YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN THE LOCAL AREA. THERE ARE VERY LITTLE ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH AT RISK THAT ARE APPROPRIATE AND CONSISTENT' (SERVICE PROVIDER).



'I TOOK THIS PICTURE BECAUSE I WANTED TO SHOW THAT PHOTOVOICE HAS BOUGHT HAPPINESS TO US CHILDREN. PHOTOVOICE HAS BEEN A GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR ME TO SPEAK UP WITH CONFIDENCE AND COURAGE. I LEARNED TO LOOK AT MY COMMUNITY IN A DIFFERENT WAY' (12 YEAR OLD GIRL).



## Conclusions

This report gives voice to Aboriginal children and young people who spend time on the streets and trains. It argues that unfairly viewing these young people as criminals is not only discriminatory it is a clear violation of their Child Rights.

These young people have to navigate the complexities of family, community and society that influence who they become and the identities they develop. If we begin to view children and young people as inherently good, despite their challenging environment we begin to see how even the most 'at-risk' young people have strengths and opportunities.

Most young people identified the importance of friendship and the ways in which these relationships help them to find love, trust and security. Not only do these relationships allow young people the space to feel like they belong, they also help them to develop a positive sense of identity. Influenced by their peers, families, communities, and culture, young people with high levels of street-presence are navigating difficult, and sometimes dangerous, social and physical environments through which they are learning how to become young adults.

The streets and trains are an easy, affordable and accessible space in which young people feel they can develop relationships, assert their independence and freedom, and find a sense of belonging with similar young people. The trains can also provide some young

people with a relatively safe space to congregate in order to escape challenges of family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and overall unsafe home environments. Counter to this, many young people also found the streets and trains to be equally as unsafe as their home lives, however they still found themselves navigating this space.

While education facilities and youth engagement programs were found to be important from a social perspective, they were often lacking in terms of providing culturally appropriate spaces to support identity development. Instead, the trains and streets were found to allow young people to identify with their cultural groups and find a safe place in which to navigate the transition from child to adulthood.

But the trains and streets do present a real risk to young people who spend time in these places. Problems of drugs and alcohol abuse, violence, and sexual behaviours place young people at risk from other people or adults engaging in the same space. It was found that Aboriginal young people were more likely to be engaging in overt risky behaviour and without more access to protective information or safer spaces in which to participate in these behaviours young people 'hanging out' on the streets face disproportionate risk.

All children have the right to survival and development, full participation in society, and life without discrimination. This report highlights that currently Aboriginal young people living in the South East Corridor of Perth are not fully attaining their rights and that a serious rethink is needed of our youth development initiatives in order for our government, non-government, and community responses to adequately support these young people to have full access to their Child Rights.

# Child Rights Report Card

Save the Children Australia is calling for a systemic paradigm shift in the thinking, attitudes, and actions taken towards Aboriginal young people who spend time on the streets and trains late at night. The current systems, policies, funding, services, and even language are posing gross violations to these young people's rights to non-discrimination, survival and development, and participation in society. Overall, we are failing to look after the best interests of our children and young people.

## Right to Non-Discrimination

Aboriginal children and young people are experiencing institutional racism and discrimination based on their ethnicity, cultural background, socio-economic status, and presenting behaviours. Young people are being labelled as criminals and institutional responses are more often punitive and based on a deficit model that further disempowers and disadvantages them.

### Recommendations:

- **That governments, service providers, and the wider community avoid the discriminatory practice of unfairly framing street-present young people as criminals and delinquents.** Young people who are on the streets and trains are often simply seeking an environment where they can find a sense of belonging. Schools, support services, statutory interventions, and future policy and research needs to be framed from a positive identity perspective in order to find constructive solutions to the challenges young people face as they develop and experience life's complexities.
- **That more attention and research needs to be focused on how the current punitive approaches, racist ideologies, and systemic lack of culturally appropriate support are prohibiting young people from achieving and realising their aspirations.**

## Right to Survival and Development

Aboriginal children and young people are falling short of realising their right to survival, safety, development and protection. More often, responses to street-presence disregard the complex environment with which children are living and pay little attention to the deeply imbedded historical trauma, family dysfunction, and institutional discrimination, which are often the underlying causes behind young people's street presence and risk-taking behaviour.

### Recommendations:

- **That governments and service providers prioritise early intervention initiatives, which support the development of Aboriginal children from earlier ages through their teenage years.** Children are aware of, and are engaging in, risky behaviours at younger ages than in previous generations. If services wish to engage children and young people in supportive development programs, those programs will need to target children at younger ages than current commonly practiced youth services. Early intervention initiatives should act preventively and provide a solid foundation for youth development.
- **That governments and service providers take into account the underlying causes of young peoples' street-presence by working with care-givers, families and wider kinship networks.** Beyond providing social outlets for young people, programs need to work to develop young people's engagement and connection with their families and communities, along with underlying issues that families may have, such as family violence, which are often the main barriers to positive development. This could be achieved through partnerships with services that provide culturally appropriate family support and case-management or through programs that provide positive role-modelling and mentoring.

## Right to Participation

Overwhelmingly young people felt excluded from society and stated their voice is not being heard in most aspects of their lives; and they often felt misunderstood and misjudged. Additionally, the limited opportunities for culturally appropriate and accessible pro-social activities for Aboriginal young people leads to further disempowerment and disengagement from mainstream society and exacerbates young people's street presence.

### Recommendations:

- **That governments and service providers prioritise culturally appropriate youth development, diversion, and leadership programs, which engage young people in pro-social activities that foster empowerment, positive peer culture, and participation in society.** Activities are more likely to have long-term positive impacts in young people's lives if they aim to foster an environment of positive peer culture through building on young people's strengths, providing strong role-modelling, and identifying and listening to their inherent potential.
- **That youth development programs at all levels, from schools and diversionary programs to tertiary interventions, need to be designed with young people, not for them.**

Programs designed and delivered in participation with young people will be able to capitalise on their interests and will likely be more culturally appropriate and more effective at engaging and build trust with young people.

- **That governments and service providers prioritise opportunities and activities that foster the wider community's voice.** Activities such as Participatory Action Research projects actively engage young people and seek their opinions, thoughts, desires and aspirations for their future. Young people need to be engaged in identifying the issues they face and be supported in identifying pathways to their development and full participation in society.

## Best Interests of the Child

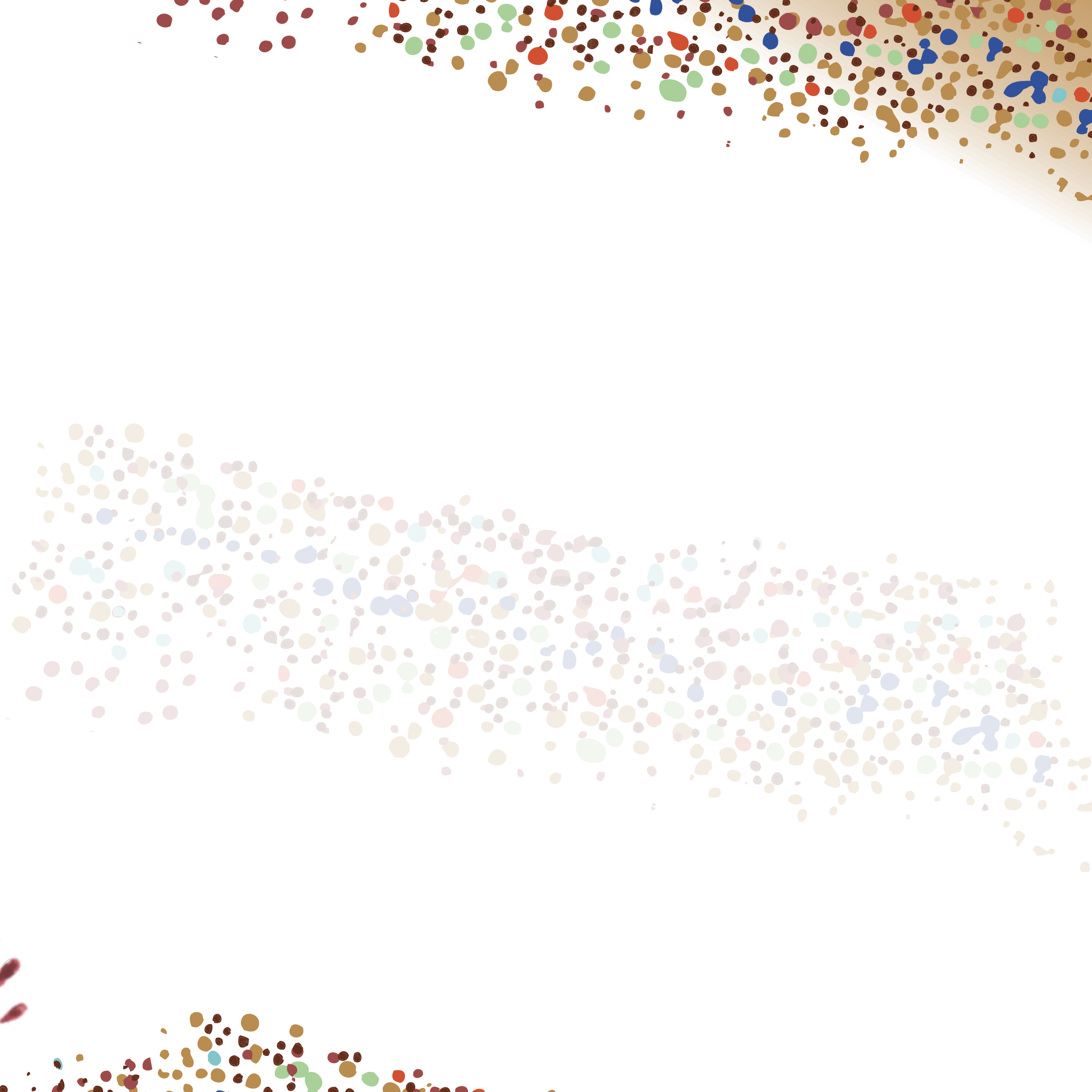
At present the predominant responses to young people's street presence are clearly reactive to the wider community outrage of misperceived criminality and are not derived from, or developed to, look after the best interest of children and young people in the community. Furthermore, these punitive approaches are often reflected in the Government's rigid funding framework for youth programming, which limits non-government organisation's ability to develop tailored and innovative responses to contemporary issues.

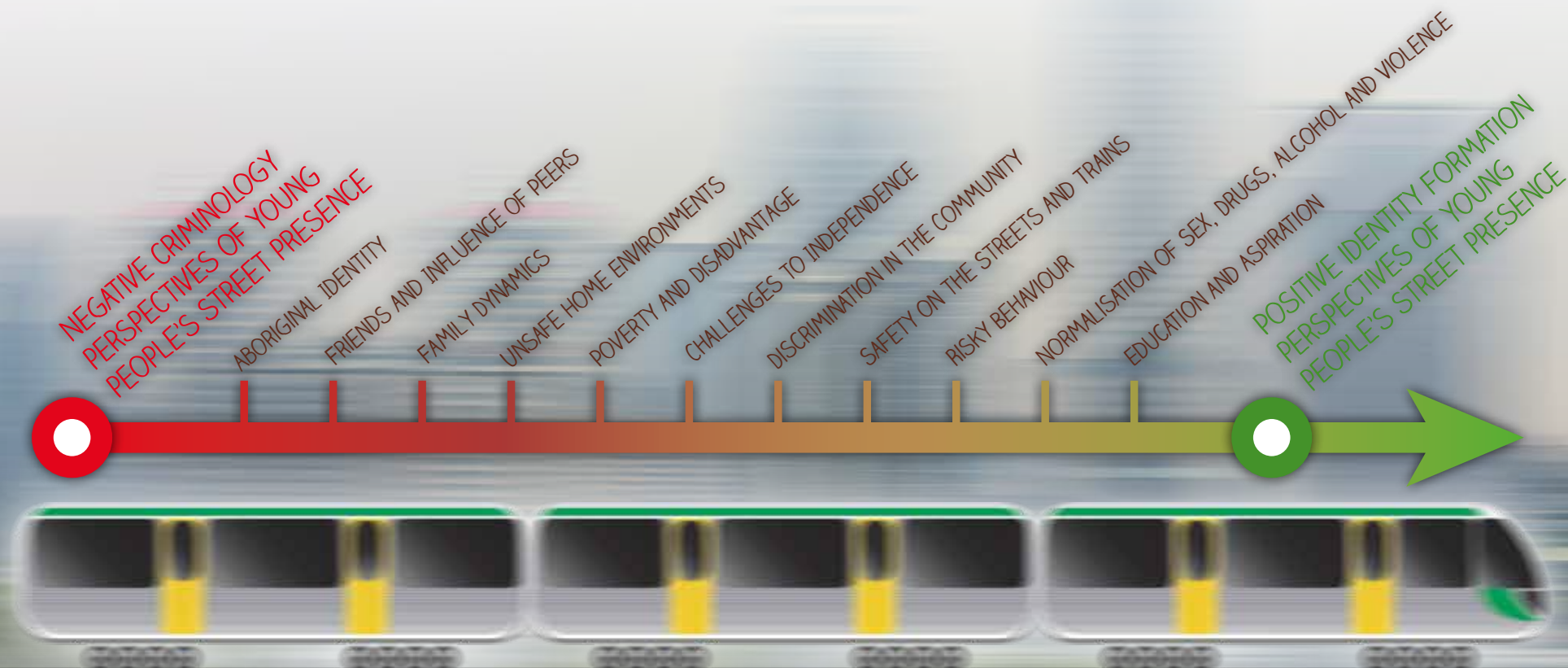
### Recommendation:

- **That all services should work openly with, and be guided by, their local Aboriginal communities, including young people, families, and community Elders, to develop culturally appropriate programs, which are tailored to look after the best interests and needs of children in ways that those communities see fit.** Engaging Aboriginal Elders in youth development programs to promote culture and tradition has the potential to strengthen young people's cultural identity and establish a sense of belonging in their community. Culture and tradition are fundamental parts of a young person's spiritual, emotional, social, and physical identity and intrinsically related to pride in self and the community, self-esteem, and confidence. Young people are also more likely to participate in programs that are respected within their communities.
- **That government funding for youth services need to be responsive to the differing needs and best interests of children in each community, broadened to encompass children of younger ages, and focused on youth development outcomes to be able to achieve lasting impacts for children, young people, families, and the community.**

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