

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System

Melbourne—Tuesday, 19 October 2021

#### MEMBERS

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair

Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

Ms Jane Garrett

Ms Wendy Lovell

Ms Tania Maxwell

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Rodney Barton

Ms Georgie Crozier

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Ms Sheena Watt

**WITNESSES** (*via videoconference*)

Mr Les Twentyman, Founder,

Mr Paul Burke, Chief Executive Officer,

Mr Jim Markovski, Manager, Youth Services,

Mr Sean Newton, Team Leader, Youth Services,

Mr Gum Mamur, Youth Worker,

Ms Tekani Perry, Youth Worker,

Ms Jazzy-Jane Abas, Youth Worker, and

Mr Richard Tregear, Outreach Worker, Les Twentyman Foundation.

**The CHAIR:** Good morning, everyone. I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System.

I would like to start by acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples and the traditional custodians of the many lands that we are gathered on today and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly want to welcome any elders or community members who are here today, who will be joining us today as part of the public hearing or who are watching online. I am in Wurundjeri country of the Kulin nation, and we acknowledge that this inquiry and the justice system exponentially affect our Aboriginal brothers and sisters.

Today I would like to welcome Kaushaliya Vaghela and Tania Maxwell, and I am Fiona Patten, the Chair.

We are delighted to be joined by the Les Twentyman Foundation, and their CEO, Paul Burke, will be introducing the people around the table in just a moment.

Could I let all of you around the table know that all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is under the standing orders of the Legislative Council but also under our *Constitution Act*. This means any information that you provide to us is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you were to repeat the same statements outside this hearing, you would not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament.

As I might have mentioned at the outset, we have got Hansard in the background recording the public hearing. They will be listening to every word you say, so I would encourage you at the end once you receive a transcript, which will be sent to you after this hearing, to have a look through that transcript and make sure that we did not misrepresent or misunderstand anything that you told us today.

Again, thank you very much for appearing before us and also, as I said, for the work that you do. The Les Twentyman Foundation is a very broad organisation, and we welcome Paul Burke to introduce the rest of the team.

**Mr BURKE:** Thank you, Chair. Starting from my left: Jim Markovski, who is our Manager, Youth Services; Sean Newton, who is the Team Leader, Youth Services; Tekani Perry, one of our youth workers; my name is Paul Burke, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the foundation; Gum Mamur, one of our youth workers; Jazzy-Jane Abas, Youth Worker; for those who do not know, our Founder, Mr Les Twentyman; and next to Les is Mr Richard Tregear, who is one of our outreach workers.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Thank you, Paul. Now, you have got an opening statement I understand, but I think one of the others is going to provide that.

**Mr BURKE:** I have got some brief words, if I might, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Great, Paul. Sorry to interrupt. We have got until 10 o'clock, so just be conscious that, I am sure, the committee would love to ask questions. So could you leave us some time to do that.

**Mr BURKE:** We think we have got our presentation down to no more than 10. I guess the point I want to make, looking at your terms of reference, is we are ardent believers that early intervention is the way to stop the increasing numbers of young people appearing in remand and appearing in jail cells. It also makes economic sense to invest in the issue at younger ages. We have staff with us who have actually been through the Les Twentyman Foundation programs. They are staff that perhaps were at an interesting juncture in their life and may have taken the wrong path. Fortunately they came into contact with the Les Twentyman Foundation programs that we run. They are now employees of the foundation, they are now active contributors to the communities that they live in and they are great success stories. We thought that it would be best for this inquiry to actually hear from one of those young people, and I am going to introduce again Gum Mamur, who will talk to you about some of the experiences in the programs that we run.

**Mr MAMUR:** Good morning, everyone.

**The CHAIR:** Good morning, Gum.

**Mr MAMUR:** I thought I should start by telling you a little bit about myself and how I have got to where I am today. My name is Gum Mamur. I am a youth worker at the Les Twentyman Foundation. I was born in Kenya and spent the first couple of years of my life in a refugee camp in Kenya before moving to Australia in 2004. During that period we did not know anyone here. There was no-one to connect to that could speak English, and it was an extremely difficult time for me and my family. During that period I went to language school, two weeks; to a high school; all sorts of primary schools—spent roughly four months there until being shifted to a high school, and that was a very difficult time for me personally. It was extremely difficult for me to connect to anyone, and during that period I kind of like ended up with the wrong crowd, started taking those risk-taking behaviours, started hanging out with the wrong people. During that period I found it extremely hard for me to connect with anyone but the people that possibly were not the right people for me, and during that period we would fight—going out to parties and spending a lot of time outside of school, and during school there was no-one to connect to.

I was lucky to be able to be introduced to a youth worker from the Les Twentyman Foundation through their basketball program. During that time a lot of my friends, let us say, two in four were either with youth justice or were going through or having first contact with or making contact with police. Some of them were getting pregnant or getting girls pregnant, and they were going through a lot of mental health. But there were no supports around us, and we found ourselves just going back and forth through the same cycle. We were not connecting with anyone at school, not being able to accomplish anything—any of the goals that we might have had or dreams we might have had.

Luckily for me through the basketball program I was able to be in a diverse community, and there was a youth worker in my face every day challenging me, connecting with my family, finding a new community for me and my family and connecting me to, let us say, as people say, stay on the way of life. During that period I started to see subtle changes in my life and it related to me being selected into a personal development program called EMBRACE. During that period I was able to dig deep within myself through the program to get to know who I am, who I was first. As I was looking at myself develop, I saw everyone around me not getting the same support, just moving further and further away, being in and out of jail, and sadly some of them are not here with us anymore. As I was reaping the benefits and my family was actually getting the support it needed, I saw all of my friends and people that were around me not getting the same deal. And as I moved forward, everything that I got from that youth worker being with me and connecting with my family—I was getting schoolbooks, I was being supported in all the right spaces, I was being supported with everything that my family needed.

So to take it away from myself a little bit, this is an issue not just for me or the African community or people who have migrated to Australia, this is an issue for every single young person in Australia. They are all facing very similar issues, and I firmly believe that if had not been supported at that young stage in my life or had someone assisting me during that period, I would not have the same opportunities I have today. I really want to focus also—like, it does not matter what cause or what gender you come from, these are issues for all the community, and whether it is setting up people at early stages, every little bit helps, and now all our programs

are trying to do that early intervention and being able to connect family, set them up in the community on a pathway to success, let alone to actually follow their dreams in whatever they may wish.

So to end, I just feel that I think all of us want every young person to have a successful life and a rewarding life, and the best way to really go forward with that is being able to continuously support them individually, because mental health does not discriminate and drugs do not discriminate and obviously poverty does not discriminate, and I think we need to give every single person the same opportunity as early as possible and follow them throughout life.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Gum. Thank you. Are there any other intro speakers?

**Mr BURKE:** That is it. I mean, we have centred it around Gum. He has gone through experiences, personal experiences which I think play into your terms of reference, and then we are happy to take whatever questions you may have, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Paul. And thank you, Gum. You have told a story really articulately, and I think it is also a story that reflects many of the stories that we have heard throughout this inquiry. Could I ask you, Gum—and others feel free to join in—two questions: how old were you when you first made contact with the Les Twentyman Foundation, and at what age should you have? I guess if the world had been perfect, at what age should you have made contact with the Les Twentyman Foundation?

**Mr MAMUR:** I came in contact—I think I was 13 years old. That was a year after being in Australia. I think for me it should have been the moment I got off the plane—the moment my family got off the plane. And as I have grown into the man that I have become today, everywhere I went, everywhere I turned as a young person, also as being a young black man, I was always told to be Australian. No-one teaches you how to be Australian. I was always challenged to go and find a job and do this—but the same opportunities were never offered; I only got those opportunities through the youth worker that was supporting me and my family. And as I will say to you now, alluding to the story that I told you guys previously, the streets were always recruiting me, but no-one else was recruiting me until that youth worker came into my life. So I think it should be as early as possible for every single person to help support them with family, school, possible jobs and everything else that comes up for them.

**The CHAIR:** While organisations such as yourselves do extraordinary work and I think sometimes kind of pick the most disadvantaged—I note that the foundation actually targets certain local government areas, and I am assuming that is because of the level of disadvantage in those local government areas—do you think there are programs that we should be embedding in schools as early intervention?

**Mr MAMUR:** Yes, absolutely. I really, really, truly believe that. I myself have worked at a primary school level with our EMBRACE program that we have implemented, and it actually really made a difference within a primary school setting and also within a high school setting. The person I was speaking about before was Jim Markovski, who is also here today. He is a person I connected with many, many years ago, and we have worked on that program over a long period of time. I can throw to him quickly just to kind of follow up a little bit more about the program and being in schools.

**Mr MARKOVSKI:** I will also get Sean, who has also worked—but being an outsider—in other areas, and how it is embedded in our philosophy what he thinks has made a difference. So the EMBRACE program we utilise is how we connect and assimilate young people of different cultures. We have a basketball program set up, sponsored by generous benefactors—non-government; we could not get government funding unfortunately. We have over 450 young people who came from all walks of life—so different nationalities. So we decided to make our team with eight different young people from different nationalities to ensure that they can assimilate, understand rules of society and be, more importantly, friends and mentors when they got out of there, to give back. So the program was to take young people on a two-year journey of personal discovery to find their true, authentic self. So they are enough. They need to be seen. And the idea was for them to have the ripple effect to be leaders within their own community and give back and then make sure that the young people out there were positive role models, and they could see some benefit of being invited.

I will also let Sean add to it, because he has also worked in a primary school. And we think the best thing to do is to work with all grade 5s and 6s at primary schools and year 7s and 8s. We think they are the crucial times, that if you work to support young people to feel good about themselves and have self-confidence, then they

know how to regulate their emotions and anger and bullying, and therefore the rest of their transition in school will be well. So I will pass off to Sean.

**Mr NEWTON:** Thank you. Good morning, all. I want to respond directly to your question. I think that it is important to understand that the work that we do is targeted to certain areas, but that is only due to funding. I think this is a program that can work across greater Melbourne, because, as Gum alluded to before, we understand that poverty, that these challenges, these barriers that young people face—they do not sit in a specific area. We see people across all regions having these problems and these challenges. We see them having them at an early age all the way through, and that continues without intervention into the rest of their lives. That is where we are seeing this increase in incarceration, even in an older population.

I think that, as Jim said, it is really important to get them at an early age. We understand there is a big investment into mental health—into welfare coordinators, into mental health practitioners at a secondary level. When we are able to focus on the year 5–6 cohort transitioning into year 7–8—we understand that that transition period is quite a challenging time in people’s lives; we know that any change can be quite a turning point for a young person—and that transition particularly is somewhere where they need extra support. Working in a primary school—we have a primary school and a secondary school quite close to each other that feed into each other—and working with the 5s and 6s and smoothing that transition allows us to not only work with those young people but also work with the families to support the young people through that transition, work with the schools to encourage healthy communication between both schools and allow that transition process smoothly but also really giving young people a person to travel along that journey. If they do not have somebody to travel along that journey with, that is when they are able to stray away. That is not to say that when we are travelling next to them they do not fall away, but we are always there to catch them, to bring them back, to catch them when they fall, and we lift them up so that that transition is a really important and successful time in their lives.

The other thing that I would say is working at a younger level, so working with the year 5–6 cohort, is breaking down that stigma that we know is still there for young people seeking support. So when we are able to break down that stigma when they are moving into year 7 and 8, they are more able to reach out and to find the support that they need at the times when they need it.

**The CHAIR:** I think that is such an excellent point. Thank you, Sean. I will move to Kaushaliya, then Tanya, and then if I have got time I will come back for another question. Kaushaliya.

**Ms VAGHELA:** Thanks, Chair; and I would like to thank each and every person of the Les Twentyman Foundation team who are present, who are here, for their time. I just heard about challenging times. What I would like to know is that the foundation has been in operation, I understand, for some years now, so what are the most important things you have learned about how to help young people stay on the right track?

**Mr TREGGAR:** Richard Treggar. I am an outreach worker with the foundation. Young people have to be connected. That is the real key. It is no good just being a nice man or a nice woman as a support worker. You need things within the community. If you do not have school, if you do not have training, if you do not have employment, you do not have a chance really. If you fall through the cracks and you are a 15-year-old unemployed dope-smoking lout, that is all you see, and all the inputs into your heart and your life come from people who think exactly like you. So keeping people at school, having them in training and having them in work really add to their growth as a human. Being connected is the real key, and that is what we and other community workers are trying to do the whole time: connect people to community.

**Mr MARKOVSKI:** Can I also add to that. The most important thing when we connect young people to community is not to forget their families—connection to families, culture and being a significant other in that person’s life. Family might not be the best place for them. So when we get them out in the street we become that significant other that navigates them back within family and community and ensures that we have the tools like schoolbooks—an ability and funding to pay for them. Our biggest challenge since we first started has always been funding. There are a lot of government agencies who reciprocate and get ongoing funding, whereas we at the Les Twentyman Foundation are the poor cousins who go to a lot of committee meetings, give out some great ideas but never the ones to say, ‘Can we assist? What can we do to make life better? How can we work in partnership?’. And I think the team that we have assembled understands the work that we do, and therefore the effort can start from right at the grassroots level—who understand you be there when a young

person and a family need you. We work around the clock. We are on call when families need us. Other agencies will clock off at 5. The police will tell you, 'We can't get anybody'. But we are around and available to our community, and also the wider community, to reconnect them back to being meaningful, purposeful and resourceful individuals, not a burden on our society

**Ms VAGHELA:** Also I just heard in the initial remarks that for one of the programs 450 young people is what you have. So what I would like to know is: how many young people do you assist on an annual basis through the youth support service program that you deliver?

**Mr MARKOVSKI:** We support through our Positive Futures, our 96ers basketball program, our EMBRACE leadership personal development program and our back-to-school program anywhere close to 2500 young people annually. And more so out of that, once you are in our orbit, it is not just, 'Here's a show bag'; we also have a Christmas fun day for the community who do not have Christmas gifts or anything where we invite them to come and have a brunch there, get their necessary gifts and whatever else they need. Plus throughout the year we would probably have an extra 500 people that we support monthly with food vouchers or food drops et cetera, because we know that COVID has really caused huge issues of school exclusion and that. And we also work a lot with the private school sector. And just to let you know, the client group that we have is not only made up of those who are impoverished. Our EMBRACE program is a selection of young people who come from all works of life—broken down families, two families, they come from elite families, upper class, middle class et cetera—because we want them all to come together, to learn from each other and get a better understanding, because when you understand each other you do not have racists, you do not have negative thoughts to a community and you can be proactive and more able to create a safer environment out there. So they are the matters that we deal with.

**Ms VAGHELA:** You have got the team today here with you. How did their work change or differ from what they were doing normally prior to COVID? How has COVID changed the way they are working with young people?

**Mr MARKOVSKI:** To be fair, we have not changed our working. We have still worked, even though COVID has come on. We have been innovative and assertive in the way we approach our young people. As you know, a lot of them are disconnected and hate Zoom, so what we have done is have a lot of face to face, walk and talk, or we will meet young people in their environment; we will walk and talk with them. We might go for a bike ride with them. We might support them with whatever it is that they need. We may give them some mental health things like show bags to keep them active. We may do some fun types of activities so they can keep connecting. So what we have tried to do is to make sure that they are still connected and have a sense of belonging.

There have been issues at home, so we have had to support family members. So as a team we will probably go out in a pigeon pair; we will have a male and a female worker go and see a young person, and we will offer that young person the support or the support worker that they feel comfortable with. Sometimes the person may feel comfortable with a gender-specific worker, or sometimes it does not matter, they will have both. So therefore when one worker is not around, there is another worker that understands. And it stops the young person retelling their story time and time again when they know and wrap services and supports around them. Plus we have the beauty of having our outreach workers like myself who go and support families. We do not neglect family, because a lot of families will say, 'What are you doing with my child?'. So therefore, not to breach confidentiality, the other workers can work to support—and put the necessary strategies in place—that family so when we do family mediation the young person is supported and so are the families.

**Mr NEWTON:** Can I suggest also I think our work has become more crucial over the course of the pandemic. We have organisations who we refer out to, and their waitlists have grown to 12 to 18 months. And so that is the period where we are having to hold these young people and really allow them to continue growing and also keep them from falling until they are able to get that targeted support that they need. Youth work is often seen as an industry where we go out there and just do activities with them. It is really to hold them while they are on the waitlist to get other services as well and to allow them to keep challenging themselves and growing as individuals even though the wait time to reach other services might be 12 months, it might be 18 months, it might be two years. And that is extending over the pandemic, as I am sure you are all aware. So the need for us to continue doing that assertive outreach has grown over the course of the pandemic, and we are seeing that in working with youth.

**Mr MAMUR:** Just 2 seconds to add to that, I think we talk a lot about relationships. Our relationships have never been more crucial—to answer your question about how it has been the last 18 months. So all of the rapport we build with young people, their families, their communities, schools and friends, our relationships are allowing us to help them throughout this period. We keep talking about relationships, but it is our connection with those young people that is allowing us to actually extend them and nurture them throughout the period where it is really, really tough for us and them also, and they are aware of that. So it is really a bit more crucial to actually continue to support them by actually saying, ‘Let’s work together with everything that we’ve gone through so far’. A lot of the young people we work with also know us through friends, so I think it is just that connection that has gone around.

**Mr TWENTYMAN:** We have been working with some families for three and four generations. It started off back in 1984 when I was an outreach worker at Braybrook in the City of Sunshine. The kids were coming to us, not for counselling. They had no schoolbooks. They had no food. I was writing a column in the local paper, which I did for 25 years, and through that we were able to get private sponsors to come on. The building we are sitting in at the moment is an old hotel, and that was purchased by a guy called Alan Johnstone that owns Penfold Motors. There are three generations of his family involved with us: Alan; his son Nick; Nick’s wife, Lexi, who is one of our board members; and his son and daughter. They were studying at university and were involved with Jim and Gum in the EMBRACE program.

I go to a lot of schools and speak, but also I go into institutions. I will never forget the time I was out at Ravenhall speaking to 60 prisoners on remand. I asked them how many of them had even gotten to year 10. Not one hand went up. I asked how many had had a job. Only about six, seven hands went up. Twenty minutes into the presentation the social worker called smoko. So they all went out to have a cigarette, which obviously they cannot do now. She came up to me to say, ‘Les, I called that smoko because I could see they were relating to you. I was wondering whether you could ask them a question we can’t ask them’. I said, ‘Oh, yeah. What’s that?’. ‘We want you to ask them about their gang activities within the prison’. So when they came back in I showed them a video that I did with Channel 9 in LA with LA gangs, and then I said to the prisoners, ‘What about here? What about your gang associations?’. They all just sat there with their eyes darting, and finally one of them, who I knew from Braybrook, said ‘Les, if you’re not in a gang in here, you’re dead’. So that is one of the issues. You think we put them in prison like it is going on to a Swiss finishing school.

I went up to Malmesbury recently. I spoke to one group; they were fine. Then I went into the guys that had been rioting at Parkville, and there were about 10 of them sitting there. The gang leader, an Islander boy who was waiting to turn 18 to be deported, just wanted to disrupt them. Anyhow, one of the kids asked me a question about, ‘Why do I continually when I get released end up coming back? Because I end up with the same sort of people’. When we went outside the youth worker said, ‘That’s going to be interesting’. I said, ‘What do you mean?’. He said, ‘That gang leader won’t be happy about that kid asking you a question’. Four days later that kid was stomped on and put in a critical condition in hospital. So those institutions should be the last thing anyone does to them. As Gum said and Tekani, all those people, we get in and because we have been working since the early 1980s with these families, as I said, second and third generations—some of the things we started were Christmas parties, because no kids were going to get a present. I think we had about 10, and then we had 60 the following year. A seven-year-old girl who was a ward of the state got a handbag, and as the kids were discarding their wrappers she was grabbing them and putting them in her bag. I said to her social worker, ‘Oh, that kid’s got a thing about tidiness’. He said, ‘No, Les, that would be her first-ever present in her life. If the parents knew where she was, they’d kidnap her and kill her’.

So from that we then went into giving schoolbooks. We have put 21 000 kids through school and about 800 through university. One kid was homeless, sleeping on the streets in Altona. His youth worker brought him to us. We gave him brand new books, he went back to school and got a scholarship to Oxford University where he qualified as a mathematician. He now runs his own artificial intelligence firm. Another boy came to see Richard. He was in a gang in Sunshine. Richard helped him with schoolbooks. That kid now owns stores in Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney and in London selling gowns and wigs to the legal fraternity and those sorts of things. We have got hundreds of those sorts of cases. Early intervention, early intervention, early intervention and you will get rid of most of your jail population.

**Ms VAGHELA:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Les. I think we can finish the inquiry right now, actually, can't we. There is the answer. Tania.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Thank you, Chair. Welcome to everybody here today, and Les in particular, thank you so much for your dedication and for the work that you do, for your role modelling and for being able to continue your foundation to work with these vulnerable young people. We need to clone you. We need more of you and your staff, and if funding is what is limiting you, then I am sure that we are all happy to continue to advocate and lobby on your behalf, because without youth workers in our communities we are not providing that early intervention to prevent young people from entering the youth justice space.

Now, Jim, you have already answered, actually, a lot of my questions. I just quickly wanted to give Jim a shout-out, because I know that you have had over 37 years of working in this field—OAM—and that you speak multiple languages, so I would assume that in your role that is actually quite handy at times in working with these young people. So congratulations and well done. Now, you spoke about not working those 9 to 5 hours, which I think is absolutely imperative, and that you can be with those young people outside of them, whether it is school hours or those normal working hours. What importance do you place as an organisation on working with not only the young person but the family?

**Mr MARKOVSKI:** I will let Richard answer that, and then I will add to it if it is okay, because Richard and I have been around a fair bit, and we realise that one cannot go without the other and they both need support, so that is where it starts. So, Richard, if you would like to add to it.

**Mr TREGGAR:** Working with families is absolutely crucial, and you really need that after-hours response to try and get as many family members together as possible. And we find that our work with families—the best outcomes more often than not with a young person happen when you include family. I started off as a youth worker in 1977 in Footscray, but I quickly became a family worker, and I still am a family worker working with the whole family, and it is absolutely crucial, Tania.

**Mr MARKOVSKI:** Can I add to that—sorry, Tania. I think the important thing is twofold. When we tell people out in the general community we do work around the clock—but our wellbeing and structure and support for our own team is great, because it does not mean you work 24 hours. You are on call, you roster out, and we like to respond while the iron is hot, because if you miss that opportunity when a young family is in stress and all hell is going to break loose—and the police come at whatever time they come, they cannot broker a deal. We have just pacified a few things, removed an individual from a home, whether it be a father, a guardian or a child, but we have not really solved the problem. We like to deal with the problem and make sure that we intensively investigate it and invest in the family for a period of three to six months around the clock, whether that means seven days a week working, resourcing, to make sure we get a positive outcome.

I have got a list of a few things that we would like to see changed, if we can, if time permits, Tania: drug law reform; rehabilitation—any young person can get a bed any time they want in a police station if they cannot get a bed for rehab; and Child First and Orange Door to make a referral if there is a family violence issue. Police attend and they remove the perpetrator, but the young people—the children within the family—have witnessed family violence. Those children need instant support there and then too. We can connect the worker with them. We need sport not to be apartheid by finance. We find that many people who have the sporting ability but cannot afford it cannot get to the starting block. They are about 100 metres behind and cannot get support. We have spoken about schools working with grades 5 and 6, developing and working to regulate their emotions and anger and transition into years 7 and 8. We are finding out many CALD community schoolchildren who are in years 9 or 10 have the literacy levels of a grade 3. Teachers know this but they do not do anything about it, and that is why our dropout rate is at year 9. Like Gum said earlier, the street will recruit you. There is a job for you out on the street. So what we need to do is have people out on the street recruiting and reconnecting and keeping young people who are absconding from school. As soon as the young person does not go to school, we know that person will be at risk and need the support to reconnect them back into school. So those are just a few things that we have got.

Like I said, if we had multiple funding and worked collectively in partnership with everyone, we could get a better holistic view of society and ensure our young people become the best version of themselves and not a burden on society. There is a cost: \$18 to keep a kid in school, \$550 a day to incarcerate them—so work out the maths. Anyway, thank you.



**Mr TWENTYMAN:** Back in 2013 and 2014, 27 000 kids in Victoria were suspended from school. Now, that may be a kid being suspended eight times, but they are the kids who end up being recruited from the street into the gangs. There is an article in today's *Herald Sun* by the assistant commissioner about all the gang activities out in the western suburbs. We know we can break that up by giving them these different sorts of activities—back to school, EMBRACE, basketball—so there is all that wrapped around this stuff.

**Mr NEWTON:** Can I suggest as well, just referring back to your question, Tania, we have young people who are going to schools—they are chatting with their teachers, they are chatting to the wellbeing staff and then they are going home. They are relearning what is happening in the home environment, and they are being retraumatized by what is happening in the home environment. They are coming back to school the following day, and their behaviours have reversed. What we need is to continue pushing through youth workers the programs that work, such as our Positive Futures program. The youth workers should be able to go out to the house after those school hours to help the parents, teach the parents and support the parents in educating their children as well and supporting their children so that we do not have that effect with things going back and forth with the young person. They are getting conflicted views, both at school and then at home, and when we look at which ones are going to influence them more, it is their home life. So unless we can get in there and work with the parents, work with their family members, we have no hope.

**Mr MAMUR:** I will just quickly, 2 seconds, add to what Sean was just saying. As we have heard already, we work with all the family, specifically the parents, and the biggest thing that we get from each and every parent is that on TV, everywhere, there is no information about how to actually work teenagers or young people. One of the biggest things that we do is intensive work with the family by giving them scenarios of how they can deal with this situation. Also we are consistently teaching and helping families. If we can do more, then in that way we can impact and make sure we stop those issues from home that filter outside [inaudible].

**Ms MAXWELL:** Thank you. Just one further quick question: I am wondering whether you have any evaluations completed—I know that you do do evaluations—and whether you can make any available to the committee, because I think to have that empirical data to support the evidence that you have given today would be very worthwhile for us to certainly consider, and it may influence our recommendations. Is that okay, Chair?

**The CHAIR:** That would be terrific. I note that you have got a 2019–20 evaluation that really shows remarkable success.

**Mr BURKE:** We can provide you with some documentation.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. I know we have run out of time, but just before we go I would like to hear from Tekani and Jazzy-Jane. I just wonder if there is a female perspective on this and if there is something different and unique that we should be considering for young women in this. Is that still sport, is that still connecting with families or are there specific issues that you think we should be considering for young girls?

**Ms ABAS:** Thank you for asking and for directing your question to us. In fact the idea of sport and being connected to family is crucial for women, because often it is overlooked. Young girls are going through school, and they have to deal with the stigmas of their peers and the judgement of their peers and often their teachers as well, just because they come from different generations and different teaching. When they do go home, again they relearn everything that they are trying to get away from. I feel like young girls often have to do a lot of learning on their own. The standardised way of teaching all the programs that are already set out targets the general public, but there is a lot more recognition for young males and a lot more recognition for the hardship that young males go through.

We have seen a lot of young females who end up doing the same things that a lot of young males get recognised and highlighted for. I feel like the dedication that our organisation has to young girls in particular is essential and commendable, because we do not disregard the girls. We tailor the care and the support for the young girls appropriately, so we do have specific protocols but instead of it being super standardised it is tailored specifically and it is very worthwhile for the young girls I think.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that. Thank you very much. I am afraid we have run out of time for this session, but I think we could have spoken to you all day. Really you have reaffirmed so much of what I think has been said to us: early intervention, early intervention, early intervention—at least three times. I do appreciate you talking about family workers and having to support children not just in schools but 24/7 in

different parts of their lives. We very much appreciate the time that you have given, and of course again I echo our great admiration for the work that you are all tirelessly doing. As I said at the outset, you will receive a transcript of today. Please have a look at it and make sure that we did not mishear you or misrepresent you. We really look forward to the report, and certainly you have helped us enormously in some of our considerations for this report. The committee will take a short break and will return at 11. Again, thanks, everyone; thanks, Les, and thanks to Paul and the team.

**Mr BURKE:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**Witnesses withdrew.**