



## THE VICTORIA POLICE VISION PROGRAM: OUTCOMES EVALUATION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2015 Victoria Police implemented an intervention program in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. The program, called VISION, was targeted at young men aged 12 to 16 years old, who were considered at-risk of escalating antisocial and criminal behaviour. VISION employed a mixture of structured activities and mentoring to assist young men identify and build upon their strengths and capabilities, with the aim of reducing antisocial behaviour, improving educational engagement, and ultimately, reducing recidivism.

The program consisted of progression through three phases, intended to expose young men to increasing opportunities to exercise leadership. Successful completion of Phase 1 resulted in a young person graduating to Phase 2 as a mentor, while successful completion of Phase 2 resulted in progression to a leadership position in Phase 3. At each stage, young men were given greater opportunities to demonstrate and exercise leadership skills, with a concomitant increase in the responsibility and expectations for positive behaviour.

The program was run during school trimesters. At the commencement of each school term, a group of young men would enter the program at Phase 1. This resulted in a ‘rolling’ sample, in that young men could commence with the program at the start of each school term. As such, participants who started the program at the beginning of 2015 were able to progress through the three phases. Conversely, young men who commenced at the end of 2015 did not have the opportunity to progress past Phase 1.

To assist with program implementation and delivery, Victoria Police partnered with a range of stakeholders, including Outdoors Inc., Anglicare Victoria, the Navitas College of Public Safety, the Royal Melbourne Hospital and a variety of local businesses. As part of this partnership, Anglicare Victoria was commissioned to design and undertake an evaluation of the program’s outcomes. The results of the evaluation are presented in this report.

A pre-post evaluation design was utilised for the evaluation. Drawing on available evidence regarding the correlates of youth offending as well as the stated aims of the program, an outcomes assessment tool was also developed. The instrument utilised, as much as possible, validated instruments to measure risk factors (individual and family/environmental) and psychosocial functioning. Specific areas of psychosocial functioning included emotional and behavioural regulation, self-esteem, school engagement and commitment, conflict resolution and problem-solving and community connectedness.

A total of 16 young men completed Phase 1 of the VISION program, with only three of these young men successfully progressing through the three phases. Given the small sample sizes, statistical analyses of change were not possible. However, a number of tentative trends could be observed. For the 16 participants who successfully completed Phase 1 there was a trend towards improvement in school engagement and motivation to learn. There was also a modest trend towards improved interpersonal skills, the ability to regulate negative emotions, and the ability to control aggressive behaviour. This was counterbalanced by weak trends towards *decreasing* ability to engage in responsible decision making, or to react to potentially provocative situations with self-control. These findings, while tentative, provide an indication of the complexity of addressing the range of risk factors that influence antisocial and aggressive behaviour among at risk youth. They also point to the need to further evaluate, through more rigorous designs, the impact of an intervention program modelled on VISION.

Data from the three participants who successfully completed the three phases of VISION further reinforce the complexity of this sample. While clear patterns across the three participants were not easily discernible, the available data highlight the unique ways that risk

factors express themselves for individuals, and the varied trajectories that young people can take towards reductions in antisocial behaviour. Once again, these data point to the need to work holistically with young people, their families and their broader social contexts in order to more fully address the multiple and interacting risk factors that influence antisocial and criminal behaviour.

Despite the difficulties in determining the efficacy of this program, there were a range of observable outcomes. Specifically, close to 70% of participants had no further contact with the Criminal Justice System following their participation in the VISION program. Moreover, close to 40% of participants remained engaged with education following the program, with a further 20% remaining connected, but showing sporadic attendance. Overall, therefore, these outcomes provide tentative support for the potential of a program like VISION.

On the basis of these data, and the broader literature regarding effective components of early intervention programs for at-risk youth, a number of recommendations have been made. In general, the recommendations address four major issues:

1. That the VISION program be re-designed to more closely reflect the current evidence-base about what works with at-risk young men. This will involve collaboration with community-based stakeholders with expertise in youth justice and family services.
2. That the redesign process involve appropriate stakeholders from the start, and contain an embedded evaluation.
3. That more attention be given to the role of the family and the broader social environment, to ensure that risk factors across these domains are appropriately targeted. This will provide greater support for young people, and will assist in achieving stronger, and more sustainable outcomes.
4. That a stronger screening mechanism be applied to assess eligibility for participation in the program. This will ensure that the program is targeted at youth who are deemed 'low risk', which is consistent with current evidence about effective programs.

Overall, the VISION program contains a number of promising elements that, if developed into a more conceptually grounded and theoretically informed program, may lead to improved outcomes for at risk youth. While the data analysed for this report cannot shed light on this particular issue, anecdotal evidence suggests that some young men made considerable gains through their contact with VISION. Some of these gains may not be have been easy to quantify, reflecting instead an increased maturity and awareness of the self. These gains, although not directly captured throughout this report, should nevertheless be considered if the program is to be continued.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Youth antisocial and criminal behaviour has been an on-going topic of concern and policy attention. Typically, youth offending is framed as a problem that requires tougher law and order responses, reflecting broad assumptions regarding the causes and correlates of crime. These assumptions are further grounded in the belief that youth crime is ‘caused’ by internal pathologies that propel young people, particularly young men, towards antisocial and criminal behaviour. This emphasis on ‘deviance’ and pathology tends to obscure the way that environments affect individuals’ developmental trajectories, often having a powerful influence on their propensity towards antisocial and criminal behaviour.

The importance of contextualising youth crime against normative developmental processes is now well-established. A large number of longitudinal studies provide strong evidence for multiple trajectories that are differentially associated with persistent and serious criminal behaviour. Among the most consistent findings to emerge from these studies is the seemingly invariant phenomenon of the ‘age-crime’ curve, which shows that across countries and time periods, the prevalence of criminal behaviour follows a typical pattern. In essence, the proportion of young people engaging in antisocial and criminal behaviour begins to increase in late childhood and early adolescence, reaches a peak in late adolescence and early adulthood, and then begins to sharply decrease thereafter. With some slight variations in the slope of the curve, this pattern has been identified with self-report and official records of antisocial and criminal activity, for various types of crime, and across genders (for example, Farrington, Loeber & Jolliffe, 2008; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 2005; Stattin, Kerr & Bergman, 2010).

Similarly, the past 30 years has witnessed an increased focus on understanding the causes, correlates and risk factors associated with crime. As a result, there is now a large body of empirical and theoretical work indicating that youth antisocial and criminal behaviour is best understood as the result of complex interactions between internal factors that predispose some youth towards aggressive and antisocial behaviour in combination with criminogenic environments (for example, Casey, 2011; Gray, 2009; Farrington, 1995, 2005a; Moffitt, 1993; Odgers et al., 2008). The weight of evidence, therefore, points to the need to work not only with young offenders but also their broader social and ecological environments, including the family, the school and the community.

The role of the community is particularly important, particularly for youth who may be becoming disconnected from the education system. As will be discussed in more detail below, these youth are also likely to come from families characterised by multiple forms of disadvantage, to be exposed to antisocial and/or criminal peer groups, to engage in a range of risk-taking activities that further increase their exposure to antisocial sub-cultural norms and their risk of victimisation. In this context, communities that are able to identify ‘at-risk’ youth and provide a range of services and supports become increasingly important.

The Victoria Police VISION Program represents one such resource. As a community policing initiative operating in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, VISION provides young men who have come to the attention of the Criminal Justice System with opportunities to strengthen their connections to school and the community, through the provision of positive role modelling and skills-based activities. As an early intervention program, VISION aims to help young men, in the transition through adolescence, to better deal with interpersonal conflict, thereby reducing their potential for escalating violence or other forms of antisocial activity.

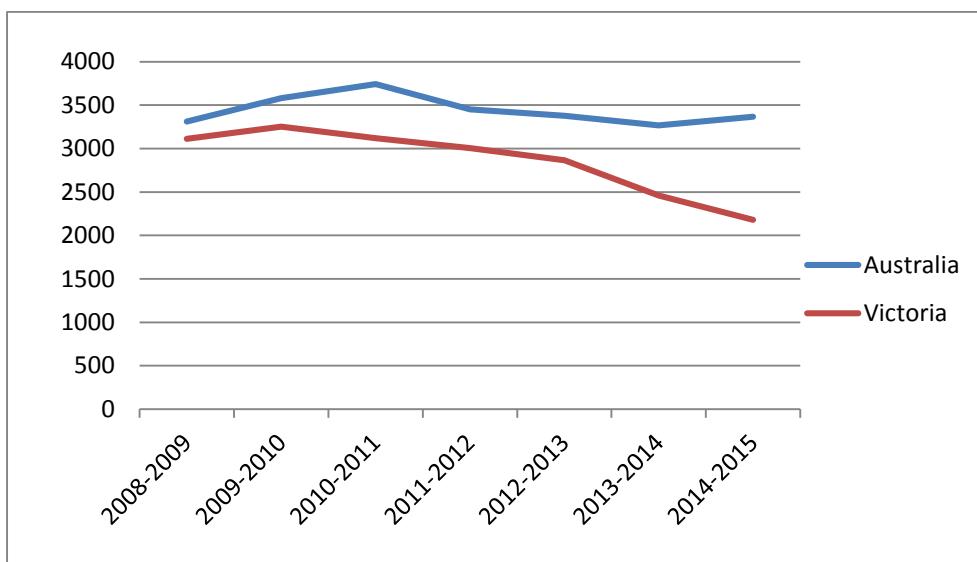
The aim of this report is provide a brief evaluation of the VISION program, based on data collected over a period of 12 months. The report begins with an overview of the contemporary scholarship on youth crime, its causes and correlates, and the types of interventions that have been shown to work with groups of young people who have not yet

fully penetrated into the Criminal Justice System. From there, the report outlines the core elements of the VISION program, and details some of its fundamental premises. A detailed methodology follows, outlining not only the design of the evaluation but also the assessments that were developed to measure outcomes. This is followed by a description of the main findings, and a discussion of the implications of these findings for future iterations of this program. Finally, the report concludes with a set of recommendations derived from the data and the broader literature, with a view to assisting Victoria Police and its partners strengthen the design of this important program.

### *1.1 Youth crime in Australia*

According to the most recent published statistics, youth crime in Australia has remained relatively stable since 2008-2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), and has in fact been declining since 2010-2011. This pattern is particularly pronounced in Victorian data, which shows a steep decline in the prevalence of youth offenders since 2009-2010 (see Figure 1).

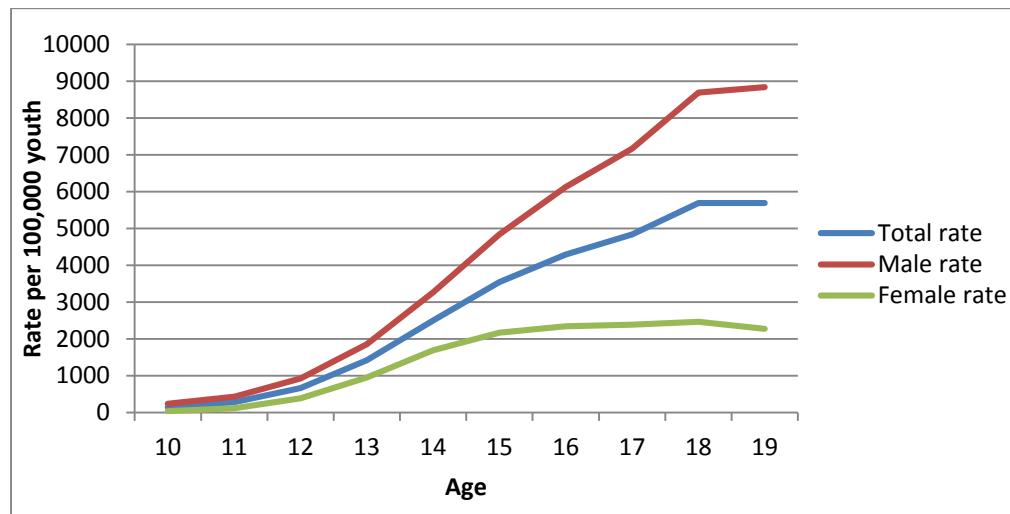
Figure 1. Longitudinal prevalence of youth offending in Australia and Victoria



Australian data also confirm the general age-crime trend. As shown in Figure 2, recent ABS (2016) data show a steep rise in the prevalence of youth crime among 12 to 18 year old youth, followed by a tapering of the prevalence among 19 year old youth. This pattern is most pronounced among males, but is also observable among females.

Official statistics in Australia, therefore, conform to broader international patterns showing a general decrease in overall youth offending, alongside an age-graded pattern of increasing prevalence during early adolescence, peaking in late adolescence and emerging adulthood. While these data provide important population-level information, they do capture those youth who are 'at risk' of either engaging in antisocial and criminal behaviour, or those who have had limited contact with the system and therefore may not be captured in official statistics. To better understand these groups, it is important to also understand the risk factors for antisocial and criminal behaviour.

Figure 2. Age-graded prevalence of youth crime in Australia for males, females and the total youth offender population



Research with community-based samples provides some further insights into the extent of youth antisocial and criminal behaviour throughout Australia. For example, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) has been conducting a longitudinal study of a national sample of children, youth and families that are broadly representative of the Australian community. As part of this study, Forrest and Edwards (2014) explored the risk and protective factors for 'early on-set' delinquency. Early on-set delinquency is an empirically-derived developmental trajectory, characterised by high levels of aggression at early stages of development (typically in infancy and early childhood), difficulties with emotion regulation, and an escalation into serious criminal behaviour prior to age 12 (see for example, Moffitt, 1993 and Domburgh, Loeber, Bezemer, Stallings & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2007). This trajectory is particularly important, as without appropriate and targeted intervention they are at the greatest risk of on-going Criminal Justice System involvement throughout their lives.

Drawing on a sample of 3,581 young people aged 12 to 13 years old, Forrest and Edwards (2014) found that among the young men:

- 23.6% had engaged in a physical fight in public
- 8.9% had carried a weapon
- 3.5% had used force or threats to get money or 'other things' from someone
- 2.9% had stolen a vehicle
- 4.8% had stolen *from* a vehicle
- 5.6% had engaged in arson
- 6.9% had engaged in graffiti
- 7.2% had engaged in theft
- 8.2% had engaged in shoplifting
- 9.3% had engaged in property damage (excluding damage to motor vehicles, which was a separate category)
- 15.2% had skipped school
- 5.6% had run away from home
- 5.4% had been caught by the police

Therefore, these figures indicate that while the overall prevalence of criminal and antisocial behaviour is generally low (with the exception of physical fights in public and status offences

linked to skipping school) a non-trivial proportion of young men are engaging in a range of antisocial, violent and criminal acts during early stages of their adolescence.

## *1.2 Risk factors for antisocial and criminal activity*

The statistics presented in the previous section provide an indication of the extent of the problem associated with youth antisocial and criminal behaviour. They do not, however, provide much information about the factors that contribute to this behaviour. Since the 1980s there has been a large body of research dedicated to understanding the causes of crime, resulting in a sophisticated knowledge base drawing on criminology, psychology, sociology, neuroscience and psychiatry. While these different disciplines tend to emphasise slightly different ‘causal’ mechanisms and pathways, they all reflect a general understanding that antisocial and criminal behaviour is determined by the interaction of multiple factors. Some of these factors are internal to individuals, and may reflect predispositions towards aggression, impulsivity and beliefs supportive of crime/violence/antisocial behaviour. Other factors are environmental, and can include family risk factors linked to violence, alcohol and/or drug abuse, mental illness, and poverty. Others still are social, reflecting much larger societal issues linked to entrenched poverty and disadvantage. When viewed in isolation, none of these risk factors are able to adequately explain juvenile offending. Together, however, many have been found to be strongly predictive of antisocial and criminal behaviour in childhood and adolescence (for example Farrington, 2005a; Intravia, Pelletier, Wolff & Baglivio, 2016; Maas, Herrenkohl & Sousa, 2008; Moffitt, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 2005).

### *1.2.1 ‘Internal’ risk factors*

A range of internal risk factors have been empirically linked to juvenile offending and re-offending. These internal risk factors include a general pattern of aggressive, violent and destructive behaviour, a reduced ability to empathise with others, a manipulative personality style, the inability to delay gratification and/or a purposeful engagement in risk taking activities, and evidence of attitudes supportive of rule violations, aggression and violence (Curcio, Mak & George, 2016; Forrest & Edwards, 2014; Wolff & Baglivio, 2016).

Research has also pointed to poor emotion regulation as a correlate of youth offending. This can include the inability to manage intense emotions in the face of provocation and/or potentially confronting social situations, and can extend to difficulties with a range of interpersonal relationships (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 2006; Fontaine, Yang, Dodge, Bates & Pettit, 2008). For example, young people ‘at risk’ of engaging in antisocial or criminal activity may react with anger and/or aggression in the face of perceived provocation (Dodge, 2006). Alternatively, some young people may internalise their emotions leading to the experience of anxiety, depression and in extreme cases significant self-harm (Wright, Crawford & Castillo, 2006). This tends to be more common in females, although it may also underlie some of the behavioural difficulties that are observed in young men (Neely-Barnes & Whitted, 2011; Schilling, Aseltine & Gore, 2008).

While these risk factors are important, they are most often contextualised against a background of broader environmental and social risk factors. Early experiences of adversity, hardship or maltreatment serve as important ‘background’ conditions that have been shown to either contribute to the development of traits and characteristics that propel individuals towards antisocial and violent behaviour, or exacerbate pre-existing dispositions.

### *1.2.2 Environmental and social risk factors*

A range of theories have been proposed to explain the link between exposure to criminogenic, or crime promotive, environments and eventual criminal behaviour. Theories that are more closely grounded in criminology and psychology tend to emphasise the interaction between proximate environments, such as the family and the community, and internal or individual-level risk factors (see for example, Crick & Dodge, 1994; Farrington, 2005b, Farrington, Ttofi & Coid, 2009; Fontaine & Dodge, 2009; Lacourse, Dupéré & Loeber, 2008; Loeber et al., 2003; Moffitt, 1993). While the breadth of theories is too expansive to review here, a particular strand of research provides insight into the role that such environments play in the development of antisocial and criminal behaviour – namely, developmental or life-course criminological approaches. These theories contextualise antisocial and criminal behaviour within a developmental perspective, and in so doing explicitly recognise the multiple factors that contribute to an individual's engagement in crime. This includes genetic and biological factors, antenatal stresses (i.e. maternal drug and/or alcohol use, experience of abuse during pregnancy, the experience of poverty and poor nutrition during pregnancy), family stresses associated with poverty or hardship, socio-economic factors, and exposure to violence, abuse and maltreatment during different stages of development extending from birth through to adolescence (see for example, Farrington et al., 2009; Fontaine & Dodge, 2009; Lacourse et al., 2008; Loeber et al., 2003; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001).

The body of literature that has emerged from developmental and life-course criminological approaches is expansive, but basically converges on the following key findings:

- Low socio-economic status, specifically poverty is a significant risk factor for later criminality. A person's race/ethnicity is also important in this context, and combined with poverty results in limited access to appropriate and affordable housing, medical and educational resources.
- These families tend to also experience significant disruption, particularly associated with parental drug and alcohol abuse, the presence of mental illnesses, and parental criminality.
- These families also tend to live in low socio-economic status neighbourhoods, where employment opportunities are limited.
- Children born into these families are often exposed to violence from early stages of their lives, either within their families and/or within their neighbourhoods. This has significant and long-term impacts on their development, both neurologically and psychosocially. That is, exposure to violence, abuse and/or neglect during early childhood have been shown to fundamentally alter neurological connections in the developing brain, leading to a range of difficulties with emotion regulation, attention, impulse control, and learning.

A number of underlying mechanisms have been postulated to explain the pathways through which exposure to these risk factors influences later criminality. At the core of many of these explanations are concepts drawn from attachment theory, social learning theory, developmental psychology and cognitive psychology. Specifically, research has shown that exposure to hostile and threatening environments during infancy and early childhood can result in physiological responses that influence information processing and behaviour (Miller, 2015; Riggs, 2010). Over time, a child also begins to develop cognitive representations that further bias information processing in favour of recognising potential threats in the environment. In response to these perceived threats, anger, aggression, hostility and disengagement can occur (Harvey, Dorahy, Virtue & Duthie, 2012; Wolff & Baglivio, 2016).

For other children, the progression to antisocial and criminal behaviour can be due to exposure to valued role models who 'transmit' values and belief systems supportive of violence. Typically such transmission will occur in the context of other risk factors, including

exposure to and/or experience of violent victimisation, as well as broader risk factors linked to disruptive family dynamics, and indices of hardship (Chung, Little & Steinberg, 2005; Mass et al., 2008). The ‘mechanism’ at play, however, is chronic exposure to significant people in the child’s life who model not just behaviour, but also the underlying belief systems that support behaviour (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961).

For some children and young people, exposure to criminogenic environments interacts with an internal predisposition towards aggression (Farrington, 2005b; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001). In these instances, the risk of future antisocial and criminal behaviour is particularly pronounced, as these children may lack the necessary protective factors within their family or broader social environments to mitigate against these risks. Put another way, while not all children who grow up in impoverished or fractured family environments will go on to engage in antisocial and criminal behaviour, the presence of such environments is *predictive* of such a trajectory (Mass et al., 2008; Odgers et al., 2008; Wolff & Baglivio, 2016). In these instances, positive parenting practices become particularly salient, as they provide the environmental and interpersonal supports that can begin to alter antisocial trajectories (see for example, Intravia et al., 2016; Forrest & Edwards, 2014; Hay, Meldrum, Widdowson & Piquero, 2016; Sroufe, Coffino & Carlson, 2010; Walters 2015b).

Finally, as children mature into later stages of childhood and adolescence, the role of peers becomes increasingly salient. There is a rich body of criminological literature that attempts to identify the specific role that antisocial peers can play in a young person’s developmental trajectory. For example, Moffitt (1993) postulated that for most young people, antisocial, risk-taking and delinquent behaviour is a normative part of development. Specifically, for most young people, the transition to adolescence and emerging adulthood is defined by identity development. In this context, forging an identity that allows a young person to separate his/her current self from his/her childhood self is imperative, and often involves pushing boundaries specially associated with authority figures. For this group of young people, antisocial activity is often conducted in the presence of peers and for their benefit. However, within these peer groups there is also a small proportion of individuals who are on a ‘chronic’ or life-course persistent offending trajectory. These young people typically exhibit a wide range of the risk factors listed above, and engage in a higher volume and more severe forms of antisocial and criminal behaviour at all stages of their development. Therefore, during adolescence and emerging adulthood, exposure to young people on the ‘life-course persistent’ trajectory can result in a ‘transmission’ effect, whereby young people who are likely to naturally desist once they enter early adulthood are nevertheless exposed to, and can often internalise, values and beliefs supportive of antisocial and criminal behaviour.

### *1.2.3 Summary of risk factor research*

In summary, the most rigorous available evidence points to a range of factors that contribute to antisocial and criminal behaviour. Some of these factors are internal to individuals and many are amenable to change. However, focusing exclusively on internal ‘deficits’ obscures the fact that criminal behaviour, especially during adolescence, is in large part influenced by the environments young people are exposed to throughout much of their development. When viewed from this perspective, family dynamics, the influence of peers and community connections emerge as salient contributory factors that need to be addressed alongside an emphasis on ‘antisocial personalities’, emotional dysregulation, hyperactivity and poor impulse control. Put another way, focussing exclusively on internal deficits is unlikely to lead to lasting and meaningful change, as young people are fundamentally embedded within broader ecological environments that can and should be drawn upon to alter ‘at risk’ young people’s developmental trajectories.

### *1.3 Early intervention approaches*

In light of the evidence pointing to the role of early experiences in shaping developmental trajectories, a number of studies have investigated the components or elements of effective programs. The research reviewed in this section will focus specifically on programs targeted at youth who have been identified as ‘at risk’ of escalating criminal justice system involvement.

In a recent study, de Vries, Hoeve, Assink, Stams and Asscher (2015) investigated the effectiveness of prevention programs. The study included an analysis and synthesis of 39 smaller studies that collectively produced a sample size of 4755 young people. Across all of these studies, the average age of youth was 14.18 years old. The results of a meta-analysis showed that overall, prevention programs had a modest effect on recidivism, resulting in approximately 13% reduction in re-offending. Moreover, the largest reductions in recidivism were associated with programs that:

- Included behavioural modelling, parenting skills training or behavioural contracting
- Targeted young people engaged in antisocial or criminal activity *and* their siblings
- Were offered in the community, or in the direct environments of the young people (i.e., home, school)
- Targeted a broad range of risk factors
- Were delivered on a one-to-one basis, rather than in groups
- Targeted violence, rather than general delinquency.

De Vries et al (2015) also found that shorter programs were more effective. This is consistent with the broader offender rehabilitation literature, which has identified that the intensity to programs should be matched to the level of risk of offenders. According to the risk principle, lower risk offenders do not benefit from intensive programs, as their level of need is lower and therefore the intrusiveness of intensive interventions is counterproductive (Andrews & Dowden, 2006; Andrews et al., 1990).

The results of this study indicate that prevention programs targeted at ‘at risk’ youth can be effective at reducing recidivism if they target a specific range of factors, incorporate cognitive behavioural techniques, are delivered within a community setting, and are extended to a young person’s siblings. Importantly, the strongest programs included parenting skills training alongside work with the young people.

Mentoring programs have also received considerable attention, especially in relation to ‘at risk’ youth. This is supported by a broader literature base, which has identified the potentially protective role of significant adult figures in young people’s lives. For example, Walters (2015a) investigated whether the presence of a role model, and a young person’s level of attachment to that role model, influenced association with antisocial peers and own antisocial behaviour. The results showed that for young men, attachment to a male role model, particularly a father or father-figure, limited the amount of contact young men had with antisocial peers, thereby reducing their own delinquent or antisocial behaviour. However, this effect was only observed among young men who were not already actively associating with antisocial groups.

The overall impact of mentoring programs for at-risk youth was tested by Tolan, Henry, Schoeny, Lovegrove and Nichols (2014) through a comprehensive meta-analysis. After reviewing 46 studies, the authors concluded that overall, mentoring programs can have a small but significant impact on delinquency, aggression, substance use and academic achievement. However, these impacts are dependent on how mentoring programs are structured. Specifically, programs that emphasise the provision of emotional support and

advocacy were on average associated with stronger effects, resulting in better outcomes for the ‘at-risk’ youth.

Overall, research into intervention programs highlights that under certain circumstances they can lead to demonstrable improvements across a range of outcomes. Importantly, the research reviewed throughout this section points to the role that families and broader communities play in ensuring that the gains that are made through these programs are sustained. By excluding the family there is a real risk that young people will be unable to alter their antisocial trajectories, regardless of the nature and intensity of intervention that is provided.

With these issues in mind, the next section provides a description of the model underpinning the Victoria Police VISION Program.

## 2. THE VICTORIA POLICE VISION PROGRAM

The Victoria Police VISION Program is targeted at young men (12-16 years old) living in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, who have been identified as at-risk of escalating antisocial and/or criminal behaviour.

VISION aims to diminish the risk of escalating antisocial behaviour by engaging young men and ideally their families. The program utilises an activity-based approach that focusses on building community connectedness, self-esteem and emotion and behavioural regulation. It further aims to increase young men's social and human capital by promoting greater engagement with education. The key components of the VISION Program model are articulated in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Key components of the VISION Program model*

| Program elements                      | Target group   |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Target group</b>                   | 'At risk' young men (12-16 years old) and their families; low-risk young offenders   |
| <b>Intervention type and modality</b> | Youth: Group-based, activity-based, education, role-modelling, links to external service providers where needed/appropriate<br><br>Families: Education, group-based activities, links to external service providers where needed/appropriate.  |
| <b>Duration</b>                       | Youth: 12 weeks per program phase; total of 3 phases<br><br>Families: Unspecified  |
| <b>Intensity</b>                      | Youth: Half-day/ day sessions, once a week for 12-36 weeks<br><br>Families: Unspecified  |
| <b>Entry and exit points</b>          | Youth: Fixed entry points and progression through the program. Provisions in place for a young man to repeat a phase if necessary (e.g., deemed not ready to graduate to next phase).<br><br>Families: Fixed entry points. Unclear whether families would also progress through various phases of the program. |

The original proposal for the program included concurrent work with young men and their families. To this end, Victoria Police partnered with Anglicare Victoria to assist with the provision of expertise in case work with disadvantaged young people, and the provision of programs/services for young people and their families. This included the provision of a modified version of Anglicare's *Breaking the Cycle* program, a therapeutic/educational program for parents/carers who are experiencing violence and abuse perpetrated by their children. This program provides assistance with parenting strategies and support to address the emotional and psychological consequences of family violence.

For the young people, the program is comprised of three progressive 'phases', each consisting of 12 weekly sessions. Full program completion therefore consists of 36 weeks

over a 12-month period. Sessions include structured activities involving Victoria Police and a range of partners, including community-based and private organisations. Activities include Ju Jitsu and mixed martial arts, outdoor ‘adventure’ activities such as bush walking and camping, survivalist skills training, attendance at the Royal Melbourne Hospital’s trauma unit, engagement in work-experience style workshops, and attendance at talks regarding cyber safety and respectful relationships.

In each session the core activity aims to build skills and address problems around the following key areas:

- Interpersonal skills development, covering leadership, teamwork, effective communication, problem solving, persistence and resilience
- Self-development, including building self-esteem, self-respect, effective emotion and behavioural regulation (i.e. anger management) and conflict resolution
- Community spirit, including respect for property, community values, community engagement
- Prosocial lifestyle, including the impact of high risk behaviour such as drug and alcohol use/abuse
- Relationships and safety, including cyber safety, responding to violence and victimisation, and respectful relationships.

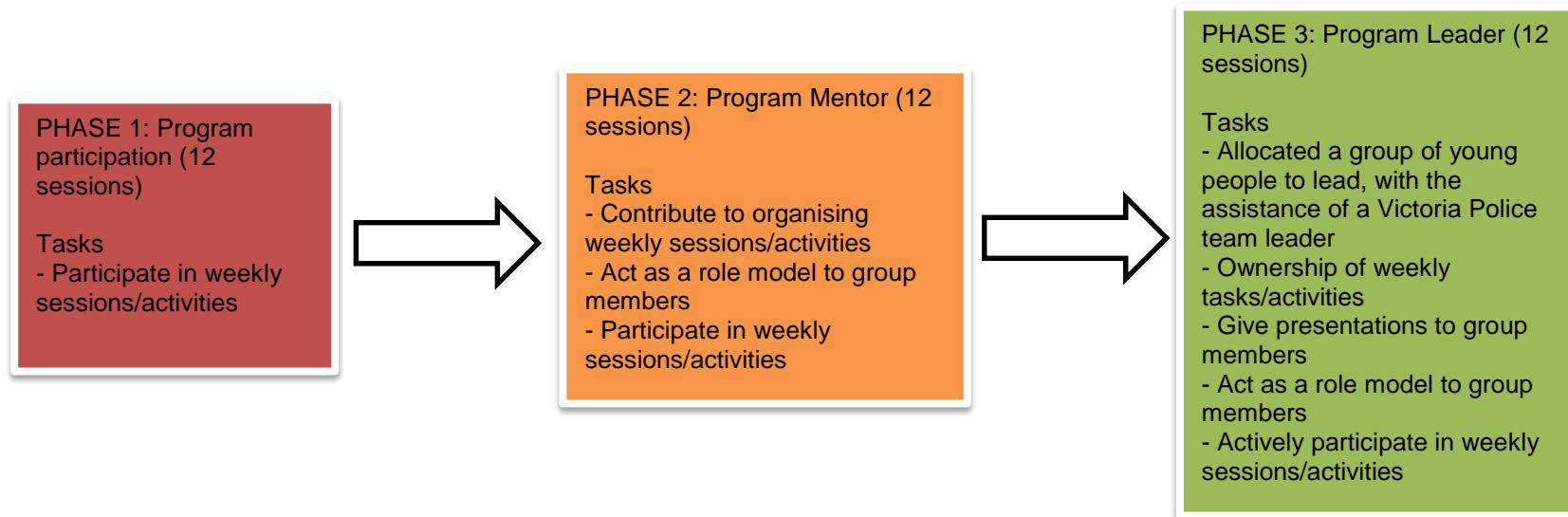
The program is facilitated by five Team Leaders and one supervisor from the Victoria Police Proactive Policing Unit, and student volunteers from the Navitas College of Public Safety, who act as mentors for the young men. In addition, program participants engage with a range of community leaders and service providers, and are therefore exposed to a wide range of prosocial modelling opportunities.

The program also contains a progressive element, whereby the young men are able to move from program participants, to mentors and finally to program leaders. Successful progression through the three phases necessitates active engagement with the program and its content, demonstrable emotional, behavioural and/or psychosocial change specifically in the areas of antisocial behaviour, and evidence of ‘leadership’ qualities and skills. Decisions about eligibility to progress to the next phase of the program are made by the Victoria Police VISION program team leaders and supervisor, based on their understanding and knowledge of each young man. While such decisions are necessarily subjective, they also entail a degree of flexibility that is important when working with young people who may be disenfranchised and disconnected, and therefore may not have opportunities to utilise their leadership qualities in prosocial ways. In this context, assessments of a young person’s ‘potential’, while vague, nevertheless allow for strengths to be identified and harnessed that may otherwise be missed.

Progression through the program phases provides participants with opportunities to further develop their interpersonal skills, build their self-concept and, ideally, begin to identify and apply their personal strengths in more prosocial ways. As depicted in Figure 3, the program aims to achieve this by providing young men with increasing opportunities to not only show their leadership qualities, but importantly, to apply these as a role modelling technique for other young men in the program. In this way, all participants, regardless of what stage they have progressed to, are exposed to a range of meaningful role models.

Finally, at the completion of each program phase the young men participate in a graduation ceremony, where their achievements are acknowledged and celebrated in the presence of their family and friends.

Figure 3  
VISION Program: Model of progression through phases



### 3. EVALUATION DESIGN

Victoria Police commissioned Anglicare Victoria, as a key project partner, to develop an evaluation framework. The evaluation framework consists of an embedded assessment tool that captures the following information:

- Demographic details, individual-level risk factors, and family-level risk factors. Items for this tool were drawn from the literature on known risk factors for juvenile offending and re-offending. The assessment is completed by Victoria Police VISION program team leaders at the commencement and completion of each program phase, and information is drawn primarily from administrative datasets, including LEAP, and parents/caregivers.
- Psychosocial risk and strengths. This assessment is comprised of validated instruments that measure psychosocial functioning across a range of domains, including attitudes towards school, self-worth, self-control and cooperation, conflict resolution, perceived social support, parental monitoring and supervision and civic responsibility. A full description of each instrument is provided in the Method Section of this report. This assessment is completed by Victoria Police VISION program team leaders in conjunction with each young person.

In addition to the assessment instrument, the evaluation employed a mixed-methods pre-test/post-test design. All assessments were conducted at the commencement of the program, and then again at the completion of each program phase. For most participants, this meant a 13 week pre-test/post-test period. These data were utilised to create demographic, risk and psychosocial profiles of program participants at program commencement (baseline) and to compare how these profiles changed following exposure to at least one full phase of the VISION program. Such comparisons, while statistically weak, can nevertheless provide some insights into the interpersonal risk and protective factors that a program of this type is most likely to effectively target.

Each assessment instrument also included open-ended questions to allow young people to describe their expectations going into the program (i.e., at baseline or commencement) and their experiences of the program (i.e., at the completion of each phase).

#### *3.1 Evaluation aims*

The aim of this evaluation is provide some insights into whether the VISION program was able to achieve the objective of reducing antisocial behaviour, improve interpersonal and psychosocial skills, and improve educational engagement for a group of young men considered at-risk of further Criminal Justice System involvement. Due to the small number of program participants, and the absence of control or comparison group, this evaluation cannot speak to whether the program was effective at achieving change. It can, however, highlight some of the areas that a program such as VISION is most likely to effectively target.

## 4. METHOD

### 4.1 Participants

A total of 18 young men participated in the program, from April 2015 to November 2015. Most participants (44.4%,  $n=8$ ) completed Phase 1, 27.8% ( $n=5$ ) completed Phase 2, and 16.7% ( $n=3$ ) completed Phase 3. Two participants failed to complete a full phase of the program. One of these participants did not engage with the program, showing poor attendance and a lack of interest. The other participant experienced significant individual and family-level difficulties and would run-away from home on a regular basis. During the course of his involvement in the VISION program he went missing for a period of nine weeks. These two participants did not have follow-up data, and therefore have been dropped from all analyses.

The mean age of the remaining participants was 14.2 years old ( $SD=1.1$ ). Consistent with the cultural diversity evident in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, there was some variability in ethnic identity among the sample, including young people who identified as Australian, Ethiopian, European (Greek, Scottish, Spanish and Italian), South American, Sri Lankan, and Pacific Islander. Only one participant identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

### 4.2 Measures

The baseline and follow-up assessment for young people was comprised of two elements. The first covered demographic details and criminogenic risk factors, while the second covered psychosocial functioning.

#### 4.2.1 Demographic characteristics and criminogenic risk factors

Items for this component of the assessment were drawn from existing literature on the factors that are empirically linked to the risk of offending and re-offending. Items covered both static and dynamic risk factors, as well as family and individual level risk factors. Static risk factors included prior contact with the criminal justice system (e.g., cautions, convictions, probation) and offence history information (type of offences, number of times that a young person has been charged and convicted, age at first conviction). Most items were dichotomously score as either present or absent.

Dynamic or individual-level risk factors included whether the young person had: scored high or very high on the Conduct Problems scale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ: Goodman, 1997), scored high or very high on the Hyperactive scale of the SDQ, perpetrated family violence<sup>1</sup>, disengaged from school, associated with antisocial peers, regularly abused illicit substances, regularly abused alcohol. Each item was given a score of 1 if it was present and 0 if it was absent. The Conduct Problems scale of the SDQ was utilised as a proxy measure of antisocial potential, while high scores on the Hyperactive scale were utilised as a proxy measure of impulsivity.

Family-level risk factors included exposure to family violence, parental criminality, sibling criminality, parental drug and alcohol abuse, and parental mental health issues.

<sup>1</sup> While this can be seen as an outcome (i.e., engaging in violent behaviour) it can also be seen as an indicator of antisocial and/or violence potential. Specifically, research has shown that aggression and violence at a young age are significant risk factors for future criminal activity (see for example Dean, Brame & Piquero, 1996; Mazerolle, Piquero & Brame, 2010; Murrell, Christoff & Henning, 2007). For the purpose of this evaluation, engaging in family violence was operationalised as a measure of risk. As such, it is not used as an outcome throughout the report.

Dichotomous variables were again created to indicate either the presence or absence of each risk factor.

In addition, two composite risk scores were created to help clarify the relative contribution of family and individual-level factors to the risk profiles of the young men in the program. The family risk composite score was the sum of each of the family-level risk factors described above. Scores on this composite range from 0 to 6 with higher scores indicating the presence of a higher number of risk factors located in the family environment. As parents/caregivers were not a specific target group for the VISION program, this composite score was only created from information obtained at the baseline assessment.

The individual-level risk composite score was the sum of the individual-level risk factors. At baseline, the score reflected the presence/absence of risk factors in the young person's life, while at follow-up it reflected the presence/absence of risk factors during the program. Total scores ranged from 0 to 7, with higher scores indicating the presence of a higher number of individual-level risk factors.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ: Goodman, 1997) is a validated instrument designed to measure children and young people's emotional and behavioural regulation and their socialisation skills. The SDQ can be used with children as young as five years old, and can either be completed by the child/young person, a teacher or a parent/carer. For this evaluation, the teacher version was used as the instrument was completed by the VISION program team leaders.

The SDQ contains 25 items rated on a 3 point scale from 0 (Not true) to 2 (Very true). The 25 items are clustered into four 'scales' including emotional symptoms (anxiety, depressive symptomatology), conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems. An additional scale 'Prosocial' measures children's and young people's socialisation skills.

Each scale has scores ranging from 0 to 10, where higher scores are indicative of greater 'dysfunction'. The only exception is the Prosocial scale, where higher scores are indicative of more adaptive functioning. Four scales (emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems) are summed to produce a Total Difficulties Score, which ranges from 0 to 40. Here too, higher scores are indicative of greater difficulties in emotional, behavioural and psychosocial functioning. A validation study conducted with a large sample of Victorian youth indicated that the SDQ has good reliability coefficients, ranging from 0.71 to 0.87 (Mellor, 2005).

#### *4.2.2 Psychosocial functioning*

Participants' psychosocial functioning was assessed across the following domains: academic engagement, behavioural regulation including the ability to make responsible choices and the ability to exercise self-control, self-worth, perceived social support from family, and civic engagement and responsibility. Parental monitoring and supervision was also assessed, as this has been found to be linked to increased risk of antisocial behaviour.

School engagement was measured through the Motivation and Self-Regulation subscale of the School Attitudes Assessment Survey (SAAS: McCoach, 2002). This sub-scale is comprised of four items measuring a young person's ability to initiate and maintain behaviours that are needed for goal attainment. In the original instrument items are rated on a 7 point scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree), with scores ranging from 4 to 28. The original validation study produced strong reliability coefficients for this subscale, ranging 0.87 to 0.90.

For the purpose of this evaluation the rating scale was modified from 7 points to 5 points, anchored at one end by a rating of 1 (Strongly disagree) and at the other end by a rating of 5

(Strongly agree). This was done for ease of readability and completion by participants. As a result, the possible range of scores is 4 to 20, with higher scores indicative of greater academic motivation and goal directed behaviour. Reliability coefficients could not be estimated due to the small sample size.

Behavioural regulation was measured through the Youth Assets Survey (Oman et al., 2002) and the Individual Protective Factors Index (Phillips & Springer, 1992 as cited in Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn & Behrens, 2005). The Youth Assets Survey was designed to measure a range of family, community and individual 'assets' or strengths that support healthy development and resilience. The full instrument is comprised of 40 items measuring family communication, peer role models, future aspirations, responsible choices, community involvement, recreational activities, religious activities and the presence of non-parental adult role models.

For this evaluation, only the Responsible Choices subscale of the Youth Assets Survey was utilised. This subscale is comprised of six items measuring the extent to which a young person is able to engage in responsible decision making. Items include, '*I can say no to activities that I think are wrong*' and '*If I really want something, I think I should work to get it*'. Each item is scored on a 4 point scale from 1 (Not at all like me) to 4 (Very much like me). Scores range from 6 to 24 with higher scores indicative of greater ability to make responsible choices. The original validation study reported adequate internal reliability estimates for this scale ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ).

The Conflict Resolution scale of the Individual Protective Factors Index (Phillips & Springer, 1992 as cited in Dahlberg et al., 2005) is a measure of young people's ability to regulate their emotions and behaviours when faced with frustration, and to interact with others in prosocial and positive ways. The scale consists of 12 items, divided into two factors – self-control (e.g., '*I get mad easily*' and '*Sometimes I break things on purpose*') and cooperation (e.g., '*Being part of a team is fun*' and '*Helping others makes me feel good*'). Items are scored on four-point scale, with all items on the self-control scale being reverse scored. The total score can range from 12 to 48, with higher scores indicative of a greater tendency towards cooperation and self-control. Dahlberg et al (2005) cite moderate reliability coefficients for this scale, ranging from 0.68 for self-control to 0.70 for co-operation.

The Global Self-Worth subscale of Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC: Harter, 1985) was used as the measure of self-worth. The SPPC contains 36 items, measuring perceptions of competence and capability across five domains, including academic, social, behavioural, athletic and physical. The scale also includes a measure of 'global self-worth', which taps into more general self-perceptions. The Global Self-Worth subscale contains six items, including '*Some kids are often unhappy with themselves, but other kids are pretty pleased with themselves*' and '*Some kids are very happy being the way they are, but other kids wish they were different*'. Items are presented as paired statements, and children/young people are asked to read each statement and choose which one applies to them. They are then asked to indicate whether the statement they have chosen is 'really true of them' or 'sort of true of them'. Each paired statement is therefore scored on a four point scale. The total score for the Global Self-Worth subscale ranges from 6 to 24, with higher scores indicating a greater sense of self-worth. The scale has been found to have good reliability, with an alpha coefficient of 0.84 (Sabatelli, Anderson & LaMotte, 2005).

Connection to family was measured through the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support – Family subscale (MSPSS: Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988). The full MSPSS is comprised of 12 items measuring an individual's subjective evaluation of the perceived adequacy of support from three primary sources – family, friends and significant others. For this evaluation, only the family subscale was utilised. This scale consists of four items that were originally measured on a 7 point rating scale. For the purpose of this evaluation, the

scale was revised to 5 points, anchored by 1 (Rarely or never) and 5 (Always). Similar revisions have been reported by Sabetelli et al. (2005) who also report that with a revised rating structure the scale achieves an excellent reliability coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

Parental monitoring and supervision were assessed via two items from the Parental Monitoring scale (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1999). The two items measure the extent to which young people perceive that their parents/caregivers know who they are with and what they are doing, when they are not home. Each item is rated on a four point scale, from 1 (Almost never) to 4 (Almost all of the time). An average score is calculated, with higher scores indicative of greater parental monitoring. Internal reliability coefficients range from 0.66 to 0.77 (Sabatelli et al., 2005; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1999).

Finally, community engagement was measured through the Civic Responsibility Survey (CRS: Furco, Muller & Ammon, 1998). The survey consists of 10 items measuring the extent to which a young person feels connected to, and values involvement in, his/her community. Example items include, '*I feel like I am part of a community*', '*I know what I can do to help make the community a better place*' and '*I feel like I can make a difference in the community*'. Each item is rated on a 3 point scale, ranging from 1 (Disagree) to 3 (Agree a lot), with higher scores indicating a greater degree of community connection and involvement. The instrument was validated with samples of primary and high school students in the United Kingdom, and showed moderate to strong internal reliability coefficients ( $\alpha = 0.76$  to  $0.93$ ).

#### 4.3 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected for all young men who commenced the VISION program. At the commencement of the program, VISION team leaders completed a 'background survey' capturing demographic, offence history and risk profile information. Team leaders also completed the psychosocial assessment, with the young person, within the first two weeks of program engagement. The risk profile and psychosocial assessment was conducted again at the completion of each program phase. As such, each participant had at least four assessments completed – two 'demographic and risk profile' surveys and two psychosocial assessment surveys, corresponding to a baseline and follow-up assessment.

A paired-samples t-test analysis was originally proposed for the evaluation. However, due to the small total number of VISION program participants, and the even smaller number of young men who progressed through the three phases of the program, inferential tests are not appropriate. Instead, descriptive statistics will be utilised to create profiles of the sample, detailing their demographic characteristics, risk and psychosocial profiles. Although baseline and follow-up statistics will be reported, it is not possible to determine whether any identified changes are statistically significant. Moreover, all comparisons are based on data collected at baseline and at the completion of Phase 1, as this represents the largest sample size available. As a result, this evaluation cannot speak to the full impact of the full duration of the VISION program (i.e., 36 weeks).

Where possible, qualitative data collected as part of the psychosocial assessments has been presented to provide contextualisation for the quantitative profiles.

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1 Risk profiles

An assessment of static risk factors showed that half of the sample ( $n=9$ ) had been cautioned at some time during their adolescence, with an average rate of just over one caution per person ( $M = 1.4$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ , range 1-3). Two of the young men had been convicted of a crime prior to the program. The average age at first conviction was just over 15 years old ( $M=15.5$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ), and charges included criminal damage, unlawful assault, burglary, theft of a motor vehicle and escape from lawful custody. As such, the overall proportion of young men who had had significant contact with the Criminal Justice System was relatively low.

A very high proportion of program participants exhibited a range of individual and family-level risk factors. For example:

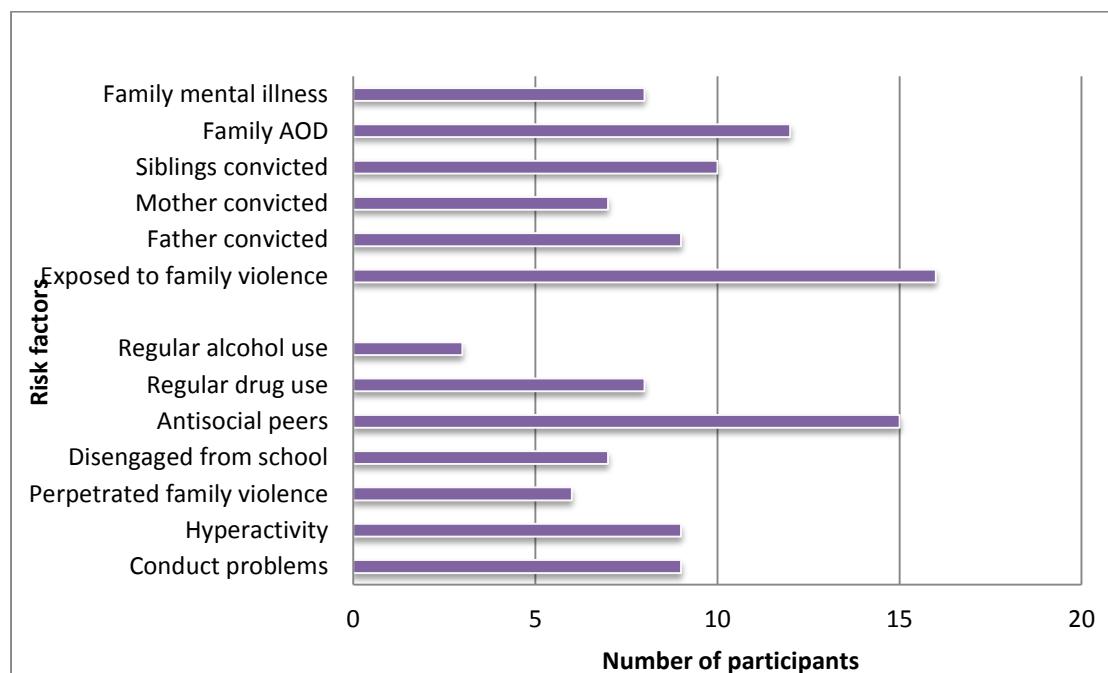
- 50% showed evidence of conduct problems and hyperactivity
- 40% had perpetrated family violence at some time prior to becoming involved with VISION
- Just over 80% had friends who were known to the police
- 40% were disengaged from school.

Within the family environment:

- Over 90% of participants had been exposed to family violence
- 80% had experienced family drug and alcohol problems
- Close to 70% had experienced family mental illness.

These patterns are highlighted in Figure 4, which shows the distribution of risk factors among the VISION program participants.

Figure 4. Distribution of family and individual level risk factors measured at baseline



At the baseline assessment, young people had a higher average number of family level risk factors ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ), compared to individual-level risk factors ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ). While it was not possible to determine whether this difference was statistically significant, this provides some indication that exposure to criminogenic environments was not only common amongst this sample, but may also have differentially contributed to their risk of antisocial and criminal behaviour.

### *5.2 Psychosocial assessments: Comparison of baseline and end of Phase 1*

Table 2 presents information on the different areas of the psychosocial assessment conducted at baseline and again at the completion of Phase 1. Some general patterns can be seen in this data. For example, there was a weak trend towards increased school engagement and co-operative interpersonal skills. Similarly, there was a weak improvement in emotion and behavioural regulation, as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).

Conversely, there was a similarly weak trend towards *decreasing* ability to engage in responsible decision making, or to react to potentially provocative situations with self-control. This was mirrored in the SDQ data, which showed elevated levels of hyperactivity at the completion of Phase 1. Moreover, following exposure to one full phase of the program, the young men were assessed as having greater difficulties with their peers, and to show less evidence of prosocial skills, compared to their baseline assessment. There was also a decrease in young people's perceptions of their self-worth. Finally, there did not appear to be any trend in the perceived extent of parental monitoring, or in the young people's feelings of connection to community.

**Table 2**  
*Comparison psychosocial assessment scores from baseline to the end of Phase 1 (n=16)*

| Construct                                       | Baseline<br><i>M (SD)</i> | Follow-up<br><i>M (SD)</i> |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| School engagement                               | 12.37 (3.26)              | 13.87 (2.36)               |
| Responsible choices                             | 19.00 (2.92)              | 18.73 (3.54)               |
| Co-operation                                    | 20.62 (2.50)              | 21.07 (2.25)               |
| Self-control                                    | 17.25 (4.20)              | 16.67 (4.35)               |
| Global self-worth                               | 14.80 (3.12)              | 12.58 (2.11)               |
| Perceived social support – family               | 16.06 (2.96)              | 16.00 (3.96)               |
| Parental monitoring                             | 3.31 (0.87)               | 3.07 (0.99)                |
| Civic responsibility                            | 23.63 (2.94)              | 23.73 (2.76)               |
| <i>Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire</i> |                           |                            |
| Emotional symptoms                              | 2.94 (1.39)               | 2.88 (1.46)                |
| Conduct problems                                | 3.47 (2.42)               | 3.00 (2.37)                |

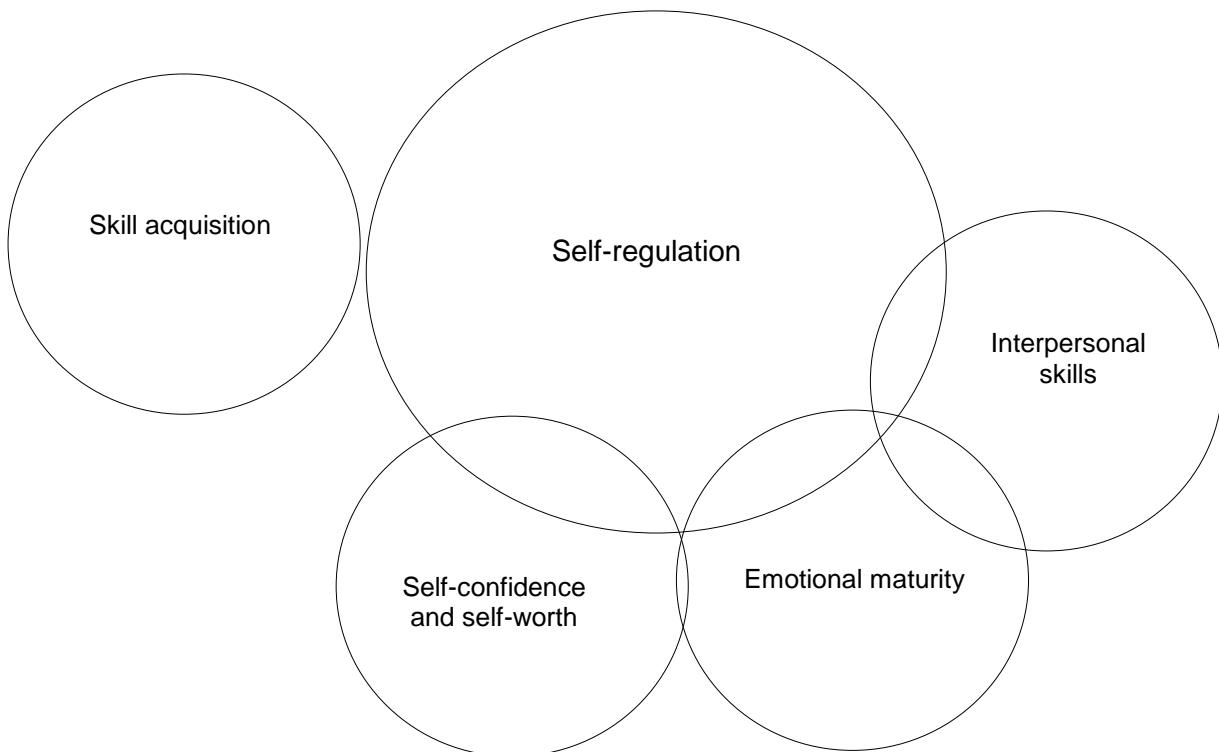
|                  |             |             |
|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Hyperactivity    | 7.56 (1.93) | 8.31 (1.85) |
| Peer problems    | 3.38 (1.78) | 3.44 (1.63) |
| Prosocial skills | 5.19 (2.56) | 5.00 (2.50) |

### 5.3 Participant perspectives: Expectations and perceived changes

The qualitative data provides additional insights into areas where the program was perhaps more effective. At the baseline assessment, participants were asked to indicate what they hoped to achieve through the program, and what aspects of the program they were most looking forward to. At the completion of each phase, participants were asked to indicate what they had most enjoyed about the program, what they had least enjoyed about the program, what (if anything) they had learnt about themselves, and any changes they had observed in themselves since participating in the program.

The expectations and aims of the young people at baseline clustered into five themes, which are depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Map of major themes on the expectations of program participants prior to program commencement



The most prominent theme related to a desire to improve self-regulation skills. This is broadly consistent with the stated aims of the program, and may in fact reflect the outcome of conversations between VISION program team leaders and participants at the commencement of the program. Nevertheless, when asked what they wanted to achieve

through their participation in VISION, many of the young people indicated a desire to improve their ability to control their anger, and to work on the behaviour that had led them into trouble, as highlighted by the following statements:

*To control my anger and be more mature. (YP3)*

*Work on my behaviour. Learn how to control myself. (YP8)*

*Not get in trouble with the police. Better connection with my family. Not to get angry easily. Not so swear so much. (YP12)*

For some young people, the desire to improve self-regulation skills also linked to a related desire to improve their interpersonal skills. This is again consistent with the broad aims of the VISION program, and was reflected in the following statements:

*How to control my anger. Doing better at listening to other people. (YP1)*

*Communicate with people I don't know. Change my behaviour towards other people. (YP2)*

Another related theme was linked to the concept of emotional maturity. This theme is closely aligned with self-regulation, in that developing emotional maturity is predicated on being able to effectively modulate behaviour across various contexts. For the young people in this program, emotional maturity appeared to be related to a desire to 'be a better person', as exemplified by the following:

*Try to be a successful person who gets a job. Try to be a better son. (YP4)*

Similarly, for some young people, the VISION program offered an opportunity to work on their self-confidence and their self-worth. For these young people, self-worth was explicitly linked to the idea of respect, which was itself linked to the ability to effectively manage their emotions and behaviours. This was most clearly articulated by one young man, who stated:

*Respect towards others and self-confidence. I want to change my behaviour. (YP16)*

Finally, for some of the young men, participation in the VISION program was perceived as an opportunity to gain a range of skills that could be transferred to other aspects of their lives. While the specific focus ranged in scope from working on fitness to gaining employability and workforce skills, a deeper analysis reveals that underlying these aims was a desire to gain confidence and feel a sense of connection/belonging. For example, when asked what they thought the most useful part of the program would be, these young men responded:

*Helping and encouraging people to do things (YP6, who identified his aim as 'achieving skills that will help me in the future').*

*Learning about how to try to help others (YP8)*

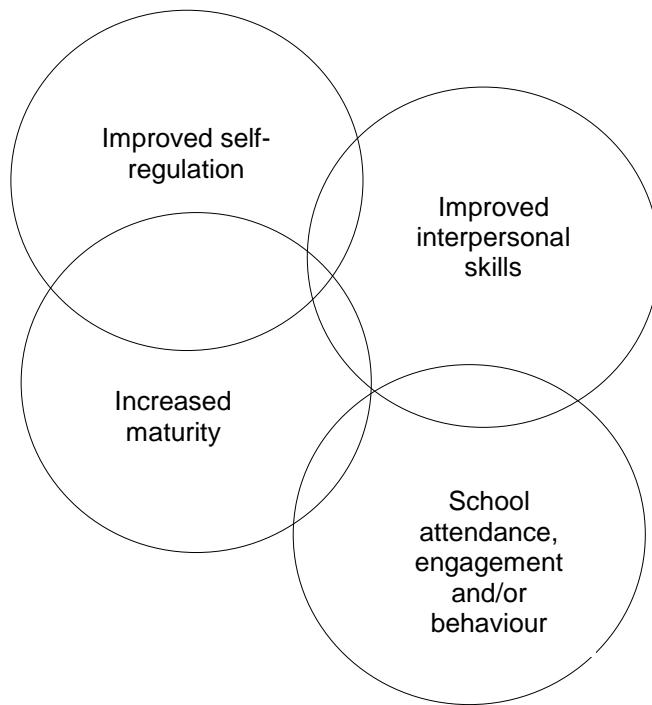
*Advice, knowledge. A good environment (YP11, who identified his aim as 'get my fitness up').*

Taken together, these data provide further insights into the psychosocial profiles of the VISION program participants at the baseline assessment. For the majority of young men,

emotional and behavioural regulation emerged as a significant issue, both in the quantitative assessment, but also in the aims and expectations with which they entered the program.

The qualitative data also provide some insights into the perceived changes that these young men experienced. Consistent with the aims/expectations identified at the start of the program, four major themes emerged from the data collected at the end of Phase 1, which are depicted in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Map of major themes on young people's perceived achievements following completion of at least one full phase of the program



Unlike the baseline data, where one dominant theme was clearly evident and provided the context for most of the other themes, the follow-up data was much more evenly distributed. In fact, the two most commonly cited achievements related to improvements in self-regulation (including emotional and behavioural regulation) and a perceived increase in emotional maturity.

Among the young men who perceived an improvement in their ability to manage their emotions and control their behaviour, the following statements are indicative of the type of changes that were most prominent:

*I have been angry at home but not as much as I used to be with my brother and mother. (YP3)*

*I haven't been getting in trouble with the cops. (YP12)*

*I haven't been as bad. I think about consequences before I act now. (YP16)*

Similarly, some young men noted changes in their maturity, identifying the following as examples of the changes they had observed within themselves:

*I'm a lot more mature. I respect my parents a lot more. (YP10)*

*I've learnt more about myself, and not to follow the same path I have been on. (YP14)*

*[I've learnt that] I wanted to go back to school, and I am not getting into trouble. (YP15)*

*I am staying out of trouble and making good decisions. (YP16)*

Some young men observed changes in their interpersonal skills, especially in their ability to make friends and show respect to others. The issue of respect was quite prominent in the responses provided by these young men, and highlights the importance of positive role modelling during key developmental transitions.

Finally, while only two participants spoke about changes associated with their attitudes to, and behaviour at school, this is nevertheless an important theme to highlight, as it links directly to one of the core aims of the VISION program. For these two young men, participation in VISION resulted in greater engagement with their schooling:

*I have been going to school more. (YP8)*

*I think I have been doing better at school. (YP6)*

#### *5.4 Progression through the full VISION program*

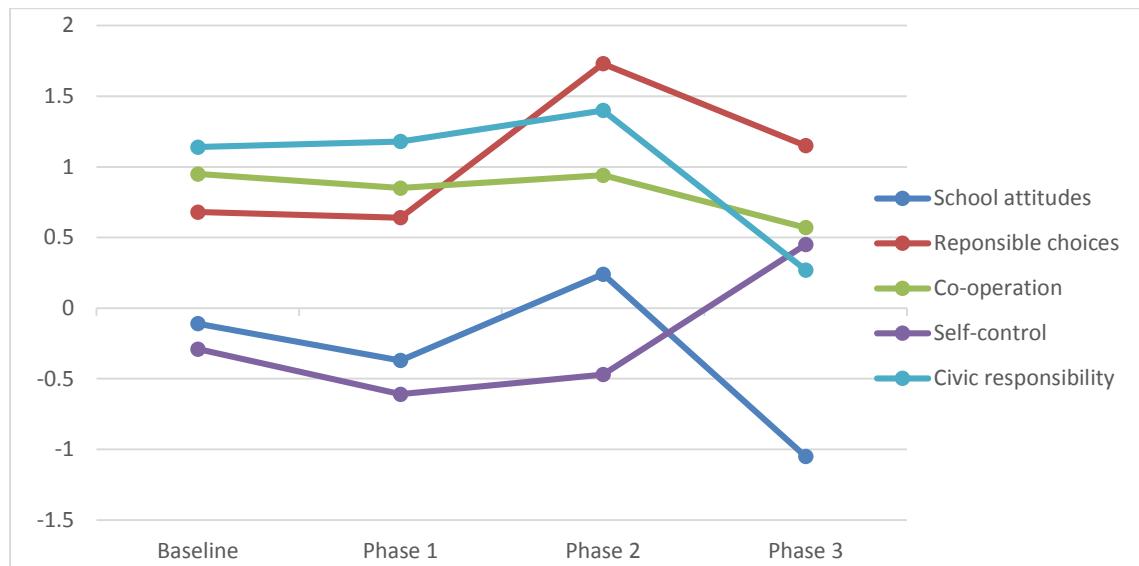
Three young men progressed through the full VISION program. Data obtained from their assessments indicates a large amount of variability in the effects of the program across the three phases, as shown in Figures 7, 8 and 9<sup>2</sup>. Due to a large amount of missing data at the baseline assessment on the measure of global self-worth this measure was not included in any of the profiles. Similarly, missing data for one young man on the measure of perceived social support from family resulted in this instrument being excluded from all profiles, to ensure consistency in the following discussions. Finally, as parental monitoring was stable across the four measurement points, this too was excluded from the following analyses.

As shown in Figure 7, at the completion of Phase 3, Young Person 1 (YP1) showed a trend towards improvement in self-control, but a decrease across all other areas. This decrease was most marked for motivation and self-regulation within an academic setting, but was also notable in the attitudes towards civic responsibility and community connection. In contrast, this young person showed a general improvement in behavioural regulation towards the middle of the program (from Phase 1 to Phase 2), which was reversed by the completion of Phase 3. Finally, there was a trend towards decreasing support for the value of co-operation by the completion of the program.

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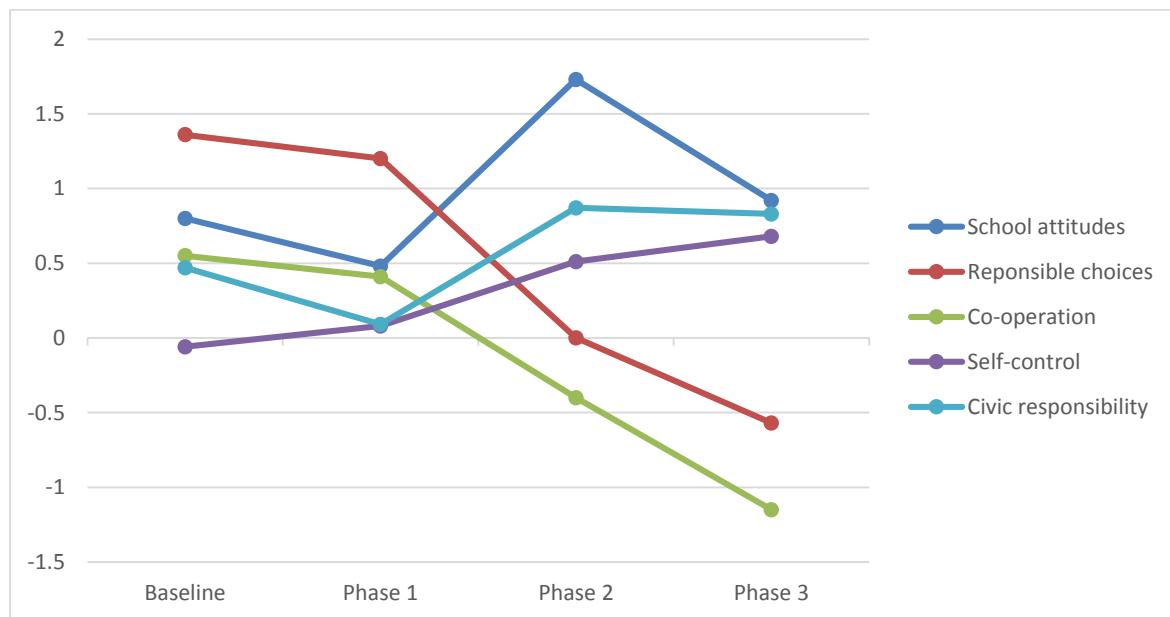
<sup>2</sup> Data for these assessments were standardized, to allow for comparison across each of the assessment instruments across the four assessment periods. Standardisation sharpened some of the observable trends, but did not change them.

Figure 7. Trajectory of YP 1 from baseline to the end of Phase 3 on five key psychosocial areas



The trajectory for Young Person 2 (YP2) was slightly different, and shows two very distinct patterns. First, there was a sharp decrease in behavioural regulation and co-operation from the end of Phase 1 to the end of Phase 3. Second, there was a trend, albeit variable, towards improvements in community connection and self-control. For this young person, school attitudes fluctuated from baseline to the completion of the program

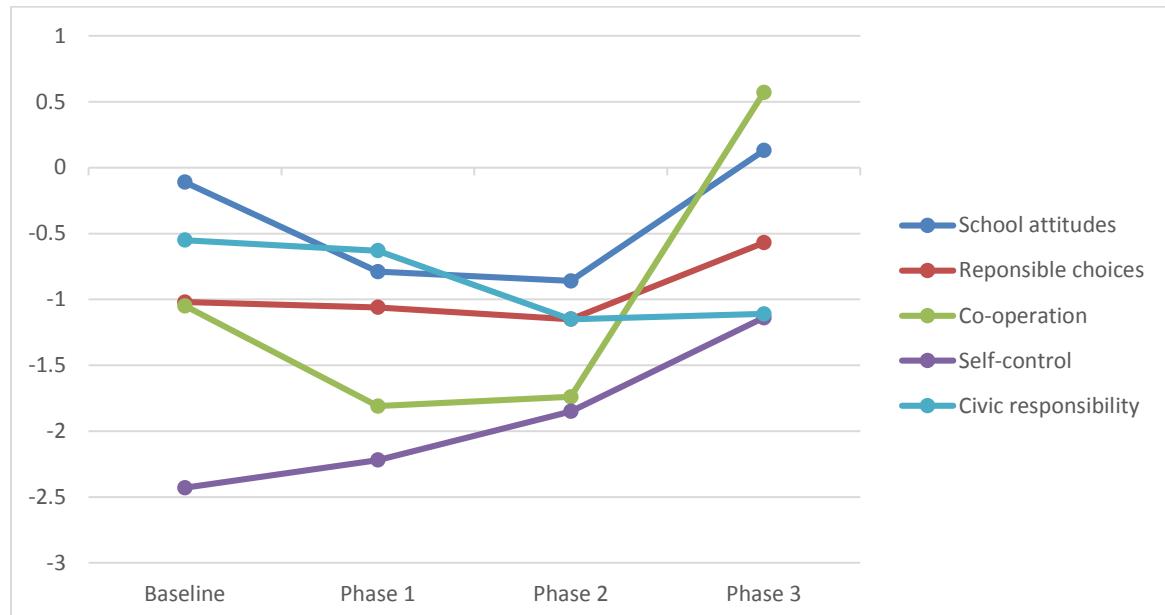
Figure 8. Trajectory of YP 2 from baseline to the end of Phase 3 on five key psychosocial areas



Finally, Young Person 6 (YP6) showed yet a different trajectory through the VISION program, marked by a general trend towards *improvement* across most of the target areas. This can be seen in Figure 9, which shows upward trajectories for school attitudes, behavioural regulation (responsible choices), co-operation, and self-control. The only area

that followed a negative trajectory was civic responsibility and community connection, which decreased from Phase 1 and then stabilised until the end of the program.

Figure 9. Trajectory of YP6 from baseline to the end of Phase 3 on five key psychosocial areas



While it is not possible to draw firm conclusions regarding the efficacy of the program based on the profiles of three participant, the information contained in Figures 7, 8 and 9 highlight substantial variability in the outcomes achieved. For the most part, the trajectories identified above represent a small magnitude of change. Despite this, one trend was consistent across all three participants, namely, improvements in their ability to exercise self-control when faced with provocative and/or confronting interpersonal situations. It is possible, therefore, that they key strength of the VISION program is in providing young men with the skills and resources to more effectively deal with interpersonal conflict.

### *5.5 Outcomes following engagement with VISION*

One of the key outcomes identified for the VISION program was a reduction in antisocial and criminal activity. A true assessment of recidivism was not possible within the scope of the evaluation, as it necessitated a longer follow-up period than could be accomplished within the parameters of the proposed project. Instead, Victoria Police provided information about contact that each young man had had with the justice system prior to, during and following contact with the VISION program. Of the 16 young people who completed at least one full phase, 31.3% ( $n=5$ ) had some contact with the justice system following the program. This included one young person who had had 20 separate interactions, including cautions, multiple charges, and custody on two separate occasions.

While just under one third of VISION program participants continued to engage in antisocial and criminal activity, it should be noted that these same individuals also had contact with the justice system *during* their involvement with VISION. This indicates that for these young men, an early intervention approach was likely inappropriate, as their needs appear to have been greater than what could have been catered for by a low intensity program such as VISION.

Consistent with the modest improvements observed in school motivation (see Table 2), six participants (37.5%) remained well engage with education following completion of the program. Another three (18.8%) remained connected, but showed sporadic or inconsistent attendance.

Two participants were no longer engaged with education (12.5%), although information provided by the VISION program supervisor indicates that for one of these young men, this was due to family commitments rather than the lack of desire and/or motivation to continue studying. Finally, for five participants (31.3%) the status of their educational engagement was unknown. It should be noted, however, that four of these five participants had had significant contact with the justice system following the completion of the VISION Program.

## 6. DISCUSSION

Youth antisocial and criminal behaviour is a significant social problem with potentially long-lasting effects for individuals, families and communities. It is therefore necessary to continue developing and testing strategies that can ameliorate some of the risk factors that contribute to youth offending and consequent engagement with the justice system. The Victoria Police VISION program sits within an early intervention framework, and represents a local strategy to address some of the risk factors that contribute specifically to antisocial and criminal behaviour among young men. Drawing on a range of partnerships, the aim of this program was to provide 'at risk' and potentially disenfranchised youth in the Western suburbs of Melbourne with opportunities to develop strengths and capabilities to assist them to alter their offending trajectories. To this end, the program was primarily structured around group-based physical activities and mentoring.

The results of this evaluation provide limited evidence about the efficacy of the program. This is due, in large part, to the small sample size which precluded any form of statistical analyses being conducted. With that caveat in mind, a number of trends can be discerned in the quantitative data. For example, there was a weak trend towards improvements on school engagement, co-operative interpersonal interactions, emotional wellbeing and behavioural regulation.

Similarly, of the 16 young men who participated in VISION, 11 had no further contact with the justice system at the completion of the program. While this is not an adequate assessment of recidivism, it does point to a potential impact of program involvement. This is further reinforced by the fact that the five young men who continued to engage in antisocial and criminal behaviour following program completion had also had contact with police prior to and during program involvement. Therefore, these young men potentially represent a higher-risk sample of youth, for whom a program such as VISION was not likely to be effective.

Consistent with the small improvement in school engagement observed during the program, six young men were still actively engaged with the education system when they were followed-up at program completion.

In contrast, it appears that as a group, certain elements of psychosocial functioning worsened following completion of at least a full phase of the program, as evidenced by:

- Decreased ability to engage in responsible decision making
- Decreased ability to exercise self-control, in the presence of real or perceived provocation
- Increased signs of hyperactivity and an inability to focus
- Increased difficulties in relating to peers in a prosocial manner
- Decreased signs of prosocial behaviour more general.

Moreover, based on the available data it did not appear that the VISION program had an impact, positive or negative, on the young men's sense of connection to their communities.

However, analysis of qualitative data provides a slightly different perspective on the potential impact of this program. Specifically, the young men identified two main areas where they had noticed improvements following their participation, namely their ability to manage their emotions and behaviour, and their increased maturity. For example, some participants commented that they were better able to manage their emotions and were able to avoid getting into trouble as often as they had in the past. These perceived changes were underpinned, for some of the participants, by a general sense that they had matured through the program.

Taken together, these data indicate that there is potential for a program such as VISION to ameliorate some of the risk factors that contribute to criminal justice involvement among ‘at risk’ youth. The absence of strong evidence to support the impact of the program is likely due to a number of factors, particularly the absence of a conceptual model to guide the development and delivery of the program. Drawing on the literature regarding youth antisocial and criminal behaviour, program elements that have been shown to be effective at reducing risk factors among at risk youth, and the results of this evaluation, the next section provides a number of recommendations to guide further program development.

### *6.1 Recommendations*

The recommendations outlined in this section address conceptual, methodological and implementation issues.

Intervention programs should be developed from strong theoretical frameworks that provide a grounding for the areas that should be targeted, why these areas are important, and how addressing specific issues will lead to change. While the VISION program aimed to reduce the risk of further criminal justice engagement for at risk young men, there was no clearly articulated theoretical and conceptual framework to guide the design and delivery of the program. As such, the areas that were assessed, while supported in the literature, were not linked to a clear program logic that outlined the process of change. For this reason, the following recommendations are made.

#### Recommendation 1

That a program logic, reflecting contemporary scholarship on what works at reducing the risk of antisocial and criminal behaviour among at risk youth, be developed for the VISION program. This will necessitate engagement with the literature, and with localised knowledge from key stakeholders, including the police and youth service providers.

#### Recommendation 2

The program logic should clearly articulate the following:

- a. The rationale for the program – what factors have contributed to identifying the need for an intervention program targeted specifically at ‘at risk’ young men in the Western suburbs of Melbourne?
- b. The aims of the program – what does the program hope to achieve?
- c. The processes or mechanisms that will achieve the identified aims – how will the aims be achieved? What specific areas will be addressed, and importantly, *how* will these areas be targeted? What are the mechanisms that will lead to change, and why have these mechanisms been identified as appropriate?
- d. Eligibility requirements – what is the eligibility criteria and why have these criteria been chosen?
- e. Program delivery – how will the program be delivered? Who will deliver it? Is there any specific training that is required?

The development of a program logic will further assist in identifying the most relevant outcomes that should be achieved as result of program engagement. While a number of outcomes were assessed as part of this evaluation, these were inferred from program materials that outlined a broad range of intended aims. In the absence of a clearly articulated theoretical framework, it is possible that some of the measures included in this evaluation were not appropriate given the scope and modality of the VISION program.

### Recommendation 3

The assessment instruments included in this evaluation should be reviewed, as part of the program logic process, to ensure that they are appropriate in light of the theoretical foundations and aims of a revised program.

In addition to the program logic, some thought should also be given to the scope of the VISION program. As discussed in the Introduction section, research has consistently identified that youth antisocial and criminal behaviour is influenced by a range of complex interactions between internal characteristics and predispositions *and* the environments young people are exposed to. In this context, the family environment has been identified as particularly important, both as a site of criminogenic risk factors and as a powerful resource that can assist change.

### Recommendation 4

Research has shown that effective programs for at risk youth address individual and family-level risk factors. As such, it is recommended that future iterations of the VISION program expand their scope to include family members, specifically parents and/or carers, and siblings. While this will necessarily change the structure of the program, it is not likely that reductions in antisocial and criminal behaviour will be observed if the young person's broader environment is excluded.

It should be noted that the current version of VISION did attempt to include parents and/or carers as part of the program model. A modified version of Anglicare Victoria's *Breaking the Cycle* program, which focusses specifically on addressing family violence conducted by young people, was offered to parents and carers of VISION program participants. However, due to very poor turnout, this element of the program was dropped.

While the inclusion of *Breaking the Cycle* in the VISION program was a promising step, effective interventions have parenting skills training embedded within the broader program model. This requires strong partnerships with relevant service providers, including Anglicare Victoria, who can work with parents and/or carers from the commencement of their child's involvement in VISION. If further requires that young people and their parents/ carers have the opportunity to work together to address relationship dynamics that may contribute to antisocial or criminal behaviour.

### Recommendation 5

In light of the available evidence, it is recommended that future iterations of VISION embed parenting skills training within the program model. This will necessitate working collaboratively with service providers who have demonstrable expertise working with vulnerable children, youth and families. It will further necessitate incorporating programs, or elements thereof, that have been shown to be effective at addressing the needs of 'at risk' families and youth.

In addition to the above, there is a need to give more attention to the eligibility criteria for participation in the VISION program. The focus on young men is supported in the literature, especially in light of the accumulated body of evidence showing that young men are disproportionately represented in official crime statistics, both as victims and as perpetrators. Nevertheless, it was not clear how eligibility was assessed.

### Recommendation 6

It is recommended that a more structured risk assessment procedure be implemented to determine eligibility for participation in VISION. This should focus specifically on the risk profile of young men, with a view to ensuring that only young men who are deemed to be low risk are invited to participate.

The risk assessment instrument developed for this evaluation showed that most participants had a range of risk factors, located predominantly within the family domain. Nevertheless, there was a small group of participants who had a large number of individual-level risk factors as well. It is possible that these young men represent a distinct group of more serious and chronic youth offenders. Their inclusion in a program of this nature can have the unintended consequence of ‘amplifying’ the antisocial behaviour of lower-risk young men, through the process of social mimicry (Moffitt, 1993). Put another way, mixing low and high-risk youth within the same program can result in poorer outcomes for all participants. The higher risk youth will not benefit from a low intensity program of this nature, as their risk profile is more severe and therefore requires more structured, cognitive-behavioural approaches to challenge the belief systems that support antisocial behaviour. The lower risk young men will also not benefit as they are exposed to peer influences that can increase commitment to antisocial behaviour.

Additional consideration should also be given to the developmental stage of participants. It is well established that the prevalence of antisocial behaviour begins to increase quite rapidly during adolescence, peaking during late adolescence and early adulthood, and declining sharply thereafter. Addressing risk factors at earlier stages of development is therefore important.

#### Recommendation 7

It is recommended that further consideration be given to the developmental stage of participants. While older adolescents can act as positive role models for younger participants, a program that includes a wide age range, spanning the entire adolescent period, needs to ensure that appropriate strategies are in place to effectively assess risk. Put another way, age and risk need to be considered, to ensure that older program participants do not negatively influence younger participants.

The recommendations provided thus far span a range of theoretical and methodological issues that should be addressed prior to implementation. This will require effective stakeholder engagement and collaboration with a range of community-based services that can provide expertise across a range of areas. While the existing partnership between Victoria Police, Outdoors Inc., Anglicare Victoria, the Navitas College of Public Safety, the Royal Melbourne Hospital, and the wide range of local businesses that provided support for the program was important, there is a need for greater engagement prior to program development and design.

#### Recommendation 8

It is recommended that Victoria Police engage with community-based organisations who have proven expertise working with at-risk youth, and youth with juvenile justice involvement. It is further recommended that community-based organisations who have proven expertise working with vulnerable and at-risk families are included in the program design. This should ensure that a redesigned VISION program will incorporate elements of best-practice with youth and families. It should further ensure sustainability of the program into the future.

Finally, the current evaluation is limited by a range of factors, including the small sample size and the absence of a control group. Without rigorous evaluation methodologies it is not possible to determine whether programs are effective, or whether they are a suitable investment for scarce resources.

#### Recommendation 9

It is recommended that the next version of VISION include a rigorous evaluation methodology. This will necessitate a larger sample size and the inclusion of a

matched comparison group. It will also necessitate an appropriate follow-up of no less than 6 months with an assessment of recidivism, and ideally, a broader assessment of key outcomes linked to the program. Such a methodology will assist in determining whether the program had a longer-term impact on outcomes of interest.

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