

Lithgow & Portland Youth Express Report



Mountains Outreach
Community Service

MOCS would like to acknowledge the Wiradjuri, Dharug, Gundungurra communities on whose land this work was done and would like to pay respect to Elders of those communities and any other First nations communities across the continent.

We would also like to acknowledge that we have the privilege of doing work on this Country because of the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and the injustices ensued under colonial rule.

We will always strive to work alongside First Nations communities and to support their self-determination.



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Cover image: Detail of a group mural made by students from Portland Central School with support from Brett Groves..



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About MOCS

MOCS (Mountains Outreach Community Service) is a social-justice-focused community development organisation that works with families, children and individuals across the Blue Mountains and Lithgow. We focus our attention on supporting those facing hardships and those who experience intersections of oppression. We aim to enable stronger families, inclusive communities, and improved social cohesion.

Office of Regional Youth, Children and Young People Wellbeing Recovery Initiative (Storms & Floods)

In 2022, MOCS applied for funding from the Office of Regional Youth, Children and Young People Wellbeing Recovery Initiative (Storms & Floods) (CYPSPF) to deliver our Youth Express project in both, Blue Mountains and Lithgow LGAs which allowed us to, first, pilot the project in the Blue Mountains region before adapting it further to suit the Lithgow and Portland communities.

This funding was released to improve access to programs and resources to help young people recover, build resilience, strengthen community networks and improve mental health and wellbeing.

From conversations with other services, through network interagencies, and from doing our own research, a need to engage with 8-13 year old young people was identified. We had made the argument that this age group is underserved and facing increasingly difficult circumstances. There is evidence from organisations like Headspace, that young people are presenting with more complex dual diagnoses and evidence from organisations such as MYST (Mountains Youth Services Team) that participants presenting at services are younger and younger, with few services funded to reach this age group.

The transition from primary school to high school is tough enough as it is, without the compounding pressure of outside factors such as, bushfire trauma, the impact of COVID19 on education and socialising and storm damage disruption. Many young people face these challenges, as well as the added barrier of being located rurally, restricting access to services.

Our submission to fund a series of creative consultations, facilitated by experienced community workers was supported by local organisations, Gindaay, Lithgow Information and Neighbourhood Centre (LINC), Lithgow Community Projects (LCP), Lithgow City Council and NOFFS.

About the Project



During school term 3, MOCS delivered creative workshops for children and young people aged 8-13 at Portland Central School and Lithgow High School. Each workshop consisted of 3 creative sessions; poster & collage, air-drying clay sculptures and a group mural with Aboriginal artist, Brett Groves.

These creative workshops functioned as a relaxed consultation designed to boost emotional resilience, encourage expression, and foster stronger relationships with peers and local service organisations.

The development of this project was backed by research and consultation and facilitated by community service workers with experience from reputable organisations. The outcome of these creative sessions/consultations will be shared with local community services to boost future programming and help secure project funding to support this community.

As MOCS is not permanently based in Lithgow, it is important that this project is a partnership with local services. Connecting young people with local services and workers is one of the lasting impacts of this project.

During the delivery of this project, we created burgeoning relationships with students, their families and their teachers. We were able to obtain a comprehensive snapshot of the unique challenges that young people in this area face as well as the strengths that they collectively have.

In a short time, and a total of 5 individual events, we had an attendance of 362 participants.

Process



In early 2023, after delivering our Youth Express project, across Blaxland, Lawson and Katoomba in the Blue Mountains, we tailored to the project to suit the Lithgow LGA and used our learnings regarding attendance to achieve a more broad cohort of young people.

Using the Office of Regional Youth Funding, we first recruited a specialised position to work on this project; Lithgow Project Officer, Ashleigh Sakkouri. As MOCS is based in Hazelbrook, it was crucial that we have someone representing MOCS in the community who knows the community. Through networks within the Lithgow community sector, such as Planet Youth, Ashleigh was able to secure meeting times with Lithgow High School and Portland Central. Through Ashleigh's own experience, accessing children and young people in the Lithgow area, as well as advice from other community sector workers, the decision was made to run the project through schools, rather than independently. This way, we were able to send an "opt out" form home with the young people, rather than promoting the workshops to their parents. The result was a much larger attendance, and much more realistic cross-section of the community.

Our facilitators were selected to represent different areas of the local community sector, and to ensure that the conversations were being facilitated by people with an understanding of non-extractive consultation and safe and supported engagement.



At Portland Central School, we worked with Head Teacher Teaching & Learning, Jess Worley to arrange two full days of workshops with students spanning Year 3 to Year 8, including the support class. In our first session on Friday, 18th of August, MOCS workers, Christy Hartlage, Claudia Roosen and Ashleigh Sakkouri were joined by Wiradjuri artist, Brett Groves for delivery. We arranged three different workshop tables in the classroom; collage and poster making, air-drying clay sculptures and a group mural, titled "Mountains" that featured Aboriginal symbology, led by Brett Groves. We had students join us throughout the day in their class groups.

They were split into threes, and randomly assigned an activity. We paid attention to the individual needs of students who weren't engaged in their activity and allowed them to switch tables. We noticed that First Nations students were particularly interested in joining Brett's mural, which we encouraged, and students with higher needs regarding concentration and engagement benefited from joining the air-drying clay activity.

In our second session on Friday 1st of September, MOCS staff, Ashleigh Sakkouri and Claudia Roosen were joined, again, by Brett Groves and this time also by Nathan Mas Stephens, Community Development Coordinator, from Lithgow Information & Neighbourhood Centre (LINC). We had the same activities again, except this time, Brett's mural was titled, "Message Sticks". In this session, we tried to make sure all students had a go at a different activity to what they did in the last session.

At Lithgow High School, we were only able to arrange one full day of delivery, with only the Year 7 students. Lithgow High School is much larger than Portland Central School, so we had to work with a more contained age group.

On Friday 25th of August, MOCS staff, Ashleigh Sakkouri and Claudia Roosen were joined by Lithgow City Council's Community Development Officer, Cristina Portilla, Nathan Mas Stephens from LINC, Lithgow High's Student Support Officer, Lisa Hawkins, and their Wellbeing Centre Coordinator, Jody Cross as well as Freya Hill, a Mental Health Clinician with Headspace, Lithgow to deliver 6 sessions of workshops with 120 Year 7 students. Brett Groves was unable to run his activity for Lithgow High, so we ran a separate group artwork using Posca pens and plain wooden coasters.

We could feel the difference in connection between Lithgow High and Portland Central, because of the limited time, and the larger groups.



Image: Portland Central School Workshops.

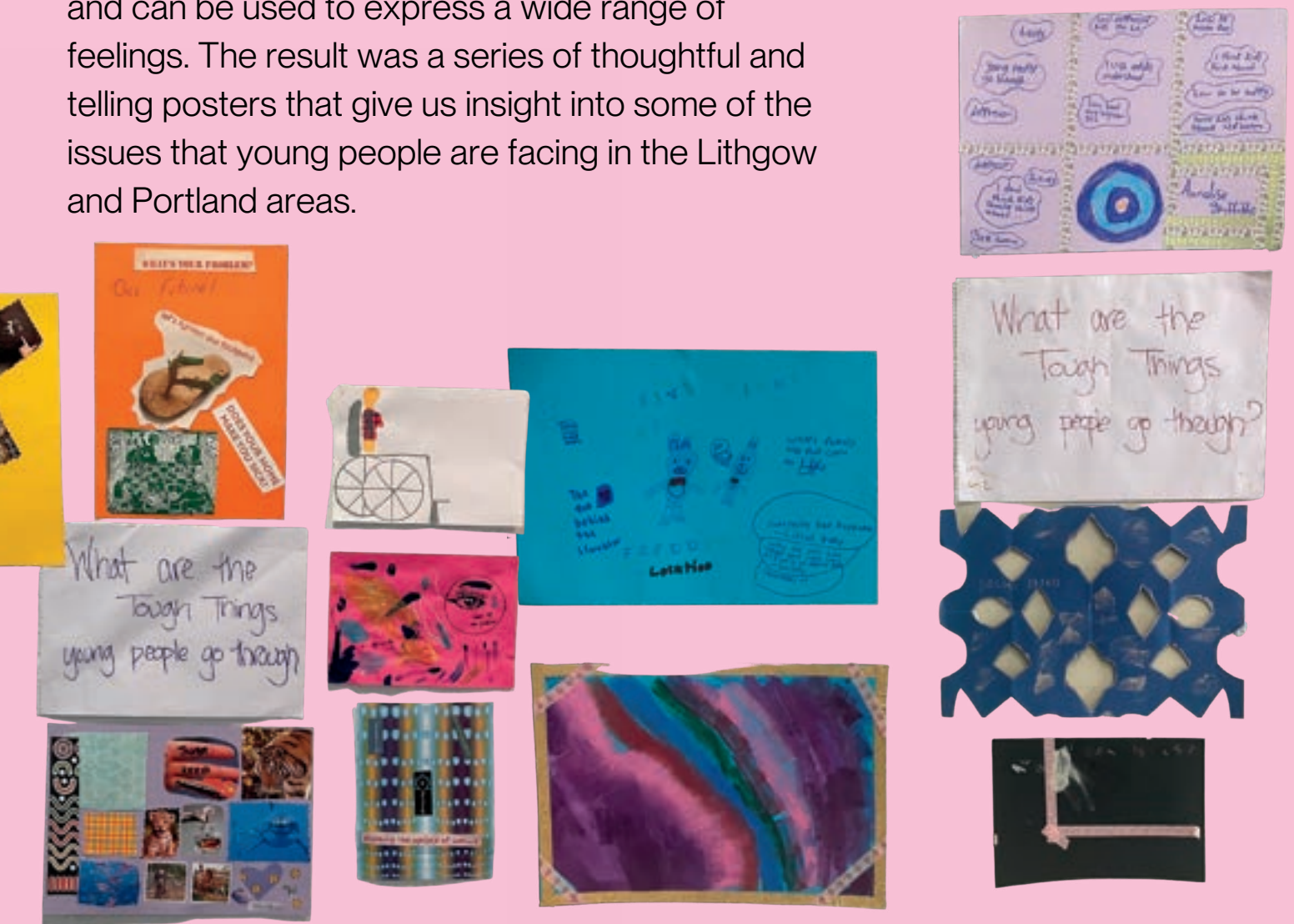
Activities

Drawing on a wealth of research that supports the claim that creative expression fosters wellbeing and resilience in children and young people (and all members of the community), MOCS chose a series of creative activities that we deemed to be conducive to creating an environment for discussion. Each activity has unique benefits for the participants.

Poster & Collage

Our poster and collage activity had a variety of materials that participants could access. We had many magazines (donated by colleagues) that reflected mental health, wellbeing, and social and climate issues. We also printed off image resources that were shared with us by Child & Family Therapist and Trauma Specialist, Ashley Gobeil.

This imagery can elicit emotions in the participants and can be used to express a wide range of feelings. The result was a series of thoughtful and telling posters that give us insight into some of the issues that young people are facing in the Lithgow and Portland areas.



“Mountains” & “Message Sticks”

- “Mountains”, Brett Groves

The students were asked to think about that is hard for them in their lives and how can adults understand them better.

We thought about a typical day where one problem after another can feel like we have many mountains to climb.

When we come together without support network, we can conquer those mountains and create beautiful things, like this communal artwork.

The students painted their own mountains with Indigenous symbols that reflected their challenges and what things they do to help support themselves and have a better day.

- “Message Sticks”, Brett Groves

The students learnt our Country’s ancient way of communicating across our many nations with many languages and that was with a message stick.

The students painted their own message stick with their choice of Indigenous symbols to reflect their stories.



Image: “Mountains” by Portland Central School students and Brett Groves.



Image: “Message Sticks” by Portland Central School students and Brett Groves.



Images: Workshops at Portland Central School

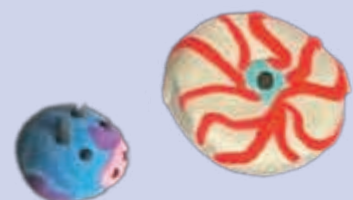


Questions

The aim of our conversations was to create a fuller picture of the needs of children aged, 8-13 in the Lithgow and Portland areas. To achieve this, we asked questions surrounding what makes young people feel strong, what is important to young people, what are the tough things that young people go through and what do young people wish that adults understood better. These prompts were designed to elicit responses which could be interpreted by community sector workers to inform their future programming and support of this underserved demographic.

Throughout our consultation process with Ashley Gobeil, Child & Family Therapist and Trauma Specialist, we discussed our approach to consultation questions.

Ashley workshopped our existing questions to “externalise” them, which will take pressure off the participants who may be reluctant to share their experiences. An example of this would be to change the prompt “What do you find challenging or tough?” to “What are the tough things for young people?” We applied our learnings about keeping children within their “window of tolerance” to ensure that we are responsible with children’s emotional states. This means that we keep the discussion light because we cannot guarantee a safe space for disclosures of abuse or deeper therapeutical conversations. We also made sure that students know that they can talk to their Student Support Officers, or Wellbeing Coordinators throughout the week if they need to. We also decided to have one question posed on a canvas at the front of the room that students could respond to at any time during the session, (or in between sessions at Portland Central). This question asked, “What is something that you wish adults understood about young people today?” These responses were unmonitored, allowing students to reveal feedback that they might not feel comfortable verbalising with their facilitators.



Community Exhibitions

On Monday 4th of September, we hosted our community event for the Lithgow High School workshops and on Monday 11th of September, we hosted our community event for the Portland Central School workshops.

The Lithgow community event was held at the Maldhan Ngurr Nurra Lithgow Transformation Hub on Western Sydney University's campus. At this catered event, we exhibited work made in during the project, displayed a slideshow that documented the workshops and provided a range of activities for attendees including, air-drying clay sculptures, giant connect-four, Jenga and other fun games. The event also helped us promote the new Youth Drop-In space that is being run by Lithgow City Council out of the Transformation Hub.

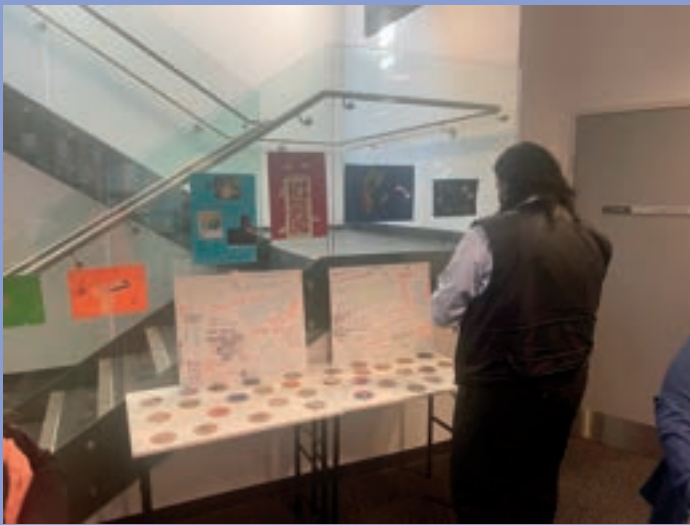
It was well attended by school representatives including Lithgow High School's principal, Foty Loupos who had a great interest in the project and its findings, sector workers from our partners, LINC, and Headspace as well as some students and their families. We estimate around 30 attendees.

The Portland event was held in the foyer of the very grand Crystal Theatre on the main street in Portland. Again, we exhibited work made during the project, and had air-drying clay, Jenga and other games provided by Lithgow City Council. For this event, we knew we had a larger buy-in from the community, so we also booked a DJ, who blasted tunes out of the foyer into the main street, activating the town. The participants had been looking forward to this exhibition, and many attended with their families, and were proud of the work they made together. Teachers from Portland Central School, parents and other community members attended. We estimate around 80 attendees, from a much smaller community, so that is a huge achievement.





Images: Community Exhibition at the Crystal Theatre in Portland



Images: Community Exhibition at the the Transformation Hub in Lithgow

Findings

The information collated during this pilot program comes straight from the young people. It's de-identified data that reflects a range of experiences from children and young people in Year 7 at Lithgow High School and Years 3-8 at Portland Central School. We hope that this information could be used to bolster funding applications or as a starting point for community service organisations who have the capacity to extend their work to reach this underserved group.

Methodology

The aim of this report is two-fold:

1. to report on what young people in Lithgow and Portland about their lives and,
2. to report on the efficacy of this project as a means of engaging young people between 8-13 years of age.

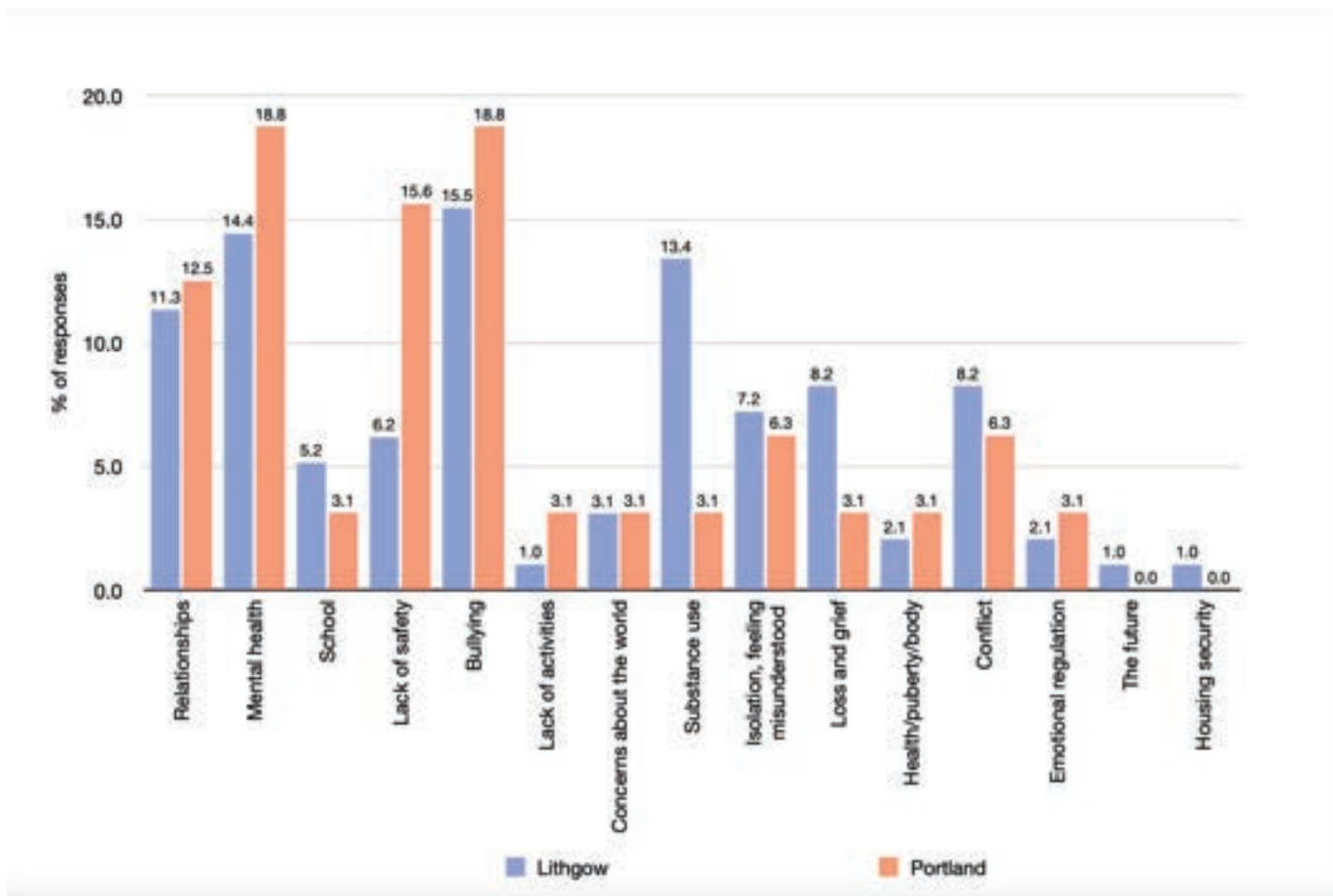
To fulfil these two aims, several methods were put in place to gather data and evaluate the project. Prior to the workshops, we developed an evaluation framework (see Appendix x) to inform the delivery of the project and provide a framework for gathering feedback about the project.

Data generated included: notes on themes that emerged throughout sessions with young people; feedback from facilitators; and photos of artworks and sessions. These were initially analysed using nVivo qualitative software and SPSS statistics and then workshopped by the report authors.

Findings: young people's views on what is tough, what is important, and what adults do not understand

The young people that participated in this project clearly communicated their needs, concerns, and values around what is tough for them, what is important to them, and what they feel adults do not understand about their lives.

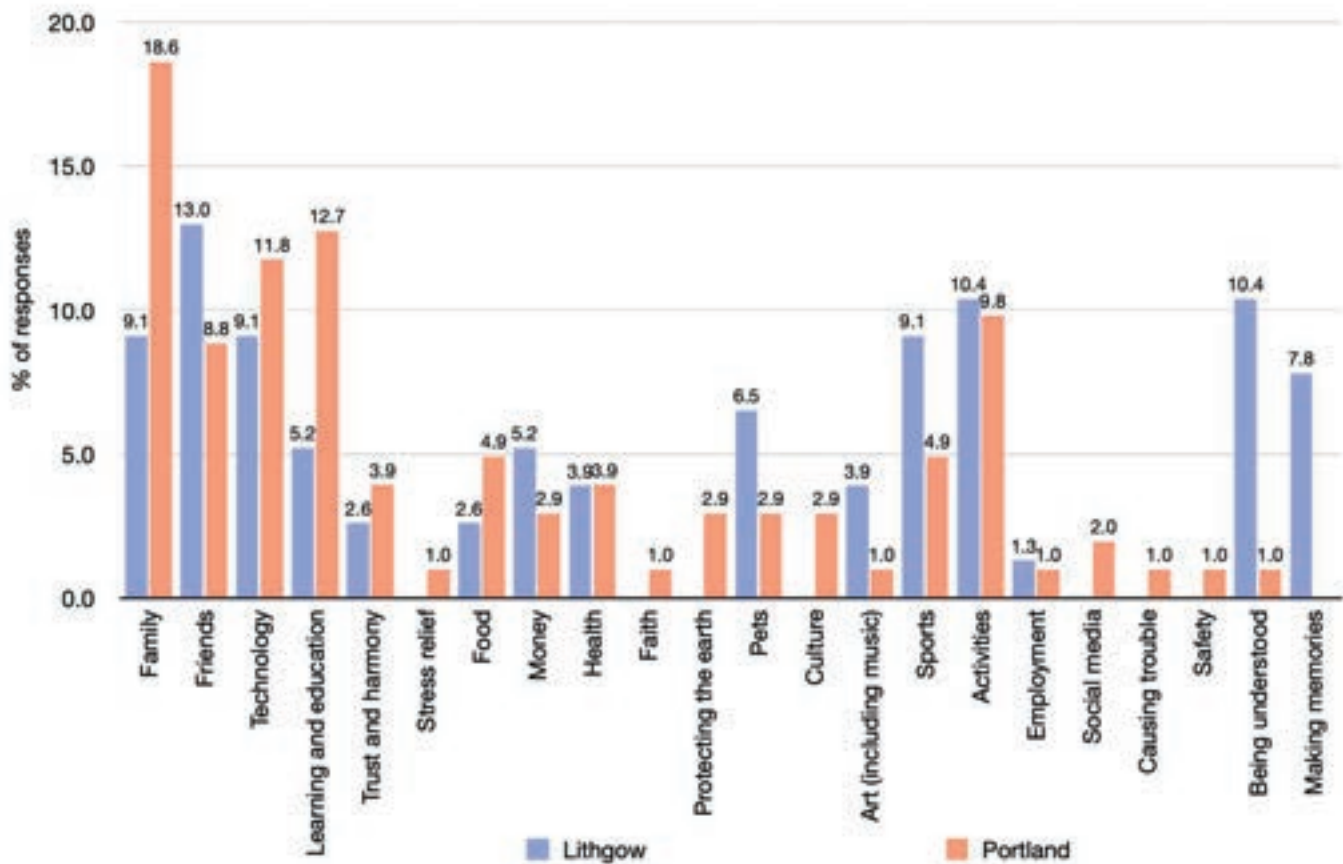
What are the tough things young people go through?



There is variance in the results between the two participant groups. For Lithgow participants, the three main challenges they identified were: bullying (including cyber-bullying); mental health, and substance use, both their own and others. For Portland participants, the three main challenges were: mental health; bullying (including cyber-bullying); and a lack of safety, which included experiences of physical and sexual assault. The noticeable differences between the two sets of responses include more concern about substance use in Lithgow than Portland (13.4% to 3.1%), more concern about a lack of safety in Portland than Lithgow (15.6% to 6.2%) and greater concern about mental health in Portland than Lithgow (18.8% to 14.4%), though mental health was significant for both groups.

The full dataset of participant responses is on the next page:

What is most important to young people today?



There is variance in the results between the two participant groups. For Lithgow participants, the most important things to them were friends, the provision of activities or things to do, and “being understood.” Portland participants felt that family, learning and education, and technology were the most important. The noticeable differences between the two sets of responses is the difference between Lithgow and Portland participants’ view of the importance of family (9.1% to 18.6%), the importance of learning and education to Portland participants compared to those in Lithgow (12.7% to 5.2%) and the prominence of the themes of “being understood” and “making memories” to Lithgow participants which didn’t emerge, with the exception of one participant, in the Portland workshops.

The full dataset of participant responses is on the next page:



Figure 3 What is most important to young people today? Portland workshop



Figure 4 What is most important to young people today? Lithgow workshop

What is something you wish adults understood about young people today?

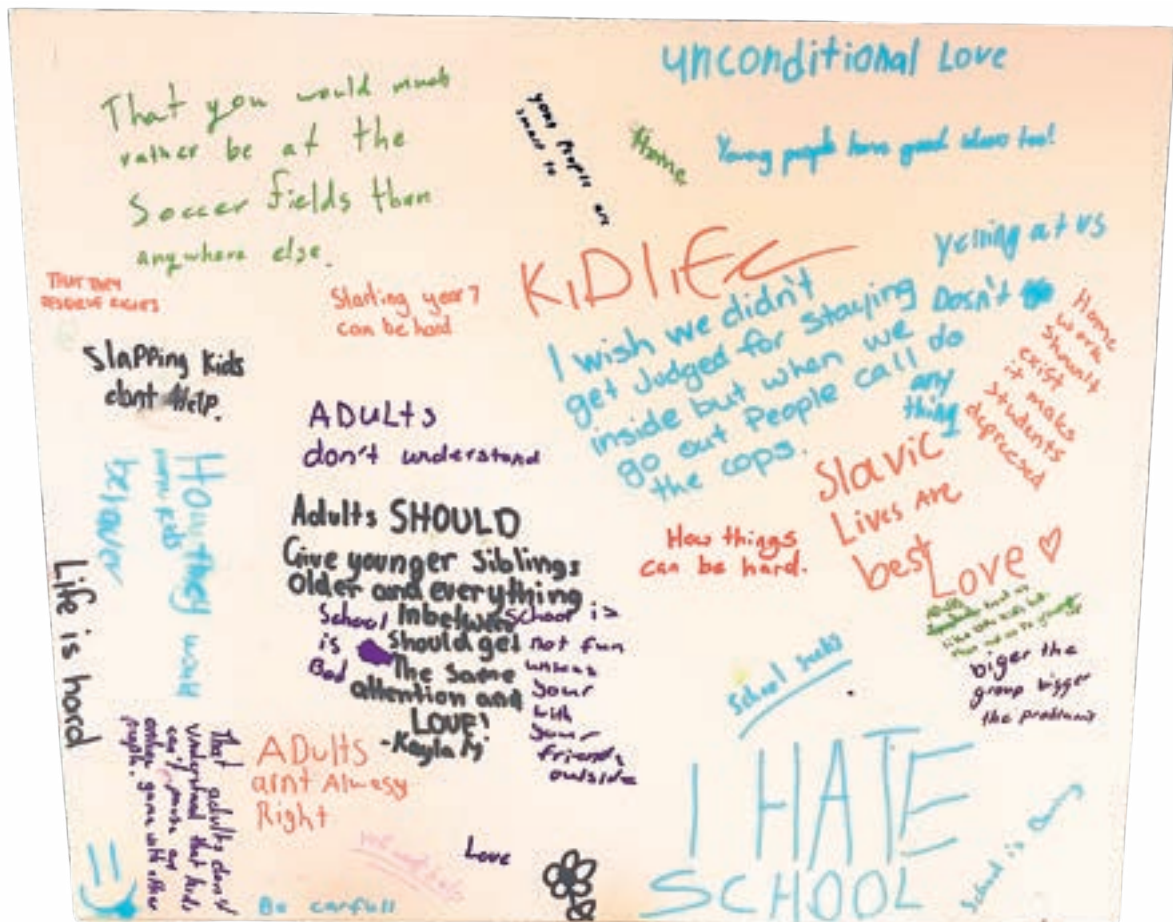
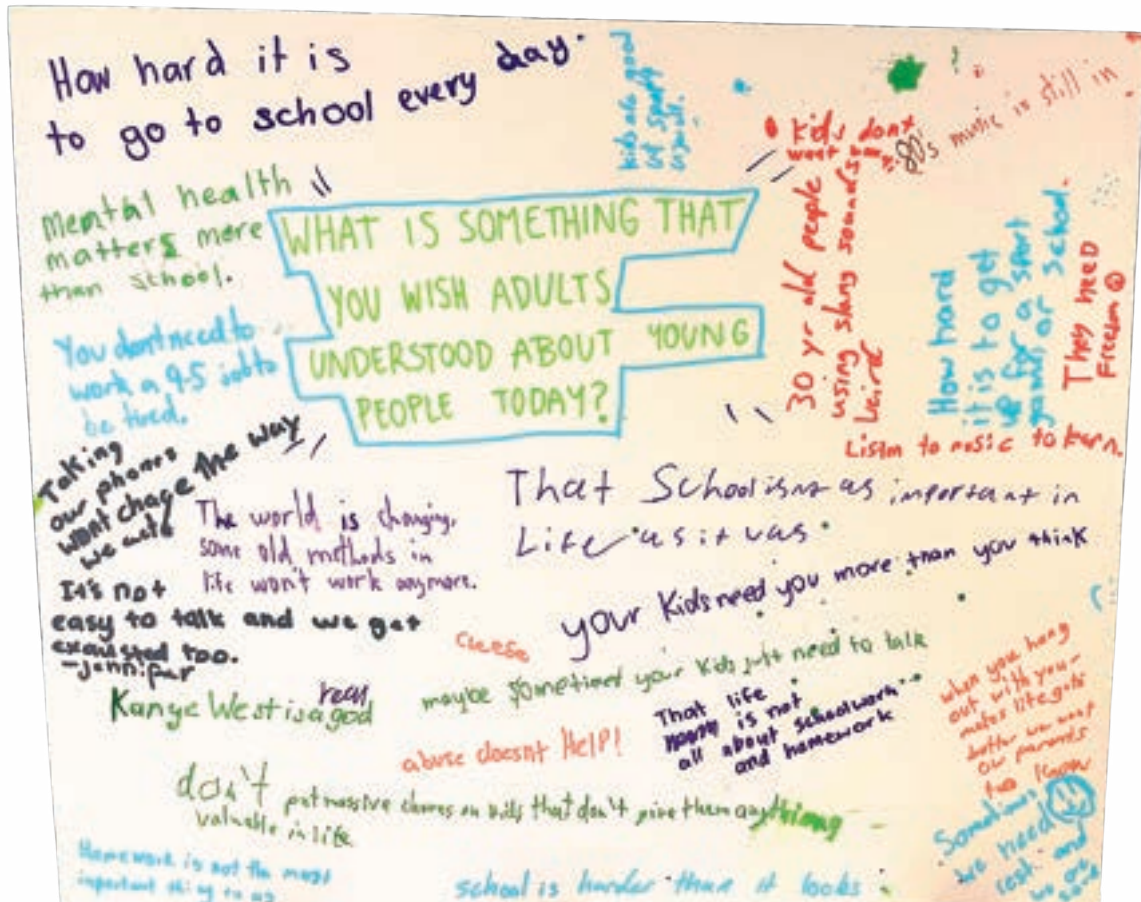


Figure 5 & 6 What is something you wish adults understood about young people today? Lithgow workshop

Young people's responses to this question point to an experience of disconnect and feeling misunderstood. Young people feel that adults, by and large, do not understand their lives: they feel adults mis-categorise mental health concerns as "attention-seeking"; interact with them in ways that are felt to be unhelpful, such as through punishments rather than support; act as if young people's lives are far easier than adult lives; and perceive school as more important than anything else in a young person's life, including their mental health and/or wellbeing. This is not to say that all of these experiences are representative of these young people's lives, but they clearly articulate how young people feel about their lives. The implications of this for co-design are described below.

Findings: the project

8–13-year-olds are under-serviced, in need of additional support, and are an age group that offers an opportunity for significantly improved outcomes.

- This age group is under-serviced and would benefit greatly from targeted service provision.
- Some facilitators noted differences within the age groups: those on the younger end of the age range (8-10) were able to identify their strengths more easily than those in the older age groups (12+). This difference shows the significant change that happens in these years and the possibility and opportunity that engagement with this age group presents in addressing issues before they become further entrenched.

This project model is effective in engaging in 8–13-year-olds, was enjoyable for participants, and resulted in excellent feedback from participants, as evidenced in the above data.

- Observation and facilitator feedback showed that participants were engaged in both the creative activities and the informal discussions that emerged throughout undertaking the creative activities. The creative activities were engaging for the duration of the workshop, with varying levels of engagement with discussions throughout the period. One facilitator noted that participants 'would get so into the activity that they'd disengage from the question, so most conversation took place at the start.'

- Another facilitator stated that ‘I think the activities and team were incredible. It was great learning about what young people find important.’
- Some facilitators noted that participants were very enthusiastic, saying that they “loved” the workshop or engaging with facilitators at the presentation event and asking for the workshops to be run again.

The engagement of young people in co-design processes is critical

The engagement of participants, the experience of facilitators, and the data generated through this process all point towards the intrinsic importance of involving young people in co-design processes. Engagement with this age group must be grounded in how they themselves experience their lives. Without working towards an understanding of what challenges young people experience, what is important to them and—perhaps most crucially—what they feel adults do not understand about their lives, policy and programs risk addressing the “problem” as seen through the eyes of adult policymakers and workers rather than how young people themselves experience the world and what specific supports they need.

An additional element to this is facilitators’ experiences of learning through this project. As described above, one facilitator described enjoying learning what was important to young people. Others mentioned surprises throughout the experience, including being surprised about the central importance of pets to young people and how commonly many participants experience racism.

A multi-visit model—as undertaken in Portland—was more effective than a one-visit mode, as undertaken in Lithgow.

The different workshop sites and models revealed the benefit of a multi-visit model. The model used in Portland, with two visits as well as the presentation, was seen by facilitators as more effective than the sole visit as well as presentation in Lithgow. Rapport, trust-building, and faith in ongoing investment from community services are long-term processes and essential for effective co-design, ethical research, and engagement with young people. A multi-visit model—as well as committing to returning to communities to presenting and celebrating participant contributions—reflects the importance of longer-term engagement.

These differences also point to the need for place-specific and responsive programs. Programs are most effective when tailored to the specific needs and particularities of a place and draw on local expertise as well as engaging with local young people in co-design processes.

**This project was funded by
the NSW Office of Regional Youth**



We would also like to acknowledge our partners and their contributions



