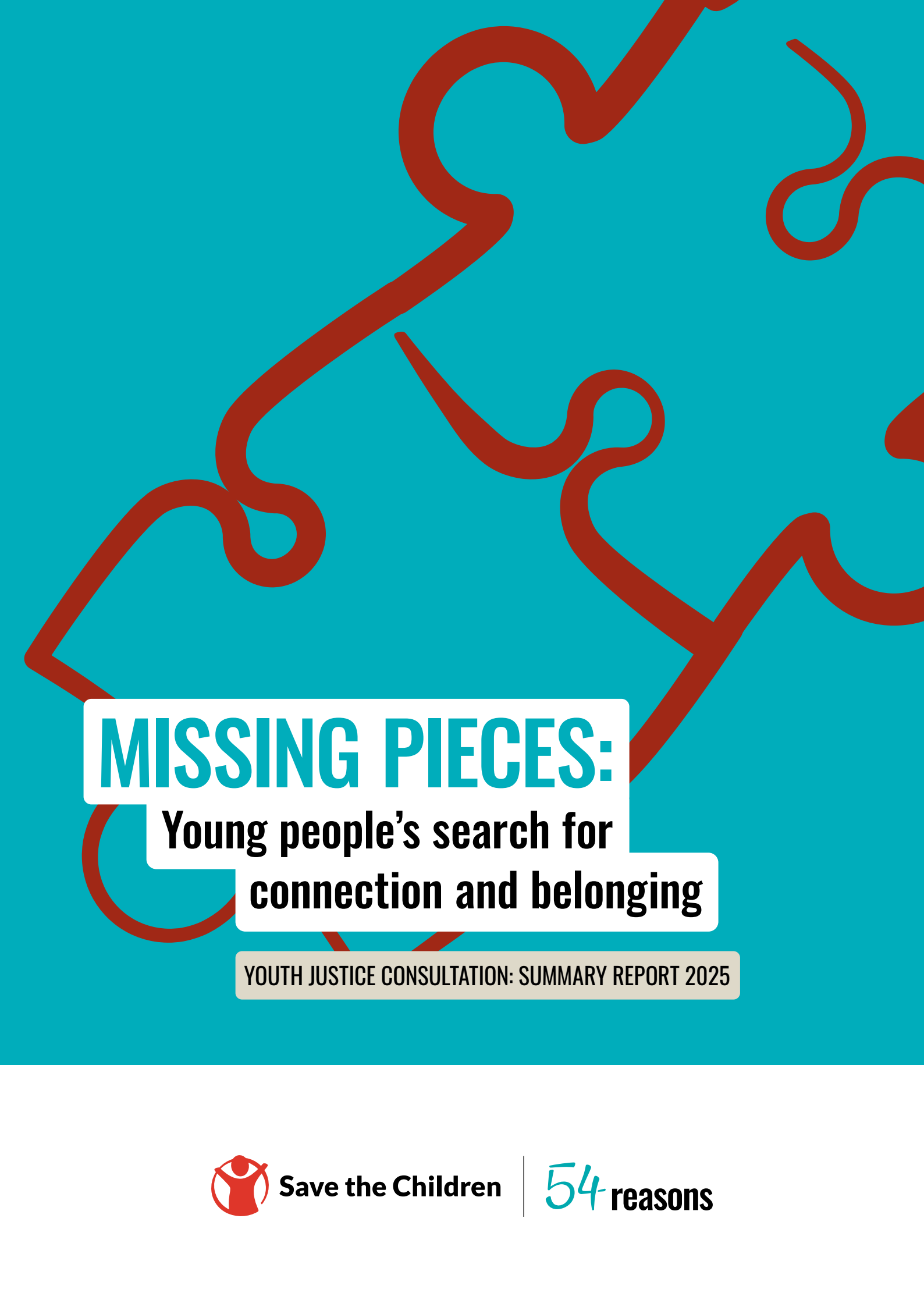


The background is a solid teal color. Overlaid on this are several thick, dark red, hand-drawn style lines that form abstract, swirling shapes, resembling stylized figures or movement paths.

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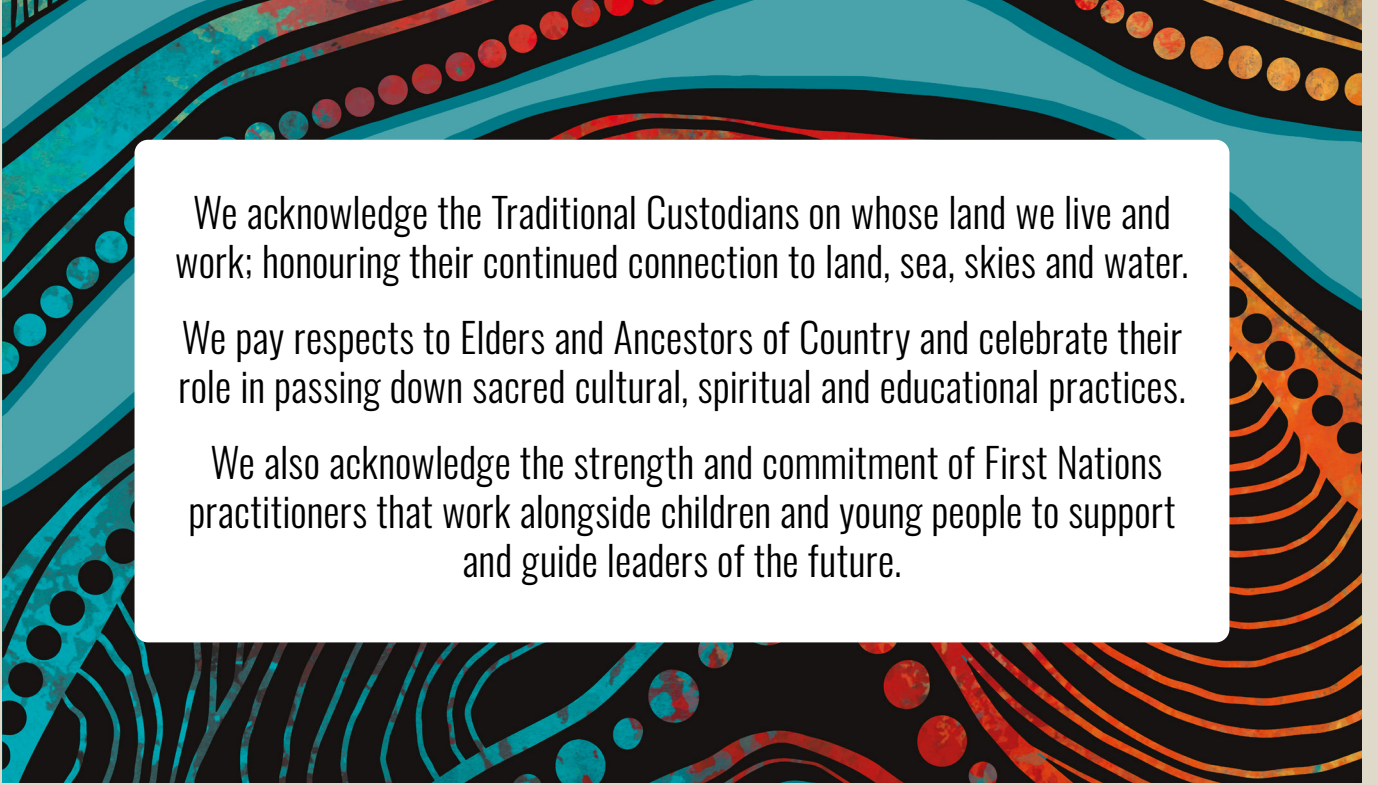
**Young people's search for
connection and belonging**

YOUTH JUSTICE CONSULTATION: SUMMARY REPORT 2025



Save the Children

54 reasons



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians on whose land we live and work; honouring their continued connection to land, sea, skies and water.

We pay respects to Elders and Ancestors of Country and celebrate their role in passing down sacred cultural, spiritual and educational practices.

We also acknowledge the strength and commitment of First Nations practitioners that work alongside children and young people to support and guide leaders of the future.

Acknowledgements

To the young people who participated in this consultation, thank you for trusting us with your experiences, insights and ideas. Know we are listening, and that we are taking what you've shared with us seriously.

With special thanks to 54 reasons team members: Renae Johns, Renee Norris, Rufaro Chimbadzwa, Ryan Montgomery, Angus Weiden, Cas Ibbotson, Tameika Bell, Tara White, Jaime McDonald, Jeremiah Harvey, Max Davis, Shane Booth, Georgia Teakel, Rebecca Chemutai, Norm Anderson, and Melissa Stoker. Thank you for sharing your practice wisdom, and for your genuine commitment to effecting powerful and positive change for children and young people in justice.

The Missing Pieces Report was finalised for internal 54 reasons use in February 2025, drawing on data from 54 reasons' 2023 Pilot and 2024 Youth Justice Consultation on 'Connection and Belonging'. The report was written by Erin Hoffman and Oliver Hill, Practice and Impact Measurement Team (email: practice@54reasons.org.au).

This summary report comprises key data and findings from the Missing Pieces Report (February 2025).

This summary report was prepared in August 2025. De-identified images have been used in this report to protect the privacy of young people in contact with the youth justice system.

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Who we are

54 reasons is Save the Children Australia's domestic team committed to ensuring children and young people's rights are real, respected and part of everyday life.

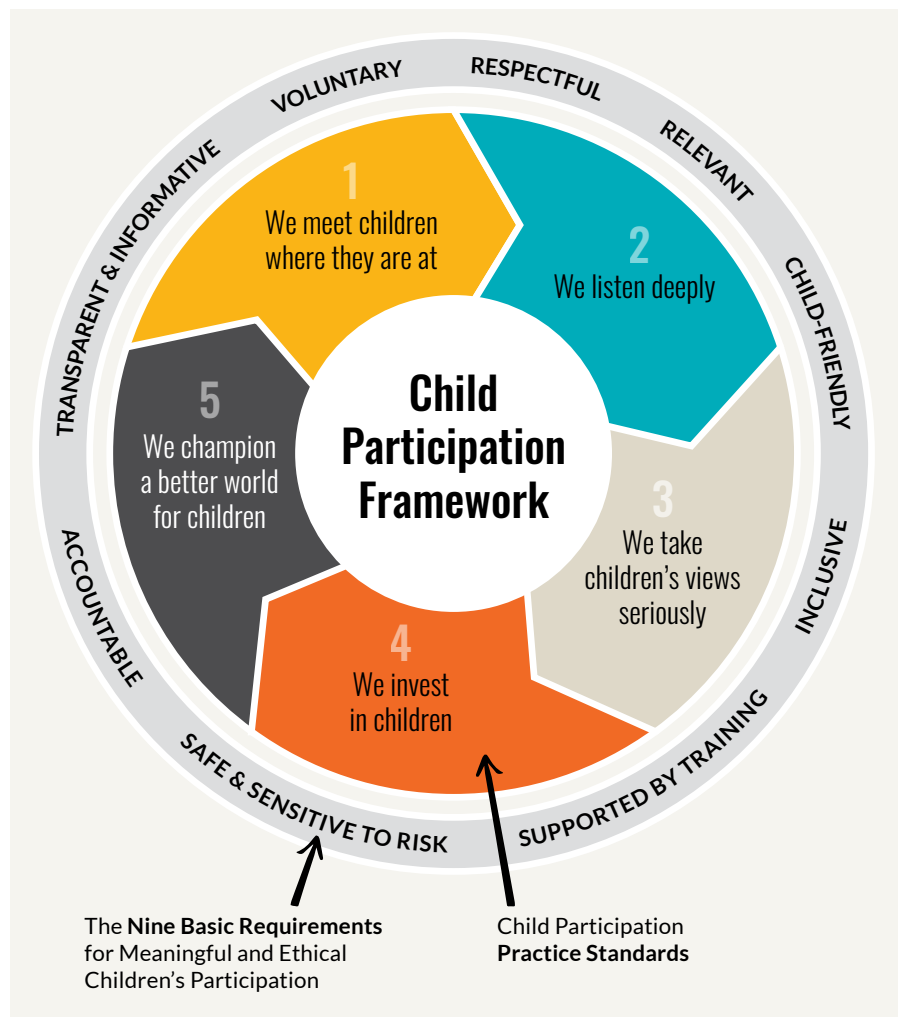
We deliver a wide range of rights-based services with and for children, young people and families. Our work spans early learning, parenting and family support, domestic and family violence, educational and youth engagement – all underpinned by a commitment to child rights.

We work to influence the broader systems that shape children's lives, and use the insights gained through our programs and partnerships to advocate for policy reform and structural change – especially where children's rights are at risk.

Our systems change work includes the Australian Centre for Child Rights, whose mission is to inform, inspire and create change through a one-stop source for best practice in child rights and participation, and a thriving collaborative child rights community in Australia.¹

We embed a Child Rights Practice Framework across our work, ensuring our services and advocacy reflect the rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. As part of that commitment, we have created a Child Participation Framework which outlines the participation principles and standards children and young people should expect from us in our work alongside them, and structured ways for children and young people to contribute to decisions that affect them. These ways include our participation pathways, engagement with practitioners, involvement in service design and review, and opportunities to influence governance.

This summary report is a purposeful act of accountability to young people with lived experience of the justice system.



¹ The Centre is an initiative of 54 reasons, in partnership with the Children's Policy Centre, Australian National University; the Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne; the Young and Resilient Research Centre, Western Sydney University; and SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children.

Executive summary

Australia's youth justice systems are ineffective, discriminatory, and actively harmful to children, young people and their communities.

54 reasons consulted with 31 young people engaged in our youth justice services in 2023–2024 on what connection and belonging means to them. This report draws on learning from the consultation and shares what they told us helps or hinders them in feeling seen, heard, and valued inside and outside of their involvement in the youth justice system.

All participants were clients of 54 reasons at the time of consultation, with lived experience ranging from early contact with the justice system or first-time detention to high levels of reoffending. The sessions were shaped around three key questions about what connection looks like, what builds young people up or tears them down, and what helps them feel like they belong.

The topic of “connection and belonging” was selected in consultation with our practitioners due to its established influence on young people’s wellbeing, identity and justice trajectory. The methodology was trauma-informed, voluntary, and facilitated by trusted practitioners in individual or small group settings.

From what young people shared, four key insights emerged:

- **A deep desire for connection** – including mentoring, family ties, and cultural engagement.
- **Being seen, heard and valued** – through reliable, caring adults and services.
- **The question of belonging** – including tensions between ‘lore’ and ‘law’, and the paradox of family and peer influence.
- **Missing pieces** – a disconnect between young people and their support systems.

These insights highlight the need for a rights-respecting approach to youth justice – one grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and shaped by the views and experiences of children and young people themselves. A rights-respecting approach recognises that children in the justice system are first and foremost children. It ensures they are treated with dignity, can access appropriate support, and are meaningfully included in decisions that affect them.

Such an approach is not only supported by international standards, but is backed by clear evidence, including from the Australian Human Rights Commission’s [Help Way Earlier report](#), that rights-based, culturally appropriate, trauma-informed responses lead to better outcomes for children and communities.

Through this consultation, 54 reasons sought to listen deeply to young people, and this summary report provides a roadmap for meaningful action: embedding young people’s insights into youth justice reform. It reinforces our commitment to placing children’s rights and participation at the centre of the systems designed to support them, and strengthens our ongoing advocacy for justice responses that are fair, effective, and grounded in what children tell us they need.



Photo: Michael Chilton/Save the Children Australia

The consultation

This consultation was grounded in 54 reasons' Child Rights Practice Framework and our Child Participation Framework – both of which guide how we work with children and young people and engage them in decisions that affect them. These frameworks are underpinned by our commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and reflect our organisation-wide expertise in ethical, inclusive, and participatory practice.

The consultation was initiated following a situation in 2022 where a young person was invited to become one of 54 reasons' Young Advisors – a group who are engaged as paid employees and advise us about key decisions in our governance and our practice. Unfortunately, the individual was unable to participate due to complex personal circumstances. In response, 54 reasons drew upon our existing frameworks and practice in participatory methods to design a consultation process tailored to the specific needs of young people engaged in the youth justice system. Our methodology ensured young people facing significant challenges of this nature still had a way to be heard, and have their views taken seriously.

The consultation involved 31 young people aged between 10 and 19 years, all of whom were engaged as clients of 54 reasons' youth justice services during the consultation period. Participants were involved through programs in Queensland, the Northern Territory, Tasmania, and Victoria. Their experiences ranged from early contact with the justice system or first-time detention to high levels of reoffending.

The consultation used two facilitation methods: one-to-one sessions and small group discussions. Sessions were run by 54 reasons practitioners who already had established, trusting relationships with participants. Practitioners used trauma-informed, voluntary, and child-safe methods grounded in our Child Participation Framework. The process was supported by psychosocial safety planning, and participants were offered a voucher of their choice for each session attended. Importantly, practitioners shared that the voucher largely was not the primary motivating factor for young people to participate, and that the opportunity to be heard and share their experiences was more important to them.

The topic of “connection and belonging” was selected in collaboration with 54 reasons practitioners due to its established influence on young people's pathways into, or away from, justice. Experiences of connection and belonging are known to impact identity, wellbeing and development, and include family, community, culture and access to meaningful activities². The consultation aimed to test assumptions about this topic and generate actionable insights to inform 54 reasons' practice and advocacy.

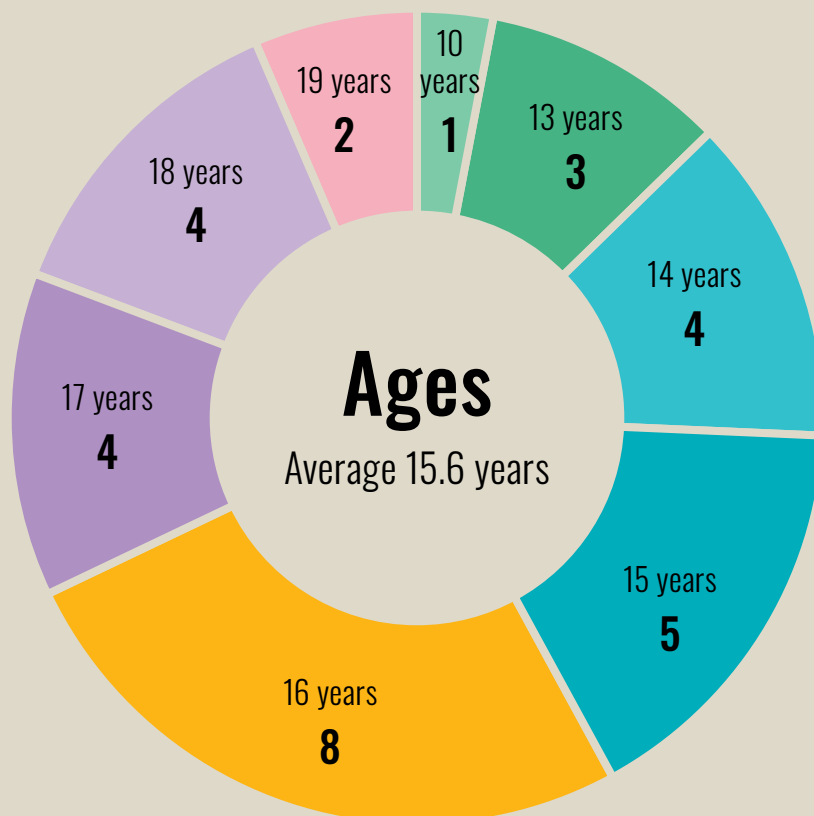
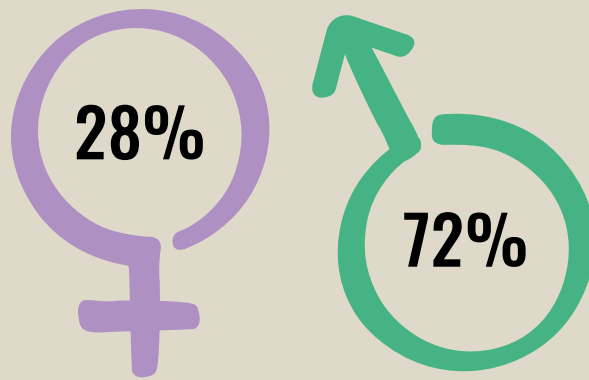
Each session was centred around three open-ended questions:

- 1. What does connection look and feel like?**
- 2. What connections build you up?**
- 3. How can people help you, and others, feel connected and like you belong?**

Young people had genuine agency in the process: choosing the time, setting and format of their session. They were invited to express themselves in their own terms, with facilitators intentional in supporting psychosocial safety and informed consent, and checking in with participants to clarify their views and voice were accurately represented.

The design and delivery of the consultation were led by staff experienced in youth-centred and culturally informed practice, justice-involved cohorts, and trauma-responsive approaches. The methodology was not designed to produce generalisable data, but to surface authentic, in-depth insights from lived experience. In being accountable to participants we developed youth-friendly versions of key insights from the consultation, have committed time and space as an organisation to considering and acting on what participants have shared, and have shared their views more widely through this summary report.

² Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). (2024). **A positive sense of identity and culture**. ARACY. <https://www.aracy.org.au/>



What young people told us

The consultation revealed four core insights from young people engaged with 54 reasons' youth justice services. These insights emerged through what participants said directly, as well as facilitators' reflections which included appropriate contextualisation. Each insight includes a series of interconnected themes that help explain how young people experience connection and belonging, and how these experiences impact them and their decision making.

1. A deep desire for connection

Young people shared a strong and consistent desire to connect – with people who understand them, with family, with culture, and with place. They described mentorship as a vital pathway to connection.

A longing for mentorship

Many participants described wanting guidance from older young people who had been through similar experiences, or who could relate to them. They valued mentors who understood their reality, could offer support grounded in cultural knowledge and lived experience, and use this lived experience to help them navigate their way forward.

We don't really have young fellas that talk about culture and community and acceptance, you only have the older people telling you.

– Participant, 19yrs, QLD

There was a real desire for adults in young people's lives to provide moral guidance and create accountability and motivation for them in practical tasks that help them to stay on track – like getting up and going to school.

I want them to have that backbone in the morning to say 'hey – let's get up, let's do something!'

– Participant, 19yrs, QLD

A sustained connection with family and community

Connection to family and community is vital, especially during detention, and being cut off has detrimental consequences to young people's identity, sense of worth and wellbeing. On top of the physical separation from family and community, there is also a psychological isolation from places where they experience belonging in a way that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

I feel most disconnected when I can't see my family, like when I was in lock up that was the most horrible feeling because I couldn't see or talk to my family.

– Participant, 15yrs, VIC

Participants also described the strength they drew from cultural practices and being part of community events.

Being connected to my Aboriginal culture makes me feel happy and safe.

– Participant, 14yrs, VIC

58%

of participants said they felt connected through family.

28%

of participants said they felt connected through culture.

28%

of participants said they felt connected through friends.

26%

of participants said they felt connected through support services.

Note: Participants were not specifically asked to answer against these areas; this data was collated from information volunteered by the participants in their discussions. Therefore these percentages are likely to understate the true number of participants who feel connection in these ways.

2. Being seen, heard and valued

Young people spoke powerfully about the impact of being misjudged by adults – especially by those in positions of authority. They want to feel like they matter: that their views are heard, their lives are understood, and their contributions recognised. This desire extended beyond token gestures. They want genuine, respectful, consistent relationships with adults who show up, follow through, and believe in them.

Meaningful relationships

Young people want genuine, trusting relationships with adults – where they feel respected and included. They spoke about how having responsibility and an active role in relationships made them feel good about themselves, whether it was helping at home, supporting peers, or doing something useful in the community. Being treated with dignity and respect is especially important to young people in relationships with their support workers.

I helped a mate do his lawn the other day and it made me feel good – I didn't even use drugs that day. I think I want to get a job doing this now. I like to feel useful – that builds me up.

– Participant, 18yrs, QLD

Feeling disrespected, unwanted and unwelcome significantly undermined young people's relationships with adults.

When people [adults] think they know better, disrespect [young people] and [tell them] that they know more about their lives, then young people feel disconnected.

– 54 reasons Facilitator

Support young people can count on

Trust was built when workers went out of their way to demonstrate care, not just compliance. Young people responded positively when workers advocated for them or met them where they were at – within clear boundaries but with authentic investment. Many participants described how the presence or absence of reliable support affected their trust. They wanted workers who were consistent (in terms of their approach, and worker turnover), who followed through on their commitments, and who were invested in what is important to each young person.

People don't show up when they say they are going to show up, like with the basketball team a few players didn't show up and we couldn't play the game so then you start to think what's the point in even playing.

– Participant, 14yrs, VIC

Being seen for who they are and not unfairly judged

Participants were highly attuned to how they were perceived, especially by people in authority. Many described feeling unfairly targeted because of their connections to specific family members, peers, or communities. This led to feelings of powerlessness or hopelessness.

They spoke about feeling as though authorities speak down to them in community and are quick to assume their guilt. This behaviour contributes towards their negative reactions to authority. There was a feeling that they might as well commit crime as they anticipate being held responsible for it either way.

[The] most important thing I want to tell them is: Don't judge a book by its cover. Don't judge a kid by his family. Don't judge the actions [of] the kid because of the family's action.

– Participant, 19yrs, QLD

Others described being written off entirely – treated as lost causes, rather than children in need of care, support or second chances.

I feel disconnected when accused or judged based on my past. Being labelled with names by peers. I have made bad choices, but I am a better person now.

– Participant, 16yrs, NT

Young people consistently said they want to be given the benefit of the doubt, be understood, and to be treated as people – not problems. When they don't feel like they are being listened to or taken seriously, this has a significant emotional impact on them, and they disconnect. This is especially acute when young people feel they aren't being believed.

When people don't listen I feel like nothing, I feel like they don't care what I think.

– Participant, 17yrs, QLD

3. The question of belonging

Some young people described being caught between competing systems: the 'lore' of their families and communities, and the 'law' of the state. Moments of belonging could be positive and uplifting, but also painful, dangerous or isolating.

Caught between expectations

Some participants spoke of the tension that exists between expectations of their family and communities, and societal expectations under law. Among those who spoke about this, there was a range of views.

Some gave practical examples of how being loyal to family sometimes meant they were expected to engage in violent or criminal activity – and some spoke about how abstaining from this would result in rejection that would critically impact their sense of belonging.

They have built me up by encouraging me to be the best I can but have also torn me down by discouraging – that's with both family and community.

– Participant, 14yrs, VIC

Some participants also spoke about the prevalence of corporal punishment in their lives, and how in their world view, physical punishment is good for children because it toughens them up for the real world.

This tension between lore and law placed some young people in impossible positions – forced to choose between compliance and connection, between belonging and legal conformity.

The paradox of family and friends

Family and friends were understandably recognised as significant contributors to young people's sense of connection and belonging. Young people described with mixed feelings how sometimes the same people who built them up would also tear them down.

Even though friends don't help me make good choices, they still make me feel like I belong somewhere.
– Participant, 13yrs, VIC

Young people's views also highlighted how not feeling connected to parents or not feeling able to trust them to come through with essential supports and guidance in their best interest, can contribute to life choices that put them on a trajectory to contact with justice.

[My] mother encouraged me to leave school and not attend further education ... I enjoyed school and was good at it. She didn't like me going to school. Told me it was a waste of time.
– Participant, 15yrs, QLD

43%

of participants said their families build them up. Siblings played a big part in this. It's important to note that many of the same participants who accredited family for building them up, shared that family was also the primary 'factor in tearing them down' and negatively impacting their choices.

The importance of play

Some of the most vivid descriptions of connection and belonging came from young people recalling simple, joyful moments: running through sprinklers with friends, sharing a BBQ with family, or playing sport. These weren't just fun memories – they were meaningful. They were moments when young people felt free, safe, and part of something good.

When me, my family, and my best friend's family all got together for a BBQ down the lake. We all just had fun with heaps of laughs. I really felt connected then.

– Participant, 13yrs, VIC

Some young people expressed a desire for more accessible opportunities for sport and recreation, seeking that same sense of connection through play.

You put me in sport, I'll focus on that for the rest of the year and I won't do nothing wrong.
– Participant, 13yrs, VIC

4. Missing pieces

Many young people described feeling like they didn't fit – not in their schools, not in support services, not in the systems designed to help them. There was a strong sense of exclusion, resignation, and disconnection – from services, from opportunity, and sometimes even from hope. But woven through these stories was also a clear call for change: young people wanted meaningful, culturally informed support, and relationships that made them feel seen and heard.

A missing piece

Throughout young people's feedback there was a common thread of awareness of what they 'should' be doing and what would help them have a good life or keep them away from detention – but there was a concurrent thread of not feeling able to achieve those things. For many participants, there was a missing piece helping them get from where they were, to the full and healthy lives they hoped for. There was a real feeling of wanting adults to invest in them and provide accountability and guidance for them, which was countered by expressing that they don't feel they belong in the support systems set up for them or feel valued through the approaches adults use to connect with them. When participants did have a service or worker in their lives who they felt valued by – they often attributed this relationship to any positive change they had experienced.

I wish the school would have tried harder to keep me there. I think things would be different now. I was one of those kids that was too hard to help – I felt excluded by the teachers like they didn't want me there.

– Participant, 18yrs, QLD

What kept me disconnected was when I was placed in foster care. This was a different culture. I ran away because I didn't feel like I belonged there.

– Participant, 16yrs, NT

Resigning to reoffending

Several young people expressed a sense of inevitability about returning to detention – either because they would be returning to the same things that contributed to their trajectory into contact with justice in the first place, or because they have grown despondent about the possibility of change.

For some, this resignation stemmed from watching the same patterns repeat across family and peers – without seeing meaningful change or real alternatives.

I see myself as an injured lost boy trying to find myself.

– Participant, 18yrs, QLD

I find it hard to think about things that make me happy – sometimes it doesn't seem like it will ever happen.

– Participant, 18yrs, QLD

Relevant, culturally informed, and accessible support

Young people expressed wanting to grow through initiatives that are specifically relevant to them. This includes initiatives that recognise the importance of their cultural engagement, and initiatives that embrace cultural ways of knowledge sharing.

I feel connected at cultural events because they are always welcoming, especially with younger ones who are keen to learn about their culture.

– Participant, 15yrs, VIC

Opportunities, both in and outside of justice, for timely and relevant support to young people were raised as something they really valued but were often a challenge to connect with because of the limited access – especially in regional and remote communities.

Multiple young people spoke or alluded to the importance of help before they embark on justice trajectories, or in early stages of engagement. Implicit in this is ‘the right kind of help,’ which centred on workers who genuinely care about and who don’t give up on them.

There needs to be more support. There needs to be more things like you guys [54 reasons workers] to help us kids.

– Participant, 18yrs, QLD



Photo: Michael Chilton/Save the Children Australia



Photo: Lucia Ondrusova/Save the Children Australia

Implications

The results of the consultation affirm what 54 reasons has long recognised: the most effective youth justice responses are those grounded in children's rights, informed by lived experience, and shaped through meaningful participation.

The insights shared by young people through this process reinforce the foundational principles set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – particularly Article 12, which affirms every child's right to be heard and taken seriously in all matters that affect them. Their willingness to share speaks to the meaningful learning that comes from implementing a child-rights approach consistent with this.

The insights also strengthen the case for rights-respecting, culturally informed, and individually tailored support within the youth justice system. What young people told us aligns closely with the recommendations in our 2023 report [Putting Children First: A Rights-Respecting Approach to Youth Justice](#). That report undertook a comprehensive review of human rights and child rights obligations (including those set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) alongside the current state of youth justice systems across Australia. It identified clear gaps in how rights are upheld and where reform is urgently needed to create better outcomes for young people, their families, communities, and the systems they encounter.

Its recommendations include the need to:

- centre systems around the needs, rights, and lived experiences of children and young people
- treat young people with dignity and uphold their full range of rights – including their right to safety, education, family, and participation
- ensure that young people have a genuine voice in decisions that affect them, through structured and supported participation mechanisms
- provide consistent, integrated, trauma-informed and culturally appropriate support that reflects the complexity of children's lives
- strengthen young people's connections to family, culture, community and place as protective factors in their development,
- facilitate sustained, trusting relationships with workers who are reliable, caring, and genuinely invested in young people's futures.

What's also clear is the value and necessity of listening to young people not only in individual support planning, but in shaping the services, systems, and policies that affect their lives. Their reflections are not only personal truths, they are policy-relevant data points, and a critical form of evidence. Listening deeply and respectfully helps uncover the true root causes of children and young people's contact with the justice system – including disconnection, marginalisation, systemic racism, and a lack of culturally safe, accessible supports. It also reveals what works to prevent that contact in the first place and what supports meaningful diversion – including connection, belonging, trust, and participation.

Taking young people seriously enables better design and delivery of programs and systems that genuinely meet their needs, and challenges assumptions about who they are and what drives their behaviour. It shifts the focus from punishment and criminalisation to support and development. Moreover, by sharing these insights publicly and amplifying young people's voices, we help to inform and educate communities, service providers and policymakers – bringing lived experience to the centre of conversations that too often exclude it. There is both a moral and practical imperative to respect and act on what young people tell us.

Our commitment to young people

This report is part of our ongoing commitment to listen, reflect, and act. The insights shared by young people are being used to shape our services, influence our advocacy, and guide our internal practice. This section outlines how 54 reasons is responding to the findings, in line with the recommendations presented in the report.

Service design implications for 54 reasons

We will explore how mentoring can be embedded more intentionally across our services and strengthen support for families, particularly during and after detention.

Service improvements will focus on:

- exploring culturally safe, relevant and accessible mentoring models, grounded in evidence
- strengthening families' ability to stay connected and support children.

Improving and embedding practice at 54 reasons

We will establish an internal Community of Practice to support youth justice practitioners to apply the insights from this consultation.

Focus areas will include:

- integrating mentoring and cultural leadership into services
- strengthening young people's relationships and wellbeing
- creating safe, meaningful, and hopeful engagement opportunities.



Photo: Michael Chilton/Save the Children Australia

Advocacy and systems change activities by 54 reasons

We will advocate for:

- improved access to family, culture and place while young people are in justice settings (e.g. communication, visitation, cultural participation)
- timely, appropriate, and rights-based support before and after young people enter the justice system.

We have developed:

- two youth-friendly versions of this report to better enable the participation of young people in the ongoing discussion.

Being accountable to children and young people at 54 reasons

This consultation was based on a promise: that young people's experiences and insights would be taken seriously. At 54 reasons, that promise is embedded in how we work. Our youth consultation methodology – grounded in our Child Rights Practice Framework and Child Participation Framework – includes structured accountability and feedback processes as a core part of meaningful engagement. These are not add-ons or afterthoughts, and are essential to respecting young people's agency, dignity, and rights.

We are upholding this commitment by:

- ensuring senior leadership at 54 reasons reviews the findings and recommendations, commits to appropriate actions, and monitors implementation
- embedding the learnings from this consultation into organisational strategy, policy advocacy, service design, and practice
- sharing the insights from this report through a youth-friendly version that is designed for young people to read and engage with
- closing the loop with participants through a second youth-friendly version of this report that was written specifically for participants.

We have made the youth-friendly versions of the report public, with the hope they will be useful for others.

Read them [here](#).

This consultation and our responses to its insights are a part of our broader organisational child voice and accountability mechanisms. It is integral to our whole-of-organisation commitment to listening to children and young people – and acting on what they tell us.

Initially I felt lost until 54 reasons started working with me. Through them I have found a voice and that I know I am being heard. I have felt connected and belonged like never before.

– Participant, 16yrs, NT

The voices of young people
have shaped this report.

They will also shape
what happens next.



Photo: Ashton & Peek/Save the Children



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