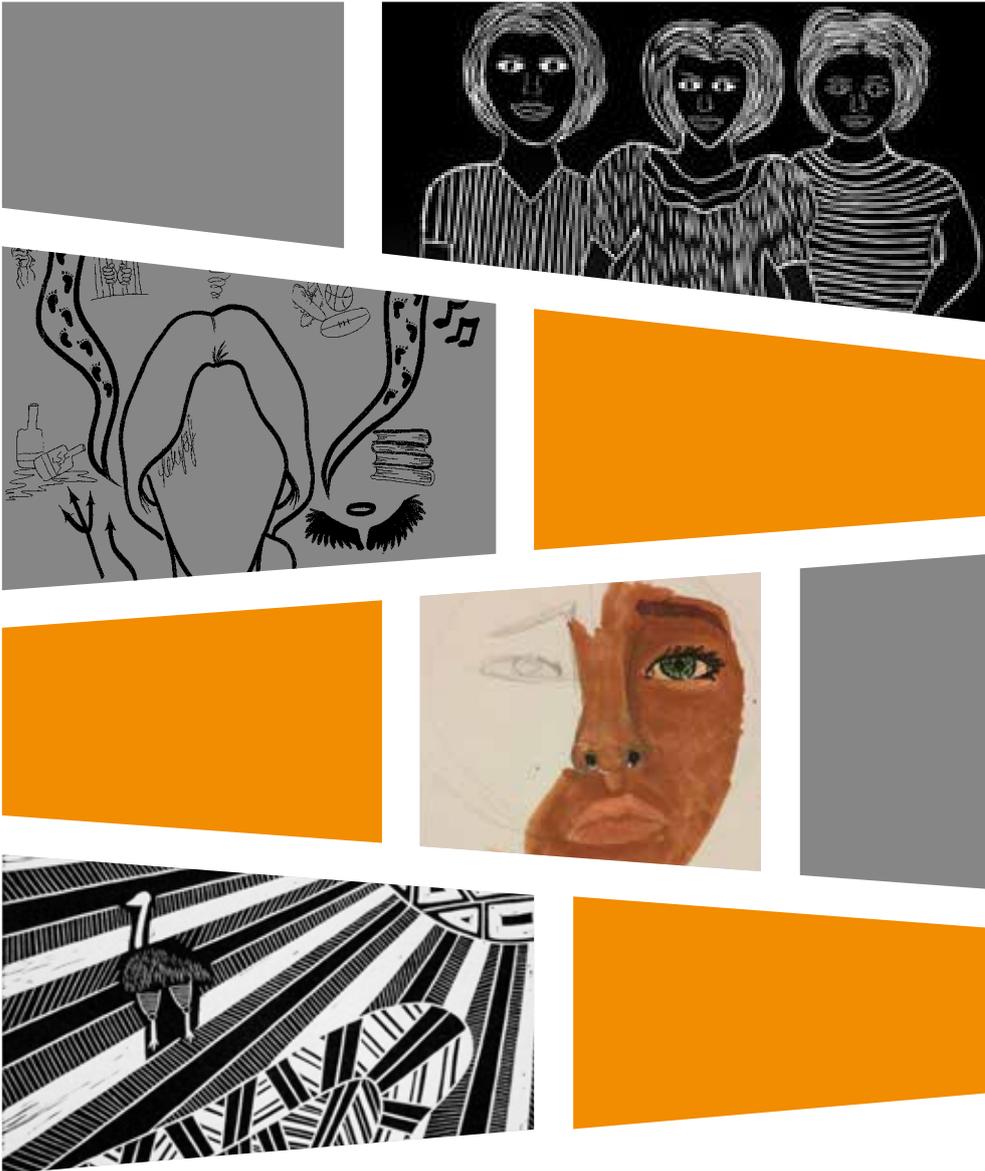


Fighting, Alcohol and Offending: Interventions Targeting Aboriginal Girls (YAWG)



**National Drug
Research Institute,
Curtin University**

December 2019





Preventing harmful drug use in Australia

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Fighting, Alcohol and Offending: Interventions Targeting Aboriginal Girls (YAWG)

Final Report

Prepared by Dr Mandy Wilson and Dr Julia Butt

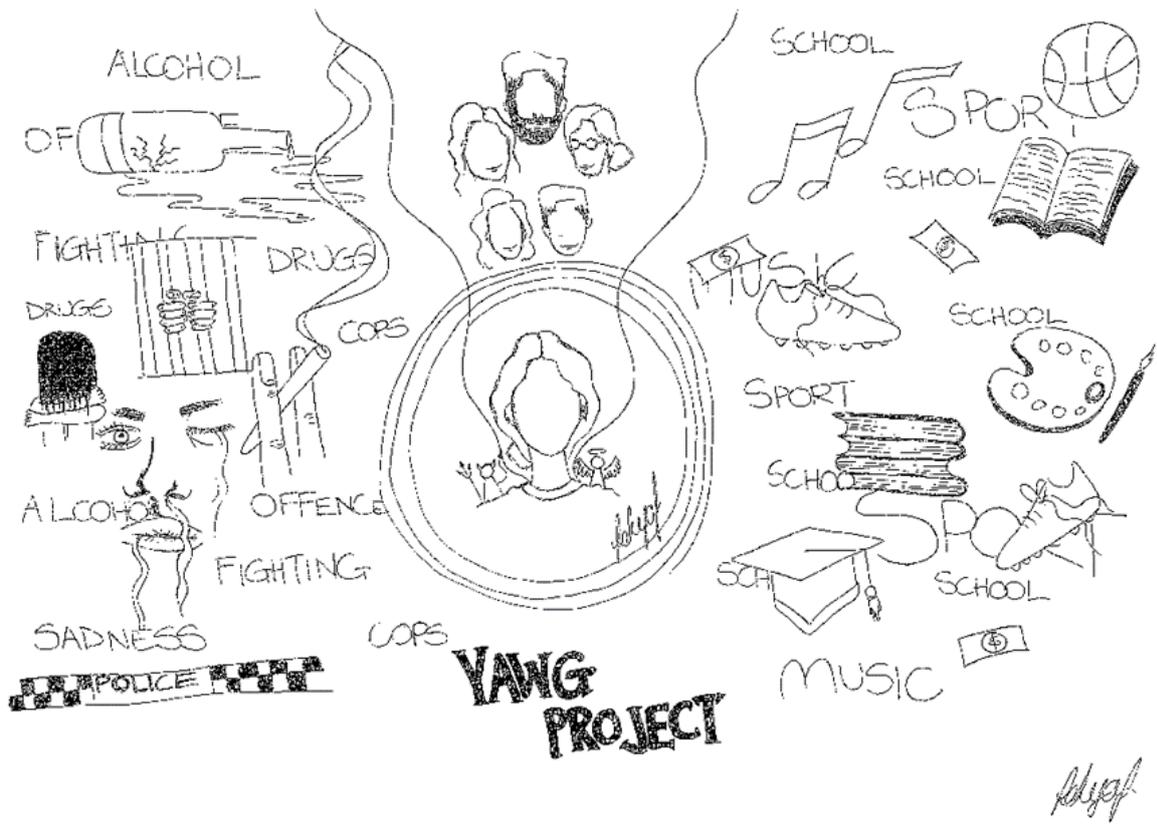
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Summary

The YAWG project was conducted by researchers at the National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, in partnership with Wungening Aboriginal Corporation. It used a participatory action approach to collect in-depth data around the experiences of 38 Aboriginal girls and young women (10-18 years) around drinking (alcohol), fighting and offending and aimed to develop a health promotion resource around these issues. The research and analysis was guided by young women's input, and identified that some service providers may not understand the lived experiences of young Aboriginal women and their barriers to seeking help around drinking, fighting and offending. To address this, the YAWG website was developed as a resource for service providers who work or come into contact with young Aboriginal women and girls.

The research was conducted over six phases:

Phase One: the project materials were developed in collaboration with a reference group of young women, and an advisory group of stakeholders and service providers.

Phase Two: involved data collection, with a final sample of 38 participants (10-18 years) participating in face-to-face in-depth interviews.

Phase Three: interview data were analysed using qualitative software package, NVivo 11.

Phase Four: consisted of a one-day brainstorming workshop with six Aboriginal young women to develop a resource package for service providers.

Phase Five: integrated the findings from the interviews and workshop to develop a resource for service providers. The result was the YAWG website.

Phase Six: consisted of a brief evaluation of the YAWG website.

The interviews with participants produced rich data around the three key research themes: drinking, fighting and offending. In relation to alcohol, young women exhibited a low awareness of the effects of alcohol on a person's physical health, having instead an understanding of the impacts of drinking on emotional and social wellbeing. Increased consumption was associated with negative consequences. Drinking at home was perceived to be a *safe* choice for a number of young women and for those who had been drinking in public spaces, some had experienced negative consequences. While some young women obtained alcohol and had their first drink with family members, for others the drinking of family members, making home *unsafe* at times, and the impact the drinking had had on the family unit, had influenced their decision not to consume alcohol or to do so infrequently.

Two thirds of the young women in this study had participated in fighting and all had witnessed a fight. For some, violence was a central theme in their lives, both within their families and among

peers. The majority of fights were with other young women, mainly other Aboriginal girls. Participants expressed fears around fighting, but it was apparent that, for some, physical fighting afforded them safety, status, pleasure and a release of anger, gains which are often not recognised when female violence is considered (Carrington, 2013). Injuries were often significant and yet the danger of fighting was often overridden by other emotions and motivations. Family history of violence was also important to acknowledge. While talking and walking away were the two key strategies put forward by the girls for solving issues without violence, for most this had not worked or was not considered a realistic option in all situations.

Most young women in this study had not been in trouble with police. Some had received warnings or fines for travelling on public transport without a ticket, and others had been caught stealing. Four young women had spent time in Banksia Hill Detention Centre for violent offences. Intergenerational offending was apparent in some of young women's families, with siblings and parents involved with the criminal justice system; family was an important influence for some participants' decisions around desisting from offending.

Significantly, in our findings **adversity did not always dictate high risk behaviour** around drinking, fighting & offending or determine the young women's ability to make positive choices in their lives. Importantly, the young women in this study were all able to express hopes for their future and to identify people who offered them strong support, particularly grandparents – who play a key role in passing down culture and guiding young women's codes around behaviour – and other family members.

Data were also collected about young women's experiences accessing services to seek help with issues they faced in their lives. Participants identified the characteristics of services that are easy to engage with as well as barriers to help-seeking. A brain storming day was held with six additional participants to explore these experiences in more depth *and* to seek the young women's ideas on how to 'get the message' out there to service providers. As a result, the **YAWG website** was developed. The YAWG website was designed to assist those working with and coming into contact with young Aboriginal women and girls, to better understand their lived realities, to open up dialogue with this group in a way they are comfortable with, and to support and empower them to make informed decisions around drinking, fighting and offending. As described by the young women – an invitation was extended to “see behind their curtains”.

The YAWG website can be found at: www.yawg.info

Background

Fighting, Alcohol and Offending: Interventions Targeting Aboriginal Girls (YAWG), focused on the experiences around alcohol, fighting and drinking of Aboriginal girls and young women residing in metropolitan Perth. YAWG emerged from previous work involving several of the investigators, the *Make a Night, Break a Night* project (Wilson, et al., 2013). *Make a Night, Break a Night* was a partnership between NDRI researchers and Moorditj Keila, an Aboriginal community group which, at the time, was running under the auspices of Southcare, Inc. It sought to provide a comprehensive picture of the experiences of young Aboriginal people with alcohol in order for services to be better placed to respond to their needs. When the results were disseminated to the research's expert advisory group and in an Aboriginal community forum, particular concern was expressed about the findings relating to the 13 female participants, many of whom were consuming alcohol at levels which placed them at a heightened risk of harm. The young women in the study also reported participation in fighting—largely with other females—which led to significant injury to self and others, and low-level contact with police. These findings were similar to the male participants, however, it was apparent the young women were less likely to report speaking with others about these issues or to be linked into support services and health-promoting activities. On the basis of these findings, elders and community members requested further research be focused specifically on the experiences of Aboriginal girls and young women.

The YAWG project was conducted by the National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University in partnership with Wungening Aboriginal Corporation and aimed to collect in-depth data around the experiences of Aboriginal girls and young women around drinking, fighting and offending, and to identify intervention points and to develop a health promotion resource for service providers who work with young Aboriginal women and girls. The research was conducted over six phases. **Phase One** involved the development of project materials (e.g. interview schedule, flyers seeking participants) in collaboration with a reference group of young girls and women and reference group of stakeholders and service providers. **Phase Two** concentrated on data collection with a final sample of 38 girls and young women (10-18 years) participating in face-to-face in-depth interviews. **Phase Three** involved the analysis of the interview data using the qualitative software package, NVivo 11. **Phase Four**, consisted of a one-day workshop with Aboriginal girls and young women to seek their input on the development of a resource for service providers. **Phase Five** integrated the findings from the interviews and workshop to develop a resource. The result was the YAWG website aimed at service providers (educators, AOD workers, youth workers, counsellors, child protection staff etc.) to improve their knowledge of the lived experiences of this group and to facilitate discussion with Aboriginal girls and young women about these issues. **Phase Six** was a brief pre-

post- evaluation of the website to determine its usefulness to workers and whether it met the aims of improving service provider knowledge and understanding of the lived experience of young Aboriginal women. Twenty nine service providers participated in the evaluation.

Objectives

Focusing on Aboriginal girls and young women (10-18 years) in the Perth metropolitan area (as defined by Local Government Statistical Areas i.e. Rockingham and Kwinana to Armadale and Wanneroo), objectives were to:

1. Collect data around girls' experiences of and involvement in fighting, drinking and offending;
2. Describe the contexts of fighting, consumption of alcohol and offending behaviours;
3. Investigate girls' motivations around and attitudes towards these behaviours;
4. Document harms experienced as a result of involvement in fighting;
5. Enhance the capacity of Aboriginal girls to take a lead role in developing and promoting health messages;
6. Increase knowledge and capacity of health and other service providers to intervene early in potential negative pathways among Aboriginal girls; and,
7. Evaluate the impact of the resource package developed as part of the project.

Methods

Phase 1: Development of Project Materials

During phase 1 two reference groups were convened. The first was a young women's reference group in which young women met with the Research Assistant (Ms Ngaire Pigram) and Chief Investigator (Dr Mandy Wilson) to discuss the types of questions to be asked in the interview and opportunities and potential barriers to recruitment. Reference group members were sought from the networks of the Chief Investigators, Associate Investigator and the Research Officer.

The second reference group – an advisory group – comprised the Chief Investigators and interested service providers and stakeholders including: members from Wungening Aboriginal Corporation, Cockburn Youth Centre, Department of Child Protection, Corridors School, and Mental Health Commission. This group met at several times throughout the life of the project – to refine methods and recruitment methods (Phase 1 and 2), to discuss the interview results (Phase 3) and to feedback findings from the workshop (Phase 5).

Phase 2: Interviews

A total of 38 Aboriginal girls and young women between the ages of 10-18 participated in one-on-one interviews for the research. Young women were purposively recruited from the researchers' own networks and from organisations providing services to these youth (youth centres, AOD treatment services, Noongar Outreach). Given the study objectives and interest from senior staff within the Department of Corrective Services, the research team submitted an application to the Department of Corrective Services to gain access to girls and young women formally involved in the criminal justice system (number anticipated = 24). Unfortunately, the application was not approved as a resource-intensive research project was underway in the youth justice space at the time and there was no capacity to support our research.

As the research commenced, word spread and representatives from several schools approached the researchers wishing for their students to have the opportunity to take part. As a result, the team applied to the Department of Education for permission to recruit participants directly from specialist programs within public schools in the Perth metropolitan area. Unfortunately, this application was also not supported as it was deemed to pose too great a risk to students. Additionally, an application was submitted to the Department of Health Human Research Ethics Committee to recruit participants from a small number of sites, particularly from those providing services to pregnant young women. Unfortunately at this time, changes to the Department of Health procedures around research were occurring; the time from submission of a research application to approval took over 12 months, and data collection had been completed by the time approval was received.

Having these avenues closed to us had an impact on how many young girls and women we were finally able to recruit—our aim was to recruit 50 participants and our final number was 38. Despite these barriers, due to the tenacity of the Aboriginal Research Officer employed on the project and the support of stakeholders, a diverse range of young girls and women participated.

Phase 3: Data Analysis

The majority of the interviews were conducted by an Aboriginal researcher, Ms Ngaire Pigram. Ms Pigram is a Yawuru Wadjeri woman from Broome, Western Australia, who was residing in Perth at the time of the research. The Principle Investigator, Dr Mandy Wilson, co-interviewed eight young women. Interviews took place at youth centres, transitional housing services, Independent schools (at the invitation of the principals), an alcohol and drug detoxification service, and at the homes of some young women. Interviews took between 20 minutes and 1.5 hours. Participants took part in face-to-face interviews. A semi-structured interview schedule was drafted. This interview schedule was informed from previous research involving several of the investigators (Wilson, et al. 2013), and

finalised with the young women and girls involved in a reference group established for the research. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed by an external party.

The interview data was entered in NVivo 11 and analysed by Dr Wilson and Ms Pigram using a grounded theory approach. Key themes explored participants' experiences with and thoughts around alcohol, fighting and offending. Young women were also asked their thoughts about when service providers and educators should engage girls and young women in discussions around alcohol, fighting and offending; how they should ask about these issues with this group; and, the young women's own good and bad experiences of help-seeking around these behaviours.

Phase 4: Resource Development Workshop

The researchers held an intensive one-day workshop with six young women specifically aimed at collecting their ideas on the design and development of the resource package. Six young women participated in the workshop which was held at The Foyer Oxford in Leederville.¹ The workshop was designed and led by Ms Pigram and co-facilitated by Drs. Wilson and Butt. The key purpose of the workshop was for researchers to partner with girls and young women to brainstorm and develop a resource. The workshop included several activities aimed at ensuring a safe space was created for participants to contribute to discussions, a number of motivational guest speakers and a series of open brainstorming sessions. Breakfast and lunch were provided, and participants received a monetary reimbursement to cover any costs of attending the workshop. To acknowledge their expertise the young women received a certificate of participation and a 'goodies' bag containing donations from several local organisations (for example Cockburn Youth Centre, Lush cosmetics, Sexual Health Quarters, The Aboriginal Family Law Services). From this workshop one young woman was commissioned to design the YAWG project logo (see title page).

Phase 5: Resource Development

A website showcasing the voices and stories of young Aboriginal women was developed as the resource. To develop the website, a Research Officer (Debbie Olow) with information technology skills in addition to a youth work and justice health research background was appointed. The website was built using cloud-based website building platform Wix.Com. The design was undertaken using an interactive process with the Research Officer designing the components and Investigators (Drs Wilson and Butt) finalising the content and then seeking feedback from other investigators and staff at Wungening Aboriginal Corporation, and a member of the Advisory Group. The website content focused on sharing the voices of the young women and also included detailed information on

¹ The Foyer Oxford "combines holistic support, high quality housing and access to flexible training to give young people the opportunity to thrive long term" (<http://www.foyeroxford.org.au/>).

drinking, fighting and offending and the broader research outcomes. It included a webinar as well as links to previous research by the team and the final report. Finally, to ensure the website was practical, a 'How To' section was developed. More details are provided in later sections.

Phase 6: Resource Evaluation

Due to challenges in the earlier phases of the research, a long term evaluation of the health promotion resource (YAWG website) was not feasible within the project time frame. To evaluate the short term impact and the acceptability of the resource, a small sample of service providers and people who work with young Aboriginal women were contacted via email and provided with a link to the website. The website also included brief pre- and post- questionnaires. Participants were asked complete the pre-website questionnaire, view the website and then complete the post-website questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time. To thank participants for their time, a prize draw was incorporated into the process and four randomly-selected participants were able to receive a \$50.00 voucher.

The pre-website questionnaire included basic demographics including: age, gender, ethnicity, work type, workplace type, time in the workforce and frequency of working with young Aboriginal women. Previous research has demonstrated that self-rated knowledge and comfort in engaging with a client group or a health related topic predict engaging with clients and discussing that topic (Butt, 2013; Cartwright, 1980; Cartwright, Hyams, & Spratley, 1996). Consequently, the evaluation investigated the impact of the website on service providers' understanding and comfort around engaging with young Aboriginal women on drinking, fighting, offending and help-seeking. Five questions asked participants to rate their understanding, confidence and comfort on a five point scale from strongly disagree – strongly agree. Participants were asked these questions at pre- and post- website viewing. The post-website questionnaire also asked participants about their intent to do something differently at work based on the information in the website. Questions were also included to get participants' feedback about the utility, acceptability, usability and design of the website.

Results

Phase 3: Data Analysis

Characteristics of participants

Interview participants ranged in age between 10-18 years with an average age of 14.5 years. The majority were still in school (78%), with the remaining either engaged in training (5%) or not attending any institution (16%). Of those in school, 69 per cent attended five days a week and 31 per cent reported attendance of 3-4 days a week. Four young women had part-time jobs, two of which

were volunteer positions. Fifteen (39%) reporting currently having a partner. One participant was expecting her first child while another had a young child and was pregnant with her second child at the time of the interview. Most participants lived in a house or unit (79%) housing between two and 10+ people, and the remainder resided in a school boarding house or alcohol and drug rehabilitation unit. Most participants were from single-headed households, living with extended family or involved with child protection.

It is important to note that the issues discussed in this report are not only issues faced by Aboriginal families and communities. Nor are they necessarily representative of the experiences of all Aboriginal girls and young women. Additionally, the behaviours and experiences spoken about by the young women must be understood within the historical context of colonisation, characterised by dispossession, loss of culture and government policy which condoned the removal of children from families which has led to the breakdown of kinship systems and high levels of intergenerational trauma for many families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

While we did not seek to quantify, the young women spoke about loss and trauma they had experienced in their lives. This included the premature loss of family members to accidents and suicide, loss of a parent to illness or incarceration, family breakdown, involvement in the child protection system and their own experiences of sexual assault, rape and family violence. Many also had caring responsibilities for younger siblings. These findings are consistent with a recent study into the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescents and youth (AIHW, 2018) which showed that Aboriginal youth were more likely to have experienced personal stressors in the past 12 months compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts (70 per cent vs 58 per cent) and to have high or very high levels of psychological distress (33 per cent vs 13 per cent).

Significantly, in our findings **adversity did not always dictate high risk behaviour** around drinking, fighting & offending or determine the young women's ability to make positive choices in their lives.

Alcohol:

Experiences with alcohol

Two thirds of the participants had consumed alcohol (66%). Consumption of alcohol commenced as young as 10 years, with 71 per cent of those who had consumed alcohol, reporting they had tried it by age 14 (see Figure 1.)² There is a lack of data about alcohol use and young Aboriginal women. From the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS, 2014-15), we know about 13% of young Aboriginal women aged 15-24 years drink at levels exceeding health guidelines

² Girls and young women who reported only having had a sip of alcohol are included among those who did not drink.

on single occasions. Among young Australians in general large national surveys have found that the average age young people start drinking is 16 years (AIHW, 2019).

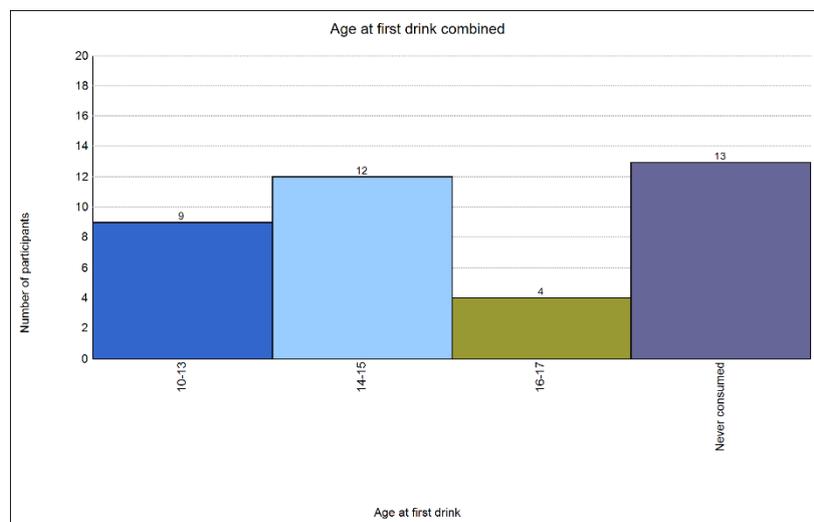


Figure 1. Age at First Drink

Knowledge of effects of alcohol

Knowledge among participants of the health effects of alcohol was low. A small number of participants mentioned physical ill-health including that “it can give you brain damage”, “it messes your brain up slowly”, “it’s bad for your body and lungs”, and “if you get addicted to it you can get very sick”. However, the majority of references to the effects of alcohol were related to emotional and behavioural changes, such as “you could be like a sad or really emotional [drunk] or you’ll be really angry and like has a lot of things on your shoulders and take it out on anybody and stuff” (17 years).

Bad effects were associated with increased levels of consumption where “if you drink too much” it can “put you in bad situations and that”, make you “do stupid things” such as “jumping in a car and having an accident”. Some commented that it could lead to self-harm, trouble with police and situations where “you go a bit out of control” which leads to violence and “fights and arguments”.

Education around alcohol:

Some young women recalled taking part in education about alcohol in school and were able to describe what they had learnt in the session: “We had like a lecture or a session about what to do when someone’s really drunk and like signs of when you need to call an ambulance and stuff like that, like alcohol poisoning or trouble breathing. It was really good um, like even when I was intoxicated I remembered everything. Like sitting up straight and answering three basic questions” (16 years). Another young woman remembered: “Yeah they had like, normally had like people come

out at schools and they had that Constable Care thing and you have to wear them, the glasses thing and you had to walk in a straight line” (17 years).

Others either stated they did not get much education around alcohol and other drugs in school, “No I never really learnt about it. Nup with school I never really got taught about it” (16 years) or felt what they did get was inadequate, “Yeah we have health classes but that’s more just like the effects, like okay yeah you’re going to get brain damage, but not really the consequences (15 years).

One young woman, who described herself as more mature than her peers and who had commenced drinking at a young age, had learnt through observation rather than school education: “Ah I sort of learnt that on my own, like you sort of pick it up, you go to parties and you see when people you know, they drink too much and they don’t know what they’re doing so it just sort of caught on I guess” (17 years).

Stories of the first time

Participants were asked to recall the first time they consumed alcohol and were asked what age it occurred, who they were with and the context in which the drinking took place. The majority of the 25 girls and young women who had consumed alcohol reported that their first drinking experience was with family members including siblings, aunties, cousins and parents, and most often this took place at home. The home was portrayed, in several accounts, as a safe place for the consumption of alcohol: “I was fourteen and with my family so I was safe and that, ‘cause my dad’s always said if you’ve gonna try something be at home and be safe” (15 years). Similarly, drinking at home was considered a measure for ensuring safety in the account of this 14 year old participant:

With Mum I guess it’s fine because I know, she normally, when she starts drinking she locks the house because when you’re drunk you can’t unlock things. And because last time I remember we were walking up a hill, we kept falling over. Mum’s fine [with drinking] as long as I’m at the house and she knows I’m doing it. And everything’s locked up, I’m at home.

In some cases adults were present, providing alcohol and participating in the drinking, and this again was perceived in terms of safety, without reflection on the underage consumption of alcohol or the parental supply of alcohol to a minor:

I think like twelve. I was with my aunty. She um, wanted me to have my first drink with her. So she can like teach me like not to like – not to over drink and if anything bad happened I know how to look after myself and everything. It was at her house and we drank all sorts. She kept asking me like if I was okay like every minute. She was like “are you okay, are you okay?” She was drinking that day and then she asked if I wanted to (14 years).

For others, alcohol was obtained stealthily while the adults were not looking or not present:

I think I tried it at thirteen. I was at a family event and I would just sneak drinks out of the esky. I was with my aunty whom I was very close with, she's only a few years older than me. Yeah, I was with family partying in the corner the whole time. They were drunk themselves so I don't think they noticed [me drinking] (16 years).

I tried it when I was really young because it was always around so I probably had my first drink when I was like I don't know, year eight. Mum doesn't drink but my brothers do so it was always around the house. They'd leave alcohol out and I'd probably have a sip just to taste it I guess. The first real time, we were at home and they mixed it in a Coke bottle and it was in the fridge and I drank it and I like, I started spewing up and stuff. Yeah I was pretty bad. I was younger than year 8, I would have been about ten. Yeah Mum got hell angry (16 years).

One young woman consumed alcohol for the first time at school: "I was like twelve. Year seven. I got drunk at school first, drunk a goon bag. I was with my friends, me and my friends got drunk at school" (18 years). When asked whether the school found out she replied, laughing, "I don't know, yeah. I never got suspended nah 'cause they didn't really know. I was crazy at school. I was always loud and that so I don't think they noticed any difference".

Other participants gave accounts of being so inebriated the first time they drank alcohol that they found themselves in situations and behaving in ways they potentially would not have had they not been drinking including, being "tempted to do something I didn't really want to do but I did it anyway. I lost my virginity that night - got drunk for my first time as well as drinking for the first time" (17 years). Another young woman described venturing into the city at night and being left with uncertainty about what had taken place with a young man:

[My first time] I was sixteen and with my cousin, we just went for a ride to the city. I was drunk, I couldn't walk. I was like legless. I was drunk before I even got to the train station, before I jumped on the train and we had another bottle in the bag. My cousin was with her partner and then she told her partner's cousin to take care of me and I don't know what he did to me. Yeah, I blanked out 'cause I was that drunk. Every time I think about it it's like weird 'cause I don't know what happened (17 years).

Involvement in offending behaviour marked the first drinking experience of a young woman who had slipped out of the house while her mother was sleeping:

Um, first time I drank I was fourteen and I actually got into a stolen car, which I shouldn't have. It was the first bad mistake that I done and that's when I just kept doing it and doing it. Oh it made me really sick but um, I still did it, I don't know why. But like it's because they were having fun and I was kind of having fun with them (16 years).

A number of the young women admitted first consuming alcohol because when they had seen other family members and peers doing so and they felt it looked like fun. As summed up in this young women's words: "Um, well first I wanted to 'cause everyone else was doing it and it looked fun. Yeah but then now I just do it because. Sometimes it's fun." (14 years). However, despite numerous narratives revealing a degree of peer pressure to consume alcohol, there was also evidence of resistance to this pressure. One participant who had directly experienced the negative impact of a

family member's drinking explained that: "I just know how to stand my ground. They're just like, 'oh you're such an idiot, it's just like a muck around kind of thing' and I'm like, yeah that's your opinion" (16 years).

Good and bad experiences

Participants were asked about their good and bad experiences with alcohol. Similar to the previous findings of the Make a Night, Break a Night research (Wilson, et al., 2013), good experiences were characterised by having fun with mainly female friends and family members, and the absence of alcohol-related harms:

So two of my friends had just turned 18, they were only three days apart. They had a joint party but it was on a party bus. And they invited all of their friends so probably like 16 people on the bus and one of our cousins was a sober driver 'cause she wasn't drinking at all. And yeah it was so fun, they had a stripper pole and then there was just good music, good vibes. The best night I had ever had. I wouldn't say I was legless. I wouldn't say completely intoxicated, but like slurring words drunk (16 years).

Bad experiences with alcohol were divided between personal experiences and witnessing the 'bad nights' involving others. Most stories centred on excessive drinking which resulted in vomiting – "My worst experience would be when I tried to drink bourbon but it was a lot of shots of bourbon and I didn't react very well and power chucked everywhere" (15 years) – or fighting and violence:

[The police] were coming and there was like a big group of kids and they were standing on the driveway and I was like you know, can you please go down the road because the cops are coming and we'll get in trouble 'cause you know we had a party and our parents weren't there. There was one girl and she was like, we're not moving and she was being a smart ass and she pushed me and 'cause we were drinking we just ended up having a fight, a big smash on the road (16 years).

Another young woman described the night she became separated from her friends and was subsequently mobbed by a group of young women:

My worst, I got mobbed one night on the train. About ten, eleven girls. The transit guards watched me get mugged. The girls jumped all over my head. I don't remember I got knocked out. I ended up getting left, apparently I was swearing at the girls [friends] and walked off on my own, jumped on the train. Then I saw my enemies³. And then they came up. And then um one of the Noongar transit guards knew me well and he seen me a couple of days later when I got out of hospital and he was like, oh when I watched the video surveillance you got mobbed on Friday night and I watched it. They asked me if I wanted to charge them but I said no 'cause I knew it would have caused big problems 'cause I would have seen them out again anyways (16 years).

³ Participants often referred to their enemies. Enemies are other young women who have it in for them, i.e. will fight or harass them when they run into each other.

Choices around alcohol

While for some girls, family members facilitated their opportunities to consume alcohol, for others the strongest motivation for *not* consuming alcohol or doing so infrequently was the drinking of family members, especially when it had impacted the households in which they grew up. One young woman recalled the time she realised she and her siblings were not safe in the house where drinking was occurring:

I don't drink 'cause when I was seven that's when I started seeing people drink around me and then me and my younger sister we ended up locking ourselves in the room, so we locked ourselves in a room while my father was drunk and my mother she was just telling me, get in the room and lock the door. She tried telling them, all the people who was drinking, to go away 'cause she had kids. So then that's when I first discovered that drinking is not good. Because when they're drunk it's like who knows what they do to you, like they could come and they could watch you when you sleep or they could just go into your room and decide to rape you (16 years).

Another young woman described what she experienced when her father and his friends had been drinking one night, an experience for which she was still receiving counselling and which strongly influenced her choices around alcohol:

Um it's kind of a mix of drugs and alcohol, so my dad, he was with his three mates, and because they got really, really drunk and also just started doing drugs and then after that happened, it was probably like 3am, that's when they all tried to like rape me. That's why I'd never want to get drunk, ever (16 years).

Estranged from her father, the same young woman explained:

My dad was an alcoholic so that affected him really bad, so he just got really aggressive and everything so I haven't seen him for like six years because of all the problems that he had. Oh it was just horrible like he just got sometimes, he'd forget who I am 'cause he often did like drugs and alcohol together so that made it like worse. He'd just get really aggressive and like sexual and everything (16 years).

Frequent alcohol use by family members was a reality some young women dealt with and were impacted by frequently as they were growing up, and which determined their thoughts around drinking:

Oh when I was younger our house used to be such a family house for drinking, like it was just like 24/7 partying and like, but Mum was such a big person on education so we used to like go to sleep with like music and dart playing and alcoholics everywhere and she would wake up hung over, vomiting, saying "get ready for school". A lot of our family events, alcohol just didn't go well, and ended up like fighting and just rowdy. Just seeing that, like growing up with that, it was just like, this is not wherever I want to be like (16 years).

Witnessing the drinking of family members, particularly when the drinking led to fighting was a prime motivator for a number of young women to abstain from alcohol:

Um, it's just being in the company of my family. Growing up with alcoholics around you. I seen how they act towards each other like they turn against each other. Yeah I'm just like I don't want to follow that path either (14 years).

Mmm, I wouldn't want to drink like when I get older and stuff 'cause like whenever like my family drinks they always fight and stuff so. Yeah like I don't want to get too attached to it. Well like some of them like drink a lot and that's like what makes me not want to. Like, like I love them and everything but some decisions they do like, I don't want to be like that so yeah. (13 years).

Summary

Participants in the study exhibited a low awareness of the effects of alcohol on a person's physical health, having instead an understanding of the impacts of drinking on emotional and social wellbeing. Increased consumption was associated with negative consequences. Drinking at home was perceived to be a *safe* choice for a number of young women and for those who had been drinking in public spaces, some had experienced negative consequences. While some young women obtained alcohol and had their first drink with family members, for others the drinking of family members, making home *unsafe* at times, and the impact the drinking had had on the family unit, had influenced their decision not to consume alcohol or to do so infrequently.

Fighting:

Sixty-five per cent of girls and young women had been involved in fights, mostly involving physical force and largely with same-sex peers. Fighting began as young as 10, but most commonly participants who had engaged in fighting had had their first fight by age 13. Among these, serious injury to self or others had resulted in some cases and other sanctions including school suspension and contact with police had occurred.

Reasons for fighting

Multiple reasons were given for why Aboriginal girls and young women might fight. One of the most common reasons given was jealousy, "Oh girls fight 'cause of mainly guys" (15 years). Participants felt that jealousy was commonplace and "just the way girls are" (16 years). Several young women described having male friends who were like a brother and this was a motivating factor for fights breaking out:

Okay so I've got more guy friends than girlfriends so at my old school 'cause that was a co-school, I had these whole big group of guys as mates but then all these girls started going at me and they're like, "oh you're trying to take my boyfriend". That's just why like they think just because you've got a guy friends you've gotta be with him (15 years).

One young woman felt that, "girls have more of like a reason, like a reason to hit like another person," particularly over males, "I don't know like someone talking to their boyfriend or something" (16 years).

Several young women spoke about having fights with other girls because of racist comments made by the other party. These comments understandably incited young women, many of whom told of examples of being racially profiled in shopping centres and on trains. When a peer made a racist remark, some young women responded with violence: “If you’re gonna be racist to me, you know what I mean? [This girl] she got a snapped jaw and that” (18 years). While the majority of fighting participants described involved other Aboriginal young women, some had also had fights with non-Aboriginal young women, and in these instances it was largely motivated by racism. The following participants described her first fight:

It was year eight it was about racism actually. I got called a couple of names for my race. I was at school so I wasn’t at a party. Um down that way. Yep and that was my first fight but I’ve had enough of fights. It was a New Zealand girl so and she was calling me, being racist about my Aboriginal, ‘cause I’m Aboriginal and then yeah we had a fight, we had a smash over that (16 years).

Similarly, another young woman described her encounter with a fellow party-goer:

So the last one I had was, so my father’s deceased and um, this girl, after a party she said something about my father and like I’m very temperamental so that kind of ticked me off and we ended up having a fight. It was a very racist like and I’m very strong on like racism and it was a very racist term and the fact that it had the back-story of my father being deceased. Whether or not my father was deceased or not, but she was just like, oh she probably doesn’t have a dad anyways. So I was like – it was really disrespectful. I didn’t actually intend on fighting when I went up to her and approached her about the situation. But she just got up and got into my face and was trying to defend herself on this comment that she made and I just said like you know like we’ll just fight (16 years).

Despite fights relating to jealousy and racism, when young women were asked to recall the reasons for their own fights, what was provoking the majority of fights was slurring a young woman’s family. Young women were often fighting to defend their family’s reputation or a particular family member. The sister of the following young woman became the victim of another young woman’s aggression. While the perpetrator was actually angry at the participant for a perceived slight, she instead physically attacked the participant’s younger sister. Seeing her younger sister, who was only seven at the time, being hurt by an older girl led her into her first physical fight at age 14:

And so I ended up, I grabbed her hand and I pulled it, pushed it towards her and I told her, you don’t ever punch my sister in front of my face and then she tried doing it again so I ended up punching her and then she was like, why did you punch me? I was like, well if you touch my sister I’m going to end up doing something ‘cause I don’t let anyone touch my sisters (16 years).

Similarly, another young woman described why she fights in the following way:

I don’t really care – that sounds weird – but I don’t. If someone wants to say something about me go ahead but as soon as you say something about my friends or my family, you’ve gotta watch out ‘cause I flip then. I’m just like I can handle it but yeah they’re my weaknesses (15 years).

Several young women spoke about engaging in fighting when another young woman slighted her parent or parents: “But when it comes to fighting and someone’s swearing my parents it’s not the fact that they’re bringing my parents into it, it’s the fact that they’re disrespecting my parents” (16 years). The family seems to be a particularly sensitive trigger point as this quote from a 13 year old girl reveals:

‘Cause um my mum passed away. Then um, everything just broke apart. We were at the back of the train station and they [my cousins] were like making us fight [participant and another girl]. ‘Cause I get so angry and then they just like think it’s funny. Like, when they talk about my mum and that. ‘Cause she was talking shit about my family. She was like, you know you only make people feel sorry for you ‘cause you’ve got no mum and that (13 years).

Another young woman, who grew up around violence and went to great lengths to protect her younger siblings when drinking was taking place in the family home, explained that she only fought for family:

The only time I fight is either when they drag my parents into the situation when they wasn’t involved in the situation to begin with or they start doing something to cause a damage to me and my parents. Like I can’t be with that. Especially what my parents have been through. Like my mum she lost a child when my other sister passed on when she was five and she’s still trying to get over that and especially when she lost her father recently. So I can’t be with the fact that they bring what happened to my parents into their business, which isn’t their business because it’s my family business and it should be just us. Basically what happens between one family stays between that family, it doesn’t have to go ‘round the place (16 years).

The other most common reason for the young women in this study to engage in fights with other girls was yarn carrying (spreading rumours), particularly when it occurred behind someone’s back:

I can’t stand people saying stuff about me especially if it’s behind my back. I’d rather someone say I don’t like you to my face than by text or through someone else. I’d rather them just come to me and say why don’t they like me and just sort it out (15 years).

When the rumour or gossip found its way back to the person it was about, this precipitated physical altercations: “Rumours. Gossip. Well someone said something and then the other person found out and then they confront each other and then it ends up a fight” (15 years). Yarn carrying was the catalyst for this young woman’s first fight at age thirteen:

I was in Carousel and one girl was walking along with other girls and yeah apparently I was carrying yarns about her but I wasn’t. And she walked up to me and she was chatting to me and then she was like “you’re the little slut that’s carrying yarns about me” and then yeah she grabbed me by the hair and she started punching me and I fought her back and then yeah (16 years).

Several women attributed alcohol to an escalation in fighting and a graduation to fighting between multiple parties rather than one-on-one. The following participant described it as a chain reaction:

Oh well I’ve noticed like when everyone’s drinking and there’s one fight I feel like when people watch it they get them hyped up and then that’s when other people start fighting ‘cause after that it just, after that I noticed then everyone starts fighting. It’s like a chain, like a reaction, so yeah I’ve noticed once someone has a fight it’s like everyone wants to fight (16 years).

Getting “a bit too mouthy” when drunk was a reason given for fighting. Just under half of the young women who had consumed alcohol had participated in a fight when they had been drinking: “Oh yeah I’ve had a drunk fight. I reckon a lot of people fight more when they’re drinking” (16 years).

Seventy six per cent of young women had witnessed a fight where alcohol was (or they believed it to be) involved: “Growing up I guess it was my dad, like it’s alcohol and he was like pretty violent towards my mum and like – yeah just like when he’s with like my uncles and stuff it’s always alcohol that wants to fight, you know” (15 years).

Being proficient at fighting means that other young women are fearful and keep their distance:

If I see them like enemies, if I see them and they say something to me I’m gonna chip them straight out. But even then you know what I mean? Cunts don’t want to test me anyways. Like when they see me again they just, you know duck me. Which is good ‘cause I don’t want to start on them you know what I mean? And I’m the sort of person if I see them I want to start on them. Yeah I just got that attitude. Where I want to start with someone (18 years).

As well, fighting affords young women social status and popularity which can in turn make them feel good about themselves:

Yeah so it was more about what other people thought than what I thought of how it would affect the other person that I did hit. Yeah it was more of like you know everyone being, “oh and you should have seen what she done at school!” It was more like I wanted that, wanted everyone to be talking to me and I’d feel good about myself (16 years).

While young women may not want to fight, some participants felt that peer pressure was a strong motivator for getting into physical fighting:

Like it’s almost as if they want to be the toughest person in school, so like as a guy would get all his friends and like, “oh you don’t want to fight him you must be a wuss that you can’t fight”. Girls would do the exact same thing to another girl who didn’t want to fight or who doesn’t want to fight and they’ll kind of pressure her into fighting and she’ll feel like, “oh well I can fight, you’re wrong” and then she’ll go and fight (16 years).

Feelings and worries about fighting

Most young women felt remorse for fighting, particularly if injury was involved, “it’s bad – I feel bad because yeah it’s like the wrong thing to do” (16 years). However, it is important to recognise that the young women’s stories revealed that while they were remorseful, the fight also served a purpose: whether that was teaching “her a lesson for future so like it don’t happen to her again” (15 years); proving a point, “honestly I don’t care if I win or lose it’s just when I fight it’s only to prove my point” (14 years); or providing an avenue for releasing pent up emotions, “I don’t know it’s sort of like a release when you have a fight I think it’s just bottled up anger” (16 years). While several participants spoke about not liking to fight, there was also a sense of inevitability in some young women’s words, “I don’t really like fighting but I never liked fighting and now it’s sort of just I don’t know, a thing that you do, you know it happens” (16 years).

Several young women were fearful about sustaining injuries from fighting, “Yeah I worry about like having a seizure, getting really badly hurt but yeah I still don’t take that into consideration” (16 years). One young woman was concerned about the reputation of a particular girl who she had previously fought with and, as in our previous research (Wilson, 2013), ensured that she was always in the presence of friends:

I don’t really worry about a one-on-one fight but I have worries about other things. Like the girl I had a fight with she’s known to like stab and brick people so I get worried about, you know, walking around or going to a party and getting bricked or stabbed or one king hit. I get worried but I’m not really by myself, I sort of always have someone with me. I try to stay with someone at all times (16 years).

Several women were also worried about others getting hurt, “I’m just worried for the people that are fighting. Just like they getting hurt ... just scared for them, getting hurt” (15 years). However, the type of fighting which caused the most concern was the threat of mobbings where a group of girls sets on another girl who is by herself and hence vulnerable: “I’m scared to get mobbed. ‘Cause some girls actually come with like groups of girls. And sometimes it’s just me, or sometimes it’s just me and a couple of girls, but these girls come with like heaps of girls” (14 years). A small number of young women in this study had been mobbed and their concerns were justified as mobbings were – unsurprisingly – more likely to result in serious injury, as described by a young woman in the next section below.

Injuries from fighting

While the majority of the fights girls and young women described involved no or minor physical injury such as losing handful of hair or “just like scratches”, a small number reported more serious injuries to themselves or their opponent, including broken ribs, a broken neck and black eyes. A couple of young women had been knocked unconscious or had knocked someone else unconscious. The head appeared to be a particular target in fights with several young women describing having their head booted or stomped on or doing the same to another young woman. One of these recalled the night she was mobbed which resulted in her hospitalisation for several days:

I got mobbed one night on the train. About ten, eleven girls. Yeah they jumped all over my head. Oh I had, my head got split open. Yeah, um I busted my arm real bad, I had two black eyes, my lip was busted, that was split all the way across. Yeah, that’s about it (16 years).

The following account describes another particularly grave encounter where it was the other young woman who was injured:

Yeah I’ve had plenty of fights, yeah [laughs]. The first was the same year I started drinking, yeah. Yeah about twelve yeah but um – It was the actual first real fight. Yeah she started it straight out and I was like you know, what are you trying to prove here? Oh she was being a racist cunt, ay. Yeah and I said well you know, “what are you trying to prove man?” Yeah wadjulla [white] girl, she got her head

stomped on. Yeah she got a snapped jaw. Yeah and she was knocked out for like three seconds, they had to put a straw down her nose. Yeah I got suspended yeah (18 years).

The role of family violence in the girls' lives

Many of the young women had grown up with violence in their homes and fighting among family, and all participants in this study reported witnessing a fight: "Yeah I've seen plenty, heaps. Older people like when we used to go to like family's house and they used to drink and some of them used to start fighting. I've had a lot of experiences" (16 years). One young woman, who believed that fighting was no longer "just sort your stuff out, done", described the experiences of her family members:

Yeah like a lot of family have been like, my uncle's got um, almost lost his life from getting stabbed by machete and stuff and like there's just been like a lot of fights that have just, they're not how they used to be, they're very machete and like gun and like weapon-based and it's just very brutal (16 years).

Another young woman who reported fighting regularly – and had been charged for occasioning bodily harm – normalised her violence with the following explanation:

Well I don't know my, my family were always a bit like if you did something wrong you'd get a, you know, a hiding, a smack or whatever, whatever you call it and I sort of just, you know, built up a tolerance and me and my siblings we used to have fights, and cousins and so it was family I think I learnt from (16 years)

Associating her own use of violence with growing up with family and domestic violence, particularly the violence her father perpetrated against her mother, the following participant commented:

She flung me to the ground and that's when me and her was into it ... like I don't like violence because I've been around it a lot like when I was young, seeing my mum go through that, but I wasn't going to let no girl like get the best of me (16 years).

Peacemakers

There were a number of peacemakers amongst the participants; young women who had never participated in a fight or those who once been fighters but made the conscious decision to no longer engage in these behaviours. These young women spoke about either intervening in fights – attempting to stop or dissuade the fighting of others – or refusing to be goaded into fighting themselves. Despite feeling angry, the following participant chose to smile instead of fight:

No I haven't had a proper, got into a proper fights like I've wanted to. I've been that angry I've wanted to hurt people before but not anymore, I'm just keeping peace now. Just smile and be nice and that. But there is different ways to handle things. Just ignore. Yeah just be nice (15 years).

Another young woman spoke about intervening in a fight which was brewing between friends, describing how she "just like kind of stepped in and said like leave it now, it's gone too far ... 'cause

one of the girls wanted to hit someone so I just stepped in and said, look come on guys this it like not the time, youse like need to stop now, it's gone too far (16 years).

Despite the young women's desire to break up fights, it is not always easy to be the peacemaker according to the following participant who, while she wanted to say something, feared the outcome:

Oh, I see like things like, I get pretty upset, annoyed when like my younger cousins and like sister-in-laws and stuff like girls bitching to them and I feel like I need to say something to the other girls and then I realise like I'm just going to get myself into shit as well so I just hold back and I don't (16 years).

Alternatives to fighting

Participants were asked what the alternative were to fighting. The majority of young women believed that talking about it was the best alternative:

Well I probably like would try to tell them without making them like go off, that I was being mean or something. I wouldn't yell in their face or like punch them or anything, I'd probably just like tell them my reasons why I think that they shouldn't have said that or why I think that they're wrong, and like try and sort it out so they don't think that I hate them but like they don't come back at me (13 years).

Compromising and delaying a confrontation while cooling off was the solution suggested by one young woman:

I'd just, I probably wouldn't talk to them, I'd probably let it go for a day, actually get my head together and then come back and see them about it because I knew if they said something about it right there I would have gone off my head. So I would have left it for a day and then come back and I'd feel calmer. And to process what actually happened and see it from their side (15 years).

Ability to solve the grievance peacefully, according to some young women, depended on several factors, for example, whether you know the other individual, "most girls if they're fighting with someone they don't really know someone won't really talk it out with them, but if you're fighting with like a good friend then youse will talk it out" (15 years) or the willingness of the other party to let it rest:

Yeah I reckon I could walk away from it. But the girls that want to fight me there's some that's really – they're really bold girls, they're like I want to fight you, you can't walk away. So if I was to walk away they would like either cheap shot me, grab me by the hair or something and you know just say, look I'm not finished with you and we're going to fight it out if you like it or not (17 years).

Talking it out was also a strategy used by schools to defuse fighting among students and by the police, as described in the following account: "I did it before [talked it out] .Well I bashed this one girl after school. 'Cause she was talking about Mum. Then she got me charged by the police and we had to talk it out, make an agreement with each other. Yeah now me and her are friends" (13 years).

Of concern is that while young women nominated talking or walking away from an argument as the best alternative, few who had participated in a fight believed this would work for them: "You can't.

There's no way. You've just gotta fight it, fight it out" (16 years). When one young woman was asked whether it was possible to resolve issues without fighting, she responded:

It depends what issue to be honest— At that time it was only right for me 'cause I knew that like I would, if I wouldn't have took it out on her I would've went off in my own world and took it out on myself and like just, and just had an anger attack on myself. So it wouldn't have, I would of needed like to express it somehow (16 years).

As another young woman summed up tellingly:

You're taught to get your anger out physically. That's how I think most of us deal with it. I can't see myself sitting down and going, "this is what's wrong, let's sort it out". That's not going to happen, that's not how it works (17 years).

Summary

Two thirds of the young women in this study had participated in fighting and all had witnessed a fight. For some, violence was a central theme in their lives, both within their families and among peers. The majority of fights were with other young women, mainly other Aboriginal girls. Participants expressed fears around fighting, but it was apparent that, for some, physical fighting afforded them safety, status, pleasure and a release of anger, gains which are often not recognised when female violence is considered (Carrington, 2013). Injuries were often significant and yet the danger of fighting was often overridden by other emotions and motivations. Family history of violence was also important to acknowledge. Many participants witnessed violence in their homes and family members; to this end for some it had been normalised as a way of solving interpersonal disputes. While talking and walking away were the two key strategies put forward by the girls for solving issues without violence, for most this had not worked or was not considered a realistic option in all situations.

Offending:

Involvement with police and the criminal justice system

Involvement in offending ranged from none (65%) through to more serious crime, with four participants having spent time in juvenile detention at West Australia's only juvenile facility, Banksia Hill. Several said they had never had contact with police, "Nah I've never been in trouble with the law. I actually want to become a police officer" (15 years) and of those who had, the majority of the offending was low-level and did not involve charges, and included riding trains without tickets or being out after curfew as described by this young woman:

Um I haven't gotten fined but they just like let me go or give me a warning or something [for not having a ticket] and like I think the police picked me up once 'cause that was late and I was walking back from my friend's house. Um I missed the last train so I was walking from Seaforth to Gosnells and yeah. It was probably past midnight. (13 years).

One girl spoke about losing her mum to cancer when she was eleven and “then um, everything just broke apart” (13 years). Her first run in with police occurred soon after her mother’s passing, when she was “just running amok” and “going through the shops and just smashing things” (13 years). Another young woman who described having had “heaps” of run-ins with the law recalled the first time she got into serious trouble when she was fourteen: “It was for assaulting a police officer. I don’t really remember, I was drunk. I just woke up in Banksia Hill. I went to court the next day. They showed me the video surveillance. But yeah it’s pretty shame now” (16 years). This particular young woman went on to commit a series of further offences, including being the passenger in a stolen car driven by a drug-affected individual which caused a head on collision with a truck and in which a number of people were seriously injured, including her younger sister.

Types of offences committed

Other than fare evasion and being out after curfew, several young women admitted to stealing offences for which some had been caught. Stealing was largely for the acquisition of goods they could not afford as illustrated in the following example:

Okay I lie, I’ve stolen a lot more than a chocolate bar. It wasn’t just the one time I’ve, like when I, maybe when I couldn’t afford something. So I’d go shopping for clothes, I’d buy the \$100 pair of pants but I’d just steal a \$10 shirt (16 years).

Another young woman, who was on a scholarship at a prestigious school in Perth, described the time she was caught stealing a jersey from a sports store. She explained why she was motivated to steal:

We’re not like the richest family and I needed a present for like someone that didn’t really know. I wasn’t well off so I wouldn’t want to rock up with like a cheap thing. [The school I go to] it’s just like, this is a very fancy place. We’re not like the richest family, I don’t want people to know that (16 years).

A small number of young women had been cautioned or charged for offences involving violence. These offences are considered more serious and are more likely to carry a custodial sentence. One young woman who had spent the majority of her young life under the Department of Child Protection and was on a good behaviour bond⁴ at the time of the interview, described the night she ended up spending the night in Banksia Hill: “I was in the city getting chased by police, getting, doing aggravated robbery, no aggravated assault with attempted robbery” (14 years). Another, who had been to Banksia Hill twice, explained what occurred when she committed her most serious offence, assaulting a police officer:

I was at Perth Train Station. I was about to get on the last train and before that apparently I hit a woman at Claisebrook. I don’t know, I don’t remember. I was drunk and she said something to me. We had an argument and I hit her and um, went to the city after that. Just before the last train the police had been looking for me and when the police officer grabbed me she slammed me up against the wall. And then I just turned around and started hitting her. And then she charged me. That one

⁴ A good behaviour bond is when an offender promises not to re-offend.

was serious because when you assault a public officer you have to get six months straight. Yeah but I only got three months 'cause of my age and it was my first time (16 years).

The following young woman had never been sentenced to detention, but had had numerous run-ins with the police with several court appearances and charges. Her main charges related to trespass and one for violence when she “hit someone in the head” (16 years). For this offence she received a community based order where she was required to report to a juvenile justice team for three months. When asked how she felt about her offending she commented, “Sometimes I feel happy like, yes! But sometimes I’m like, at the end, like I just realise what I’ve done and I’m like, oh shit I know that they’re looking for me now. So yeah, yeah a bit scary” (16 years).

Intergenerational offending

Several young women spoke about family members who had histories of contact with the criminal justice system; the mothers of two participants were incarcerated at the time of interview. Having her sister with her in Banksia Hill made one participant’s time there much easier. Another young woman was able to stay overnight with her mother who was in prison for six years during the participant’s childhood. Being surrounded by others – including friends – who offend, appeared to motivate the following young woman to desist from offending:

Oh a lot of stuff, most of my friends have been to Banksia and they do break ins, stealing cars whatever. I always stay away because I know like, I know better, I don’t want to be like, you know all my brothers have been in jail and all my family like I saw, like I see and I just, but it doesn’t interest me. I go to school and I try to stay away from that. Mum went to jail for fraud and Dad went to jail for multiple things. Dad’s in [a mental health facility] now (16 years).

Similarly, another participant who grew up on an Aboriginal community in a rural suburb north-east of Perth until she was seven, spoke about the offending on her father’s side of the family and how this impacted on the way she viewed breaking the law:

On my Dad’s side of the family and Mum’s but like mostly from what I remember, it’s mostly been Dad’s and like Dad, they’ve gone to jail for doing stuff and so like I don’t ever want to do that. If I even say something wrong I’m like, my heart starts beating, I’m like oh my god what did I do? Like I don’t want to ever be in a position where I have to kind of like I don’t know. I don’t want to be in the position where I have to go to jail or I have to own up to something that I’ve done because I just wouldn’t be able to do it (16 years).

Several young women also spoke about the positive influence of family members who encouraged them to respect the law and avoid getting into trouble: “Mum and dad told me it’s not the right thing, [they told me] the right and wrong things to do” (15 years); “I just remember her [mum] like nailing it into me that you should never ever steal” (16 years). One participant who had never been involved with the criminal justice system despite having friends and family members who had, described her motivation for staying out of trouble in the following way:

Just say if it was my Nan, 'cause she lives by herself. Say if it was like someone breaking into her house, how much it would hurt her if they like, you know, broke her things and stole her money. I sort

of like put myself in the person who gets attacked's position, you know, like how would they feel about it (16 years).

Summary

Most young women in this study had not been in trouble with police. Some had received warnings or fines for travelling on public transport without a ticket, and others had been caught stealing. Four young women had spent time in Banksia Hill Detention Centre for violent offences. Intergenerational offending was apparent in some of young women's families, with siblings and parents involved with the criminal justice system; family was an important influence for some participants' decisions around desisting from offending.

Social supports:

Most participants were able to identify a person they could go to for support or who they admired. As in previous research (Wilson et al., 2013), the majority turned to a family member, particularly nannas⁵ who played key roles in the young women's lives: "I just need my nanna for my support and what not and I'll be right" (16 years). Elders are important contributors within Aboriginal families (Lohaor, Butera & Kennedy, 2014), and many participants spoke respectfully and with admiration about their grandparents. For one young woman, her grandmother was her link to her culture: "my grandmother she's like, she's the culture, she's the most cultural one in the group so I look at her and she teaches me a lot more about my culture" (15 years). For another, it was her pop⁶:

My pop got me involved with like a lot of cultural awareness ... in a lot of cultural dancing. I was always one of the cousins that used to love sitting there learning language with my pop and asking like – oh what's the word for this word? And then like learning his back story like how he used to be and like alcohol and like being drunk but still going to College and getting his degree and he holds that so, that's why it's so important, education's so important to me because it's been passed down you know and it's always been passed down through him to Mum and to all of us you know (16 years).

The loss of a grandparent marked significant changes in girls' lives in different ways. One young woman described the impact of losing her nan in the following way:

I'm not really that proud of myself and what I did when I was younger [14-16] but I kind of pulled my head in at 17 when I lost my nan. My nan kind of taught me not to be the Aboriginal stereotype. She taught me to try and make something of myself, to try and change and not be like my cousins and that 'cos they'd gone in a bad way, and cos she was Christian and part of the Stolen Generations as well (17 years).

Other people who provided support included mothers, fathers, siblings and aunties:

My mum, definitely. I've only ever had her in my life. She's just always been there for me, like, whenever I need her, she's always been there. I don't know she's just, she's the only person I've ever had. She's all I've had. Her and my sister, they're all I've had in my life. Dad's never been anything, yeah (14 years).

⁵ 'Nanna' or 'nan' are Australian colloquial terms for grandmother.

⁶ 'Pop' is an Australian colloquial term for grandfather.

However, some young women did not feel like they could turn to their families as family members had their own problems: “Our family goes through a lot so I don’t really like to turn to them because we all are going through the same things so it’s like, keep a lot to yourself” (15 years). Another young woman who had experienced the death of her mother and was being brought up by her older sister, explained, “Sometimes I struggle but I keep that to myself. I don’t really, I’m not really open enough with a lot of my family to speak to openly like” (16 years).

It was rare for a young woman to turn to anyone outside of the extended family as a source of support which is consistent with the belief a number expressed that it was potentially dangerous to speak about what was occurring in their lives, a theme returned to in the discussion. Central in narratives was a tendency for the young women to keep things to themselves and reasons provided for doing so included distrust of others, especially peers at school or people in a position of authority: “I’m not silly, I wouldn’t tell people from school, you’re an idiot if you do that” (16 years).

Help-seeking and experiences with service providers

Detailed examination of the young women’s experiences around accessing services is represented in the final resource (see Phase 4 and Phase 5). The key themes emerging from interviews included the positive and negative characteristics of different service provider organisations, the barriers to accessing services and the challenges associated with developing relationships with service providers.

Characteristics of services and their impact on engagement

Experiences with more informal ‘yarning based’ services were seen by many young people as an important pathway to getting both information and support:

“Deadly Sisters Program and how they used to come here and they used to talk about healthy eating and stuff. It used to be really good, so that was good but not on this subject... like they did like a really good yarning pace and we all were able to feel like together and stuff... they used to come and just used to bring like heaps of food and just say oh like um, here’s the topic we’re gonna be talking about and we would just sit there talking and they’d just go through stuff” (16 years).

“When I was in year 8 there was like this support group that came in every Thursday to talk about issues like this and stuff, so I’d say more, like more support groups” (17 years)

“-mm I think there may be a few people who are scared to talk to people knowing that it is being written in some formal situation, but maybe informal things like if there is an Aboriginal service or a yarning sesh” (16 years)

Opportunistic support with youth workers in youth centres was also seen as an important way to engage with services “... yeah talking with youth workers; more relaxed situations” (16 years). Many felt there was a role for peer mentors, or those who had been through similar experiences, as important characteristics of service providers, and that this would mitigate some sense of shame.

I just don't talk to people about my past and what I'm going through 'cause like I feel they like they are gonna judge especially if they are not Noongars or something (16 years).

Face-to-face engagement was regarded as preferable to other modalities of engaging with services.

I can't connect with people through texting or emailing. I feel like if I'm sitting in front of someone I would, like I say I need to connect with someone to talk to them, to know that I trust them. It's not so much confidentiality, it's knowing that I can tell them this and get a truthful answer and yeah (16 years).

"Face to face is easier - I just, it's really weird that you have to talk to a person first over the phone" (17 years).

In terms of more formal counselling-based services, some young women expressed frustration at long waiting lists. For those who did engage with more formal counselling services, flexibility and choice in service providers was highlighted by one young woman as critical. She had had four previous counsellors before she found one with whom she connected with:

The [others] were too professional and this is what you've got to do, you have to do this. But with Yorgum it's like this is your options, this is whatever one best suits you and whatever one you pick that's the way, then we'll from there on we'll try and overcome it. It's not like you have to do this, what you did was wrong. You shouldn't have done that. It's like ok, yes you did this but this what you can do from hereon (15 years).

Despite the perseverance of this participant, others did not continue searching for a support service after a first experience was negative. One young woman reported being referred to a man for counselling and then dropping out of counselling because she felt uncomfortable. In this instance she had not been supported to identify a new support service or counsellor.

Participants also highlighted the role of schools as an important gateway to providing support:

"...like school's the main thing, if you get through to schools then you get through to people" (15 years). One young woman, who had positive relationships with school support staff described the importance of ongoing relationships with school staff:

They noticed I wasn't smiling around school anymore, I wasn't participating in anything, and so I went to the school counsellor. They you know asked 'what's wrong, you're not smiling'. Then they notified the counsellor and I went to talk to her (17 years).

Barriers to seeking support

Lack of knowledge and understanding of how services work and how to access services was a barrier for several young women in seeking support. As expressed by one young woman:

Where to look 'cause I tend to overthink a lot and I think a lot of young kids do that as well. I think about 'How do I pay for this?'. I think 'How would I get there? What about school and my other commitments? If I miss out and that, that might affect that.' When really your mental health is before anything else. I think that's why I just don't know where to start... I know I'd have to think about transport one and payment number two. (16 years)

There is a voice out there, stuff being said about this kind of stuff but I just, I don't think it's enough or enough detail, Like Beyond Blue, R U OK I know these things exist but they're not reaching us (16 years)

For others, the fear and stigma of seeking help presented a barrier, as described by this participant:

I'm not like comfortable talking to people about like I don't think they're gonna judge but you know not like Australian, or like if they're Australian or like I don't feel like talking, like I don't talk to people like about my past and what I'm going through 'cause like I feel like they're gonna judge especially if they're not Noongars or something. So yeah. I just won't talk to anyone, I just – I let it build up and build up and then I just lose my shit (16 years).

At what age should we should be start talking to the girls about these issues?

Consistent with the literature (Spoth et al., 2009; Wilson, Butt, Gower, Wilkes, Gray, and Howe, 2012), young women in this study felt that it was important to start a dialogue with girls around these issues early, “Probably like year seven or eight” (17 years), “I reckon thirteen” (15 years). Some young women felt that when to start talking would depend on what the girl is doing: “I don't know, 'cause there is some things like, people going to parties – young Aboriginal girls. These girls are thirteen and younger, twelve” (15 years) or what is going on at home for the girl. In these cases participants suggested an even younger age for starting the conversation, as illustrated in the following example:

Like from, well depending like if they grow up around the drugs and alcohol, abuse and that. I reckon probably like 10 because like if they had like grew up around it and they just want to build it up and build it up then they might lose it and like lose their shit and go off or something or just they will not learn to like talk to people but if they talk to people they might feel more comfortable so yeah (16 years).

Suggestions for better support

Consistent with the findings above, services that provide outreach and opportunistic interventions to young women and were easy to access were regarded as providing better support.

Whilst some participants reported wanting only Aboriginal service providers, others felt it was more important to have choice. One theme was the need to connect to the individual providing the support and that they should have some understanding of the issues facing young people: “If they weren't ignorant or blind by anything, that helps. Otherwise you feel like you're talking to a brick wall” (16 years).

Several young women reported apprehension towards those providing help, and being not sure of their motivations. These feelings led some young women to suggest that service providers reach out to them and show them that they did actually care – usually through some sort of practical support such taking them to appointments: “I don't know like take them to places, so that you do actually support them if that makes sense” (15 years).

The importance of developing a therapeutic relationship was identified by a number of young women; they wanted the chance to get to know service providers before opening up: “You want to be like comfortable, and have a yarning space because people aren't going to open up and like really

pay attention to people when they are strangers. Like especially Aboriginal youth, they're like such shame job like you know" (16 years). Similarly, "Oh yeah I think when it comes to counselling you really have to hit it off with the person, you really have to feel comfortable" (16 years).

Summary

Participants identified the characteristics of services that are easy to engage with – those that are more informal, easy to access (school based or youth services) and non-judgemental. In addition the stories of several participants emphasised the importance of trust and a personality fit, and to feel invested in, in terms of the service provider's time. Barriers to help-seeking identified by participants included fears of being judged or not understood and not connecting with a service provider as well as practical challenges such as understanding services, how to access them, their procedures and what help and support looks like.

Hopes and aspirations for the future:

All young women were asked what they wanted for themselves in the present and in their futures. For the young women still attending school, most of what they wanted now related to school activities, either wanting to do better, "I just want to like focus more on school. Um, I've been passing my tests. Which is like the first time ever" (15 years) or wanting to get through and finish high school, "I just want to graduate school. I don't care what my scores are, I just want that certificate" (16 years).

Participants had no difficulty envisaging what their lives might look like in the future and their aspirations included, in particular a job, house, car and family: "Working. Yeah I'll be working. I'll be driving. I'll be having a boyfriend. Probably like at a hair shop or business thing. Like a good family and – No harassments" (13 years). One young woman who had been sexually assaulted by her father and his friends, had been motivated by the experience to help and protect others:

I want to be a police officer. I just want to be, I really like protecting and helping other people, I really do like that. I'm not pleased [about what happened with my dad] but if that didn't happen when I was younger I might have never wanted to become a police officer so I'm actually, I overcame something now I have the ability and strength and emotional strength to help others (15 years).

For others, making the most out of their lives was important to them including experiencing new things and travelling the world:

I want to live my life, like I don't want to not do something. [I don't want to] necessarily do everything but I don't want to limit myself. Like if I see a sale on bungee jumping and I'm in the town at the right time, I'll go bungee jumping. I don't want to be held back or anything. Surround myself with people that think likewise (16 years).

I want to try all different things. I would want to travel the world as well and do different jobs and see different things and the culture, learn different cultures and things. And I would like to like know more and that about my culture and stuff (15 years).

Finally, developing a sense of stability in life was seen as important for the future.

...I have a partner, a job. I want to be in a job that is stable, so I'm not scratching. I want to be stable. I don't care if its pay check to pay check. As long as I have food on the table, the lights are on, the water is running, I'm fine. That's what I see as stable (15 years.)

These findings in the interviews highlight the desire young women have for living productive and positive lives.

Phase 4: Resource Development Workshop

Following the completion of the interviews and initial analysis of interview data, the research moved into the fourth phase which was a one day workshop with six young women to inform the development of a health promotion resource. This step was key to ensure that the participatory framework of the research was maintained and to ensure the young women could directly educate service providers, and influence and shape the provision of future services. Participants were invited to the workshop by the research officer through her networks (N=3) or had indicated they wished to be further involved with the project following interviews (N=3). Numbers were capped to ensure a level of comfort for participants and adequate opportunity for discussion. The purpose of the workshop was to speak in more depth to young women about the issues covered in this research and to collect their ideas around the creation of a training package or resource for service providers. The intention was to help service providers in their work with young Aboriginal women experiencing drinking, fighting and offending behaviours and their associated risks to health. Importantly, the young women participated in two key brainstorming sessions, the results of which are presented below. Prior to brainstorming participants were shown the results of the interviews and discussed the findings. Workshop participants confirmed the findings and analysis of the findings; supporting the need to help young Aboriginal women with issues around drinking, fighting and offending.

Session One: Collect ideas about how service providers might engage girls/young women in conversations about fighting drinking and offending.

The young women all fully participated in the session and contributed a range of ideas to key questions.

- *What should service providers know about drinking, fighting and offending?*

In response to this question the young women supported the findings of the research – and supported the idea that service providers, and importantly teachers, need to know about their experiences. Interestingly young women reported that they felt services only advertised during NAIDOC week and it was difficult to find what help was available at other times.

Furthermore the young women explained that service providers needed to see beyond these behaviours to understand the context and background of young Aboriginal women. As part of these discussions young women also emphasised the need to reach out to girls when they are young, at least 10 years old. This was seen as important because the women felt that by this age many girls had witnessed or directly experienced or drinking, fighting and/or offending.

- *Why don't young women reach out?*

Preliminary discussion focussed on the attitudes that some young people may hold which prevent help-seeking. For example, some young women thought “no one will understand me so why bother?”. This led to discussion about not knowing which services might be helpful or good. Importantly this led to further discussion about how many young people do not know what actually happens when a service is contacted. This lack of certainty creates reluctance to contact a service.

I know with every child-related incident they say go to kids helpline, Beyond Blue, like we have access to it but we haven't been shown, we don't know if it's going to be good or not. We haven't had that experience with them. You know it's there but you don't know if it's going to backfire onto you and so you're afraid to use it. Also, it's like over the phone. You don't want to talk to someone over the phone. You need someone there, present, to relate to you (16 years).

Further discussion emphasised concerns around the impact of waiting lists and feeling rejected by services. The theme of phone services was expanded and participants reported that many young women do not want to make a phone call; that they wanted to talk to someone in person. This sentiment was consistent with the interview data. It indicates a need for services and service providers to recognise that information about services should come from not just the service itself but from others who have used the service. Services need to be ‘vouched for’ by other young people in order to be seen as trustworthy.

Reaching out for help within the family was discussed extensively. Whilst the young women felt that there were families in which there was support for talking about coping, they felt that trying to raise personal issues in the home setting would be difficult for many Aboriginal young women. They explained that many families lacked the resources to deal with young women's issues: “Homes are busy and noisy, there are lots of people, there are parents with mental health issues, it is too difficult”, “families don't know how to talk about it, don't know how to deal with anything”, “they can only talk about what happened to them”, “they only talk about emotions when they're drinking, that's when there is affection”.

While young women opened up at the workshop and spoke candidly about their experiences around the issues they face in their lives, they all agreed that talking about personal or issues causing them concern was difficult and even discouraged within their family units:

Yeah, with my family we don't really talk about stuff like that, like it's probably pretty common within Aboriginal families, you don't really talk about stuff like that. You just kind of gloss over it. Yeah, like we don't talk about emotions (16 years).

Also when you talk to older people in your family they bring it back to their childhood and they tell you 'just toughen up'. So you're just forced to bottle it in and not do anything about it (17 years).

The young women also explained various challenges with reaching out for help at school. Whilst reporting that it was the most important place for young women to receive help, they also explained some of the limitations. For example, help may only be offered when there is a problem, "There is no in-between space to talk about it; there is no talking till it's a big issue, then it is hard to speak your mind". They also worried that the school may report any discussion straight back to parents, or the risk that they may report the family to child protection services (which is discussed in more detail below) was also raised as a concern.

The importance of teachers and how they treat young women became a central topic of conversation. Young women reported experiences of racism, being judged and negatively stereotyped, as well as positive experiences. These experiences were described as particularly memorable for the young women.

I'd just get told to go and sit outside but no one would actually go sit outside with me so I'd go wander off and I'd end up leaving school for the day. Go get drunk and stoned. I used to just get so pissed off and think, 'What's the use of coming to school if I just like get kicked out of every class because they can't take what it is I have to say?' (17 years)

If you've got a teacher and they don't believe in you, how do they expect you to pass? Honestly, I've had teachers who have just told me to give up and I failed then I've had other teachers who have just pushed me and pushed me even when I didn't believe in myself and I passed (16 years).

- *What could go wrong if you reached out for help*

In this session, a clear picture emerged that many young women were afraid that seeking help could backfire due to fears of child protection services' involvement resulting in being removed from their family. They worried that any contact with the Department of Child Protection (DCP) would make things worse for them and their families.

Some young women reported that they were actively encouraged not to share information with teachers and other service providers, "we were told don't talk to your teachers" "don't report the issue no matter how bad you think it is", and for others the decision not to share was more implicit, "it feels like it's you and your family against the world". The fear the young women and their families had of DCP intervention was a strong motivator for keeping issues to themselves:

Even though I haven't dealt with DCP personally, I'm still afraid of them. I'm like scared for if I have kids even though I wouldn't have the same drug-related problems [as mum] there may still be some

problems, and the kid might just speak to someone and that teacher will then go tell DCP and then that's my kid gone. I feel like they find the littlest reasons to take kids off Aboriginal families. I got told those stories, 'don't go near the white vans, the ones with the tinted windows' (16 years).

When I was in DCP in primary school and there would be stuff happening at home I wasn't allowed to say anything to anyone cos my siblings, my cousins, they would tell me 'you can't tell anyone' cos they would know that DCP would make it even worse and I could be put into another family or something (16 years).

In school I avoided talking to a psychologist for years because it might send red flags to welfare and I had already been through the system when I was younger so say if I went to ask for help I feel the school would have blown it right out of proportion and welfare would've got involved and it would've just made things way worse (17 years).

My mum was on drugs but she still did the best she could while she was on drugs even though sometimes it wasn't like the best and sometimes it was ... the problems I had with her, I couldn't actually go speak to my elder sisters about it because they would just say, 'we know, we went through it but you just have to wait.' Like basically I just had to wait until I was 18, that's all I looked forward to was just, not living my life but growing up so that I could move out by myself. Like my mum's the reason I've never touched speed because seeing how it can destroy someone so quickly was like really scary and the fact that she's gone into rehab and like she's been in there for seven months and like she's doing well for herself. She's always wanted to go to get counselling but she didn't want to lose us kids. Like my aunty did that and she wasn't even as bad as my mum and her kids got taken off her for two years and she had to fight for them back (17 years).

The young women were acutely aware of the history of child removal in their families, the experiences of their parents and grandparents in being removed as children, and the impacts that the policies leading to the Stolen Generations continue to have on them to this day.

In addition, young women reported that potential lack of confidentiality, shame and stigma within services were common concerns among their peers. This included thoughts of being dismissed because issues were "just an Aboriginal thing". The desire to have opportunities to talk with others who have experienced similar issues was strong:

It's not that we [Aboriginal girls] don't like to talk, it's just the situations we're given to talk are to people who don't understand or people who are going to say "that's a typical Aboriginal and Aboriginal problems." But here today we all understand, we've all been through it, we've all got similar problems and everything so yeah, it's completely different. We've all got drugs and alcohol effecting our lives and it's just easier to talk to people who have gone through it than other people who think they know what it's like but haven't actually experienced it (16 years).

I've literally not heard of any support services other than (Aboriginal service) but I'm not doing that cos too many people talk. Heaps of people know your family. More about the trust, doesn't matter if they're wadjella. Every time I talked to her [school counsellor who knew her mum] I'd get home and get a hiding from mum (17 years).

- *What should and shouldn't service providers do to help*

The young women summarised that the fear of child protection prevents help-seeking but that families don't have the resources to help. They felt there needed to be more support before child protection involvement.

In times of a critical incident (such as following a fight at school) young women emphasised the importance of service providers giving young women a safe space and a fair hearing. They reported the need for school-based services to "evaluate situations one on one", "not jump to conclusions", "give us a chance to explain" and to "slow down with questions, give us time, ask indirectly sometimes". They reported that young women need to "given space, given choices".

An important theme that emerged from this discussion was the need for relationships between young women to develop and be reciprocal. An important component in this was behaviour by service providers which demonstrated that they genuinely cared and didn't just listen because 'they're paid to'. The participants gave examples of workers who had demonstrated 'going the extra mile':

We don't want to talk to people who are just paid to listen, who like just don't want to help you. There's a difference between people getting paid to listen and people who just want to help. Like people who get paid don't really care, like just write down a bunch of notes and put you under like a file number. But those people who really want to help are the ones who go out and do the extra and the stuff they don't have to do (16 years).

The young women detailed positive experiences at school and with counsellors when they had felt heard and supported. In addition to this, the young women discussed the challenge of experiencing different issues in their homes at a young age. These situations were often different to those of their peers and the young women felt that service providers, in particular schools, did/could not always provide what they needed, saying "I remember a puppet talking in a van, they didn't talk about what was happening in my family" and "[e]ven at 10, I knew I couldn't go to teachers". This emphasises the need for service providers to understand the lived experiences of this cohort in order to respond in a way that is more meaningful to the young women.

Session Two "How do we get the information/ideas collected in this project out there to the community" What form might it take?"

It is important to note that during this brainstorm and prior to presenting the young women's thoughts about the development of a resource, they had had a lengthy discussion about experiences of racism. These experiences were seen as critical to understanding their daily lives and the impact of racism on their experiences, wellbeing and behaviour in the school and broader community:

You know what actually happens? Like me and my sister and my two cousins went to the shops and we were shopping there and I was buying a present for my brother's birthday and as we walk out we

see three security guards and a lady and we show them our bags and then the security guards leave after we left. And they weren't there before and they just went there because of us (15 years).

Furthermore, the experiences of racism contribute to not feeling sufficiently comfortable to access services or seek help.

The themes the young women brainstormed for developing a resource focused on engagement - on wanting the services in their lives (predominantly school- and child protection-based services) to better understand their day-to-day realities and to feel comfortable in discussing these realities. They wanted to share their stories so they could be better understood, and to feel they had a chance of developing better relationships that may be able to support them with drinking, fighting and offending. The phrase 'behind my curtain' was an important metaphor for understanding their daily lives and experiences, most of which is concealed from and foreign to others. They discussed different methods of portraying and conveying their experiences. Importantly in these discussions (see below) the young women wanted their experiences to be a key component of any resource:

Like if you give teachers a short film of what we had to put up with to walk out the door and why we're not in the mood for it today and the reason why we're like this and they might even realise that they're got some students like this. Telling a student that they can sit outside isn't like going to help, it's just like, you're setting them up to fail. Like they come there to not only get away from the problems at home but they come there to get a chance and most teachers don't even give them a chance, they're like, "if you're not going to do it, get out of my class." It shouldn't just be one video, it should be a series of videos. Like what happened when I went to school and like what happened when I went out last night and what happened when I was on the train last night and how you deal with transit guards and police (17 years).

I think what we could do a short film about is like what we have to experience like before walking to school or what we have to put with at home and like what the teachers see and what is actually happening – Behind the Curtains. Also like the experiences of going out, for a night out and to the shops and all that. And then perhaps they'll have an understanding of it and maybe think "well one of my students was being a bitch yesterday and like maybe she had something wrong." Cos I like grew up all my life with DV and drugs and alcohol and teachers just think I'm like just another normal child (16 years).

I think a video would be like really good. Like short, sweet and you can watch it in under 5 minutes. Could use it as a resource. Gets them thinking and then they'll have so many questions to ask (15 years).

Other options were discussed within the brainstorming session such as providing workers with practical information or a training package as well as different formats for sharing their voices such as cards or a game. However, it was clear from the group that finding a platform from which to share their stories in audio-visual format was preferable because they wanted service providers to *understand* their realities rather than just tell them how they should be working.

Summary

Two key themes emerging from the yarning and brain storming were (1) the importance of barriers to accessing services and (2) teachers only saw young women's behaviour and not the story behind their behaviour.

The young women explained that a lack of understanding by some service providers resulted in a lack of comfort in discussing issues of importance to young women which was an important reasons why they did not want to seek help. Importantly, the fear of engaging with service providers due to fears of negative consequences for them and their families – particularly DCP intervention – also influenced their decision not to seek help. Young women reported wishing that teachers and counsellors could see 'behind their curtain' to understand what was happening for them before criticising them or judging them. They felt misunderstood and misjudged by teachers.

The young women also reported barriers to both accessing and opening up to service providers. Some participants described challenges to discussing worries and concerns within the family setting – suggesting whole of family resources are important. Whilst this is beyond the scope of the current project, it emphasises the importance of having accessible service providers, and reducing the barriers perceived by young women to engaging with services

Phase 5: Resource Development (website)

Consistent with the brainstorming sessions in Phase 4, a website was proposed as the most appropriate modality to share young women's stories. The YAWG website was designed to assist those working with and coming into contact with young Aboriginal women and girls, to better understand their lived realities, to open up dialogue with this group in a way they are comfortable with, and to support and empower them to make informed decisions around drinking, fighting and offending. As described by the young women – an invitation was extended to “see behind their curtain”.

The website was designed to include both audio and written stories of young women so these could be easily shared. Attempts to re-engage the workshop participants in developing the website did not come to fruition⁷, thus the website development was undertaken by the research team utilising the outcomes from the research and the workshop to finalise the content.

⁷ Several attempts were made by the researchers to re-engage the young women in the website development. Two further meetings were planned and participants confirmed attendance. On one of these occasions only one young woman attended and on the other none of the participants returned. As researchers we recognise that “young people's involvement in research has shifted from one that views children as passive objects of inquiry to a view of children as social actors who are recognized as having the experience and competence to understand complex issues” (Fern & Kristinsdottir, 2011). However, as with our previous research (Wilson et al., 2013) we found that the young people were a busy and mobile group, and our research was unsurprisingly not necessarily their top priority.

To develop audio content, key themes tied to the outcomes of the workshop were identified and then quotations from the participants were identified by the research team to exemplify and illustrate the themes. The quotations were also selected to reflect the diversity of experiences of the young women. To ensure confidentiality, some quotations were combined and/or identifying features removed. Quotations were read by young Aboriginal women known to the research team and recorded. The key themes presented in the website and the descriptions of these themes is summarised below:

- Behind my curtain: Three videos which provide an insight into the complexity of young women's lives. Coping with school when dealing with the reality of life's competing demands is key theme across these stories.
- What was happening for me at 10: The four stories in this section follow on from 'Behind my curtain'. They describe experiences young women had already had by the time they were 10 years old. These experiences lay the foundations for their interactions with schools and with support services, and contributed to the challenges that they faced in their lives.
- My experiences at school: During the YAWG research many young women discussed the importance of school and experiences at school were central to the stories they shared. The four stories in this section highlight these experiences, both the positive and the negative.
- Racism: Experiencing racism was a common experience for the young Aboriginal women participating in YAWG. The two stories presented here highlight typical experiences.
- Why we don't talk about these issues: The five stories in this section are some of the most important stories presented in the website. The young women describe situations in which they have had negative experiences in reaching out to services providers, beliefs they have which make it difficult for them to take the first step and engage, and broader family experiences which make women feel it is difficult to talk about their feelings and personal needs. These stories highlight the barriers young women have in accessing support and the challenges they face in reaching out. Understanding these concerns opens the door for stronger engagement.
- How I'd like you to talk to me: The six stories in the section present both young people's ideas for service providers to do things differently as well as positive stories about engaging with support services.
- What I want my future to look like: This section presents two stories with a powerful message; that despite the existence of persisting negative stereotypes about young Aboriginal women in Australian society, this group do want to succeed in finishing school, and aim to have productive and stable lives

Written quotations from interview data to highlight experiences of drinking, fighting and offending were included to complement the audio content. These quotations were also selected from the 38 interviews by the research team to represent the diversity of young women's experiences, whilst honouring the key themes. Five quotations about fighting are presented, four are about alcohol while a further four are about offending. In addition five quotations are presented on the theme 'the person I admire the most' to showcase the important people in young women's lives.

To ensure the website had practical utility a brief *How to Use* guide was included in the website to show how the website could be used to:

1. improve the knowledge about the lived experiences of the Aboriginal girls and young women among service providers, practitioners and educators who come into contact and work with this group.
2. show service providers, practitioners and educators how to better engage with Aboriginal girls and young women and encourage discussion about issues such as drinking, fighting and offending, in a culturally sensitive format.
3. reference when planning for organisational development.

Additional content included a description of the project and its aims, links to background reading and a webinar about the project, and a list of referral sources and acknowledgements.

Phase 6: Resource Evaluation

The intention was to evaluate the package at two follow up points (3 and 6 months), due to challenges experienced throughout the course of the research, the website has, at this stage, only been evaluated immediately pre- and post-launch of a pilot website.

In total 29 participants completed questionnaires with data from 3 participants deleted as both pre and post questionnaires were not completed. The summary of findings below are based on a sample of 26 respondents. Participants were 72% female and 76% non-Indigenous; all participants were 25 years or over (25-35 years = 32%; 36 – 45 years = 36%; 46 – 60 years = 32%). The roles of the participants varied (Youth worker 29%; Teacher 21%; Other 50%), the majority had worked in their role for under 2 years (28% Less than 1 year; 36% 1 – 2 years; 20% 3 – 5 years; and 16% over 5 years). Notably, 68% of participants reported not receiving any professional development with content specific to Aboriginal girls, however the majority reported contact with young Aboriginal women and girls daily (36%) or weekly (36%) in their work context.

Participants were asked to self-report the time they spent looking at the website. Results indicated that 50% reported spending between 10 – 15 minutes looking at the website and 31% spent between 15 and 30 minutes.

Changes in participants’ understanding and comfort working with Aboriginal young women.

To examine the website’s impact on participants’ self-reported understanding of issues facing young Aboriginal women, and their comfort and confidence in working with young women, they were asked how much they agreed with six statements on a five point scale (1 = Strongly Agree – 5 = Strongly Disagree) before and after viewing the website. In examining responses at pre-test, the results demonstrate that the highest mean scores (suggesting less comfort and understanding) were for self-reported “I have a good understanding of the lives of young Aboriginal girls” (M= 2.38, SD= 1.17), “I have a good understanding of the issues facing girls when they seek help” (M= 2.58, SD= 1.24) and “I feel comfortable talking about fighting, drinking and offending”(M= 2.63, SD= 1.40), and “I feel confident engaging with young Aboriginal women” (M= 2.50, SD= 1.25). These results are consistent with the interview data and workshop findings which emphasised a disconnect between young people and service providers resulting from a lack of understanding about the issues that young Aboriginal women are dealing with and their barriers to help-seeking.

The difference in mean scores on these questions at pre- and post-test is presented in Figure 2 which demonstrates a trend whereby participants reported feeling they had better understanding and an increased comfort in working with young Aboriginal women.

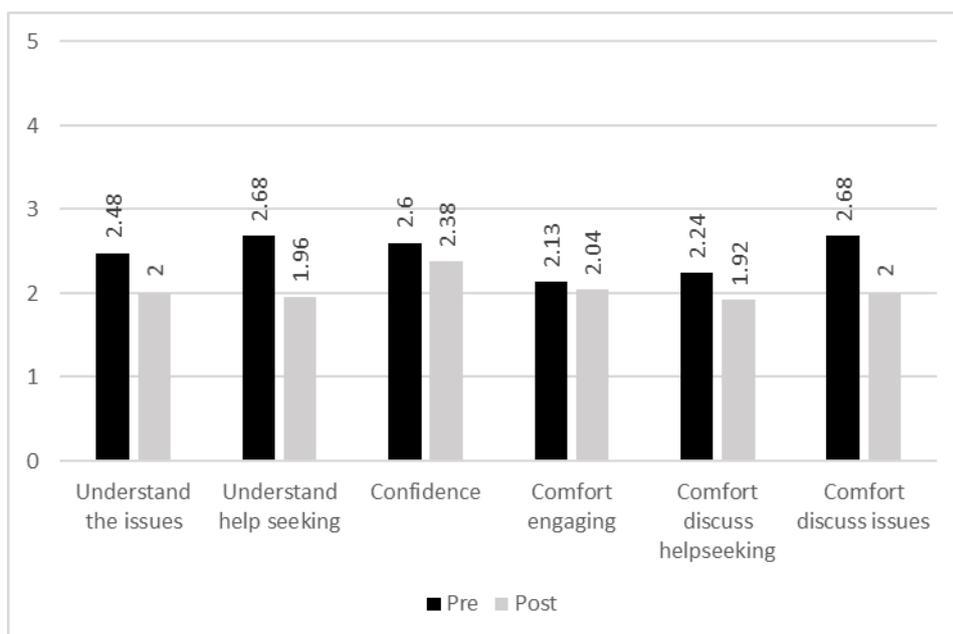


Figure 2. Changes in Service Providers Understanding and Comfort in Engaging with Young Women

To examine if these trends were significant a paired samples t-test was used. Results demonstrated a significant difference for that there was a significant difference in “Understanding of the lives of young Aboriginal girls” pre-test (M= 2.38, SD= 1.17) and post-test (M = 1.92, SD = 0.78); $t(23)= 2.70, p= .01$, “Understanding issues facing girls when they seek help” pre-test (M= 2.58, SD= 1.24) and post-test (M = 1.88, SD = 0.78); $t(23)= 3.47, p < .01$, “Comfortable talking about seeking support” pre-test (M= 2.21, SD= 1.17) and post-test (M = 1.92, SD =1.01); $t(23)= 2.60, p < .05$, and “Comfortable talking about fighting, drinking and offending” pre-test (M= 2.63, SD= 1.40) and post-test (M = 2.0, SD = 1.02); $t(23)= 3.50, p < .01$. There was no significant difference between “Confident engaging with young Aboriginal women” pre-test (M= 2.50, SD= 1.25) and post-test (M = 2.42, SD = 1.06); $t(23)= 0.34, p > .05$, “Comfortable engaging with young Aboriginal women” pre-test (M= 2.38, SD= 1.17) and post-test (M = 1.92, SD = 0.78); $t(23)= 2.70, p= .01$.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that, over the short term, the website shows promise in improving service providers’ understanding of the lives of young Aboriginal women and the challenges they face when seeking help, as well as increasing the comfort service providers have in discussing help-seeking and drinking, fighting and offending with young Aboriginal women. It is unsurprising that the website had little effect on changing confidence; confidence may require more practical activities to improve. Participants were also asked if they intended to try something new at work as a result of what they saw and heard on the website; 70% of participants reported that it was ‘Definitely true’ or ‘Probably true’ that they would try something new.

Acceptability and utility of the website

To examine the acceptability and utility of the website, participants were asked a range of questions about the website at the post-test. Participants were asked to rate the impact of the website on a five point scale (1= Strongly Disagree – 5 = Strongly Agree). Mean scores on these questions are reported in Table 1. below and demonstrate that the website was seen as both engaging and having practical value to participants. Importantly, no participants felt that the website content was a repeat of existing resources.

Table 1. Mean Scores on Website Ratings

| | Mean (SD) | Percent responses scoring agree (4) or strongly agree (5) |
|--|------------|---|
| The stories on the website are engaging | 4.58 (.50) | 100% |
| I learnt something new from the website | 4.08 (.74) | 85% |
| The website gave me a better understanding of the issues facing young Aboriginal women | 4.23 (.65) | 89% |
| I could use this website when talking to young women | 3.77 (.51) | 73% |
| There was nothing new here, I have heard these stories before. | 1.92 (.69) | 0% |
| The stories on this website will help me in the work I do | 3.88 (.71) | 69% |

Participants were asked if the website was easy to navigate: 73% responded ‘Yes’, 27% responded ‘Somewhat’, and if they would revisit the website in the next week; 58% responded ‘Yes’ and 38% ‘Maybe’. Finally all participants responded that they would recommend the website to colleagues. These findings support the acceptability and utility of the website for the target audience.

Finally, participants were invited to leave some feedback in the form of open-ended questions regarding things they liked about the website, areas of improvement and who might benefit from seeing the website. Positive comments were broadly supportive of the look and feel of the website. In addition, participants reported enjoying the audio content and hearing young women’s voices. For example: “The stories, thank you, insightful”, “I really appreciate the stories from the young women”, “I really enjoyed the stories about fighting...”, and “Understanding the fear of getting help”.

The main areas of improvement noted was the need for some technical improvement around improving navigation and the loading of videos. Additional areas for improvement included requests for links to resources and adding more factual/research information about drinking, fighting and offending in the target population. More information on developing healthy engagement pathways in addition to ‘static’ referral sources was an important suggestion. A final piece of feedback worthy of note was the recommendation to provide more information, or a caution, for people viewing the website about what might be ‘heard’ to ensure website is trauma-informed. These areas of improvement have been addressed.

Finally, participants were asked who may benefit from this resource and the response included the full suite of job roles that engage with young women; from teachers and child protection workers, to counsellors and those in police and justice systems. One thoughtful respondent commented:

For me, it seems like it could develop into a really useful tool to use to develop awareness and understanding, and hopefully empathy for young Aboriginal Women and Girls. I can see it being useful in trying to reduce discrimination and increase empathy in a number of settings, for example: - Hospital Emergency Departments - Police Watch House - Community Mental Health settings - Local

Government Community Development Sessions or Workshops - Campaigns to reduce violence against women.

Summary

Taken together the initial evaluation of the website was very positive, suggesting that the information fills an existing gap in resources and engages service providers in thinking about the issues facing young Aboriginal women and girls, and to change some of their activities based on this information.

Discussion

During the research phase of the project, it was found that many girls and young women commenced drinking and fighting at a young age. There is a lack of data about alcohol use and young Aboriginal women. From the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), we know about 13% of young Aboriginal women aged 15-24 years drink at levels exceeding health guidelines on single occasions (NATSISS 2014-15). Among young Australians in general, large national surveys have found that the average age young people start drinking is 16 years (AIHW, 2019). More than one-third (34%) of young Australians surveyed reported they had NEVER consumed alcohol. Forty three per cent of school students who were current drinkers obtained alcohol from their parents (AIHW, 2019). There has been a reported reduction in drinking among teenagers in Australia (Toumbourou, et al., 2018) and importantly among our sample, a third had not tried alcohol. However, those who had reported consuming alcohol, began drinking at an early age, did so regularly and at levels which can be considered harmful. This is particularly concerning as participants were under the age of 18 years. Drinking in adolescence has been associated with an increased risk of acute harms such as alcohol-related injuries and accidents (Lam, et al., 2017) and longer-term harms such as dependency in later life, social harms and mental health issues (McCambridge, McAlaney & Rowe, 2011). While this study is not representative of the experiences of all Aboriginal girls and young women, our previous research (Wilson, et al., 2013) also found that young Aboriginal women were consuming alcohol at levels which placed them at increased risk of experiencing alcohol-related harms. Significantly, they were commencing drinking at a very young age, well below the legal drinking age of 18.

It is of concern that the young women who were consuming alcohol demonstrated little reflection on underage drinking. Additionally, the supply of alcohol by older family members in the family home or at family events was perceived as a strategy for helping them stay safe. Studies show that, while there has been a reduction in parental supply of alcohol which has corresponded with a decrease in adolescent drinking (Toumbourou, et al., 2018), parents are still one of the main providers of alcohol to their underage children (Toumbourou, et al., 2018; White & Williams, 2016).

In relation to fighting, the majority (65 per cent) of young women in our study had engaged in a fight and most had done so by the age of thirteen. Fighting preceded drinking and offending for most participants. While it is important to note that males continue to perpetuate more violence than females, there has been growing speculation in the Australian and international media that females (in general) are becoming more violent (Special Broadcasting Services, 2013; Sayer, 2013). The jury is out as to whether this is the case with some arguing that the seeming increase is an artifice due to factors such as changing policing practices and less societal tolerance for girls' behaviour that was previously overlooked (Carrington, 2013). Scholars propose that there has not been attention paid to girls' fighting because it's viewed as something girls just do not do – as deviant, against the laws of femininity. For example, in relation to fighting Ness (2004, p. 33) argues that “[f]ew studies have specifically contemplated its value for girls as a source of pleasure, self-esteem, and cultural capital”.

The young women in this study offered a variety of reasons for why girls fight including jealousy, racism, rumour spreading and slurs against family. Participants' fighting was both instrumental (aiming to achieve a future goal) and expressive (emerging spontaneously out of anger or rage). While some young women reported feeling remorse for fighting, it was apparent that fighting also came with social and cultural capital, self-esteem, a release of anger and in some cases, pleasure (Ness, 2004; Carrington, 2013).

However, despite perceived benefits, fighting was causing serious injuries for the young women and their victims. Statistics show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are hospitalised as a result of assault at six times the rate of other Australians (AIHW 2016). For Indigenous girls and young women, the rate of injury due to assault is more than 17 times higher than other Australians (AIHW, 2016) and this is cause for great alarm. A small but growing scholarship around girls who use violence shows they have often been victimised themselves, come from backgrounds of poverty and parental drug and alcohol misuse, are part of the racial minority and have experienced sexual or physical abuse (Jones, 2008). These girls are more likely to respond in ways that place them at further risk of harm, disenfranchise them from protective mechanisms such as school, or to increase their likelihood of contact with the justice system through the misuse of drugs and alcohol, and fighting. Additionally, participating in violence increases the risk of future violence victimisation (Jones, 2008).

Additionally, many young women identified talking as an alternative to physical fighting. However, few could see it working and, on occasion, participants spoke as if fighting was an inevitable part of being a young Aboriginal girl. Several young women also spoke about their anger and ‘seeing red’ when they felt provoked – particularly in response to a slur against family – and had been taught to

deal with anger with their fists rather than their words. Resistance to the idea of alternatives to physical fighting may be because the young women do not have a *script* and have not often seen this behaviour modelled. This is an important finding and suggests a need for opening up a safe space for conversation around this.

It is crucial to recognise that most of the fighting the young women were participating in was against other Aboriginal girls. Aboriginal singer/songwriter, Richard Frankland, described lateral violence as:

The organised, harmful behaviours that we do to each other collectively as part of an oppressed group: within our families; within our organisations and; within our communities. When we are consistently oppressed we live with great fear and great anger and we often turn on those who are closest to us (qtd in AHRC, 2011).

Factors contributing to lateral violence include a people's history of colonisation and minority status, domination, intergenerational trauma, feelings of powerlessness and ongoing experiences of discrimination and racism from the dominant culture. It occurs when colonised and oppressed peoples turn on each other rather than the oppressive system and can involve gossiping, jealousy, shaming, feuding, physical violence, etc. (AHRC, 2011). Understanding the mechanisms and motivations of the young women's fighting cannot be disengaged from the historical context of colonialism and dispossession.

Given that Aboriginal juveniles and young adults are disproportionately over-represented in the criminal justice system and are more likely to be incarcerated today than any other time since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (SCATSIA, 2011) it is a positive finding that two-thirds of the young women in our study had not been involved with the criminal justice system, and of those who had, it was commonly for more minor offences. . Many of the young women reported experiencing loss and trauma in their short lives, but this did not necessarily dictate adverse outcomes. However, those who had had more extensive involvement with the justice system described contact with child protection services, intergenerational offending and parental incarceration, family breakdown and regular and heavy alcohol use, all of which have been recognised as risk factors in an Aboriginal person's pathway into the justice system (ALRC, 2017).

Aboriginal people are grossly overrepresented in Australian prisons and are the most incarcerated group of people in the world (Anthony, 2017). It is estimated that around 20% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will experience parental incarceration during their childhood compared to around 5% of non-Aboriginal children (Quilty, et al. 2014). Studies have shown an association between a parent's offending and anti-social behaviour with the likelihood of a child exhibiting their own conduct issues (Tzoumakis, 2019) and between parental incarceration and a child's increased risk of negative outcomes and involvement in the criminal justice system

themselves (Quilty, et al. 2014). Parental incarceration also puts young people at a heightened risk of involvement with child protection services (AIHW, 2017), increasing three-fold if a parent is or has been incarcerated (Dodson & Hunter, 2006). Aboriginal children are disproportionately over-represented in the child protection system and are 10 times more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be in out-of-home care (O'Donnell, et al., 2019). The Bringing them Home report highlighted the relationship between out-of-home care and an increased likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system (HREOC, 1997).

Various factors have been identified that place children and young people at risk of encountering negative outcomes. While it is now accepted that an Aboriginal young person's chance to transition into a healthy adult is far greater than has been the case in the past, many Aboriginal children continue to face significant adversity on their pathways to adulthood (Young, et al., 2017). However, as found in this study, adversity did not always predict involvement in drinking, fighting and offending. This finding is similar to other research which has shown that resilience in the face of adversity is common among Aboriginal youth (Young, et al., 2017; Hopkins, Zubrick & Taylor, 2014). Importantly, the young women in this study were all able to express hopes for their future which included graduating school, learning more about their culture, having their own houses and families, enough money to put food on the table, stable employment and travel. Such aspirations act protectively, and empowering young women to achieve them can circumvent negative pathways (Villeneuve, Dufour & Turcotte, 2019; Young, et al., 2017).

Considering the harms experienced by young women from drinking, fighting and offending, in addition to the trauma experienced by some young women, the importance of reaching out to and engaging with service providers and also accepting support was regarded as critical to reducing harms and for prevention. The girls and young women in our study revealed that they learnt early not to speak to people outside of the family circle and expressed a very real fear of child protection services and being taken away from their family as a consequence of seeking support. Additionally, they reported that their families were not well equipped to help them deal with stress and other emotional challenges. This results in a difficult situation for young women who require support and for service providers wishing to engage with young Aboriginal women. The role of family support in addressing challenges was not a key focus of this research, however it is an important finding requiring further consideration as it emphasises the additional support some families perhaps require.

Successful service provision and health promotion programs require engagement with young women. Previous research has identified that critical to this is the need for services and programs

which are easily accessible and also deemed as acceptable to young women (Warwick, Atkinson, Kiterua, et al., 2019). The characteristics of services and programs related to better engagement and fewer perceived barriers include low perceived risk of shame or stigma, group settings, and informal and opportunistic service delivery models. These findings are consistent with previous research (Durey, McEvoy, Swift-Otero et al., 2016; Gray, Wilson, Allsop et al., 2014; McBain-Rigg & Veitch, 2014; Warwick et al, 2019).

Practical challenges to accessing support services were also highlighted by the young women, including knowledge of actual service providers, their processes and what getting help looks like. Further unknowns such as transport to reach services and if payment for services was required created anxiety for young women seeking support. This lack of knowledge, and importantly lack of information from sources seen as credible by the young women is one that can readily be addressed by service provider organisations. Other research has similarly emphasised the need for service providers to understand barriers to accessing their services and develop strategies with community to reduce those barriers to access and engagement (Durey et al., 2016).

The therapeutic relationship with individual counsellors and others was also seen as critical to ongoing involvement. Consistent with previous research with Aboriginal young people in a remote setting in Western Australia (Warwick et al., 2019), the young women in our study highlighted the importance of workers who understand their lives and can communicate that with young people (indeed some highlighted the value of lived experience and Aboriginal identity as critical in a service provider). The use of yarning circles was identified as a low-barrier method of health promotion practice, information sharing and problem solving for young women. Important in this was the sense of safety and collaboration established in yarning circles, with reduced risk of shame.

A setting of importance discussed by many young women was school. Young women reported both positive and negative experiences with classroom teachers, school based support services and external services visiting school. The need for high quality in-school programs was clear from findings, including the need to house or deliver services that match the needs of young women. Notably, young women wanted to succeed at school. They wanted support from teachers without judgement and also recognised the need for early intervention for young people at risk. School was seen by some as a safe place and by others as a place of marginalisation. Those who felt marginalised at school also reported racism, lack of empathy from teachers and bullying. Those who felt safe and supported reported being engaged in an ongoing fashion, not just when there were problems. Additionally, they reported having teachers who believed in their abilities and school support staff (counsellors) who were readily available.

The fear of removal from family by child protection services was an important barrier to reaching out for help, and to the acceptance of help. The impact of past policies of removal on previous generations was still felt keenly by the young women in our study. These findings demonstrate the pervasiveness of these concerns and the extent to which they prevent young women accessing support. Low-risk opportunities for young women to engage in help and support are critical.

Despite their fears, the desire of the young women to be able to better engage with the services such as school and child protection in their daily lives was an important theme in the interviews and workshop. Young women wanted to be understood and heard by those working with them. They felt that increased understanding of their lives by service providers would lead to better opportunities. The resource, the YAWG website, developed as part of this study honours the voices of the young women and their stories and opens up their lived experiences to service providers. Preliminary evaluation results were positive, and suggested that viewing the website improved service providers' understanding of the issues facing young women and their own comfort in discussing difficult topics with young women, and barriers to and challenges of help-seeking with young women. Addressing comfort and understanding is consistently referred to as critical to reducing the barriers to young women seeking help in this research.

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