The State of Victoria’s Children 2021 and 2022

Meeting local needs

# State of Victoria’s Children

The State of Victoria’s Children report series is produced by the Department of Education on behalf of the Children’s Services Coordination Board. The Board comprises the Chief Commissioner for Police and the secretaries of the departments of Premier and Cabinet, Treasury and Finance, Education, Health, Families, Fairness and Housing, and Justice and Community Safety.

**Note:** During and following the period covered by this report, the Victorian Government issued administrative orders restructuring some of its activities via machinery of government changes. As part of the machinery of government restructure, on 1 February 2021, the Department of Health and Human Services became 2 new departments, the Department of Health and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.
On 1 January 2023, the Department of Education and Training was renamed the Department of Education. Also on this date, the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions was renamed the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions and the Department of Transport was renamed the Department of Transport and Planning.

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## Language statement

We recognise the diversity of Aboriginal people living throughout Victoria. While the terms ‘Koorie’ or ‘Koori’ are commonly used to describe Aboriginal people of southeast Australia, we have used the term ‘Aboriginal’ to include all people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who are living in Victoria.

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# Introduction

The locations in which children live, play, and go to school can have a strong influence on their development, experiences, and life outcomes. Significant geographic variables can include the proximity and quality of services, existence of social and support networks, availability of family-friendly activities, perceptions of neighbourhood safety, and aspects of the built environment such as the quality of public open spaces (Goldfeld, et al., 2018; Crawford, et al., 2017).

There is also a significant intersection between geography and socioeconomic disadvantage, a factor known to negatively affect many aspects of people’s lives including physical and mental health, educational attainment, and safety (Lamb, et al., 2020; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2017). Australian research has found that high concentrations of socioeconomic disadvantage in an area are correlated with poorer life outcomes, having the potential to exacerbate the disadvantages experienced by individual households and increase the risks of intergenerational disadvantage (Vinson, 2009).

This report examines the health and development, education, and safety of Victorian children and young people in 2021 and 2022, and analyses how related outcomes can vary depending on where they live. Data used in this report is from these years only and does not reflect the impact of new or expanded services or programs that have occurred since 2022.

Throughout each section of this report, examples are given of where government initiatives have been tailored to intervene earlier and meet the local needs of children, young people, and their families during this period, or where communities themselves have taken a leading role in the design, decision making, and implementation of place-based services.

The report finds that while most children and young people in Victoria are healthy, safe, and doing well in their education, some are more likely to experience poorer outcomes. The collated data support the existing evidence that geographic location is a significant factor in driving inequitable access and outcomes for Victorian children and young people.

# Key findings | Health and development

In Victoria, the proportion of children developmentally on track on all 5 domains of the Australian Early Development Census has remained stable.

2009 (56%) to 2021 (58%)

The 5 domains are:

* Physical health and wellbeing
* Social competence
* Emotional maturity
* Language and cognitive skills (school based)
* Communication skills and general knowledge

2021 results show, however, that disadvantaged children, including those from lower socioeconomic status areas, are less likely to be developmentally on track at the time they commence school.

## In 2021:

* 7 out of 10 (72%) Victorian children were reported to eat the recommended daily serves of fruit, but very few children from any demographic were likely to eat the recommended daily serves of vegetables, with a statewide average of 2.9%.
* Children living in the most disadvantaged areas were twice as likely to drink one or more cups of sweetened beverages every day compared to those living in the least disadvantaged areas.
* In many parts of Victoria, fewer than half of children aged 5 to 12 years were undertaking enough physical activity to meet the *Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Young People.*
* Some of the lowest levels of physical activity were in metropolitan areas, highlighting that city children may experience more barriers to active play and transport than their rural and regional counterparts.
* Children living in the most disadvantaged areas were twice as likely to drink one or more cups of sweetened beverages every day compared to those living in the least disadvantaged areas.

# Key findings | Education

* In 2022, Victoria’s 4-year-old kindergarten participation rate remained high over the 5 years to 2022 but experienced a small temporary decline in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
* Over the same period participation was consistently higher in non-metropolitan areas than in metropolitan areas.
* Victoria’s overall performance in standardised achievement testing is strong, with NAPLAN results among top performing Australian states and territories and showing long-term improvement in Reading scores at primary school year levels.
* 2022 results show, however, that students in non-metropolitan and disadvantaged areas are more likely to achieve lower scores in reading assessments.

# Key findings | Safety

## In 2021 and 2022:

Rates of children in out-of-home care are highest in non-metropolitan areas with high levels of disadvantage and lowest in metropolitan areas with low levels of disadvantage.

Most Victorian children in out-of-home care were placed in kinship care arrangements (75.7%) where care was provided by relatives or other members of a child’s social network.

The rate of alleged offender incidents for young people ages 10 to 17 was at its lowest levels since 2013.

Locations with high numbers of alleged offences include places where young people congregate, such as the Melbourne central business district, and destinations like shopping centres where young people commit acquisitive crimes such as shoplifting.

## 2018-19 to 2021-22

The cautioning rate for Aboriginal first-time offenders ages 10 to 17 increased from 52.0% to 70.6%, meaning that more Aboriginal young people were being diverted from further contact with the justice system. This reflects the introduction of the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program, amendments to the Victoria Police Manual to broaden cautioning criteria, and increased monitoring of cautioning decisions.

# 1. Health and development

The conditions in which children are born and live play a crucial role in their lifelong health outcomes (Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, 2008). Socioeconomic position, experiences of discrimination, and individual health literacy all influence health, as do geographically variable factors such as community networks and aspects of the physical environment that may enable or discourage healthy behaviours like active transport. These non-medical factors that influence health outcomes – known as social determinants of health – are a consequence of the broader political, social, and economic contexts that influence the distribution of social resources (Islam, 2019). This is why services targeting health and wellbeing inequalities for children and their families must often focus on the specific needs of a particular area and community.

## 1.1 Early development

Children’s early development, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioural attributes, is highly predictive of their abilities at older ages (Tayler, Cloney, & Niklas, 2015). The Australian Early Development Census is a national data collection completed by teachers of children in their first year of school every 3 years. The instrument collects data relating to domains of early childhood development, which include physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge. Children are assessed as being on track, at risk, or vulnerable in each domain. The results from the Australian Early Development Census help communities understand how local children have developed by the time they start formal full-time school and informs preparation in early childhood practice. This information enables communities to better understand what is working well to prepare children for school and address the gaps.

In Victoria, the proportion of children developmentally on track across all domains at school entry has remained stable from 2009 to 2021, sitting at between 56% and 58%. Children living in the most disadvantaged communities, however, persistently show higher rates of developmental vulnerability. Consistent with previous results, 2021 data shows that some cohorts are less likely to be assessed as on track, including Aboriginal children, children who did not attend pre-school, and children for whom English is a second language. Male children (49.8%) are also less likely to be assessed as developmentally on track than female children (64.9%).

Over the 5 Australian Early Development Censuses conducted from 2009 to 2021, some local government areas have experienced a decline in developmental vulnerability in the context of demographic change and reductions in local levels of disadvantage. However, in other cases local government areas have reduced rates of developmental vulnerability while local levels of disadvantage have remained stable or even increased. This shows that in addition to shifts in socioeconomic disadvantage and advantage there are other local factors that can influence changes in children’s outcomes over time.

These factors may include access to high quality services, improvements in infrastructure, presence of community networks, and strong local leadership.

**Figure 1** shows the proportion of Victorian children developmentally on track across all Australian Early Development Census domains by local government area against the Index of Relative Socioeconomic Advantage and Disadvantage, which summarises economic and social conditions, based on a suite of economic, education, income, occupation, and household characteristics measures. This illustrates that on average children from areas with higher levels of disadvantage are at greater risk of developmental vulnerability, while children from areas of higher advantage are more likely to be developmentally on track.

Figure 1: Children developmentally on track by local government area socioeconomic advantage/disadvantage, 2021



***Source:*** *Australian Early Development Census (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022); Index of Relative Socioeconomic Advantage and Disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a)*

# Meeting local needs

## A Comprehensive Monitoring System

The Comprehensive Monitoring System is a project aimed at providing governments and local communities with additional data to complement the information captured by the Australian Early Development Census. The Comprehensive Monitoring System delivers 8 surveys at key developmental points from infancy through to 21 years of age. The surveys collect information about children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing, and social and emotional development.

In 2021 and 2022, a trial of the Comprehensive Monitoring System was undertaken in Buloke, Loddon, and Gannawarra, facilitated by the North Central Local Learning and Employment Network and supported by the Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development at Deakin University, the Victorian Department of Education, and the Human Early Learning Partnership at the University of British Columbia, Canada.

The communities of Buloke, Loddon, and Gannawarra reported that the additional data provided by the Comprehensive Monitoring System had immediate benefits including supporting conversations across sectors and strengthening existing collaborations. Additionally, the communities reported that the data was used to inform planning and decision-making, including evaluation of initiatives and policies, and making cases for future investments.

## Child and Family Health and Wellbeing Locals

Child and Family Health and Wellbeing Locals are a place-based and family-focussed approach to delivering integrated health and social services for children ages birth to 11 who are experiencing developmental, emotional, relational, or behavioural challenges. The services encompass paediatric health, mental health, family, and parenting supports and are delivered through community health services funded by the Victorian government in partnership with the Commonwealth through the national Head to Health Kids network. The services are located in areas of high disadvantage and have been co-designed in partnership with the community, people with lived experience, and the service sector.

The Child and Family Health and Wellbeing Locals received funding in 2021-22 and respond to Recommendation 19.3 of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System. To prioritise sites for the initiative, an index was calculated using 6 indicators of need and vulnerability and consideration was given to local system capacity. This helped identify areas where children were experiencing poor health, development, and wellbeing outcomes because of experiences of adversity, and informed the decision to establish sites at locations in the Brimbank Melton, Southern Melbourne, and Loddon areas.

## BEAR bus (Brimbank Early Years)

Participation in early childhood services, such as maternal and child health checks, can enable early diagnosis and intervention for health and developmental concerns that parents might not recognise by themselves, and which could present barriers to later development and learning (Harris, 2016; Rudolph & Leonard, 2016).

The BEAR bus is a mobile outreach service used by the Brimbank City Council to deliver services to families at their homes, including the Maternal and Child Health Service. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the BEAR bus conducted more than 450 home visits across the local government area, enabling families to engage with the Maternal and Child Health Service while still under public health restrictions. These outreach activities were one of the few face-to-face services families received during this period and facilitated critical early intervention referrals to general practitioners and other health professionals. The BEAR bus continues to promote the Maternal and Child Health Service at community events and is used for outreach by the Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Service teams to visit families in their homes.

## B4Kids (Ballarat 4 Kids)

B4Kids was formed in 2019 as a coalition of organisations taking a whole-of-city approach to supporting children and families in Ballarat to access the support they need to thrive. B4Kids aims to reduce the number of families falling through gaps in service delivery or experiencing barriers to participation by providing access to coordinated social, health, and education services.

To understand the issues affecting their community and inform system design, the initiative uses a variety of children’s outcomes data including the Australian Early Development Census, data collected by the Crime Statistics Agency, and surveys administered by the Department of Education. Findings from this data include that Ballarat has:

* an average rate of 22% of children vulnerable in at least one developmental domain, but rates as high as 39% in some areas (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022)
* 153 family members ages birth to 17 affected by family violence in the year ending September 2022 (Crime Statistics Agency, 2022)
* a larger proportion of families experiencing high or very high stress (12.1%) than the Victorian average of 8.8% (Department of Education, 2022).

Working in partnership with families, B4Kids are helping to build parents’ skills and capacity, prevent family violence, and address the intergenerational impacts of disadvantage and poverty. B4Kids has over 35 participating coalition members across Ballarat. Representing early learning, health, community, education, sport, First Nations, disability, LGBTQIA+, justice services and local and state governments, they are working together to increase opportunities for children and their families to participate in and benefit from Ballarat’s services and community life.

## 1.2 Healthy foundations

Healthy eating and active living support healthy growth and physical and cognitive development. They equip children and young people to stay alert, concentrate and learn better in the classroom, and protect against infections, poor mental health, and the development of chronic diseases in later life.

Building strong foundations for good health and reducing the risk of unhealthy weight can be strongly influenced by location. The physical, socioeconomic, and cultural features of neighbourhoods influence parents’ perceptions of whether it is safe for their children to undertake active methods of transport, such as walking and cycling, or independent free play in public spaces without adult supervision (Crawford, et al., 2017; Francis, Martin, Wood, & Foster, 2017). Emphasising the relationship between social disadvantage related to place and health outcomes, research has also found that those experiencing food insecurity are more likely to be obese, as food insecurity can lead to a reliance on cheaper, nutrient-poor foods (Carvajal-Aldaz, Cucalon, & Ordonez, 2022). From 2020 to 2022, the proportion of adults reporting food insecurity in the Victorian Population Health Survey increased significantly from 5.8% to 8.1% (Department of Health). This data showed that adults experiencing food insecurity were more likely to have children aged 17 years or younger (36%) than those not experiencing food insecurity (28%).

The latest state data from the National Health Survey 2017-18 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018) suggests that more than one-fifth of Victorian children are overweight or obese. National data shows that over one-quarter of Australian children (27.7%) were overweight or obese in 2022, while 7.5% were underweight (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Boys and girls had similar rates of overweight and obesity (29.2% and 26.1% respectively). Data collected by the Department of Education show that while 72.0% of Victorian children were reported to eat the recommended daily serves of fruit in 2021, very few children from any demographic were likely to eat the recommended daily serves of vegetables, with a statewide average of only 2.9% (Department of Education, 2023). It was also found that children living in the most disadvantaged areas were twice as likely to drink one or more cups of sweetened beverages every day compared to those living in the least disadvantaged areas.

Figure 2 below shows that in many parts of Victoria in 2021 fewer than half of children ages 5 to 12 were undertaking enough physical activity to meet the Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Young People (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021). While physical activity levels are low generally, some of the areas with the lowest levels were metropolitan areas, highlighting barriers to physical activity that city children can experience, such as smaller backyards or concerns that undertaking active methods of transport, such as walking and cycling, or independent free play in public spaces is unsafe without an adult present (Crawford, et al., 2017). A 2018 survey of young people ages 10 to 17 found that even fewer in this age group were physically active with only around one-quarter meeting the guidelines (Department of Education and Training, 2019).

Survey data also reveal a substantial increase in the proportion of Victorian children ages 5 to 12 years exceeding the recommended daily recreational screen time limit of 2 hours per day, which remained stable at around 18.0% from 2013 to 2019 before growing to 32.5% in 2021 (Department of Education, 2023). This change is most likely attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic which is known to have affected children’s activities and behaviours in several ways, including increased screen time (The Royal Children’s Hospital National Child Health Poll, 2020; Centre for Community Child Health, 2022).

Figure 2: Proportion of children aged 5 to 12 years undertaking the recommended amount of physical activity, 2021

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Area name | Proportion |
| Mallee | 57.3% |
| Outer Gippsland | 55.6% |
| Ovens Murray | 55.2% |
| Central Highlands | 52.3% |
| Inner Gippsland | 51.0% |
| Hume Moreland | 50.8% |
| Wimmera South West | 50.2% |
| Loddon | 49.5% |
| Western Melbourne | 49.5% |
| Barwon | 47.9% |
| Southern Melbourne | 47.1% |
| Goulburn | 46.5% |
| Inner Eastern Melbourne | 46.4% |
| North Eastern Melbourne | 46.1% |
| Bayside Peninsula | 45.5% |
| Brimbank Melton | 41.3% |
| Outer Eastern Melbourne | 40.4% |

***Source:*** *Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing Survey (Department of Education, 2021)*

# Meeting local needs

## Vic Kids Eat Well, supported by Healthy Kids Advisors

Vic Kids Eat Well was launched in October 2021 as a flagship initiative of Victoria’s Healthy Kids Healthy Futures Strategy with a focus on creating healthier food and drink environments in children’s settings. Funded by the Victorian Government, Vic Kids Eat Well is delivered by Cancer Council Victoria’s Achievement Program in partnership with Nutrition Australia’s Healthy Eating Advisory Service. To support Vic Kids Eat Well the Department of Health has leveraged Commonwealth Government funding to promote healthy eating in 13 local government areas through Healthy Kids Advisors. Working with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, the Healthy Kids Advisors connect schools, sports clubs, and council operated facilities with community resources and offer guidance on how they can reach their healthy eating goals.

Healthy Kids Advisors were located in selected communities aligned with the VicHealth Local Government Partnership initiative (see **Figure 3**). These communities have shown success in encouraging participation in Vic Kids Eat Well and making healthier food and drink options more available for children. The 13 communities accounted for 33% of schools registered for the initiative, and 51% of the recommended small changes recorded by schools and organisations across the state.

Figure 3: Local government areas with Healthy Kids Advisors, 2022

|  |
| --- |
| LGA |
| Glenelg Shire |
| Mildura Rural City |
| Southern Grampians Shire |
| Northern Grampians Shire |
| Buloke Shire |
| Central Goldfields Shire |
| Greater Bendigo City |
| Hume City |
| Greater Shepparton City |
| East Gippsland Shire |
| Colac-Otway Shire |
| Melton City |
| Greater Dandenong City |

**Source:** *Healthy Kids Advisors (Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation, 2023)*

## Active Schools

Active Schools aims for all Victorian students to have the skills, confidence, and motivation to be active in life. Active Schools builds on existing programs and funding to boost support and resources for schools to get kids moving. The initiative includes a toolkit for school leaders and teachers, expert Physical Activity Advisors, and funding for schools.

Schools are encouraged to use student voice and agency on their journey to becoming an Active School to ensure students identify the barriers to participating in physical activity in their school and community and are included in the planning and decision making about related strategies and improvements to the school environment.

At Belle Vue Park Primary School it was found that many Year 6 boys were involved in community sport, but not girls. A goal for the school was to engage students in active play in the playground via improved access and opportunities to transition into community sport, with students identifying netball as a sport associated with fun and inclusion. Staff spent lunch times and sports lessons with students to assist with training, building teamwork, and developing students’ understanding of the rules and game. Over time, the growth of student confidence and capabilities enabled a student team to play in weekly competitions through the local Darebin Netball Association.

At Bundalaguah Primary School many students reported that they were not active on weekends due the geographic barriers to participating in extra-curricular activities. A goal for the school was to provide students with a stimulating learning environment and update playground spaces to engage students in active recreation. Students participated in discussions and decisions about new play spaces, and it was identified that the existing playground equipment was not challenging or interesting for the older students. Ideas generated for the Active Schools grant included different climbing structures and alternative play spaces, which have now been installed. Students are now more active and there has been a decrease in challenging behaviour incidents in the yard.

At Yuille Park Community College the installation of a new track around the school grounds was originally intended to support the Bike Education program but was discovered to be an opportunity for students to be active throughout the entire school day. Students participated in the design and mapping of the track, which is now used to promote active breaks and incorporate outdoor physical activity into learning as part of cross-curricular activities. Classroom teachers now provide physical education staff with activities to be used in warmups, and physical education staff link physical literacy to classroom active breaks. Student physical activity levels have improved significantly, and active breaks have supported students to better self-regulate and regain focus on learning.

# 2.Education

## 2.1 Early childhood education

There is strong evidence that children from vulnerable and low-income households benefit the most from full-time attendance at kindergarten as compared to part-time attendance (Campbell, et al., 2012; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). In Australia, however, family advantage factors, such as socioeconomic status and education levels, have historically predicted higher hours of kindergarten attendance (Tayler C. , 2016), while disadvantaged families have been more likely to experience barriers to accessing early education (Fox & Geddes, 2016). In Victoria, fee subsidies and programs such as Early Start Kindergarten are targeted at reducing these barriers and increasing participation in kindergarten before school. Funding is also provided to help kindergartens make facilities and activities more accessible to children of all abilities, and to enhance learning environments for children with disability or additional needs.

As shown in **Figure 4**, 4-year-old kindergarten participation rates remained high in Victoria over the 5 years to 2022 but experienced a small temporary decline in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the same period participation was consistently higher in non-metropolitan areas than in metropolitan areas. At the local government area level, kindergarten attendance does not necessarily correlate with socioeconomic variables, with higher and lower levels of participation found across advantaged and disadvantaged areas. However, as the calculation of rates relies on population estimates derived from Australia Census data, rates for areas with smaller populations can be inaccurate or fluctuate substantially from year to year.

**Figure 4:** Kindergarten participation in the year before school

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
| Non-Metropolitan | 96.1% | 97.3% | 92.2% | 98.0% | 95.9% |
| Metropolitan | 91.3% | 90.4% | 88.5% | 91.7% | 90.5% |

***Source:*** *Children enrolled in Victorian government funded kindergarten services (Department of Education, 2023)*

# Meeting local needs

## School Readiness Funding

School Readiness Funding is an ongoing component of the Victorian kindergarten funding model that services can use to enhance kindergarten programs and improve outcomes for children, particularly those more likely to experience educational disadvantage. Funding is needs-based and informed by the parental occupation and education of the children attending the service. Kindergarten services spend their School Readiness Funding allocation on items from a menu of evidence-informed programs and supports, which align with the priority areas of Communication (language development), Wellbeing (social and emotional), and Access and Inclusion.

Services that receive more than $5,000 in School Readiness Funding will have a portion of their funding allocated to allied health sessions. Allied health professionals will collaborate with educators, families, and children in the kindergarten service to address the service’s identified needs and goals, and to build on existing skills and improve outcomes for children. Different areas of the state show different preferences for how these sessions are used as determined by local needs. In 2021 and 2022, for example, services in non-metropolitan areas spent a higher proportion of their allied health sessions on speech pathology compared to those in metropolitan areas.

In 2022, kindergarten service providers were asked to evaluate the impact of School Readiness Funding, available menu items, and the allied health allocation (if applicable). Between 89% and 100% of providers in each of the Department of Education’s 17 operational areas reported that at least some knowledge and skills development outcomes were met by the program, and between 64% and 92% of providers in each area reporting that all outcomes were met or exceeded.

It has been found that, after controlling for student characteristics, children who attended kindergartens in receipt of School Readiness Funding performed better in reading tests and were less likely to be absent in their first year of school, as compared to the children who attended the same kindergartens before School Readiness Funding was available.

## Ready, Set, Prep!

*Ready, Set, Prep!* is a community initiative aimed at improving school readiness, health, and educational outcomes for children in the culturally diverse suburb of Fawkner. The initiative was established in response to the 2015 Australian Early Development Census which showed that in Fawkner the proportion of children starting school vulnerable in one or more developmental domains was significantly higher than the state average. Schools in the area also reported high rates of late school enrolment, and a substantial number of students arriving at school on their first day not having enrolled or attended a transition to school session.

Merri Health, in partnership with Merri-bek City Council and with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, worked to strengthen relationships between kindergartens, primary schools, early years services and other community services. Weekly educational sessions for parents and guardians of pre-school aged children were rolled out to local schools. Following these efforts, the percentage of developmentally vulnerable children in Fawkner dropped from 36.6% in 2015 to 25.5% in 2018.

In 2021, kindergarten attendance rates were impacted by the COVID-19 lockdowns and Australian Early Development Census data showed increasing rates of vulnerability. Building on the efforts of *Ready, Set Prep!,* City of Merri-bek service providers were able to respond to these changes. Supported by School Readiness Funding from the Department of Education, Merri Health worked collaboratively with kindergartens, providing multidisciplinary and evidence-based support to meet local needs. Initiatives included the employment of community workers and community champions from different language and cultural backgrounds to support children’s attendance at maternal and child health checks, and school readiness sessions.

## LOOKOUT Early Childhood Learning Advisors

The LOOKOUT program was established in 2016 to improve the educational outcomes for school-aged children in out-of-home care. In 2018, 13 early childhood advisers joined the program to work with local governments, kindergartens, and maternal and child health nurses to better support children in out-of-home care before they start school. These advisors facilitate and monitor children’s participation in 2 years of high-quality kindergarten, promote Early Start Kindergarten, and facilitate the transition to school.

The Victorian Budget 2022-23 provided $20.9 million to continue early intervention for vulnerable children, including funding for the Early Childhood LOOKOUT, Access to Early Learning programs, and to expand the Kindergarten Fee Subsidy to all children known to child protection and those from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds.

## 2.2 School education

Literacy is a foundational skill for participation in education, employment, and civic life. Students with high levels of literacy are more likely to complete school (Curtis & McMillan, 2008), undertake further education, and have a wider range of employment opportunities available to them (Shomos & Forbes, 2014). In Australia, both skilled and unskilled employment require relatively high levels of literacy as compared to other countries (OECD, 2016).

Student literacy achievement is known to be influenced by individual characteristics, teaching quality (Hattie, 2009), and negative experiences such as bullying (Thomson, Hillman, Schmid, Rodrigues, & Fullarton, 2017). However, other important variables include the quality of resources available in the home learning environment from an early age, family background and cultural capital, parental education levels, and parental aspirations for their children’s education, all of which are highly interrelated and are associated with socioeconomic status (Niklas, Tayler, & Schneider, 2015; Crampton & Hall, 2017; Tayler, Zubrick, & Christensen, 2016; Walker & Berthelsen, 2010).

Victoria’s overall performance in standardised achievement testing is strong, with NAPLAN results among top performing Australian states and territories. Reading at primary school year levels shows a long-term trend of improvement with statewide results in 2021 and 2022 being the highest since testing begun in 2008.[[1]](#footnote-1) There are, however, achievement gaps in NAPLAN Reading for cohorts including Aboriginal students, students with low parental education levels, and male students as compared to female students.

**Figure 5** below shows trends in NAPLAN Reading mean scores for Year 5 students by geographic location, with those in metropolitan areas having higher average Reading scores than those living in non-metropolitan areas. **Figure 6** demonstrates the relationship between socioeconomic status and literacy, comparing local government areas by their Index of Relative Socioeconomic Advantage and Disadvantage, and students’ achievement in NAPLAN Year 9 Reading. Higher levels of socioeconomic advantage are associated with higher average Reading scores, and higher levels of disadvantage are associated with lower average Reading scores.

Figure 5: Year 5 Reading scores by geographic location, 2016 to 2022

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
| Major cities | 515.2 | 518.6 | 523.2 | 518.6 | - | 525.8 | 523.1 |
| Inner regional | 499.7 | 503.1 | 510.4 | 504.0 | - | 509.5 | 507.0 |
| Outer regional | 493.6 | 501.6 | 507.3 | 501.1 | - | 508.2 | 502.3 |

***Source:*** *NAPLAN Year 5 Reading mean scores (Department of Education, 2023)****Note:*** *NAPLAN testing was not conducted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic*

Figure 6: Year 9 Reading scores by local government area socioeconomic advantage/disadvantage, 2022



***Source:*** *NAPLAN Year 9 Reading mean scores (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2023); Index of Relative Socioeconomic Advantage and Disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a)*

# Meeting local needs

## Our Place

The Department of Education has a partnership with the Colman Education Foundation, a philanthropic organisation, to implement the Our Place approach. The approach was first established by Colman at Doveton College in southern Melbourne in 2012. The approach realises the value of schools as a universal platform to deliver education, health, and family services for the local community from a single location, creating an integrated community resource to support improved outcomes for children and families. These services include early childhood education and care, primary and adult education, the Maternal and Child Health Service, and training and job seeking services. Our Place is currently being implemented at 11 schools in disadvantaged communities across Victoria.

## Side by Side

Side by Side provides student and family support for primary school students, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, as well as training for schools to improve school culture and inclusiveness. The program is delivered by Berry Street and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency through funding from the Victorian Government’s Partnerships Addressing Disadvantage initiative. It is supported by the Department of Treasury and Finance, Department of Education, and investors who are managed by Social Ventures Australia.

Side by Side was launched in 2021 and is located in 3 areas: northern Melbourne, western Melbourne, and inner Gippsland. Working with 9 Victorian schools and supporting 300 children and their families, each student and family receives 12 months of intensive support to help them progress. Evidence-based approaches used by the program include one-on-one student and family support, literacy tutoring at the school, and training for the whole school that is both trauma-aware and culturally grounded to improve school culture and inclusiveness.

# 3. Safety

## 3.1 Children in care

Families residing in different locations, often with intersecting socioeconomic variances, can encounter distinct challenges that can significantly affect the support they are able to provide to their children. Geographic disparities can impact employment availability, accessibility of services, parental education attainment, and other community contexts that can contribute to the level of stress experienced by families and parental capacity to meet their children’s needs.

Victoria’s children and families service system supports children, young people and their families to improve safety and developmental outcomes, while building capacity and resilience for children, families and communities. When children cannot stay safely in their family home, due to significant family difficulties, abuse or neglect, they may be placed in out-of-home care, which provides a safe alternative placement and supports to heal and grow, including working towards reunification with parents where possible.

Over the 5 years from 2017-18 to 2021-22, the number of children in out-of-home care in Victoria increased from 7,954 to 9,124, excluding children on third party parental responsibility orders (Productivity Commission, 2023, 16A.2). However, the number of children being admitted into care fell by an average of 8.8 per cent per year between 2018-19 and 2021-22. This is considerably faster than comparable states such as New South Wales (2.9 per cent decrease per year) and Queensland (0.2 per cent increase per year) (Productivity Commission, 2024, 16A.4). On 30 June 2022, Victoria had the lowest rate of children in out-of-home care in Australia (Productivity Commission, 2024, 16A.2).

Aboriginal children and young people are over-represented in child protection services in all Australian states and territories. In Victoria, one in ten Aboriginal children were in care placements (102.2 per 1000) at 30 June 2022, a rate 21.7 times that of their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Productivity Commission, 2024, 16A.2). Victoria continues work with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Aboriginal community to reduce over-representation, delivering on an important aspect of Victoria’s Aboriginal Child Placement Principle to ensure Aboriginal children have the right to be raised in their own family, culture and community. As at 30 June 2022, Victoria had the highest proportion of Aboriginal children placed with relatives/kin in Australia (77.8 per cent) (Productivity Commission, 2023, 16A.22).

As shown in **Figure 7,** the majority of children in out-of-home care in 2021-22 were placed in kinship care (75.7%), provided by relatives or other members of a child’s social network. Rates of children in out-of-home care show a strong socioeconomic gradient. Families in areas experiencing relative disadvantage are more likely to experience a range of challenges. This can include fewer employment opportunities and reduced accessibility of services. These factors can significantly affect the capacity of families to meet their children’s needs and, where the safety of a child is a significant concern, can lead to higher rates of children in out-of-home care (**see Figure 8**).

Figure 7: Children in care by placement type, at end June 2022

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Placement type | Number  | Percent |
| Kinship care | 6909 | 75.7% |
| Foster care | 1489 | 16.3% |
| Residential care | 488 | 5.3% |
| Other home based care | 194 | 2.1% |
| Independent living (incl. private board) | 42 | 0.5% |
| Other | 2 | 0.0% |
| **Total** | **9124** |  |

***Source:*** *Report on Government Services 2023, Table 16A.20 (Productivity Commission, 2023)*

Figure 8: Children in out-of-home care by local government area socioeconomic advantage/disadvantage, rate per 10,000 population at end June 2022



***Note:*** *The placement of children in out-of-home care is based on safety or welfare concerns for the child, not socioeconomic status. Index of Relative Socioeconomic Advantage and Disadvantage factors such as employment, education, income and housing can impact parental capacity to keep a child safe, which can
in turn lead to higher rates of children in out-of-home care.*

*Location is based on care service placement and not the originating residential intake location of the child.*

**Source:** *Client Relationship Information System (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, 2023); Index of Relative Socioeconomic Advantage and Disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a); Estimated Residential Population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b).*

# Meeting local needs

## Family Preservation and Reunification Response

The Family Preservation and Reunification Response (the Response) aims to promote strong families with children who are safe, healthy, resilient, and thriving and parents
and caregivers who are supported to create a safe and nurturing home environment.
The Response is being delivered by 21 community service organisations in partnership
with 12 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and child protection services in each of the 17 Department of Families, Fairness and Housing operational areas.

## This service model includes:

* Child Protection Navigators in each area who proactively identify and connect children and families with intensive support and facilitate connected service responses between family services and child protection
* evidence-informed practice modules, along with workforce capability supports, for more effective engagement, behaviour change, and capability building
* integrated cultural practice elements that capture unique ways of working with Aboriginal children and families, as co-designed with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

## Putting Families First

Putting Families First is an intensive, whole-of-family service response, designed for justice-engaged families who require multiple supports across health, social and justice services. Interdisciplinary teams, led by a family practitioner, deliver coordinated assessments and integrated supports that aim to divert families from long term, acute and statutory service usage. Putting Families First is being trialled in Brimbank Melton and Goulburn Areas.

## Local Site Executive Committees

Local Site Executive Committees are local area strategic governance bodies, co-chaired by the departments of Families, Fairness and Housing and Justice and Community Safety, that bring together local leaders across government departments and Victoria Police, and in some areas, Aboriginal organisations, and sector organisations. As place-based structures they build on their local knowledge and networks to identify local issues and priorities for action. Many of the Local Site Executive Committees have prioritised activities that focus on improving outcomes for young people and support new ways of working at the local level. For example, the West Metropolitan Integrated Strategic Executive and Goulburn Local Site Executive Committees supported the design and implementation of the Putting Families First initiative (see above). Since June 2022 there have been Local Site Executive Committees established in all 17 Department of Families, Fairness and Housing administrative areas across Victoria.

## 3.2 Youth offending

The social and economic environments of different geographic areas can also influence the risk of young people engaging in anti-social or criminal behaviour. By involving local organisations in the design and implementation of programs, place-based approaches promote a sense of ownership within the community and can better target the unique circumstances to prevent criminality and support positive alternatives for young people.

Alleged offender incidents data are based on alleged incidents where a person has been charged, and do not represent actual offences where a person is prosecuted and pleads guilty or is found guilty by a court.[[2]](#footnote-2) Over the decade from 2013 to 2022, the rate of alleged offended incidents for young people ages 10 to 17 in Victoria trended downward, with results for 2021 and 2022 below pre-pandemic levels (**Figure 9**). In 2022, young males had a 2.8 times higher rate of alleged offender incidents than young females, and those aged 15 to 17 had a rate 3.6 times higher rate than those aged 10 to 14.

**Figure 10** shows local government areas with the highest numbers of alleged offender incidents for young people, representing the locations where the crimes occurred as opposed to the alleged offenders’ last known residence, which may have been in a different local government area. Locations with high numbers of alleged offences include places where young people congregate, such as the Melbourne central business district, and destinations like shopping centres where young people commit acquisitive crimes such as shoplifting.

Figure 9: Alleged offender incidents, rate per 100,000 population ages 10 to 17, 2013 to 2022

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **10-14 years** | **15-17 Years** | **Total** |
|  | **Alleged Offender Incidents** | **Rate per 100,000 population** | **Est. Population** | **Alleged Offender Incidents** | **Rate per 100,000 population** | **Est. Population** | **Alleged Offender Incidents** | **Rate per 100,000 population** | **Est. Population** |
| 2013 | 5,024 | 1,501.1 | 334,698.0 | 13,058 | 6,244.3 | 209,118.0 | 18,082 | 3,325.0 | 543,816.0 |
| 2014 | 4,893 | 1,444.6 | 338,709.0 | 12,726 | 6,048.1 | 210,414.0 | 17,619 | 3,208.6 | 549,123.0 |
| 2015 | 5,195 | 1,514.2 | 343,096.0 | 13,228 | 6,242.6 | 211,898.0 | 18,423 | 3,319.5 | 554,994.0 |
| 2016 | 5,271 | 1,499.5 | 351,523.0 | 13,552 | 6,339.8 | 213,760.0 | 18,823 | 3,329.8 | 565,283.0 |
| 2017 | 5,510 | 1,516.1 | 363,425.0 | 12,906 | 6,025.4 | 214,195.0 | 18,416 | 3,188.3 | 577,620.0 |
| 2018 | 5,058 | 1,349.9 | 374,693.0 | 11,971 | 5,568.8 | 214,965.0 | 17,029 | 2,887.9 | 589,658.0 |
| 2019 | 4,981 | 1,292.3 | 385,444.0 | 13,140 | 6,055.8 | 216,981.0 | 18,121 | 3,008.0 | 602,425.0 |
| 2020 | 4,497 | 1,135.9 | 395,913.0 | 14,014 | 6,405.5 | 218,781.0 | 18,511 | 3,011.4 | 614,694.0 |
| 2021 | 4,285 | 1,075.3 | 398,509.0 | 11,042 | 4,991.9 | 221,199.0 | 15,327 | 2,473.3 | 619,708.0 |
| 2022 | 5,882 | 1,463.9 | 401,799.5 | 12,237 | 5,281.8 | 231,682.1 | 18,119 | 2,860.2 | 633,481.6 |

***Source:*** *Rate of alleged offender incidents (Crime Statistics Agency, 2023)*

Figure 10: Local government areas with the highest numbers of alleged offender incidents for young people, ages 10 to 17, 2022

|  |
| --- |
| LGA |
| Casey City |
| Greater Geelong City |
| Wyndham City |
| Melbourne City |
| Latrobe City |
| Frankston City |
| Greater Bendigo City |
| Whittlesea City |
| Greater Dandenong City |
| Mornington Peninsula Shire |
| Yarra Ranges Shire |
| Kingston City |
| Melton City |
| Cardinia Shire |
| Hume City |

***Source:*** *Number of alleged offender incidents (Crime Statistics Agency, 2023)*

***Note:*** *List shows areas with the highest numbers of incidents, not the highest rates per population.*

# Meeting local needs

## Empowering Communities Partnerships

The *Empowering Communities Partnerships* are a place-based approach to crime prevention. They recognise that communities are well placed to deliver effective, innovative, and sustainable crime prevention approaches when they have access to resources, expertise, and practical tools, and are united by a common goal.

$6.45 million has been invested in *Empowering Communities Partnerships* which have been established across Victoria in Brimbank, Melton, Hume, Wyndham, Ballarat, Shepparton, Knox, Dandenong, and Casey. Across 2 rounds of funding in 2020-21 and 2021-22, the *Empowering Communities Partnerships* provided $700,000 each to 9 sites to support innovative, evidence-based and locally led approaches to address crime and improve community safety, with some partnerships identifying early intervention for young people as a focus. Additional funding support was also provided to deliver a forum in each location. Each site established a local action group to design and deliver place-based crime prevention.

## Youth Crime Prevention Program

Since 2016, over $40 million has been invested in the *Youth Crime Prevention Program*, including $13.6 million over 3 years provided through the 2023-24 State Budget to continue prevention of youth offending through early intervention. The initiatives funded under the program seek to prevent offending and reoffending by young people ages 10 to 24 who have had contact or are at risk of contact with the criminal justice system. Initiatives provide a range of local support services for young people including intensive case management and pro-social activities.

The *Youth Crime Prevention Program* is delivered through a place-based approach. Initiatives in each location are delivered by a lead agency in partnership with other community organisations and agencies. As a place-based initiative, Youth Crime Prevention Program participants maintain a connection to the local government area, and young people are supported in the context of their family and community to ensure benefits are maximised and sustainable.

## Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program

A caution is a formal alternative to a charge. It is issued by police and means that a young person will not go to court for their alleged offence and will not record a criminal conviction. The Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program was introduced with the aim of improving outcomes for Aboriginal young people by diverting them from further contact with the justice system. The program provides Aboriginal young people in contact with police with an opportunity to connect with Elders and culturally appropriate support services in their local area. This connection supports young people to address the factors underlying their contact with police.

The program was developed in partnership with Aboriginal communities and draws upon local Aboriginal culture and knowledge to ensure a tailored response for young people. The program incorporates the principles of Aboriginal self-determination, early intervention, and harm reduction. Initially trialled in Bendigo, Dandenong, and Echuca, the program has now been expanded to cover more than 20 local government areas across the state.

**Figure 11** shows the proportion of Aboriginal first-time offenders ages 10 to 17 who received a caution in place of other disposition outcomes, including arrest, summons, intent to summons, or a penalty notice. From 2018-19 to 2021-22, the cautioning rate for Aboriginal young people increased from 52.0% to 70.6%, reflecting the introduction of the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program, amendments to the Victoria Police Manual to broaden cautioning criteria, and increased monitoring of cautioning decisions.

Figure 11: Cautioning rates for Aboriginal first-time youth offenders, ages 10 to 17, 2017-18 to 2021-22

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | **2017-18** | **2018-19** | **2019-20** | **2020-21** | **2021-22** |
| Cautioning rate | 59.8% | 52.0% | 57.0% | 60.0% | 70.6% |

***Source:*** *Cautioning rates (Crime Statistics Agency, 2023)*

Figure 12: Cautioning rates for local government areas with the highest numbers of cautions for Aboriginal first-time youth offenders ages 10 to 17, 2021-22

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| LGA | Cautioning rate |
| Ballarat City | 100% |
| Latrobe City | 100% |
| Warrnambool City | 100% |
| Greater Shepparton City | 84.2% |
| Wyndham City | 84.2% |
| Wodonga City | 83.3% |
| Campaspe Shire | 81.8% |
| Greater Bendigo City | 80.0% |
| Swan Hill Rural City | 80.0% |
| East Gippsland Shire | 76.5% |
| Whittlesea City | 75.0% |
| Mildura Rural City | 58.8% |

***Source:*** *Cautioning rates (Crime Statistics Agency, 2023)*

## Aboriginal Youth Justice Hubs

Since 2020-21, funding has been provided to co-design and establish Aboriginal Youth Justice Hubs to provide place-based Aboriginal-led services for children and young people. The Hubs, which are being designed and developed in partnership with the Aboriginal Justice Caucus and key Aboriginal community organisations, aim to coordinate and provide holistic supports for Aboriginal children and young people who are in contact with, or at risk of entering, the youth justice system.

# Conclusion

Most children and young people in Victoria are healthy, safe, and doing well in their education, but some groups are more likely to have poorer outcomes than others. This report has examined this from a geographic perspective and has found that children living in non-metropolitan and disadvantaged areas of Victoria are at greater risk of development vulnerabilities in early childhood, have lower average NAPLAN Reading scores, and higher rates of placement in out-of-home care. The report also highlights persistent over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in child protection and care services in Victoria, emphasising the importance of continuing to address social determinants of child protection involvement, and of supporting Aboriginal self-determination and Aboriginal-led service responses.

Not all outcomes data show the same geographic patterns. For example, kindergarten participation in the year before school is consistently higher for non-metropolitan areas, and the proportion of children undertaking the recommended levels of physical activity was lowest in some metropolitan areas. Such examples show that while the effects of geographic location and socioeconomic status on children’s outcomes can often be closely linked, there are other aspects of place that can influence children’s lives in different ways, which may include access to services, availability of support networks, and the nature of the built environment itself. Working with communities to address these local issues is a key capability for government. Partnerships between government agencies, nonprofit organisations, healthcare providers, and community groups are often necessary to understand the unique characteristics of a community, leverage local networks, and
bridge service gaps.

Programs and initiatives across Victoria are increasingly utilising an early intervention and place-based approach connecting children and their families with integrated supports where and when they are needed most. An example given in this report is Family Preservation and Reunification Response which aims to promote strong families, with children who are safe, healthy, resilient and thriving and caregivers who are supported to create a safe and nurturing home environment. A further example is the Youth Crime Prevention Program, delivered in partnership between community organisations and government agencies, which has demonstrated reductions in offending by connecting young people with local support services and pro-social activities. Such approaches have the potential to address the social determinants of poor health, education, and social outcomes, and through consideration of the environmental factors that contribute to these, can work towards improved systemic change.

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1. In 2023 the NAPLAN measurement scale and time series we reset, meaning that results up to 2022 will not be able to be compared to 2023 onwards. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The rate of alleged offender incidents is calculated per 100,000 population by using the incident count for the period divided by the most recent estimated resident population data for the relevant age group multiplied by 100,000 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)