To be seen and heard

Increasing visibility of children and young people growing up in single mother households:

Their perceptions of services and social supports that will enhance their life options now and in the future.

Findings from a survey (2023) and focus groups (2024) undertaken by the Council of Single Mothers and their Children.

Council of
Single Mothers
and their **Children**

Suggested citation: Juanita McLaren, Zali Harris and Andi Sebastian, *To be seen and heard: Report on young people in single mother households.* Council of Single Mothers and their Children. January 2025. Available at: www.csmc.org.au/youth-report/

Contents

Summary

> *Our children are ultimately our future. Hence an Australia with a bright future is one where all children are safe and secure to grow and thrive.*
>
> *They are well fed, have access to quality health care and education, and a secure home – no matter where they are or what the circumstances of their parents."* [1]

Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC) has throughout its fifty-six years had the wellbeing of children at its heart. From the right to raise our own children to the right of all children to live free of poverty, CSMC has and continues to advocate for a fair start in life for every child.

Single mothers head 17% of Australian families with dependents aged 0-24, including children aged 15+ in full-time study.[2] Distressingly, 44% of children in sole parent families are living below the poverty line compared with 18% in couple families.[3]

Children of low income single mothers experience a combination of challenges that impact on their current wellbeing and future opportunities. Recognising this, CSMC embarked on a two-stage study to find out what older children and young adults think about these aspects of their lives.

This report centres the voices of the total of one hundred and twenty four (124) children, adolescents and young adults growing up in single mother households who were involved in the study.

A survey was conducted in 2023 with **seventy (70)** respondents, aged 9 to 23 years, living in a mix of sole and shared care family arrangements.

Following this in 2024, with funding from the Brian M. Davis Charitable Foundation, a series of focus groups fostered in-depth conversations about the survey findings and explored possibilities for action.

Fifty four (54) participants aged 11-23 were recruited for these conversations through CSMC members, school wellbeing coordinators and youth workers in urban and regional settings.

Survey respondents articulated the positives of being raised primarily or solely by their mothers, including the love they receive, the priority their mother places on their wellbeing regardless of her challenges, and the independence it fosters within them.

Challenges they identified were:

Ramifications from their mother's financial hardship and lack of time.

Weariness from constantly moving between parents' homes, remembering and carrying things.

Lack of community or family support.

Uncertain career or study plans.

47% believe that coming from a single mother household will impact on their future opportunities, with 17% unsure.

Only 14% of survey respondents access spaces or online platforms designed to support young people. This finding was replicated in the focus groups. In multiple choice options for service improvements, online services were among the least favoured.

1   Duncan A & Twomey C (2024), 'Child Poverty in Australia 2024', Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, August 2024. Pg 48 Accessed at: valuingchildreninitiative.com.au/assets/uploads/documents/VCI-Child-Poverty-in-Australia-2024.pdf

2   Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), June 2023

3   Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS), 2020

Preferred ways to better meet the needs of children of single mothers were clear in the survey and supported in the focus groups.

76% wanted more support from schools, universities, and other education areas.

58.7% sought a place to find resources e.g. sports and recreation programs, ways to get their driver's licence, find a job etc.

50.9% wanted '*recognition in society*'.

Ten focus groups were conducted overall. Five online, two in secondary schools, one in a secondary college, one in a community library and one at a youth community centre. All participants were remunerated.

Focus group conversations

Among their 'positive life experiences', participants identified close bonds with their mothers and siblings; independence and resourcefulness; and the abilities to 'thrive in chaos'.

Less positive experiences included facing constant expectations from school and society that they should have a dad; 'missing out' due to financial difficulties; having only one parent to manage the household and family; and difficult relationships particularly between their parents.

Overall, most felt both the good and the not-so-good aspects culminated in life skills, resourcefulness, coping mechanisms, emotional maturity, and understanding how to navigate complex family dynamics.

The participants valued being heard. Some indicated they felt supported by facilitators' care for them and interest in their experiences. One participant was so surprised that CSMC was valuing their stories that they asked; 'Why are you paying us for this information?'

As a nation, we are just beginning to actively listen to children and young people and this study confirms for us the importance of doing so.

Recommendations

Council of Single Mothers and their Children recommends that communities, services and governments listen to and take seriously the voices and suggestions of children and young people around the nation who have been raised by single mothers.

The young people engaged with made these requests.

Poverty alleviation

1. **A version of health care or pension cards for children of low-income single mothers.**

   Many young people have to fill in forms, go to the doctor or seek subsidies independently.

2. **Have 'child of a single mother' as an optional tick box in forms where applicants are asked about poverty or disadvantage.**

   To highlight in special entry, access schemes and university applications being the child of a low-income single mother, given that it comes with barriers, financial and otherwise.

3. **Better access to safe transportation - free public transport cards, subsidised taxi or Uber accounts.**

   Particularly important for those living in areas with poor public transport and for teenagers accessing evening work or social activities where their parent cannot drive, does not have a car, or has younger children to care for.

4. **Improved affordability for mental health plans, neurodivergence diagnosis, and prescribed medication.**

   Mental health plans and rebated visits require upfront payment which many families cannot afford. Subsequent medications are priced at inaccessible amounts for children living with a low-income single mother. Many neurodivergent children cannot access special accommodations as the family cannot afford a formal diagnosis.

5. **More subsidies or free extra-curricular activities for children of all ages.**

   State subsidies for activities like camps, sports and excursions do not cover musical instruments and lessons, or other activities involving the arts or creative interests.

Safer & more secure housing

6. **Fast tracked emergency housing access.**

   Participants highlighted the negative impacts they experienced, the difficulty of finding emergency housing and rental accommodation even when their mothers tried to support them.

7. **Remove age as the enabling factor to access emergency housing (currently 16 in Victoria).**

   For young people who have to leave home before the age of 16, they need safe emergency housing available to them.

8. **Better access to affordable, long-term housing for single mothers without administrative requirement or proof of need.**

   Very young single mothers with limited support networks are locked out of emergency and continuing housing due to age barriers and the looming threat of child protection. The dangers they face in trying to find alternative accommodation put them and their babies at great risk and negatively impacts their future.

Recognise & Address Stigma

9. **Address the harm of misinformation, stigma and unconscious bias.**

   Given that 60% of single mothers and their children in Australia have experienced family violence, all policies and interactions with these children should recognise this possibility and act in ways that minimise trauma and enhance healing.

10. **Check assumptions.**

    Assumptions that every child has a father in their lives or that every child has time to do homework and the dedicated resources and assistance to manage it are harmful and hurtful.

11. **Train teachers, police and social workers about the distinct experiences of children of single mother families, and how their attitudes and stigma are often misinformed and harmful.**

    Policy changes may be required including, for example, not calling both parents if there is an incident. Alternative practices with children should ensure children are not required to learn or respond based on traditional nuclear and heteronormative family dynamics.

12. **Review process for engaging with children and teenagers in situations of family violence or family court matters.**

    Ensure that children are not re-traumatised and that their agency is respected, both where they want to comment and where they do not.

Community connections & support

13. **Strengthen protective factors with opportunities for children of single mother families to connect.**

    Enable children of single mother families to connect through co-designed physical and online spaces and experience the wellbeing benefits of shared experiences.

14. **Enable children and young people to have and maintain trusting relationships with support service providers within schools and communities.**
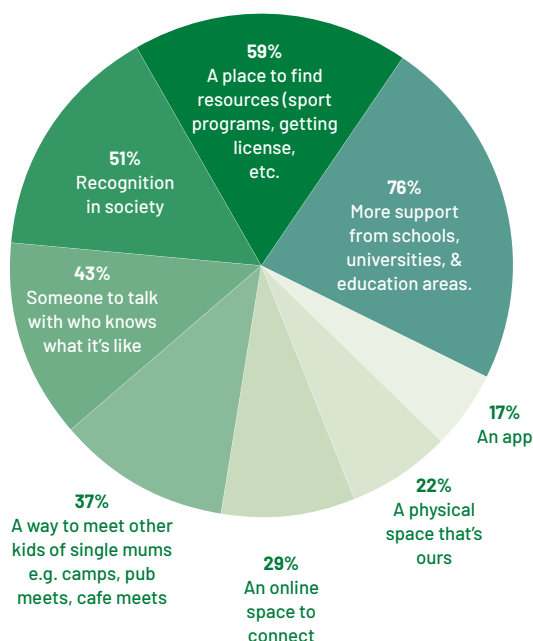
    Create better working spaces and conditions for case workers in child protection, social work and wellbeing providers so they have time and can create and maintain continuity of contact. Young people need more consistency in caseworkers, with fewer who are stressed and burned out.

15. **Better advertising of all levels of government support for access to activities.**

    Many local councils offer grants for individuals to participate in sport or other creative activities, but these are rarely advertised in spaces young people see or school wellbeing staff and youth workers know about.

16. **Demonstrations from adults in key contact roles, particularly teachers, that they 'see' the individual.**

    Adults in key contact roles need to deal with children of single mother families as individuals rather than constantly emphasise their loss and difference.

- 59% A place to find resources (sport programs, getting license, etc.
- 76% More support from schools, universities, & education areas.
- 17% An app
- 22% A physical space that's ours
- 29% An online space to connect
- 37% A way to meet other kids of single mums e.g. camps, pub meets, cafe meets
- 43% Someone to talk with who knows what it's like
- 51% Recognition in society

Things you would like to see available to kids of single mums

About these young people

Age

Most participants in both phases were mid to late teens.

Younger participants provided practical responses, such as 'how to be fair', and 'how to find a good deal', when asked what they learned from living in a single mother household.

Mid-teen participants engaged quite emotionally with questions about potential barriers or support to reach their educational and career goals.

- On the one hand, they expressed confidence that they can make ends meet while studying and working.

- On the other, they felt keenly the limitations of knowing they can't rely on parents for financial support.

- They want to be successful in breaking out of the cycle of poverty but are not clear on options that will support them to achieve this after study.

This age group was more aware of wider social stigmas and articulated feelings of 'difference' from their peers in couple families.

Ages of participants n=124

| <13 | 13-15 | 16-18 | 19-21 |

Combined

Focus Groups
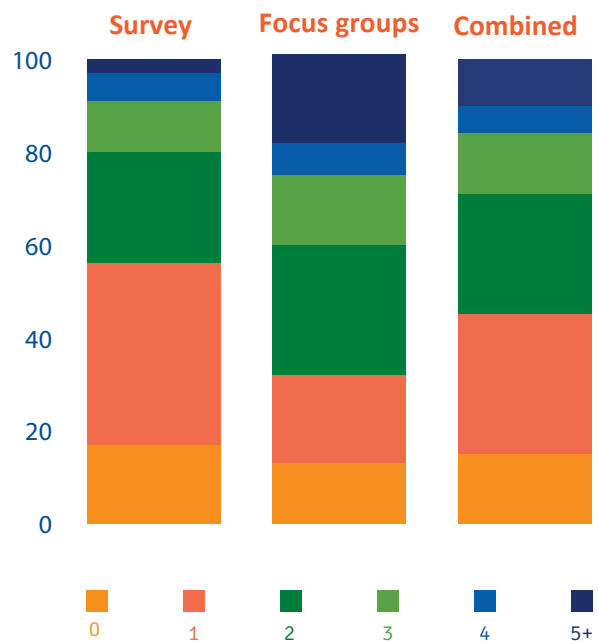
Surveys

0   20   40   60   80   100%
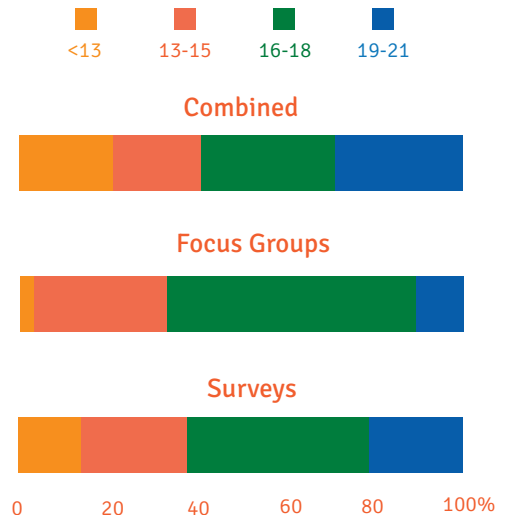
Siblings

- 15% of all participants were only children.

- One or two siblings was the norm, with 63% in the survey, 46% in the focus groups and 56% across the whole group.

- In the focus groups there was a relatively large representation (19%) of families with five or more siblings.

- This suggests a different and possibly more disadvantaged cohort to our national survey where 1168 respondents had 1.88 children each.[4]

National statistics show that from 1981-2021:

'Across the three census years, one-parent families most commonly had one dependent child (51%–52%) or two dependent children (32%–34%).

Having three or more dependent children was uncommon among one-parent families (15%–16%).' **ABS**

Number of siblings

Survey   **Focus groups**   **Combined**

100

80

60

40

20

0

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5+ |

4   Sebastian, A 2023: *Navigating turbulence: COVID and beyond for Australian single mothers. Report of a 2022 national survey by Council of Single Mothers and their Children.* Available at:
https://www.csmc.org.au/national-survey-2023

Other characteristics

Gender

55% of all participants were female, a slight skew due to one of the focus groups being entirely female. Five identified as non-binary or gender diverse and one responded that they did not 'know' their gender identity.

First Nations

6% of survey participants and 7% of focus group participants identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Cultural Identity

16% nominated a cultural background other than First Nations or Australian.

Cultural identities represented:

Aboriginal
American
Ashkenazi Jew
Australian
Canadian
Chinese
Eglish
Egyptian
Greek
Hebrew Israelite
Irish
Italian

Malaysian
Maori
New Zealander
Pakistani
Persian/Iranian
Samoan
Scottish
Serbian
Somali Australian
South Sudanese
Torres Strait Islander
Ukrainian

🌻 Disability 🌻

- **27% of 124 participants declared a disability or long-term health condition** that significantly impacts or restricts their daily activities. 7% preferred to not comment.

- **20% of focus group participants disclosed neurodivergence or mental health.** Mention of *'undiagnosed ADHD and autism'* led to discussions of financial barriers to getting diagnosed for ADHD, autism spectrum, anxiety and depression in several groups.

- Long term health conditions such as endometriosis came up in two of the focus groups, where the cost, wait lists and accessibility was a barrier to formal diagnosis and support.

- Several participants mentioned a sibling's disability as factors in their mother's daily lives.

Location

Both phases of the project were well represented across Victoria.

- **77% of survey respondents live in the suburbs of Melbourne** compared with 56% of focus group participants.

- **40% of focus group participants live in a regional area,** almost double those in the survey (21%). There was one survey respondent from a remote area, and three from interstate.

Location

Legend:
- Remote
- Regional
- Outer Urban
- Urban
- Inner City
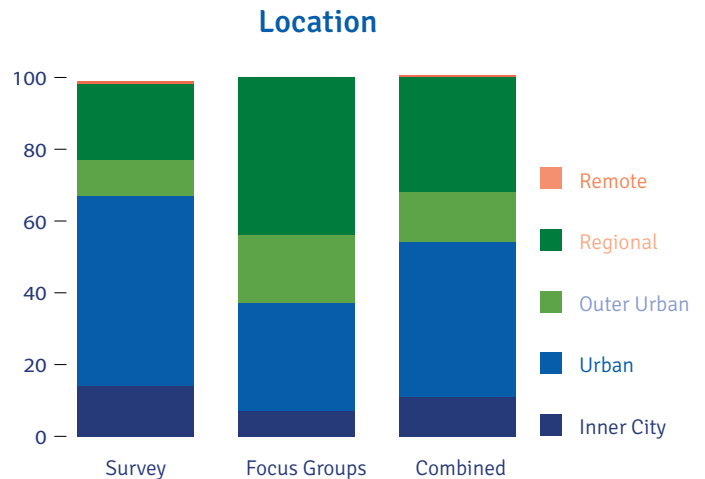
Living arrangements

79% of participants lived with their mother 100 percent of the time (58%) or *'most of the time'* (22.6%), both of which are consistent with national data on single mother led households.

- Two of the 124 lived most of the time with their father and eleven (9%) of all participants lived equally between their parents.

- Three participants lived with their mother and grandparents in the same house.

- Seven of the 124 lived independently. They were all female and in regional areas. Of these seven, four live in a youth housing facility, five have five or more siblings, and four were under 18.

- Only one lived with a guardian/foster carer, and three selected none of the above – with one of the three elaborating on this, saying their house had burned down and with their mother and siblings, they were currently homeless.

Education

There was a broad mix of participants from primary school, high school, secondary colleges, alternative year 12 streams, TAFE, university, private and government education represented across both survey and focus group participants.
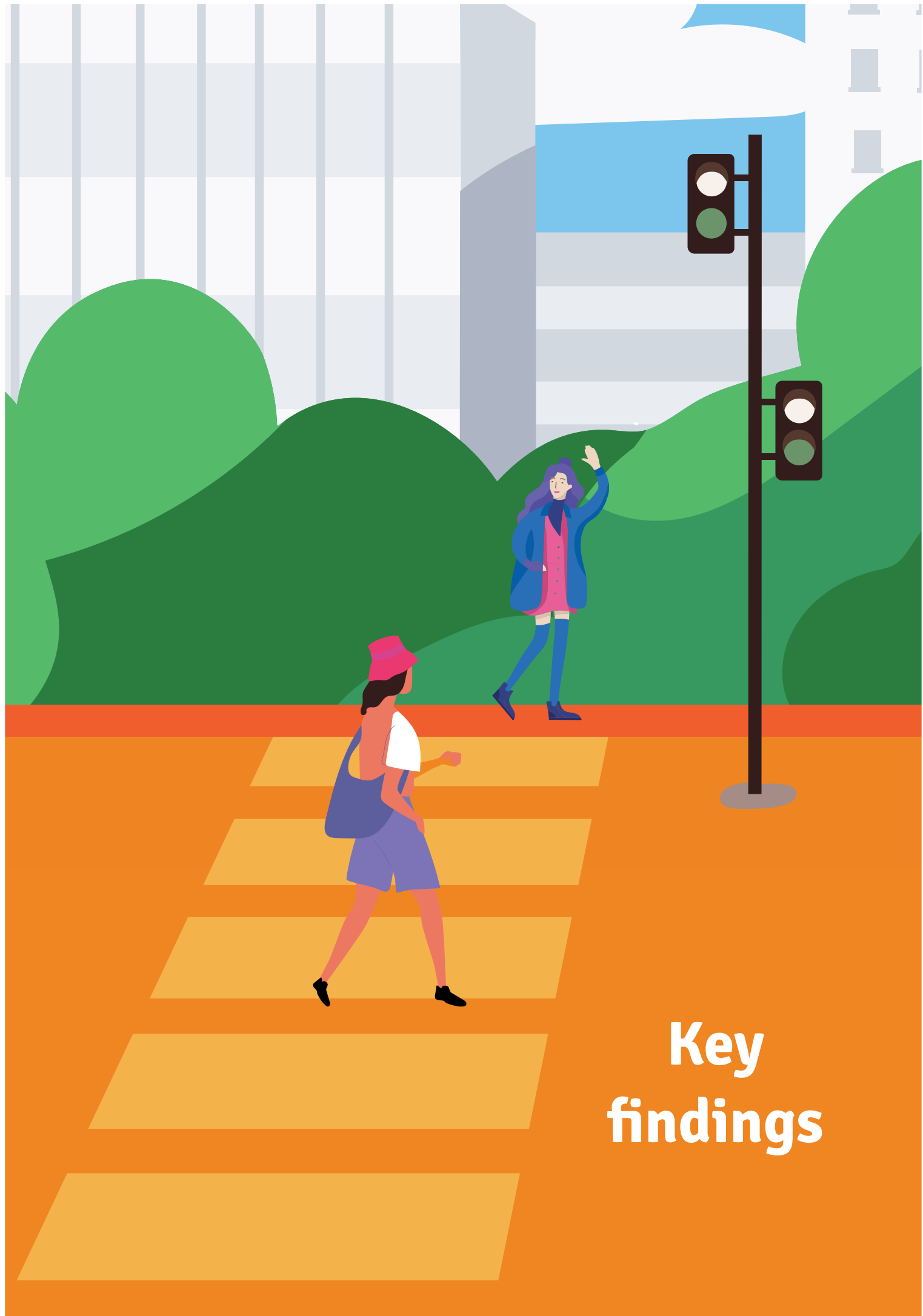
Key

findings

To state the obvious: there is only one parent!

Young people consistently expressed the view that their mother sacrifices her own needs to support her children's needs and interests as best she can. Underpinning this was a common thread in all group discussions about the multiple calls on their mother's time and the impact of these on both her finances and availability to meet her children's needs.

'It always felt weird seeing the other kids go home on time at school, while I had to wait in the after school program since mum had to do work later into the day'

Strong sub-themes were:

Other siblings requiring more of the mother's time (particularly but not exclusively, if another sibling had a disability or was much younger).

Their mother being 'too busy' either working or parenting.

Ways participants tried to avoid adding to their mother's stress.

'Having a single mother of 8, I wanted to help her as much as I could'

The absence of the father in the lives of these children had a directly acknowledged impact upon their mother's time across a complex spectrum. Participants identified a sense of impacted emotional connectedness with their mothers because of the needs of other siblings, due to age, siblings' disability, and the work obligations of the mother that often removed her from the household space.

The subject of absent fathers came up in each group. Boys and young men often expressed the absences of their fathers in relation to events, sports clubs, or lack of a role model. Girls and young women tended to comment more in respect of the impacts caused to their mothers.

'Things like Father's Day at primary school…'

'Not having a male figure around'

'Mum not being able to come to things because there's only one parent and more children'

The mother's state of mind and her relationship with the child's father impacts on both mother and child, financially and emotionally.

'My mum doesn't have spare time to support me and my brother because she needs to work so much. I know my dad causes my mum all sorts of problems to interfere with her life. His behaviour affects me and my brother.'

Finances and financial insecurity

Almost every focus group participant 15 years and above worked part time or casual jobs outside of or instead of school. Many reported contributing to household expenses.

Financial awareness, and feelings of stress and guilt experienced at quite young ages were common themes in each focus group.

Participants described perceiving a kind of social separation early, feeling 'different' from other kids and subject to social stigmas. These young people had all experienced the loss of a parent, and where they had multiple siblings, reported feeling they had to act as a second parent to fill the void left by the absent parent.

Mid-teen and older participants displayed more nuanced financial complexities. These young people were more aware of and involved in shared concerns over housing insecurity, or their mothers' job instability.

'Lack of money to fund educational needs has impacted my ability to study. My time and energy are spent working to cover expenses instead of being able to concentrate on studies. Not to mention the time spent worrying about how I will manage in the years to come.'

Participants gave examples of actively avoiding asking their mothers for items such as clothing or hygiene products that were beyond their basic needs, preferring instead to work themselves for items such as deodorant or branded sneakers.

Many older participants knew that the amounts their fathers were legally expected to contribute were inadequate in the face of real costs. Several expressed disappointment that their fathers didn't recognise this, and sometimes didn't pay at all. Shame and guilt about their fathers' behaviour seemed to affect both genders and to be an unfair burden for them to carry.

Another burden was having to take financial control of their life goals because their mums don't and most likely won't have money to support any educational expenses as they move toward adulthood. This was particularly true for those whose mothers are on minimum wages or government income payments.

'Trying to achieve something whilst trying to help your single mother pay for bills and look after the house is a lot harder than most would assume.'

For most participants, there was no optimism that their fathers would step in to assist.

Borrowing from extended family also didn't seem a likely option, with some alluding to financial support from family becoming problematic.

'We are cut off from family members. They have helped us in the past with schooling money and other things, but mum has always had to pay it back or they get nasty, so we don't take money or have any contact with them anymore.'

Stigma & stress

'Domestic violence has impacted us severely - it's isolating, inancially devastating, & our support system has been decimated'

Stigma

Shifting the social stigma on single mother families was one of the most highly prioritised changes young people need. This presented as a desiring greater recognition in society of the realities and challenges faced by the children of single mothers.

'There are some kids who won't be friends with me because my parents aren't together.'

'I think our family situation is mostly accepted, but perhaps not by all.'

'We have no support'

'No one really accepts my family. We are always on the outer as my mum has to juggle everything on her own. She doesn't have anyone to balance the load.'

'Other adults judgments of her ability to raise kids on her own'

Rather than advertising or social campaigns, participant suggestions were:

- Social dialogue and conversations with teachers, sport coaches, and community leaders to address social stigma.
- Improved practice that can filter from adults down to kids, rather than arise from advertising.

Stress

Participants 16 to 18 years reported feelings of 'pressure' to become, and remain, more self-reliant than their peers and to perform well in school environments or achieve high paying jobs as soon as possible.

Stressors for this age group included:

- Completing the requirements for learner driver licenses quickly, due to their mothers having insufficient time and money to invest in a longer time to succeed.
- Heightened feelings of existential concern and stress about their futures. They worried about university acceptance for 'good' or 'high paying' job fields, and about how they would manage to fund university attendance and associated complexities.

Across the other age groups, the need for extra self-organisation in living between two houses was a stress, regardless of whether a step-parent was involved or not.

'I'm tired of living in two homes.'

73% of survey respondents identified the importance of:

maintaining or attaining good results in education *'so I can help support my mum and siblings.'*

having a good life - usually combined with education and having opportunities to be financially secure so that other elements such as health and wellbeing will fall into place, along with financial independence.

The wellbeing of the people in the kids' immediate community; their mum, family and friends.

Whether preparing to access higher education or currently being in it, **the correlation between finances and education appear to go hand in hand.**

Protective factors

Sibling relationships were very important and, while not always unproblematic, provided a highly valued protective factor for the closeness generated through having significant shared experiences.

Younger siblings and those with a disability generated an added sense of responsibility for some participants who felt resentment at their siblings 'taking more of mum's time and energy', mixed with understanding.

Birth-order varied among these children and created, as in many families, a significant dynamic in relation to responsibility and assistance.

Another important protective finding from this research is that that the children of single mothers find significant meaning and understanding in having peers around them who have shared experiences, whether as siblings or friends who are also children of single mother households.

Given the amount of anxiety these young people appear to shoulder, protective factors are a welcome discovery.

Personal and emotional development

Loss

Notwithstanding the strengths participants indicated from growing up in a single mother household, it is also clear that their lives are marked with loss.

They reported early emotional maturity, and strong feelings of responsibility to ease the load on their mothers wherever possible.

Those whose parents were still interacting, many described feeling caught in the middle, sad at the arguments and 'toxic relations', and sometimes feeling they needed to deflect aggression.

All of this led to hyper-vigilance and children trying to be pre-empt and prevent issues that may occur in situations where both parents needed to be present.

'I was always told I was mature for my age but now that I am an adult I feel as though I missed out on my childhood.'

'Missing Mum at Dad's, missing Dad at Mum's.'

'Feeling sad seeing other friends' parents together.'

'Not having my parents together as a team.'

'Feeling abandoned by my dad.'

Gains

Young people also identified the positives of have been raised by a single mother.

They had learnt resilience, determination, independence and life skills.

Many considered their single mothers to be a strong role model for their future lives.

'Mum's strength shows me I can achieve whatever I want even though it's hard. Sometimes I think, 'I wish I had rich parents' but then I wouldn't have learned that good feeling you get when you get something all by yourself.'

'... really, it's a strength. Like my mother took on the role of both parents and still managed to raise us with manners and respect.'

'I think it will impact me only positively with regards to my ability to be emotionally aware and considerate.'

'Managing public transport and public life is easier for me than for other people due to having to navigate it on my own more often.'

Housing

Housing affordability, accessibility, availability, and instability were raised often.

Young people call for more emergency housing to be available both for young people leaving home and for the whole family.

Participants commented on their feelings of distress rising from knowing their mothers were stressed about housing. Additionally, many expressed anxiety and stress about their own options as young adults seeking independent housing, now or in the near future.

Participants from regional areas sought assistance from several support services for young people.

- These housing services were accessed by the young people themselves who took the initiative and navigated the process of gaining housing so they could live independently, including being enrolled in school and attending 85% of classes.
- Berry Street and Quantum facilities both provided housing in a single building with individual rooms and shared facilities. These services also provided on site counselling and mentoring.
- One mid-teen utilised a Kids Under Cover studio offer enabling him to live semi-independently. Most participants had never heard of the option of movable units or pods in the yard of their mothers' rental home. They were keen to learn more, as a potential way to relive the pressure of numbers within their households and desire for their own space.
- A youth refuge was accessed in Gippsland, but participants spoke of challenges in accessing emergency housing for them and their babies. Age was the greatest barrier as eligibility begins at 16.

'Single mother houses are always so full'

'Mum has taken in overseas students for extra income.

'If it wasn't for my grandparents buying mum's, we wouldn't be able to afford housing. They live with us now.'

'...so many siblings and cousins.'

'...foster kids as well.'

'Single parents getting rentals is hard.'

'My house burned down'.

One young woman fled her mother's home at the age of 15 with her baby and 2 of her younger siblings. She was blocked from utilising the youth shelter because of her age and dependent infant and was unable to utilise the adult shelter due to her age.

Supports and services - needs and experiences

Systems

A key finding from all the groups was that processes and systems are often seen as more important than the individual needs of the kids.

Participants spoke about interactions with teachers, Victorian police officers, representatives of the Department of Health and Human Services, therapists, and social workers.

They described learning from a young age to just go through the motions, or not engage, due to the constant churn of case workers, and the lack of understanding about their family circumstances, which were often treated with pre-existent assumptions and social bias.

Urban participants, including those around the Mornington Peninsular, experienced less overt stigma than those in regional areas. They did however express annoyance and dismay at stigma they experienced in social systems, such as Centrelink and when dealing with the police, and school processes that were entirely based on two parent models.

Emotional, financial and services supports participants accessed included extended family, community (including clubs, community health, GPs), schools, TAFES and universities, social services (non-government and government), and Victoria Police.

15% of survey participants accessed spaces or online support platforms. Those who did said they used a mix of online resources, talking with someone via phone and face-to-face, and had done so for socialising and support. Focus group participants were a little more expansive about their experiences although many of those participants, likewise, did not much value the online experiences.

Few mentions were made of state-wide youth organisations, none of which appear to take note of family make-up.

While race, culture, gender and disability seemed well accounted for, poverty and one-parent family status were not.

OLLY (A hang-out space)

Youth Housing (The Forum) what is this?

Better Futures (a Victorian government initiative supporting children who have been in care)

Smith Family ('because we're poor, not because I'm from a single mother family.')

Berry Street

Kids Under Cover

L2P driving programs

Salvation army

Headspace

Free counselling at school

GP management plan

Orange door

Youth Support & Advocacy Services (YSAS)

Friends, school coordinators, family and siblings

___

Kids Helpline

Kids Messenger

Asmile

Black Dog Institute

Suicide care & prevention program

Psychologist

Lifeline

Local council events

Youth centre drop-in for 10–17 year olds

Service feedback

Participants felt strongly about their service experiences and wanted it recorded and noted.

- Key among their needs were skilled and consistent support workers and the opportunity to develop trusting relationships that were ongoing and didn't make empty promises.

- Services that had high numbers of different people they had to meet, high turnover of staff and no explanation of who does what were overwhelming. Strategies for dealing with this, common across groups, were to 'just go through the motions' at each visit. **Of particular concern are descriptions of feeling stressed and fearful of doing or saying the wrong thing in case they were separated from their mother and/or siblings.**

'Child protection workers are inconsistent, make empty promises and then just disappear.'

'School wellbeing staff are always changing.'

'Centrelink are not always helpful.'

Knowing doesn't make a difference

'I would rather not be singled out.'

'Teachers not remembering my name, or my story, hurts. Like I don't matter.'

'If I got in trouble at school, having to explain that only one parent could come get me, and she's busy with her job. Having to beg teachers not to call and disturb her.'

Participants raised the issue of classroom teachers and year level coordinators knowing their family circumstances and ignoring these when there was an administrative matter.

- Whilst the kids didn't want to be called out for being 'different', they also wished that their teachers would discreetly support them in areas such as getting both parents to sign a form or helping arrange school administration support for paying for school activities that aren't covered entirely by subsidies.

- They found it hard to understand how a teacher could know their family circumstances and yet give no sign of understanding that they had extra responsibilities such as organising themselves between two households, or caring for younger siblings, and that these factors impacted upon homework time.

- Students who understand teachers can't be across everything sometimes just took action to evade feeling undermined, such as forging their father's signature to simplify things.

Police

Those who had experience with the police recalled feeling stigma, and the lack of understanding of police staff working with their family situation.

- One participant had been held by police for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The police insisted on contacting both parents to say what had happened even though the child had asserted that contacting the father would cause issues at home for the mother - something which turned out to be true.

- This desire for police to work on a case-by-case basis, listening to children of single mother households, was echoed by those across the focus groups who had been in contact with Victoria Police.

- **There was frustration that police, who they felt should know better about the impacts of family violence, insisted on following protocols that will often create danger for the child and mother.**

Valued support

A youth centre within walking distance of the area's largest schools with healthy food options, a fully stocked kitchen and a popular drop-in space.

A valued service provided by the centre was a minibus that would drive kids home each evening when the centre closed at 6pm.

Learning to drive

L2P, a learner driver mentoring initiative provided via many local councils, was well used by participants who said they would never have been able to get driving lessons otherwise.

Reducing bureaucratic hurdles between youth services, communication teams and library services. Excellent spaces and engaging and helpful frontline staff are wasted when processes and procedures ignore users.

Friends and family

62% of participants said they have friends who come from a single mother household. 53% of these described a 'unique connection with kids who mainly lived with their single mothers'.

'We have compared notes at times, sometimes helped each other a bit if things are rough.'

'They also didn't have much money and much 'stuff' that kids our age usually have.'

'Felt like I wasn't alone anymore and found comfort knowing we had a shared experience.'

'My friends support me and understand when I can't do things with them because mum can't afford it.'

'With other friends with split up parents, it makes it more normalised, and we support each other.'

'My mum doesn't get supported by her family, but she does have a few close friends who support her through tough times.'

'My grandma lets us live with her.'

'My grandma helps my mum.'

'My mother's friends and family understand her lifestyle, they provide acceptance and guidance when needed and overall support.'

Focus group
geographical analysis

Regional areas

In Gippsland and Central Victoria, the demographics, life circumstances and determination for improvement exhibited by each participant were highly consistent. The difference lay with the significant gap in appropriate support for the children of single mothers who become young guardians themselves.[5] This became evident in Gippsland where the focus group was facilitated at an education and training centre for young single mothers. Becoming a young guardian represented a unique but highly impactful stress factor.

In our regional focus groups (Central Victoria and Gippsland),[6] mental health and instability in housing, financial stress, and limited access to support were the most discussed aspects of their lives. Additionally, there is no child protection proceszs or aid services focused on out-of-home care to support the demographic of at-need youth who are under 16 but that also have their own dependents.

Among the Gippsland focus group (eight participants), the significant gaps in social services became apparent. Participants were all youthful children of single mothers, still under 18, and now single mothers themselves. This combination of factors weighed on their ability to self-advocate and improve their own life circumstances. Those who sought support were often denied in a systemic, routine way that in turn enabled dire events and circumstances to develop before genuine intervention occurred.

Regional youth had more issues with housing and accommodation and were well versed in navigating those systems. Three of our Central Victoria participants sought out-of-home care opportunities, which were enabling them to successfully complete alternative year 12 programs and industry training. One had multiple siblings and had been out of home since the age of 12. Another lived out of town and as the eldest often needed to work around his mother's care and work duties to be able to get transport into town for schooling or other activities, as public transport is very limited in the area.

The lived experiences, and the determination to change their circumstances of the Central Victoria participants matched almost entirely with the lived experiences and aspirations of our Gippsland participants who were themselves now young mothers. For these participants, however, it was much harder to access the same kinds of services as those available in the Central Victorian example.

Combinations of a lack of reliable public transport and the cost of other forms of transport to fill the gaps, such as taxis, were regular challenges for regional participants, particularly if they lived out of town. This often meant no safe ways to move around, particularly at night when their mother was not able to collect them. They missed out or placed themselves in vulnerable positions such as walking home late at night.

Some young mums in Gippsland spoke of the difficulties of shopping with a pram and having to go to various shops for the best deals and then get home with shopping, their baby and no car.

The young mums, and some other regional participants, spoke about social stigma, such as sympathetic or judgemental looks from people in the street or at school drop off, or judgemental treatment from medical receptionists, mental health nurses and other health care professionals.

This increased their fear of separation from their families as they felt that representatives of services used their systemic power to call Child Protection, making recommendations based on misinformation rather than the needs of the actual child.

---

5 *'Young guardians'* refers to having their own children as well as sometimes becoming responsible for younger siblings as well.

6 Morning Peninsular participants could fit into regional and urban, however the project has focused on the regional areas being Central Victoria and Gippsland due to the commonalities not attending conventional schooling.

Urban areas

Participants in the urban areas tended to speak more openly than their regional counterparts about their knowledge of the use of Medicare and Centrelink services.

They had experience of taking themselves to the doctors, or navigating MyGov with their own accounts, and a keen understanding of the difficulties of accessing mental health and neurodivergence assessments due to long waiting lists and the up-front costs. This impacted on their schooling and day-to-day activities as they were not able to receive the supports they need because they lacked a diagnosis.

Constant changes within their school's wellbeing departments and teams compounded their difficulties. Students from one school where the wellbeing coordinator had facilitated recruitment of a number of participants to this project said that this new staff member was the fifth they had had in two years.

They commented that the wellbeing coordinator was the first who seemed like she actually cared, and they had not had a chance to create a trusting relationship with the previous ones.

Urban kids generally had less trouble with accessibility, availability and costs of public transport which supported their independence, although groups were not held in the peri-urban fringe with limited public transportation.

Methodology

Surveys

Questions were developed through engagement with several early adult children of single mothers and tested with professionals who work with children 9-13 to ensure they were appropriate for any younger responders. Using Survey Monkey, the questions were disseminated through CSMC member networks, social media, and referring agencies.

Thus, the primary methodology for contacting young people was through their mothers, and as a two-step process, was a known limiting factor. However, this allowed CSMC to trial a set of questions and assumptions, with responses forming the basis for further enquiry in the focus groups.

Survey responses were anonymous, with a final question providing respondents with the opportunity to leave their email address for future contact. The email addresses were immediately separated from the data.

Questions were in four categories: demographics and living arrangements, broader community support, education and opportunities, and supports now and in the future. All sections included open-ended questions where participants could expand on their answers, experiences and ideas.

Focus Groups

Ethics

Given the focus groups involved young people under the age of 18, the following were embedded:

- Payments to participants for their time and expertise.
- The need for knowledge of trauma-informed responses and techniques if necessary, arising from potentially triggering content.
- Facilitators requiring Working With Children Checks.
- De-identification of participants and minimal personal information collected in registration, participation and post focus group.
- Having child and parental consent to the recording of online groups and clear protocols to manage these.
- Participant consent forms and parent/guardian consent for all participants under 18.
- Engaging one or two Youth Consultants to co-lead the focus groups.
- Reflexivity considerations as the focus group facilitators are now adult children of single mother households, in addition to two of the three being single mothers themselves.
- Ensuring the lens of a child from a single mother household was maintained. This is particularly important as CSMC works constantly on issues such as poverty and family violence, and are very conscious that the perspectives of children on these issues are often subsumed to those of the adults. The focused of the project was purposely deliberately on the view of children and young adults living in a single mother household.

Recruitment

Participants were sought initially through CSMC's social media and newsletter networks. This yielded three online sessions, with many of those registering located in throughout Victoria.

The project staff then approached wellbeing staff at high schools, youth services and at several councils to see if they could help reach participants or provide a space to conduct a focus group on-site.

This strategy resulted in five online groups and groups in schools (three), a local library (one) and at a youth community centre (one).

The focus groups at the secondary schools/colleges and the youth community centre each had one of their own staff members present to observe and assist with managing any triggering issues, although this was not needed. The staff did, however, offer valuable and supportive feedback on the research and focus group delivery afterwards.

Processes

Participants registered for each session via a QR code or link to a Survey Monkey registration form. Each registrant then received the following via email:

1. Participant Consent Form

2. Parent/Guardian Consent form for those under 18

3. Form for their bank details for payment after the focus group

4. Links to the Zoom session if it was online or details on the times and location of the face-to-face group. For those held at schools, the staff contact at the school communicated these details to the students.

The same outline of questions was followed for each focus group, with minor adjustments depending on the age groups.

1. Demographics: anonymous, via a Zoom quiz link or Survey Monkey link.

2. What's not so great about growing up in a single mother household?

3. What is good about growing up in a single mother household?

4. What are some of the lessons or life-skills you've learned from your single mother household?

5. What does more recognition in society look like to you?

6. What resources or services are you aware of or do you use?

7. What resources would you like to see available for children of single mother families and how would you want to access them?

Zoom sessions utilised:

- An online whiteboard allowing participants and facilitators to make notes or responses on a virtual post it-note under each question.

- Chat function for comments and direct messaging with the designated support facilitator.

- Capacity for participants to agree with others' comments on the whiteboard or in chats.

In face-to-face sessions:

- Butchers' paper replaced the online whiteboard, with one facilitator capturing responses on it.

- Participants could write their responses on a post-it-note and stick it to the butcher's paper in the break or at the end, which some of the quieter participants did.

- At the end of the session, each of the participants was given a sheet of dot stickers and invited to put a sticker next to the responses on the butcher's paper that they agreed with and/or related to. This enabled allocation of weight of each response and assisted identification of the key themes.

Following the focus groups, a feedback survey was sent out together with a list of services that was compiled over the course of the focus groups based on suggestions or indication of need within he group discussions.

Participants were paid via electronic transfer after the sessions.

Challenges of focus groups

Recruitment of participants was the biggest challenge, given CSMCs need to rely on external networks to reach the desired number of participants.

CSMC staff was mindful to use a replacement facilitator if a participant knew the facilitator personally, to allow for confidentiality and to remove any unconscious bias the facilitator might have.

Relying on agencies to help with recruitment led to many dead ends and a couple of cancelled sessions where promotional materials created and distributed did not generate potential candidates. Working with councils and libraries initially appeared to be a great partnership, however three of four sessions booked in this way ended up being cancelled due to lack of sign-ups. The one that did work out and had the largest number of participants was booked at the library, but recruitment came largely from a wellbeing teacher at a local high school in response to a call from Council of Single Mothers and their Children.

Nationally, data shows single mother families are the family type most likely to live in poverty. In addition, there is an epidemic of family violence in Australia, and many single mothers carry both the emotional and financial load of two people. Despite these factors, it was important not to assume that every participant was struggling financially or emotionally. CSMC was particularly conscious of our knowledge base being the mothers' experiences and did not want to impose this on the participants. For this reason, the questions and style of facilitation were geared to allowing expression of differences based on individual experiences.

There was no need for anyone to discuss poverty or family violence if they did not want to. Some who had experience of family violence spoke candidly about their experiences, although in other cases there was a tentative mention that did not develop further.

The breadth of issues that could arise for each focus group meant that there was no predicting the direction discussions would go in and for how long. For example, subjects such as family violence may be triggering and need extra care or support, or issues of large households often prompted busy and animated discussion on the minutiae of day-to-day life.

Whilst discussion was deliberately participant-led, facilitators did guide themes and when needed changed topics to avoid fixation on certain themes such as violence and, thereby, to de-escalate tensions.

After the sessions, participants who sought further contact were guided into discussion on the benefits of their experiences and provided with lists of support services and reassurances of support if needed.

More Information

You can find this report on the CSMC website:
www.csmc.org.au/youth-report/

Council of Single Mothers and their Children
210 Lonsdale St, Melbourne VIC 3000
ABN: 28796387679
T: 03 9654 0327
W: csmc.org.au
F: csmc.org.au facebook.com/councilofsinglemothers

For specialist information, support and referral contact our Support Line
T: 03 9654 0622
E: csmc@csmc.org.au