

The background of the cover features a row of white paper cutouts of human figures holding hands, set against a light green background. The figures are arranged in a line, with some in the foreground and others receding into the background, creating a sense of depth and community.

# DROP THE KNIFE: COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

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# SUMMARY

The following is a Report on the Youth Activating Youth Project: “Drop the Knife, Save a Life – Community Conversations” held in the Northwest of Melbourne in May 2022. The Drop, the Knife, Save a Life project is a response to the issue of knife crime through prevention and early intervention. Following these conversations YAY will create an educational campaign co-designed with young people and the community which aims to educate young people about the consequences of carrying a knife and the devastating impact this could have for themselves, their families, and the community.





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the traditional owners & continuing custodians of the land on which these conversations were held. We pay our respects to their elders, past and present.

The author wishes to acknowledge the work of the Youth Activating Youth team Romany Amarasingham and Juliane Albuquerque and Hanad Hersi in conceiving of and organizing the community conversations. I wish to also wish to acknowledge the hard work, commitment and enthusiasm of the Youth Network who delivered the findings of the initial work on the issue as well as actively engaging with the community in these impactful sessions: Sudra El-Kassar, Farida Machar, Warda Amin, Abdifatah Ahmed, Bukhosibenoki (Bukhosi) Masangoo, Agum Reech.

The work of Titan Debirioun in his role of co-MC with Romany Amarasingham cannot be understated in facilitating these successful community conversations.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this report is to detail the data collected during the community conversation phase of the Youth Activating Youth project “Drop the Knife, Save a Life”. It outlines the key learnings generated through this process. It includes a description of the problems and issues raised during the various meetings as well as set of suggestions on how to address the problem and a number of recommendations.

## AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The “Drop the Knife, save a Life” project was designed to respond to the issue of knife crime through prevention and early intervention. A key outcome of the project YAY will be an educational campaign co-designed with young people and the community in aims to educate young people about the consequences of carrying a knife and the devastating consequences for themselves, their families, and the community.

The project sought to

- Increase their awareness of knife crime and its consequences
- Help Schools and other agencies (support services, youth services and health services) increase their capacity to educate on issues of knife crime
- Intervene in pathways of violence offending
- Reduce knife carriage & knife crime amongst young people

## WHAT IMPACT IS EXPECTED

The Projects theory of change assumes that the activities used to engage young people that are most affected by knife violence, provides YAY with an opportune position to make an impact on how knife crime is impacting communities and how communities can build safer environments by actively addressing the issue themselves to create change.

## **PROJECT DELIVERY**

YAY has undertaken a youth led initiative comprising a Youth Network/multicultural team who facilitated a series of community conversations with Service providers, young people, their families, and broader networks from multicultural communities in the North and West of Melbourne. The community conversations were led by these young people and drew on their community connections to help facilitate the meetings. Through this initiative YAY aims to be proactive in its two-way communication with the community in relation to the ongoing impact of knife crime and its campaign development. The community conversations were undertaken to ascertain community feedback and measure the current impact. Included in these conversations, were organisations such as Victoria Police, youth-based services and faith/community leaders who will further inform the development of a social media and educational campaign about knife crime.





## 2. BACKGROUND

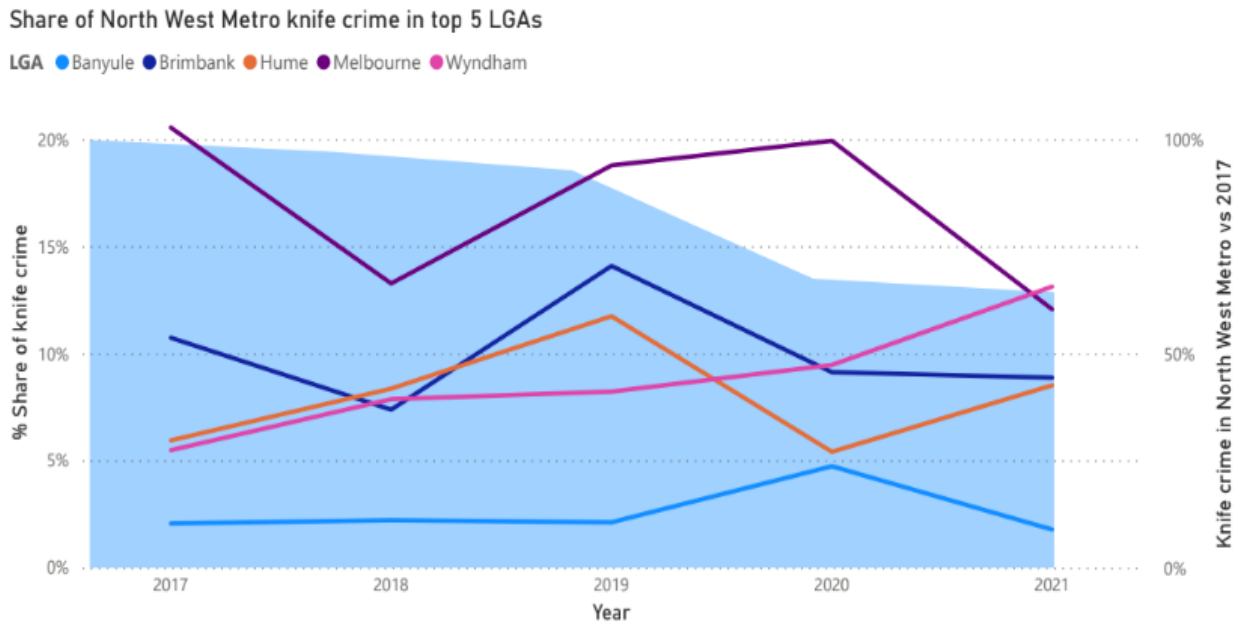
### KNIFE CRIME IN VICTORIA FROM 2017 TO 2021

YAY was supported by Gilbert and Tobin to access information from Victoria Police, as a Freedom of Information request, relating to the incidences of Knife Crime in Victoria from 2017 to 2021. Once again these are the most current stats we could access, which provide us with quite a varying picture over the last few years.

According to Victoria Police data, recorded knife crime dropped significantly in 2020 and 2021 compared to 2017-2019. However, we must take into consideration how Covid lockdowns and policing resources have impacted on the data and trends.

- Knife crime overall is down or stable in LGAs across the Northwest Metro Melbourne, but case numbers reported in the City of Melbourne and Wyndham remain high.
- Since 2017, levels of recorded knife crime have remained stable or dropped.
- However, case numbers in Melbourne and Wyndham are surprisingly high considering the overall drop in the rest of the reporting results.
- On average, the top 5 LGAs for juvenile knife crime are: City of Melbourne, Brimbank, Wyndham, Hume and Banyule.
- There are early indications of juvenile knife crimes rising in Wyndham, Maribyrnong, Banyule and Melton.
- Males form most knife crime offenders in all LGAs and time periods.

Figure 1 Knife Crime Northwest Metro 2017-2021



## YOUTH NETWORK

In 2021 Youth Activating Youth established a Youth network consisting of six young people, varying in age, and backgrounds. The Youth Network also brought their lived experience and understanding of these issue and the direct impact it is having on them as a demographic (multicultural youth) The network was established to raise awareness about knife crime and its effects on the community.

In October of 2021 the group undertook many weeks of capacity building to understand the various drivers of knife crime and how these drivers impact on young people, their families, and the broader communities. The Youth Team consisted of: Sudra El-Kassar, Farida Machar, Warda Amin, Abdifatah Ahmed, Bukhosibenoki (Bukhosi) Masangoo, Agum Reech.



# INITIAL KEY DRIVERS IDENTIFIED BY THE YOUTH NETWORK

In 2021 Youth Network engaged in a program of training and research into the issue. The initial work undertaken by the Youth Network as well as the 2021 Gilbert and Tobin study identified the following key drivers of knife crime:

- Young people fear being the targets of victimization, a weapon provides security and prevents vulnerability.
- Young people who carry a knife, don't always intend to use it. However, the act of carrying a weapon creates its own danger.
- If a young person is in a dangerous situation, they could be provoked into using it against someone and hurting them.
- Ease of moving from victim to perpetrator.

Following this initial scoping work in 2021 a series of Community conversations to test and extend these initial findings were organised and conducted in May of 2022.





## 3.COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

### Process

YAY undertook a series of community conversations with Service providers, young people, their families and broader networks from multicultural communities in the North and West of Melbourne. In initiating this process YAY aimed to be proactive in its two-way communication with the community in relation to the ongoing impact of knife crime and the development of an awareness raising campaign and educational toolkit. The sessions were led by a team of young people from a range of communities who had undergone rigorous leadership training. The young people on the team researched the issue and developed the material that was presented to the community during the conversation sessions. The process of empowering a team of young leaders who were fully versed in the issue and were skilled in leading conversations and articulating their views on the matter proved to be a powerful intervention.

The community conversations were undertaken to ascertain community feedback and measure the current impact of knife crime. The sessions were held in the community during the evening across the Northwest during May. Dual sessions were held across the northwestern suburbs during May. Day time consultations were held for youth and community services, Victoria Police, other agencies. Evening consultations targeted community members and faith/community leaders. The following Local Government Area's/regions were included in the project:

- Melton
- Hume
- City of Melbourne/Moonee Valley
- Brimbank
- Wyndham

Participants in these conversations, included individual citizens, Youth and community focused service providers, Victoria Police, faith/community leaders.

Table 1 Participants

Venue	Community	Stakeholders
Melton	16	5
Melbourne & Moonee Valley	21	33
Hume	8	9
Brimbank	10	18
Wyndham	63	19

### Outcomes of the process

The community conversations held by YAY drew significant levels of community participation and engagement over the period that they ran. The conversations brought together a range of interested parties; individuals, families, service providers, youth/community activists and local and state government representatives. In evaluating the sessions, it was evident that the communities within which these meetings were held were concerned with the issue of knife crime and were eager to be heard and for some type of action to follow. The community conversations generated suggestions for a range of possible policy and community and governmental interventions. A range of solutions and recommendations generated by the conversations are highlighted in sections 8 and 9.

One of the significant outcomes of using the community conversations format has been the capacity for this approach to both attract and involve a range of interested parties. The data contained in this report demonstrates that when given an opportunity and a supportive structure, community members are willing and able to discuss and debate issues that are impacting their lives and that of their families and the wider society. It was clear that participants saw the process as both useful and informative.

### Future use of the process

As a method of community engagement and education around important issues the community conversations model has proven to be highly successful. The informal and open nature of the conversations – led by young people and facilitated by a member of the YAY team proved

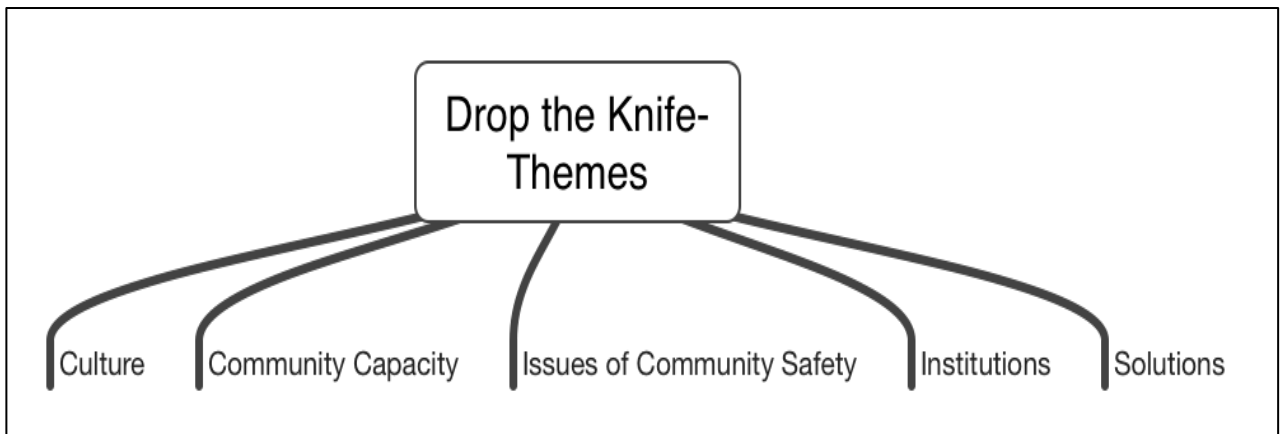
was both engaging and successful. The success of the conversation's points to the usefulness of the model to reach members of the community who might otherwise not feel welcome or able to express their views. At a number of the conversation's community participants stated that this model should happen again and that they found it highly valuable as a forum within which their voices and concerns were listened to.





# DATA

Figure 2 Key Themes





## 4. CULTURE

A range of topics were raised during the community conversations which could be categorized as relating to issues of culture. These can be summarized under the following themes:

- Family
- Gender
- Identity
- Media
- War & trauma

### FAMILY

The serious nature of knife crime and its impact directly and indirectly on families was highlighted during the community conversations. The concern shown by parents and young people for how the issue was impacting the well-being of families from all communities was clear in the data collected. During the community conversations issues relating to families such as: the role of parents and differing attitudes to parenting, family structures, as well as towards significant issues such as culture-based views of mental health were raised.

#### Parenting

It is important to note that there were participants from a range of communities who participated in the community conversations – Pacifica, African and other linguistically diverse communities were represented in these sessions. The issue of parenting was raised in the sessions, in particular the difficulty of navigating, migration, work, local culture, and the dangers faced by young people. One of the young people attending a session pointed out the difficulties often faced by their parents who must work long hours to support their families: ... “Parents are working and unable to be home to feed the family”.

The complexity of parents adapting to a new culture/society and working through how to raise their children in this new society was highlighted by a young person who stated that : ... “We are being raised by a culture from overseas”. The implication being that parents were struggling to adapt to their new home and dealing with how to raise their children in this new context.

A service provider stated that: ... “As many parents come from overseas, they don’t understand the struggles that their children are facing essentially alone.” A young person commented that, ... “Our parents need to raise us as Africans who live in Australia and adapt to the system”. Another young person stated that parents felt they were giving young people as much as they could, they used a cultural metaphor for this, parents often assert that the young: ... “chew the meat and leave the bone”. A community participant stated that, ... “I don’t think it affects young people in the community it affects mothers, sisters, relations and seeing how powerless they feel and fear and how this affects the family dynamics”.

One young person summed up a strategy to help mitigate this sense that parents were divorced from involvement in bringing up the young by communicating with their parents and helping them to understand the dilemma’s faced by young people: ... “I think we need to educate our parents and tell them how we feel”.

## **M E N T A L   H E A L T H**

In the community conversations issues relating to mental health were consistently raised by the participants. Both young people and service providers spoke about the complexity of identifying issues of mental health and providing adequate support. As one service provider stated: - ... “We need to stop with the mentality of “One fits all”. We may need to slow down rather than getting parents up to speed with mental health. Try to adapt to parents and find a way to educate them at a pace they can keep up with”. This statement indicates a growing realisation amongst professionals that the community and the services approach and understand issues of mental health in distinct and often conflicting ways. For example, participants indicated that they see mental health in profoundly divergent ways, depending on their cultural context. As one young person stated that: ... “we need a more nuanced approach. For example, how we deal with grief is different and beautiful”.

It emerged during the conversations that even discussing issues of mental health were, as in the general community often difficult. As one young person asserted: ... “Mental health issues ...(are)... taboo subjects and people often stereotype mental health as being “crazy” due to their lack of knowledge and experience”. Adding to this was the view that even seeking out service providers to begin dealing with mental health issues was difficult due to community attitudes. As a young community activist stated, there is a: ... “stigma on social services and counselling”.



## GENDER

The issue of gender was raised during the conversations, specifically in the context of whether the carrying and possible use of knives to commit crimes was a masculine issue. One young person asserted that: ... “It’s a Male issue when it comes to carrying knives”. In contrast to this view that carrying knives is purely a male problem both community and police representatives put a contradictory perspective. A community participant stated: ... “It affects all genders. People use knives for protection”. A law enforcement representative argued that in recent years: ... “(m)ore girls are coming to in contact with justice system”. It can be surmised from these comments that it is too simplistic to see knife crime as being gendered.

Another more nuanced less reductive way of examining the implications of gender and knife crime is to look at issues of identity, culture and their relationship to masculinity. As one young person stated: ... “When the young are with older males, they are respectful. Once outside then the very young act up and might use knives”. This idea of “acting up” leads us to idea that image, identity, and reputation.

## IDENTITY

The issue of identity was a consistent theme which emerged during the various community conversations. There appeared to be a consensus that many young black people have an identity crisis and are struggling with what it means to be “black”. In the meetings it was clear that participants felt the wider community saw young people of colour as fitting into, or not fitting into particular “stereotypes”. As one young person asserted: ... “The stereotype of success within the black community is only associated with being a musician or sportsman. However, there are other ways of being successful that needs to be shown within the community. Due to this stereotype, many young black people believe there is no way of being successful other than those routes and turn to knife crime”. This feeling that if a young person in specific communities doesn’t fit the mould that society ascribed to them, then their only option is crime can be seen as a sign of alienation from and within their community. This sense of alienation has profound implications for individuals and the wider community.

Participants pointed to the struggle some young people face in resisting the impact of alienation as one young person asserted by attempting to: ... “create their own identity”. But as this young person went on to state, the young men struggling with alienation are confronting, ... “issues with their masculinity, and this encourages many young men to believe if they are carrying a knife that this is associated with being a ‘man’. Knife = being a man”. Adding to the association between knives and manhood is what Katz (1988) has called the “seduction of crime”. Carrying a knife is linked to group

acceptance and “coolness”, as one with young person: stated: ... “(t)he environment you are ...(in)...also has influence on your lifestyle, makes it difficult to be who you want to be because you also want to look cool and not be an outcast”.

A service provider summed up both the complexity faced by young people, but also by the parents and guardians in working through issues of identity and belonging. The provider stated that: ... “Young people often have issues of identity as many people are from different backgrounds within the Australian community. Young people struggle to navigate themselves within Australian society and must create their own identity where many lack the knowledge. As many parents come from overseas, they don’t understand the struggles that their children are facing essentially alone. While navigating their way through, often many go down the wrong path and turn to knife crime”.

### “Postcode Wars”

Community participants identified a sense of feeling unsafe in their neighborhoods. Participants in the Community conversations highlighted the growing awareness of the role young people identifying with their specific “Postcodes” is playing in the rise of Knife crime. As one Service provider stated: ... “Postcode wars allow young people to have a sense of family and loyalty.” Another participant stated, ... “Postcode gives a sense of belonging and identity”. One of the participants at a community conversation suggested that ... “young people are fighting for the same beef from years ago or postcode.” This suggests that intergenerational conflict rooted in postcode identity is a growing and serious issue.

The relationship between postcodes, identity and a sense of belonging was raised in several sessions. The significance of postcodes for identity is highlighted in the following statement made by a young person stated that identifying with, ... “Postcodes means we are cool, and we are family”. In other words the bonds of family are not as strong as the sense of identity and belonging attached to one’s postcode.

The concept of “Postcode wars” is a significant finding and was raised across the diverse settings in which the community conversations were held.

## **MEDIA**

Issues relating to various forms of media, both new media such as social media, but also legacy media such as television. Community participants highlighted the one-way nature of traditional forms of media, and consequently the potential for negative images and attitudes being projected. As one participant stated there is: ... “(n)o direct advocacy from the community to mainstream media”. This

feeling that legacy media basically projects its negative impressions about race and violence. This view is highlighted by the following statements made by community participants who asserted that the media, ... “plays a huge role in exaggerating the race part”. Adding to this perception of the negative role of the media another participant stated that: ... “knife crime is sensationalised within the media”.

Participants in the community conversations consistently pointed to the impact that non-legacy media, “social media” has on the community and how it deals with knife crime and a range of other issues. One participant emphasised the complexity of the digital life that young people are engaged in by stating that young people: ... “Get more information in a day than someone got in their whole life”. This information overflow has, according to one community participant led to: ... “ruining ... (the)...connection ... (young people have) ... to culture, values, and identity”.

Another participant pointed to the far-reaching impact that social media has on the community, they stated that with: ... “social media – even if you’re not directly involved – you can get drawn into from the anxiety ... (of)... sharing stories”. The participant went on to argue that because of the “stories” being spread via social media young people often: ... “convince themselves that they need to be part of group”. At the centre of the social impact of this form of media is the way it spreads and reinforces negative ideas and concepts. As a community participant pointed out: ... “(t)he reach of negative posts are higher than the reach of positive things within the social media”.

## **WAR AND TRAUMA**

The issue of childhood trauma was raised by one of the service providers. The service provider specifically pointed to the lack of evidence establishing a relationship between early experience of childhood trauma and war and the carrying and use of knives. The participant stated that during armed conflict: ... “their parents tried to protect young people the best they ...(could)... in that environment of war - however it is difficult to pinpoint how the trauma would impact on knife crime.” This is an important area and the brief comments above point to the need to do specific research into any actual link between war/childhood trauma and the carrying and use of knives in these communities.

Though a causal or recognised link between war/childhood trauma was not raised by the community, the impact that general trauma and pre-existing mental health issues might have on young people were raised. A service provider argued that there was a lack of awareness about how young people were coping of the complexity of their everyday lives. The provider contrasted how different the perspectives of parents about life in Australia was from the lived experience of their children or grandchildren:

... Parents grew up in completely different lifestyles where they lived. There was no problem. So they don't understand why ...(young people)... are going through something mentally here. When they bring ...(their children)... to this country to settle and live a better life. They don't understand how ...(young people)... are struggling.

The service provider went on to state that: ... “One of the key aspects of participating in risky behaviours, it's actually a pre-existing mental health issue. It could be child trauma, depression, or anxiety”. The quotes above highlight the impact that mental health has on the possibility of participation in “risky behaviours” such as knife crime.



## 5. COMMUNITY CAPACITY

During the community conversations the role of service providers, Local Government and the State government in building community capacity was raised by participants. In this context the following themes emerged through the conversations:

- Community involvement
- Communication
- Connections

### COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Participants in the sessions pointed to the need to broaden the basis upon which decisions that impact the community are made. As one member of the community stated during the conversations it is important have the various communities to, ... “make decisions rather than just one entity”. This represents a sentiment that was highlight across the community conversations. Participants wanted to be heard and felt that this was not happening in government (at all levels) circles. Another participant asserted that when it came to: ... “Council meetings- ... (there was not) ...enough community ... (representation)... within this space”. Another community participant stated that government needed to, ... “(t)alk to people with lived experience”.

This view that community is not being listened to or that their problems are adequately being addressed led one service provider to ask, ... “Are we supporting the community enough to build a capacity”? Another service provider raised the issue of trust between agencies and the local community. The service providers stated that between: ... “(c)ommunity trust and crime prevention- there is a gap”. Community trust is built on community involvement/inclusion in key decision making processes. Community feel that they are isolated from these processes and excluded, therefore trust is directly impacted by that.

### COMMUNICATION

Issues of communication between agencies, specifically local law enforcement and the community was raised in the conversations. As one law enforcement representative state, the: ... “Police are going back to connect with the community and relationships”. The concept of a “breakdown” in communication between communities and agencies was also raised by service providers. A service provider stated that there is a: ... “(b)reakdown of communication”. Another asserted that there are: ... “Blockages ... with communicating- the conversations aren’t continuing- young people use services and once they get what they want they leave- the young people don’t feel like they are a part of the decision-making- you have to nurture a relationship and continue a relationship- relationship’s make it ...(a)...safe place- services are seen as a safe place”. A service provider stated that, ... “We need to get to know each other well in the community”.

Another participant commented that, ... “People have forgotten how to interact and communicate so violence is occurring more often”.

## **C O N N E C T I O N S**

A theme that emerged in the community conversations was the notion that connections between service providers and local communities were failing. As one service provider stated, ... “There’s a disconnect structurally”. Another service provider confirmed this development by asserting that they were, ... “Losing connections within the community. We need to make young people who are disconnected within the community connected to others or even jobs”. According to one service provider a lack of connection leads young people to, ... “disconnect from home and school and find the collective on the streets”.





# 6. ISSUES OF COMMUNITY SAFETY

During the community conversations a range of individuals, organizational representatives and young people raised a variety of issues concerning their attitude to knife crime and community safety. The issues raised in the conversations included:

- Access to knives
- Knife crime not being a single group issue but a community problem.
- Awareness of knife crime within families and the community.
- The normalization of knife crime.

## ACCESS TO KNIVES

Participants in the community conversations identified access to knives as being an issue in their community and more widely. Participants pointed to the ease with which people of any age could access (in the home) or purchase knives in local shops or online. Participants pointed to other parts of Australia where an ID is required to purchase a knife. As one parent pointed out: ... “Knives are easily accessible in the community. You do not need a license to buy a knife”. One community member asked the: ... “Where did the use of knives come from?” Which hints at the exasperation felt by the community at the extent of ready access and use of knives in the community. Some participants argued that Government needed to be much stricter when it comes to the accessibility of knives: ... “(t)o fix accessibility parliament would have to create legislation and go against the community which most likely wouldn’t happen.”

Participants also spoke about why young people think that they need to carry a knife. In one instance a young person pointed to the ease of access to knives, but also that a: ... “Knife is a more accessible weapon than a gun.” Another young person stated they carried a knife because: ...” It’s for protection because I don’t have a friend or backup”.

# KNIFE CRIME IS A COMMUNITY PROBLEM

The participants in the community conversation were clear in their view that the issue of knife crime should not be reduced to a single group issue, or a problem related to the CALD background of residents. Participants in the community conversations asserted that the issue of knife crime is rooted in a broad range of socio-economic factors that these factors are contributing to the problem.

One of the representatives of Law Enforcement pointed out that there is a popular misconception that only some specific cultural groups carry knives. According to the Law Enforcement participant Knife crime occurs amongst a ... “diverse ... (range of) ... young people- all young people are carrying a knife...(it’s)...community issue not cultural issue”. Another participant from a Service provider stated that the issue of knife crime was: ... “Not about race more about their socio-economic situation”.

## AWARENESS OF KNIFE CRIME

The full extent of the issue of knife crime within communities was according to participants common knowledge. As one participant put it there is a, ... “(g)eneral awareness but most are not willing to be part of ... (a)...solution”. Despite this general awareness of the extent of knife crime participants asserted that parents don’t, ... “know how to deal with the issue”. Another participant asserted that, ... “(p)eople ... (are)...listening to others who know little about the issues”. One participant argued that it was essential to educate, ... “Educating kids about how to recognise danger and protect their loved ones”.

## NORMALIZATION OF KNIFE CRIME

The idea that knife violence and its impact on the daily lives of young and their families is normal – or an everyday occurrence was highlighted during the conversations. The normalization of this form of violence was described by a community activist in the following way:

... I just got more and more used to it. It wasn't this shocking thing anymore. It was this thing where it was normalized. I was like, okay, that's something that happens. It is what it is. I'd hear about something happening. I'd be like, damn, that sucks. I feel for them, but I'd be able to get over it quickly. Or I thought I would be able to get over quick. And one day I was just thinking, I just said, nah, this is this, isn't it. There's all these people that I know are beautiful people, um, that are stuck in this, this place where people just aren't hearing us or aren't seeing us and they're having their lives completely changed for all this time.

The reality that this is part of the everyday lives and experience of young people, and their families has the effect of both altering their attitude to what might happen but also how they react. As the quote above states incidents of knife violence are no longer “shocking” but they have the impact of reinforcing a

sense of being “stuck” and the view that people outside of the community are oblivious to the consequences of these acts.

Another community member pointed to the fear that this normalization of knife crime has had on them and created within their community. The community member stated that:

... I get scared about that. And then I also hate the fact how it's becoming normalized and we're becoming de-sensitized to it as well. And it's just like, it's just, oh, so and so passed away. Oh, this other one coming, you know, or just things like that or what's new. So, I hate the fact that that's happening within like everyone's communities.

The devastating consequences of knife crime – specifically the death of friends, family or community members is as the quote above highlights, now a matter-of-fact event. It no longer shocks, - “what’s new”.

Another participant pointed to how location relates to the normalization of knife crime and a sense that individuals and groups add to the regularity of these events and build them into a spectacle. The Young person stated:

... Well, I was born and raised in ... (redacted) ... So, um, like you guys said, you come normal to it. Like I've been around, um, people who, you know, carry weapons and knives. cause they want to feel important and like respected in a circle and you know, like I've seen people get stabbed and I've seen people run away from like stabbing and that, and it's just on not a great sight. It's not a great feeling and people who cheer, like wind them up, like with hype and stuff. It's not, it's not it. So, it's very disheartening people are losing humanity. Yeah.

The participant paints a contradictory picture of the impact of knife crime on their community. They state how horrific the events that they have witnessed are, ... “I've seen people run away from like stabbing and that, and it's just on not a great sight:”. However, they also assert, ... “that people who cheer, like wind them up, like with hype and stuff “. This winding up of members of the community is it could be argued through social media and the ability of that technology to generate high levels of engagement and enthusiasm for confrontations.

The quote above also points to a recognition that knife crime is dehumanizing and that this is having a corrosive effect on the community. This reinforces the need for some kind of systematic response to the communities’ fear.

Another community activist asserted that the normalization of knife crime has had a numbing effect on both the community and service providers. The activist stated that:

... I'll be honest. It's normal now, you know, it's just a part of our, a part of our lives, you know, like really stop and reflect and like how, who, what, when, how, no, it's just okay. What else to do? Yeah. That's like, it's become that normalized. Whereas back then it's like the whole community will stop, you know, there's conversations happening. Elders are talking, you know? So, uh, police, officers, schools, teachers, counsel, people are

getting are getting together. Right. Yeah. But now it's just like, oh, okay. Someone got stabbed.

It could be argued that this normalization of knife crime has had the effect of silencing the community in that the events described no longer generate reactions or conversations within the community and with external services. As the activist stated the reaction now to a knife crime is: ... “oh, okay. Someone got stabbed”.



## 7. INSTITUTIONS

Another theme that emerged within the various community conversations was the relationship between young people, the community, and the institutions that they interact with. Some of the intuitions referred to by the community included the following:

- Justice system
- Schooling
- Service provision

### JUSTICE SYSTEM

The interaction between the Justice system and young people and the community was highlighted as a significant issue in relation to knife crime and its consequences. Issues relating to reporting, data collection and the increasing instances of very young people being drawn into the criminal justice system were raised.

A law enforcement representative asserted that: ... ‘(y)oung people don’t want to call the authorities and it’s also going unrecorded hence lack of accurate data.’ The reasons for this failure to report knife related criminal activity was in part due to a fear of the consequences for individuals after the reporting. As one young person stated after speaking up things, ... “worsened as soon as they took it to the police”. In response to this comment a law enforcement representative asserted that people’s identity is protected when reporting. The official stated, ... “police don’t record personal information when reporting. Only when a statement is made”.

One of the community activists raised the topic of a high-profile knife crime in the West of Melbourne which led to the death of an individual. According to the community member, ... “The age range of the people involved in the incident was 13-22. Like what is 22-year-old doing with 13-year-old.” This engagement in criminal activity by very young children was clearly a point of community disquiet and its consequence – children entering the criminal justice system should be addressed.

In this context the possibility and complexity of diverting young people from progression from juvenile justice into the adult justice system was raised. One member of the community expressed the view that, ... “When they go into the adult prison, they take it more seriously”. This supports a view from

some community members that 'scaring them straight' could be an option for young perpetrators. One service provider argued that diversion programs were not effective, ... "Perpetrators will not to come this". Another provider stated that we, ... "Can't force young people to get the help they need once they have committed the crime".

## SCHOOLING

The relationship between young people, the community and schools were also highlighted during the community conversations. One member of the community raised the issue of communication between schools and parents. According to the community participant, "Teachers ...(are)...not communicating with parents". Another community participant expressed the view that they felt, ... "Neglect from the school structure." This issue highlights the significance of the work undertaken by Youth Activating Youth such as its education programs with schools and workshops that form part of its health & wellbeing program for students. These comments demonstrate the community view that Government needs to provide additional support to staff in schools. The YAY education program and toolkit which this project will generate should assist schools in dealing with these matters.

Issues of violence and safety in and around schools was raised during the community conversations, ... "Teachers are scared going to and from schools due to people within the student body". An educator stated that, ... "Schools are impacted due to staff and student safety". A parent stated that, ... "I feel safe, but I'm scared to send my daughter to certain community schools".

A community worker described a sobering experience that they had during a visit to a school the anecdote that they recounted highlights the depth of the problem. The community worker spoke about what occurred in a school earlier that they were speaking at earlier in the day:

... For example today. So I spent the whole day in a school in the west. Speaking to literally 300 kids, majority of them being African. Right. I think I tried to ask the question before like, oh, raise your hand up. If you've been impacted by knife crime, raise your hand up. If you know, someone only carries a knife, someone who's being stabbed or victimized, right. We're talking about 90% of the kids in that school talking 300 kids a whole year level. Right. Put their hands up. So ... we have an issue that we need to deal with.

Another participant spoke of the levels of bullying students confront in school and the way in which this is normalised. The participant stated that:

... you know, speaking about like the younger generation they do spend most of their time in school and stuff. Right. And school and teachers have a major part in basically in all our lives. So in regards to that, we see a lot of like, you know, the bullying posters just represented around and you know, spoken about on orientation day. Like it's another subject or you know, just another like topic to like, you know, this is school, that's how it's gonna be, deal with it. So it's never like spoken about seriously and bullying is kind of,



you know, at the heart of basically what's happening, like the problems and the solutions and everything.

At another community conversation one of the community workers pointed to the gap between home and school and the feeling that schools exacerbate the problem. The worker stated that

.. schools are a pathways to prison. And I think ...(the)... point about bullying is really important. Young people are at school more than they are at home. So what does that mean? They're a part of the system more than they are connected to their families and their communities.

The gap between home and school is also highlighted by the following comment made by a young person talking about how their grandparent didn't understand the complexity of school life and the issues faced. This participant described what happened when they raised the issue of racism in school with their grandparent:

She doesn't understand what are you talking about? What are you talking about? What's all this stuff. Do your maths. You're telling me about racism at school. What's nine times nine, you know? But then also just these different things where if I said the N word or something and I go, you know what? I got into a fight with this person. Cause he called me N word. She said, ha you mean a rapper?

Another participant pointed to how schools can impact on a young person's perception of themselves. The participant gave the following example:

Like my homegirl, she works as an African liaison at a specific school. I won't mention which one. So, there's been like two incidents, one of them, it was last week, just a group of boys hanging out and ...(a)... teacher pulled up and they were like, you guys can't do that. You're a gang. So obviously, you know, that's gonna impact them.

This participant went on to link what they describe as "neglect" by schools of young people facing personal or other problems. According to this person:

... I feel neglect has a lot to do with it. Like there's this kid in year two now, but in year one the teachers have just completely been neglecting him and now they are diagnosing him with some sort of mental ... (problems)... just to add that into the mix as well. So I feel like that is obviously gonna cause so much anger for the child at school. We don't know how he's gonna react outside of school. So neglect is the big part of why people resort to these type of things as well. And I feel like we also need to be aware. I mean, you can never really tell what someone's going through.

## **COVID-19**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was also raised by an education representative during one of the conversations. According to this participant:

... COVID exacerbated things. I think for young people in particular, so there was an increase in the number of young people committing knife crimes. I think that sense of isolation during that COVID period, I think we really underestimated the impact on, on

young people that kind of age group between say anywhere from eight right up to, you know, 18. And I think school was one part of it. So if you were struggling with school, it got worse. Like it got significantly worse. Cuz online schooling was terrible.

Another participant stated that COVID lockdowns created a sense of isolation and a lack of face-to-face interaction fuelled knife crimes amongst the very young. According to this participant young people:

Lost year seven year eight. They're going to school. They're by themselves, you're being online the whole time. Your teacher can tell you something's wrong, something's bad, but that's online. You're not talking to a person face to face.

Another issue raised by community representatives and young people was the need to recruit educators from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. One parent suggested that this would be a way of increasing engagement, ... "Schools should recruit more community engagement officers that young people identify with.

## **SERVICE PROVISION**

The complex relationship between the community and service providers was also raised during the community conversations. Service providers highlighted the complexity of their daily work within communities. As one provider stated:

... in my work, I get a lot of grief from parents who want me to talk to their children about knife crimes. I get, um, you know, kids being referred to our service. Who've had, you know, um, problems, um, mental health problems in addition to having, um, carried knives or being suspended from school. So, I get shocked.

Being confronted by highly complex situations and individuals with complex needs was singled out as a regular occurrence. Clients presenting with a range of issues from mental health to school disciplinary matters is confronting. Adding to the complexity of the issues raised is a breakdown in the relationship between providers and young people.

According to one service provider there is a, ... "Lack of trust between young people and services". Reasons for this lack of trust could be what some providers described as the under resourcing of services and consequently the creation of a, ... "Massive waiting list to be able to use some services due to being understaffed and under resourced". Due to the chronic lack of resources, one service provider stated, ... "Many services are unable to come out into the community due to the sector being busy". Another service provider asserted that, ... "Services are under resourced and overwhelmed it will be challenge especially after covid". A community member pointed to the need for service providers and the police to work together. The participant stated that, ... "It's about collaboration and needing other services because police are stretched thin of resources".

The community conversation impressed community and service providers alike in its ability to provide a forum for discussion of serious concerns such as the extent and impact of knife crime. It provided

an opportunity for community members to present their needs directly to service providers. One service provider whilst highlighting the need for expanded service provision conceded the need for further community conversations. The provider went on to state that the, ... “Response we need is counselling and bigger conversations like this”.



## 8.SOLUTIONS

During the community conversations participants generated a range of solutions to address the emerging problem of knife crime in response to a question posed by YAY: How, can we spread the message that this crime is only hurting our community/Family/friends?

These solutions included the following:

# Diagram 1 Safety

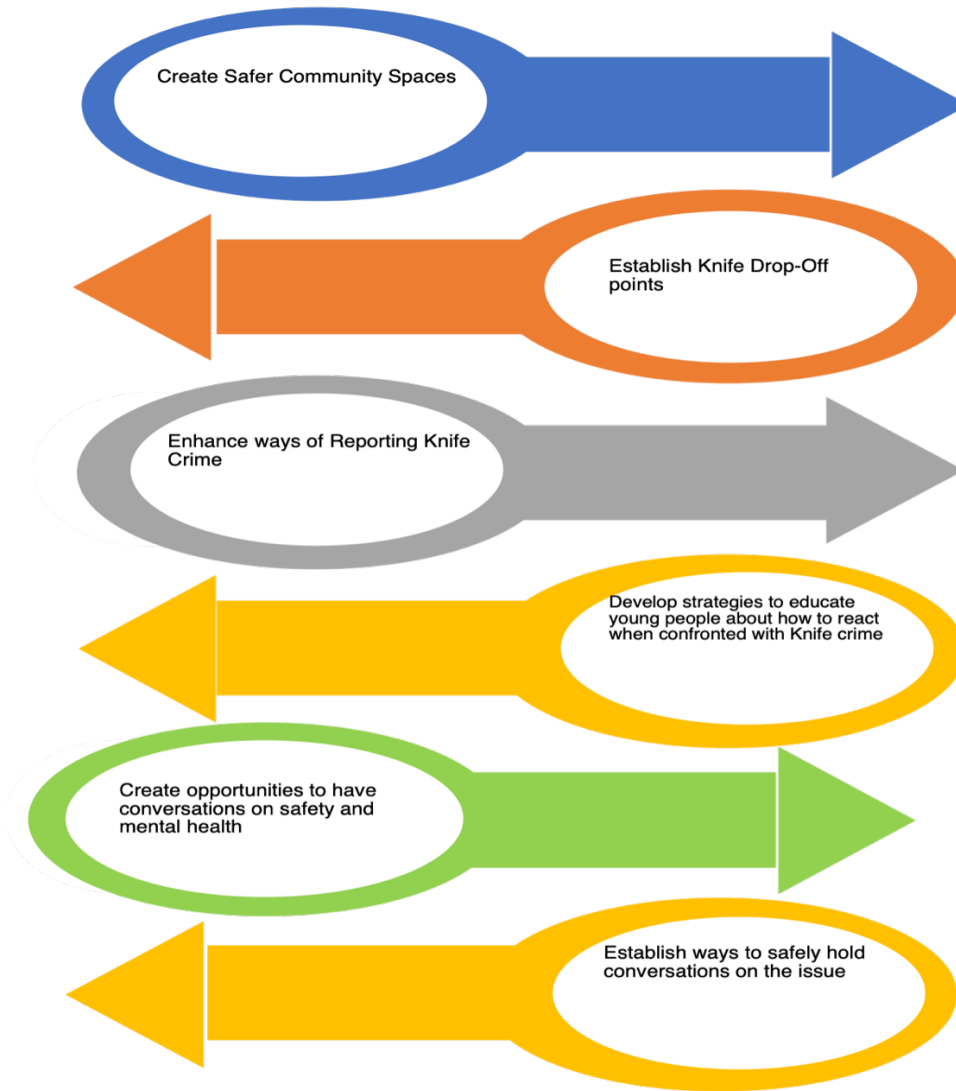


Diagram 2 Services

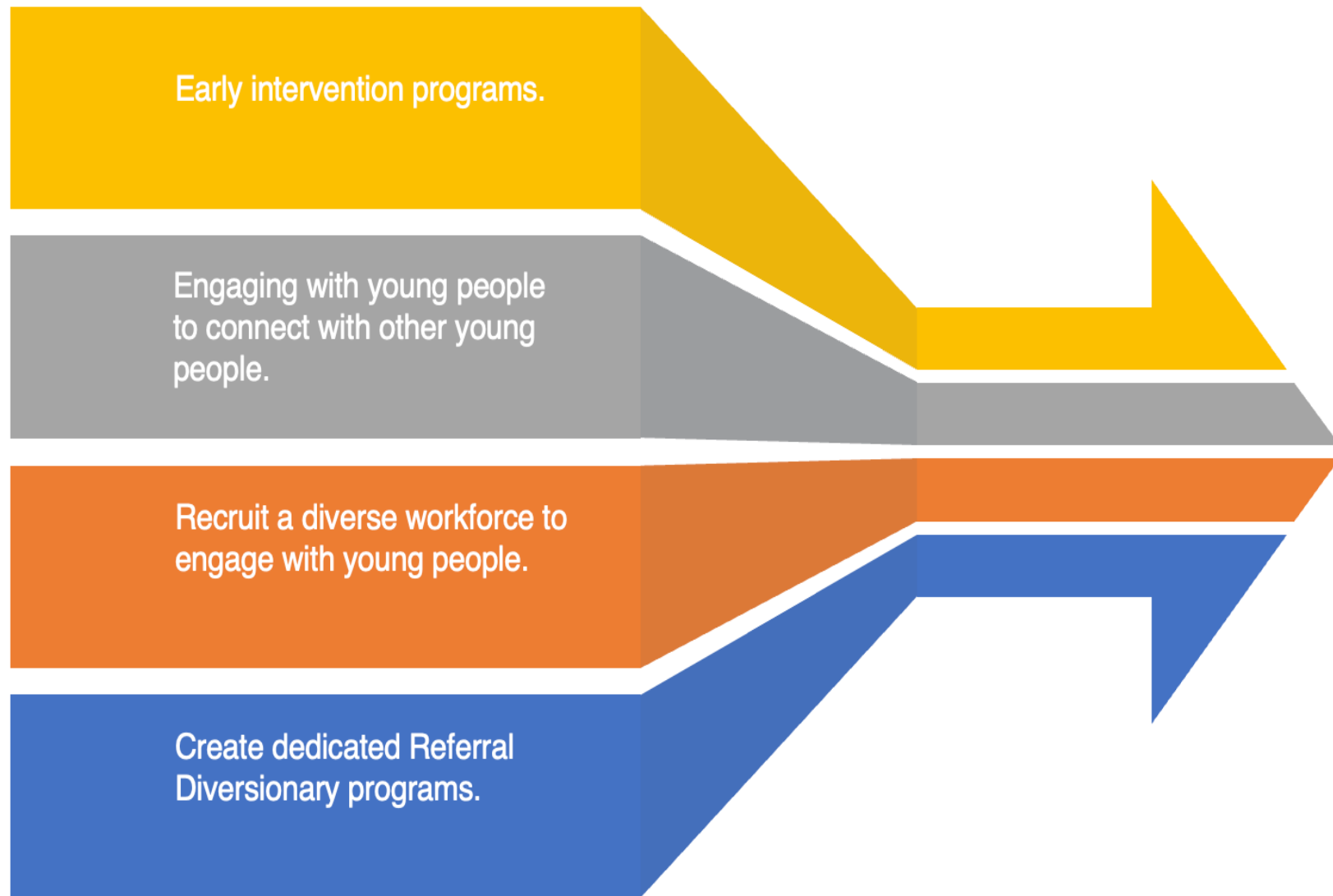


Diagram 3 Education and Training

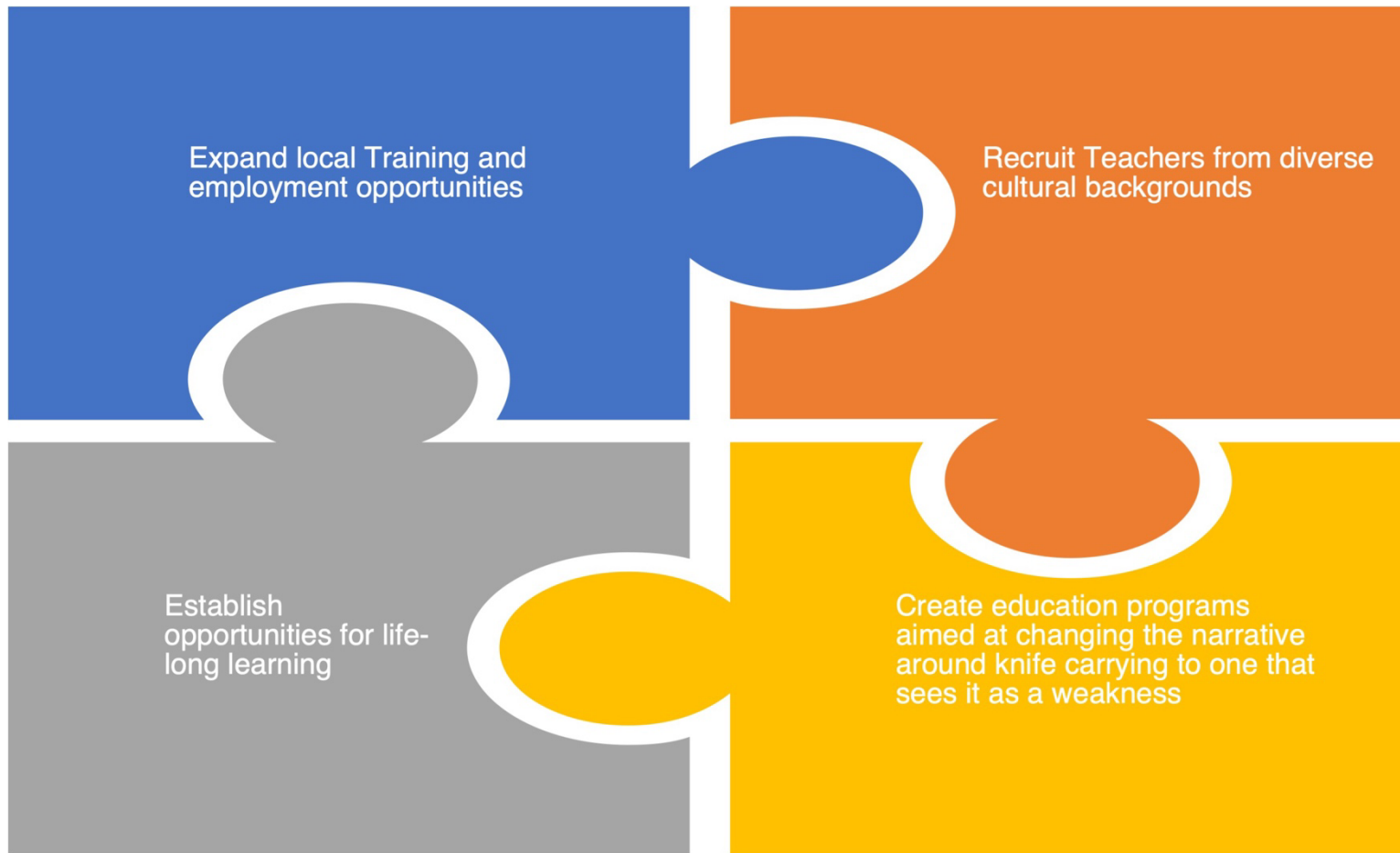
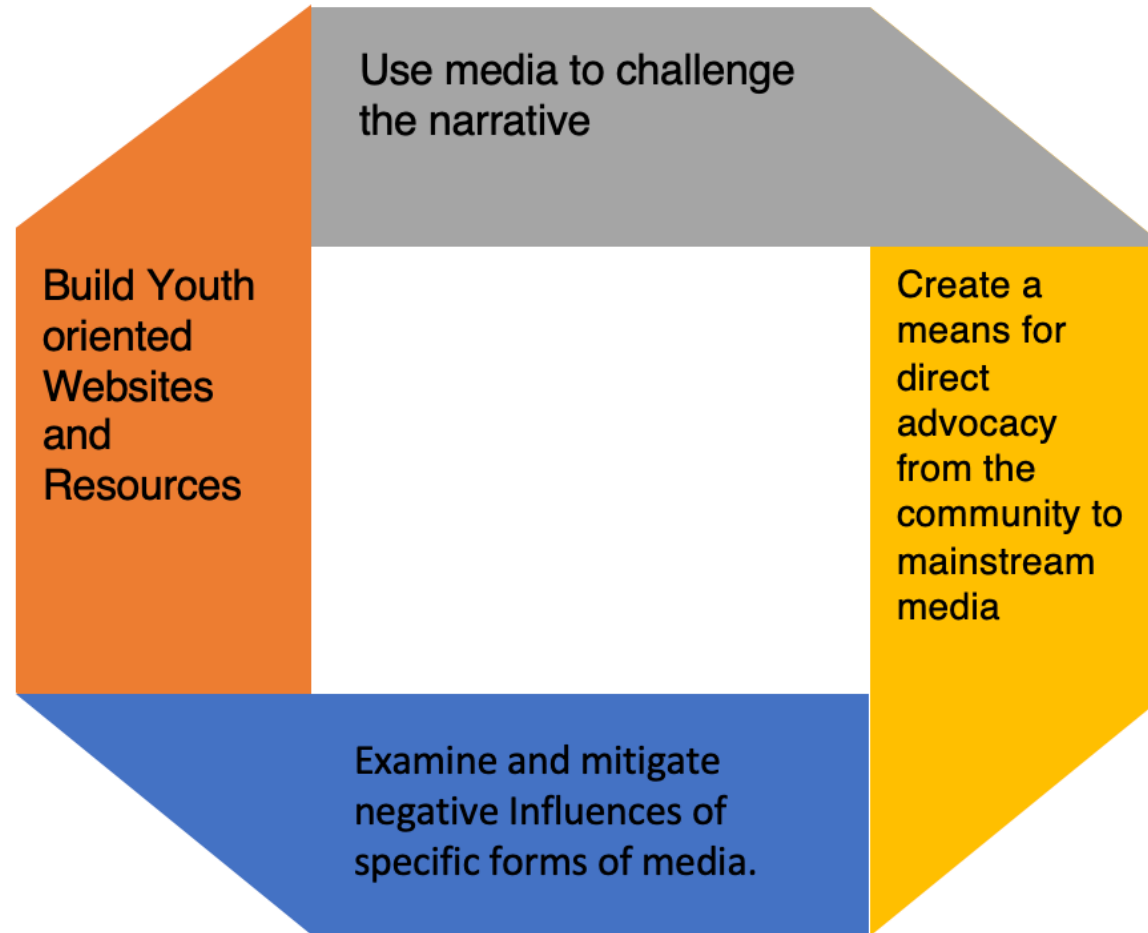


Diagram 4 Social media & Other forms of Media





### Diagram 3 Building Community Capacity





## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

The community conversations produced many suggestions on how to mitigate this problem. The suggested strategies included the following:

1. Create strategic platforms for community conversations between Government Departments and agencies (including Victoria Police and Ambulance services), service providers, community organisations and young people and their families about issues in the community.
2. Identify and facilitate employment pathways, including employment and training programs in the region, for young people who have skills and training but lack opportunities;
3. Hire people and establish diverse recruitment policies within the education system to ensure that more staff that look like them in the education system;
4. Design a community focused media campaign that delivers the message that Knife carrying is “uncool” to change the narrative.
5. Hold more events for young people, that are initiated and led by young people, to build stronger communities
6. Establish a range of “Drop the knife” boxes so people can come and drop their knives. A similar program that was done in the UK which was a success.
7. Department of Education & Training work more closely with communities through engagement with relevant community and youth organisations to develop extra-curricular and capacity building programs that will address important issues negatively impacting young people, whilst simultaneously supporting teaching staff and building a safer learning environment for everyone in school.



## 10. REFERENCES

Katz, J. (1988). *Seductions of crime : moral and sensual attractions in doing evil*. New York: Basic Books.



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