

Travel **Assistance** Program

Key Findings and Recommendations 2019 Program
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WEstjustice

Footscray

Level 1 / 72 Buckley Street, Footscray VIC 3011
Tel: + 61 3 9749 7720
Fax: + 61 3 9749 8276
Email: admin@westjustice.org.au

Werribee

Level 1 / 8 Watton Street, Werribee VIC 3030
Tel: + 61 3 9749 7720
Fax: + 61 3 9749 8276
Email: admin@westjustice.org.au

Sunshine

Visy Cares Hub, 80B Harvester Road, Sunshine VIC 3020
Tel: + 61 3 9091 8237
Fax: + 61 3 9091 8207
Email: sunshine@westjustice.org.au

WEstjustice provides free legal help to people in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. We can help with a broad range of everyday problems. Please call (03) 9749 7720 to find out more about our services or to make an appointment.

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WEstjustice acknowledges the ancestors, elders and families of the Kulin nations, who are the traditional owners of Western Melbourne, the country we are located on. As we work to achieve a just and fair society we pay our respects to the deep knowledge embedded within the Aboriginal community and Aboriginal custodianship of Country. We acknowledge this land as a place of age-old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal, and that the Kulin peoples' living culture has a fundamental role in the life of this region.

"I can go to school now and don't worry about finding money for my Myki."



Photo by Andrea Tummons

A Research Project by WEstjustice, 2020.

- **Note:** any names used in this report and in the case studies are pseudonyms, and all identifying information has been removed.
- **Disclaimer:** any legal information provided in this publication is provided as information only and is not provided as professional legal advice.
- **Citation:** WEstjustice, 'Travel Assistance Program Report: Key Findings and Recommendations' (Research Report, 2020).

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Wyndham City Council conducted background research and a literature review, and compiled student and wellbeing surveys.

The Steering Committee (comprising of the Public Transport Ombudsman, Department of Transport, Department of Education, Victorian Council of Social Service, Wyndham City Council and Metro Trains) assisted with the overall structure, development of the surveys and editing of this report.

Social Ventures Australia analysed the monthly reporting data, and identified the trends and patterns reflected in this report.

Thank you to the schools involved in the project, as well as to the wellbeing staff who collected monthly data and were surveyed for this research.

Thank you sincerely to the students who participated in the surveys for this research.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WEstjustice has a significant track record of advocating for law reform in areas that impact vulnerable and disadvantaged young people in the western region of Melbourne. One area that WEstjustice has focused on is the impact of the cost of travel on young people who need—and want—to get to school. In 2016, WEstjustice's report *Fare Go* put a spotlight on this issue,¹ as did WEstjustice's 2017 report *Couch Surfing Limbo*.²

Education is not only a basic right, but in Australia, attendance at school is also required by law. Yet, the cost of public transport is often prohibitive for many young people to exercise this right and comply with the law. Ironically, students' desires to fulfil compulsory education requirements can often result in unlawful travel due to public transport fare evasion. Such unlawful travel can lead to fines and a number of other issues such as increased debt, increased family stress, poor health and social, psychological and emotional issues.

The program provides a new approach to dealing with these issues. The lack of affordable transportation is a frequently cited barrier to regular school attendance. This program has shown that many disadvantaged young people want to attend school and will attend school if they are given a free and accessible way to get there. In many cases, the provision of access to pre-paid public transport resulted in increased school attendance and punctuality, decreased stress, increased access to wellbeing services, decreased non-compliant travel, and young people feeling safer.

In addition, young people experiencing homelessness and family violence, on top of or separate from financial hardship, were able to move to safer places to stay. This suggests the program was successful in assisting young people experiencing vulnerability to achieve short-term safety.

The findings of this program evidence the need for a state-wide initiative to introduce pre-paid public transport for vulnerable young people.



Photo by Max Wolfs

“In many cases, the provision of access to pre-paid public transport resulted in increased school attendance and punctuality, decreased stress, increased access to wellbeing services, decreased non-compliant travel, and young people feeling safer.”

¹ Su Robertson, WEstjustice, *Fare Go: Myki, Transport Poverty and Access to Education in Melbourne's West* (Report, 23 March 2016).

² Shorna Moore, WEstjustice, *Couch Surfing Limbo: Legal, Policy and Service Gaps affecting Young Couch Surfers and Couch Providers in the West* (Report, August 2017).

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide pre-paid travel for disadvantaged young people through the provision of travel passes or Mykis.

The Victorian government requires school-aged children to attend school. The Victorian government also requires school children to pay to travel on public transport. Sometimes these legal requirements are mutually exclusive for impoverished families.

2. School wellbeing teams should be used to assess which students meet the eligibility criteria.

School wellbeing teams generally have a sound understanding of students' needs and vulnerabilities, and often have strong relationships with students. Therefore, these staff are well-placed to determine which students meet the criteria to access free public transport. Further funding programs must ensure engagement with wellbeing teams continues to be a central pillar of the program.

3. Public transport staff need better training about new products.

The Department of Transport, together with transport operators, should review and update training material regarding travel passes and other new travel products. Regular training should be provided to ensure that Authorised Officers ('AOs') and other transport staff are familiar with all operative travel products.

4. Public transport staff need better training about how to interact with vulnerable young people.

There should also be a focus on training public transport staff to safely interact with passengers experiencing vulnerability, in particular young people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. More training is required to ensure that public transport staff are equipped to treat all passengers with respect. The Department should introduce a system of recognition for good practice and ensure that there is accountability for poor practice, which has the potential to traumatise vulnerable segments of the population.

5. Consider increasing funding for school wellbeing teams to extend support for vulnerable young people in schools.

The Victorian government should consider increased support and funding for school wellbeing teams, which perform an invaluable function in supporting vulnerable young people in schools. The range of services able to be coordinated by school wellbeing teams is critical to the wellbeing of students.



Photo by Daniel Pelaez



Following the launch of the *Couch Surfing Limbo* report by Shorna Moore in 2017 and subsequent research conducted by the Public Transport Ombudsman, the Schools-Myki Pilot Project was established. The project involved trialling a solution to the problem of couch surfing high school students in the City of Wyndham receiving public transport fines due to inability to pay for travel.

The project ran for six months, from March 2018 to August 2018, and involved over 40 students in four participating secondary schools in the Wyndham region. Students were given access to funded public transport through the provision of Myki cards by the schools' wellbeing teams. The project encouraged students to engage with wellbeing teams and access additional support and services. Outcomes from the project were positive and are discussed in detail in *School-Myki Pilot Project Report: Key Findings and Recommendations*.³

Following this successful pilot, the Victorian government through the Community Support Fund provided funding for WEstjustice to extend the project to all state schools in Wyndham in 2019. WEstjustice delivered the Travel Assistance Program in partnership with the Public Transport Ombudsman and the Department of Transport, supported by a steering committee which included Wyndham City Council, Metro Trains, the Department of Education and the Victorian Council of Social Service ('VCOSS').

Students were provided with 30-day pre-paid travel passes, which entitled them to travel for 30 days on the public transport network on presentation of the pass instead of Myki cards. The government was trialling these passes as a measure to assist people experiencing vulnerability to access transport. Travel passes (or 'vulnerable persons products') can be purchased by organisations such as welfare agencies. In this program, the travel passes were available at WEstjustice. WEstjustice then provided the passes to schools for distribution to students in the program. As the passes are paper products, students are not required to tap on and off electronically. Instead their tickets are manually checked by public transport staff. These tickets are considerably cheaper than comparable Myki products.

Thirteen schools participated in the Travel Assistance Program ('the program'), with a total of 266 students benefiting from the program. This report discusses the outcomes of the program, its benefits and challenges, and makes recommendations to address transport poverty amongst school-aged students in western Melbourne, and Victoria more broadly.

³ WEstjustice, 'School-Myki Pilot Project Report: Key Findings and Recommendations' (Discussion Paper, 2018).



Photo by Dean Bennett



CYCLES OF DISADVANTAGE

Educational opportunity is significantly impacted by socio-economic disadvantage. Differences in education outcomes are compounded by differences in access to educational services.⁴ Students experiencing disadvantage attend fewer hours of early childhood education, have lower attendance at school and are more likely to leave school early.⁵

Education is one of the major factors that can break cycles of disadvantage.⁶ Some young people cannot access education because they cannot travel to school. They cannot get to school because they do not have access to transport other than public transport. Public transport is not free. Due to socio-economic disadvantage, many students cannot pay for public transport.⁷ And so the cycle continues.

Ensuring that all young people have a free and accessible way to get to school so that they can participate and engage with the education system is a practical and affordable first step for government to take in order to break cycles of disadvantage.

TRAVELLING TO AND FROM SCHOOL COSTS MONEY

Victorian school students must pay for access to public transport regardless of their socio-economic status. Students enrolled in Victorian schools are eligible for reduced fares on a Victorian Student Pass.

As at 2020, a half yearly pass costs \$320 and a yearly pass costs \$617. Should a student forget to carry their Myki or not be able to afford to top it up, a fine for failing to produce a valid ticket is \$248 for an adult or \$83 for a child.

When this project started, a young person aged 17 or 18 and travelling on a reduced fare was required to carry government-issued proof of age identification ('ID') or proof of a transport concession entitlement (such as a Public Transport Victoria ('PTV') School Student ID card). School-issued student cards were not accepted as valid proof of age. Hence, in addition to the cost of travel, families must have purchased a PTV School Student ID card, which costs \$9.00. If the young person needed to purchase a passport photo for the ID card, there is a further cost of \$18.95.

During the course of original pilot project, members of the Steering Committee lobbied for a change in policy to remove the requirement of a separate identification card. Minister for Public Transport, Melissa Horne, announced that, from Term 1 2019, school students would be able to use their PTV approved school identification card to receive concession travel on public transport.⁸ For those schools that participate in this initiative, this assisted to achieve compliant travel where a Myki product was used. For those using a travel pass, no proof of concession was required.

MANY YOUNG PEOPLE CANNOT PAY FOR PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Most young people under the age of 18 do not earn any income, cannot drive, cannot afford to buy a car, and yet must attend school.⁹ As a result, young people are often dependent on their parents or guardians to help them pay for public transport costs. These difficulties are exacerbated if a young person is experiencing family violence, couch surfing or has parents who are unable or unwilling to give them money for public transport.

Further complications arise due to the exposed risk of travelling without a valid ticket and incurring an infringement for fare evading. Public transport fines are one of the most common legal issues experienced by young people.¹⁰ The risk of being fined can cause young people stress and may deter them from travelling on public transport and attending school.¹¹

⁴ Stephen Lamb et al, *Educational Opportunity in Australia 2015: Who Succeeds and Who Misses Out* (Working Paper, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, 19 November 2015) 7; Emma E Rowe and Christopher Lubienski 'Shopping for schools or shopping for peers: public schools and catchment area segregation' (2017) 32(3) *Journal of Education Policy* 340, 341.

⁵ See generally Rowe and Lubjensky (n 4).

⁶ Teach for Australia, *Breaking the Cycle: A Snapshot of Educational Disadvantage in Australia, Why Teaching and School Leadership Matters and How You Can Help Break the Cycle*, (Report, Teach for Australia, 18 April 2017) <teachforaustralia.org/2017/04/18/breaking-the-cycle/>.

⁷ Moore (n 2) 50.

⁸ Minister for Public Transport, 'Cheaper And Easier Public Transport Travel For Students' (Media Release, Premier of Victoria, 13 December 2018) <www.premier.vic.gov.au/cheaper-and-easier-public-transport-travel-for-students/>.

⁹ Robertson (n 1) 10; The 2016 Census indicates that 55.4% of Australian 15-17 year olds have no income: see Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing 2016* (Community Profile, 2016 Census Community Profiles, 23 October 2017) <https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/communityprofile/036?opendocument>.

¹⁰ Moore (n 2) 50.

¹¹ Ibid 53.



**BENEFITS OF GETTING YOUNG
PEOPLE TO SCHOOL**

EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS

The benefits of completing Year 12 and gaining a school certificate or equivalent are well known.¹² Year 12 achievement is regarded as an important measure of the development of a platform of individual skills and knowledge needed for further study and participation in the workforce.¹³

EMPLOYMENT BENEFITS

Completing Year 12 increases a young person's likelihood of continuing with further study and entering the workforce.¹⁴ Young people who do not complete school are more likely to experience unemployment.¹⁵ Those who do find work are more likely to obtain jobs in a narrow field of occupations.¹⁶ They are more likely to earn lower wages by as much as 10% for each year of non-attainment.¹⁷ They are also more likely to be dependent on social security support.¹⁸

CHANGING ECONOMY

While Australia's economy has achieved 27 years of continuous economic growth, Australia will need to draw on knowledge and technology-based industries (that will require Year 12 attainment and often further study).¹⁹ As a result, Year 12 attainment is becoming increasingly important. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis increases the need for governments' economic response to be agile and flexible, and to take account of a broader range of skills and expertise.

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Enabling young people to travel to school means that they are more likely to remain in school and develop stronger social bonds with friends and teachers.²⁰ It also gives them the chance to take advantage of sport and other social opportunities available through most Victorian schools.²¹ Students who feel disconnected from school often become alienated, struggle to succeed and place themselves at risk.²² Research repeatedly demonstrates a strong correlation between disengagement from school and the slippery slope into dysfunctional behaviour, truancy and crime.²³ In short, failure to complete Year 12 can increase the likelihood of a young person engaging in antisocial behaviour and criminal activity.²⁴

WELLBEING BENEFITS

Schools can serve as a sanctuary for many young people experiencing family violence or unsettled home lives. At school, young people have the opportunity to access various wellbeing services available within the school environment.

Most student support services comprise of a broad range of professionals including psychologists, counsellors and social workers. These providers work as part of an integrated wellbeing team within schools (or networks of schools) offering place-based services and warm referrals in an integrated setting.²⁵

The Department of Education has long recognised the value of onsite health services. The equity funding model provides additional funding targeted at students who face more barriers to success than their peers. School principals have a broad discretion as to how they spend these funds. For example, it may be used to employ relevant support staff (such as Koori engagement officers, psychologists, youth workers and school lawyers) or implement programs (such as hands on learning and trauma informed practices).

Programs purchased with equity funding are designed to assist students who are socially and economically disadvantaged and/or have additional learning needs. The funding is calculated based on:

- The student, their family and community characteristics such as the occupation of the parents;
- The student's disability and medical requirements; and
- Whether English is a second language.²⁶

In addition, the Department of Education facilitates the Secondary School Nursing Program and the Doctors in Secondary Schools Program. These services provide health promotion, advice and care to the students most in need.

HEALTH BENEFITS

There is also a link between access to education and improved health. For example, education can lead to improved health outcomes through:

- Knowledge formation and cognitive development, which help impact positive decisions and behaviours related to health;
- Development of social networks and access to information and services;
- Association with healthy behaviours such as lower rates of smoking, lower rates of obesity and higher rates of preventative service use; and
- Relationship with employment, increased income and resulting increased access to health care and health insurance.²⁷

12 See, eg, Stephen Lamb and Phillip McKenzie, Australian Council for Educational Research, *Patterns of success and failure in the transition from school to work in Australia* (Research Report, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, 6 January 2001); Lynne Robinson and Stephen Lamb, Foundation for Young Australians, *How young people are faring '09* (Report, 2009); Clive R Clive Belfield and Henry M Levin, *The Price We Pay: Economic and Social Consequences of Inadequate Education* Levin, (Brookings Institution Press, 20072008).

13 Lamb et al (n 4).

14 Access Economics, *The Economic Benefit of Increased Participation in Education and Training* (Report: Dusseldorp Skills Forum and Business Council of Australia, 2005) 10.

15 Ibid.

16 See generally, Access Economics (n 15).

17 Andrew Leigh, 'Returns to Education in Australia' (2008) 27(3) *Economic Papers* 233, 240.

18 Lamb et al (n 4) 41.

19 David Gonski et al, 'Through Growth to Achievement: the Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools' (Report, Department of Education and Training, March Schools (2008), 3–4.

20 Robertson (n 1) 1.

21 Ibid.

22 Lamb et al (n 4) 53.

23 See generally Quentin Beresford and Paul Omaji, *Rites of Passage: Aboriginal Youth, Youth Crime and Justice* (South Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996).

24 Bruce Chapman et al, 'Unemployment Duration, Schooling and Property Crime' (Working Paper No 447, Centre for Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, 2002) 1.

25 'Student Support Services', Department of Education (Web Page, 30 August 2018) <www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/Pages/sss.aspx>.

26 'Additional School Costs for Families Appendix A: Victorian School Funding Explained' (Parliamentary Paper No 3, Victorian Auditor-General, February 2015) 10.

27 Deloitte Access Economics, 'The Socio-Economic Benefits of Investing in the Prevention of Early School Leaving' (Research Paper, September 2012) 5.



APPROACHES AND THEIR LIMITATIONS



Photo by Christina wocintechat.com

The current Victorian public transport framework offers reduced fares to school students.²⁸ While this offer is similar to the schemes that exist in South Australia and Western Australia,²⁹ other states provide free public transport to school students who meet certain criteria.

In NSW and London, students can apply for free public transport to and from school. To be eligible, they need to be enrolled full time in a recognised school and live too far away to walk.³⁰

In the Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania and Queensland, students can apply for free public transport if they meet similar criteria and the student or their parent or guardian have a recognised concession card (for example, a Health Care Card, Pensioner Concession Card or Veterans' Affairs Pensioner Concession Card).³¹

One limitation of this approach is that it only enables young people to travel to and from school. As a result, free public transport does not have the secondary benefit of providing young people a way to leave situations of family violence and find a safe place to sleep. It also fails to facilitate travel to and from support services that are available outside of school.

Some schemes also have specific and restrictive requirements. For example, in Queensland, a parent can only register one address as the principal place of residence from where the student can catch public transport.³² Therefore, if the young person is couch surfing with relatives or friends, transport assistance is not available from those addresses.

A new program has recently emerged to address this need in Victoria. The State School Relief organisation has obtained funding to provide 6-month Mykis to vulnerable students across Victoria, building on the outcomes of this project.

28 'School Students', *Public Transport Victoria* (Web Page, 2020) <<https://www.ptv.vic.gov.au/tickets/myki/concessions-and-free-travel/children-and-students/school-students/>>.

29 'Who is eligible for Student SmartRider?' *Transperth* (Web Page) <www.transperth.wa.gov.au/smartrider/types-of-smartrider/student-smartrider>; 'Concession Cards', *Adelaide Metro* (Web Page, 7 September 2018) <<https://www.adelaidemetro.com.au/Tickets-fares/Concession-Cards/student>>.

30 'About the School Student Transport Scheme', *Transport for New South Wales* (Web Page) <apps.transport.nsw.gov.au/ssts/#whosEligible#scrollTarget3>; 'Free School Transport', Government of the United Kingdom, Transport (Web Page) <www.gov.uk/free-school-transport>.

31 'Student Transport Program', *Access Canberra* (Web Page, 19 February 2020) <www.accesscanberra.act.gov.au/app/answers/detail/a_id/1246/-/student-transport-program#ltabs-2>; 'Student Travel', Transport Services, (Web Page, 2 June 2020) <www.transport.tas.gov.au/passenger/student_travel>; 'School Transport Assistance Scheme (STAS)', *Translink* (Web Page, 2020) <<https://translink.com.au/tickets-and-fares/concessions/school-students/school-transport-assistance>>.

32 Department of Transport and Main Roads, 'School Transport Access Scheme' (Report, April 2017) 7.



The limitation of these other initiatives can be resolved by a broader approach as evidenced by the Travel Assistance Program.

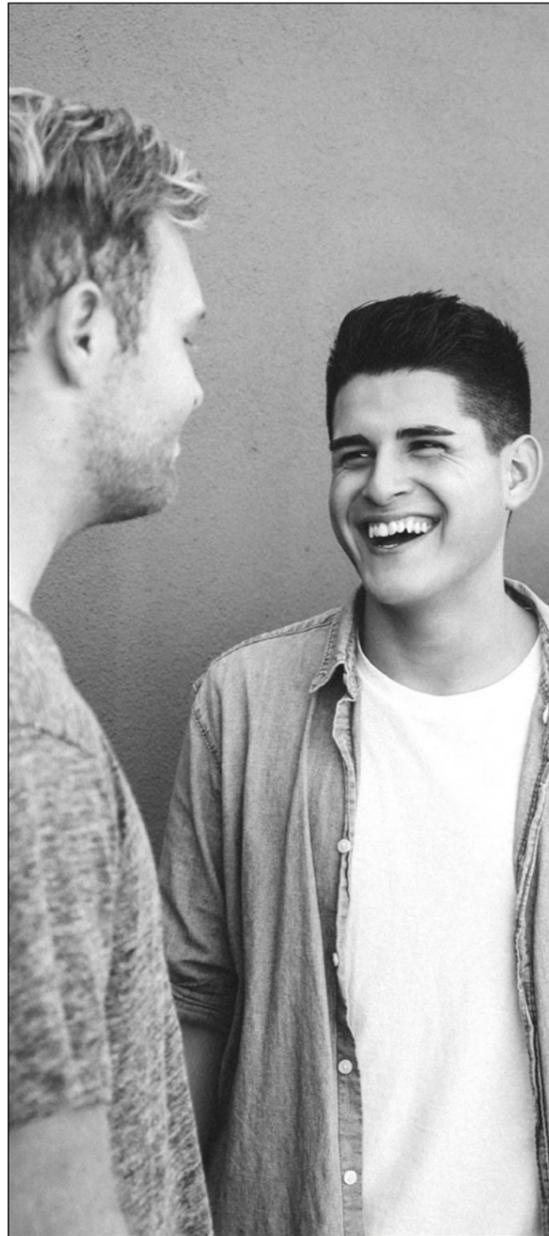


Photo by Alexis Brown

THE TRAVEL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Travel passes were purchased by WEstjustice under the Vulnerable Persons Product scheme and distributed to thirteen schools in Wyndham. School wellbeing teams assessed students for eligibility and provided travel passes to eligible students for a period of 30 days at no cost to the student.

To be eligible, students needed to:

- Be enrolled in one of the participating schools;
- Be experiencing unstable housing (for example, be couch surfing, experiencing family violence, be sleeping rough, be living in out-of-home care or kinship care, etc) or be experiencing financial hardship;
- Be engaged with a school wellbeing program and engage with a member of the wellbeing team on a regular basis; and
- Have exclusive use of the travel pass (i.e. the student was not permitted to share or sell the card and was required to report immediately if the card was lost or stolen).

As part of their participation in the program, students agreed to engage with the wellbeing team each month to allow a review of their circumstances and whether they required ongoing assistance. After a review was conducted, the student would receive a new travel pass for the following month. This engagement had a secondary benefit of ensuring that the students regularly engaged with the school wellbeing teams and received any necessary support.

The program was delivered in collaboration with thirteen schools. WEstjustice already had a relationship with four schools, where the Schools-Myki pilot project was delivered and where WEstjustice provides a school lawyer. WEstjustice approached all sixteen state secondary schools in Wyndham to participate in the program. However, some schools felt the program was not suitable for their needs, for example because the vast majority of students walked to school.

WHY WYNDHAM?

The Wyndham region in Melbourne's Western suburbs was selected due to the increasingly high rates of family violence, youth homelessness and the dependency of young people on public transport. Wyndham is a growing municipality with a population of 288,212 as of 2019, and is projected to reach over 500,000 by 2040 (pre-COVID-19 forecast).³³ School-aged young people (aged up to 17) make up 54,792 or almost 20% of the current population.³⁴

By way of illustration, in 2019, the City of Wyndham reported the fifth highest number of family violence incidents of all Victorian municipalities.³⁵ Between the years ending 2015 and 2019, the number of family violence incidents in Wyndham increased by 17.7%.³⁶ This increase is higher than in Victoria (13.7%) and the North West Metro area (10.6%) during the same period.³⁷

Additionally, in 2016, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that there were 730 homeless people in Wyndham,³⁸ up 76.3% from 2011.³⁹ Approximately one third of those 730 people were aged under 18.⁴⁰ The Australian Institute for Health and Welfare reports that in 2018–19, as many as 3,816 people accessed homelessness services in Wyndham.⁴¹

Wyndham's unemployment rate is higher than that of Greater Melbourne (5.4% compared to 4.9%).⁴²

Wyndham has a far lower youth offender rate on average than Victoria does. At the end of March 2019, the rate was 3,158 offenders per 100,000 young people (aged 10–24 years old), while in Victoria it was 4,345.⁴³ In the last three years, the youth offence rate has decreased in both Wyndham and Victoria. In Wyndham, it decreased from 3,586 in 2016 to 3,158 in 2019, while in Victoria it dropped from 4,829 in 2016 to 4,345 in 2019.⁴⁴

HOW WAS IT FUNDED?

The project was funded by a grant of \$175,000 from the Victorian Government through the Community Support Fund.

33 'Welcome to the City of Wyndham Population Forecasts', *City of Wyndham* (Web Page, November 2019) <<https://forecast.id.com.au/wyndham>>.

34 Ibid.

35 Wyndham City, 'Family Violence', *Community Safety: Health and Wellbeing Profile* (Web Page) <<https://wyndham-digital.iconagency.com.au/node/14#family-violence>>.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness, 2016 Census* (Catalogue No 2049.0, 14 March 2018).

39 'Homelessness in Wyndham', *Wyndham City* (Web Page) <<https://wyndham-digital.iconagency.com.au/node/37>>.

40 Ibid.

41 Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 'SHSC geographical location of client – SA3, SA4, RA, GCCSA', *Specialist Homelessness Services Collection Data Cube 2018–19* (Web Page, 2019) <<https://reporting.aihw.gov.au/Reports/openRVUrl.do>>.

42 'City of Wyndham: Unemployment', *City of Wyndham: Economic Profile* (Web Page, December 2019) <<https://economy.id.com.au/wyndham/unemployment>>.

43 'Community Safety', *Wyndham City* (Web Page) <<https://wyndham-digital.iconagency.com.au/node/14#youth-crime>>.

44 Ibid.

PROJECTED OUTCOMES

Prior to commencing the project, the Steering Committee identified the following projected outcomes:

1. To allow young people in unstable housing to escape family violence and move between houses to find somewhere safe to sleep.

A significant proportion of students and the wellbeing staff, who support them, reported that the program made it easier to find somewhere safe to go when home was unsafe.

2. To assist vulnerable young people to effectively and compliantly engage with public transport.

Overwhelmingly, the program found that vulnerable and disadvantaged young people were able to effectively and lawfully travel on public transport using the travel passes.

3. To decrease the accrual of transport fines by young people participating in the project by providing a means of compliant travel.

There was a significant decrease in the accrual of fines by students participating in the program, compared to the twelve months prior to the program.

4. To increase school attendance and punctuality by assisting students to travel to school.

Roughly a quarter of students increased their attendance during their participation in the program. Punctuality also increased for students from participating schools.

5. To decrease stress levels of young people when travelling on public transport.

Students surveyed overwhelmingly reported that they felt less stress travelling on public transport with a travel pass.

6. To increase engagement with the school wellbeing team and/or other youth support services amongst young people participating in the program.

Almost all students engaged regularly with wellbeing and a large number of students were also connected to external support services.

7. Decrease in negative interactions with public transport authorities.

Overall, negative interactions with public transport staff decreased, but there were a small number of concerning incidents where students were treated inappropriately by Authorised Officers and a V-Line conductor in relation to their travelling with a travel pass.

8. To increase overall student wellbeing.

Students and staff surveyed reported a decrease in stress and reported feeling more positive about school and themselves.

9. To build the capacity of schools and wellbeing officers to support couch surfers, youth experiencing family violence and young people in out-of-home care or experiencing financial hardship.

Wellbeing staff reported that they appreciated having the additional tool to support young people experiencing disadvantage, and this tool allowed them to provide significant additional support to vulnerable young people.

10. To create a new pathway of compliant travel for young people who do not have access to income and rely on public transport to travel to and from school.

The program was successful in instituting a mode of lawful travel for a cohort of vulnerable students experiencing significant disadvantage. We heard many stories of how the program made travelling to and from school easier and more effective for students who would have otherwise walked long distances to school or missed out on school altogether at times. Students and staff reported that they were highly appreciative of an effective and very helpful program.

There were no unintended outcomes. These findings are discussed in greater detail on the following page.

ASSESSMENT OF THE PROJECT

The project materials were derived from the following sources:

- A literature review of relevant materials;
- Surveys of the following research subjects:
 - Students who participated in the program; and
 - Members of the participating school wellbeing teams.
- Analysis of data collected throughout the project, including
 - Monthly reports with members of school wellbeing teams who were asked to provide data mapping the progress of each participating student by reference to their school attendance, engagement with services, the number of new fines received and a number of other areas; and
 - Monthly feedback collected from students and schools.



Photo by Nik Shuliahin



KEY FINDINGS FROM DATA COLLECTED THROUGH SCHOOL MONTHLY REPORTS

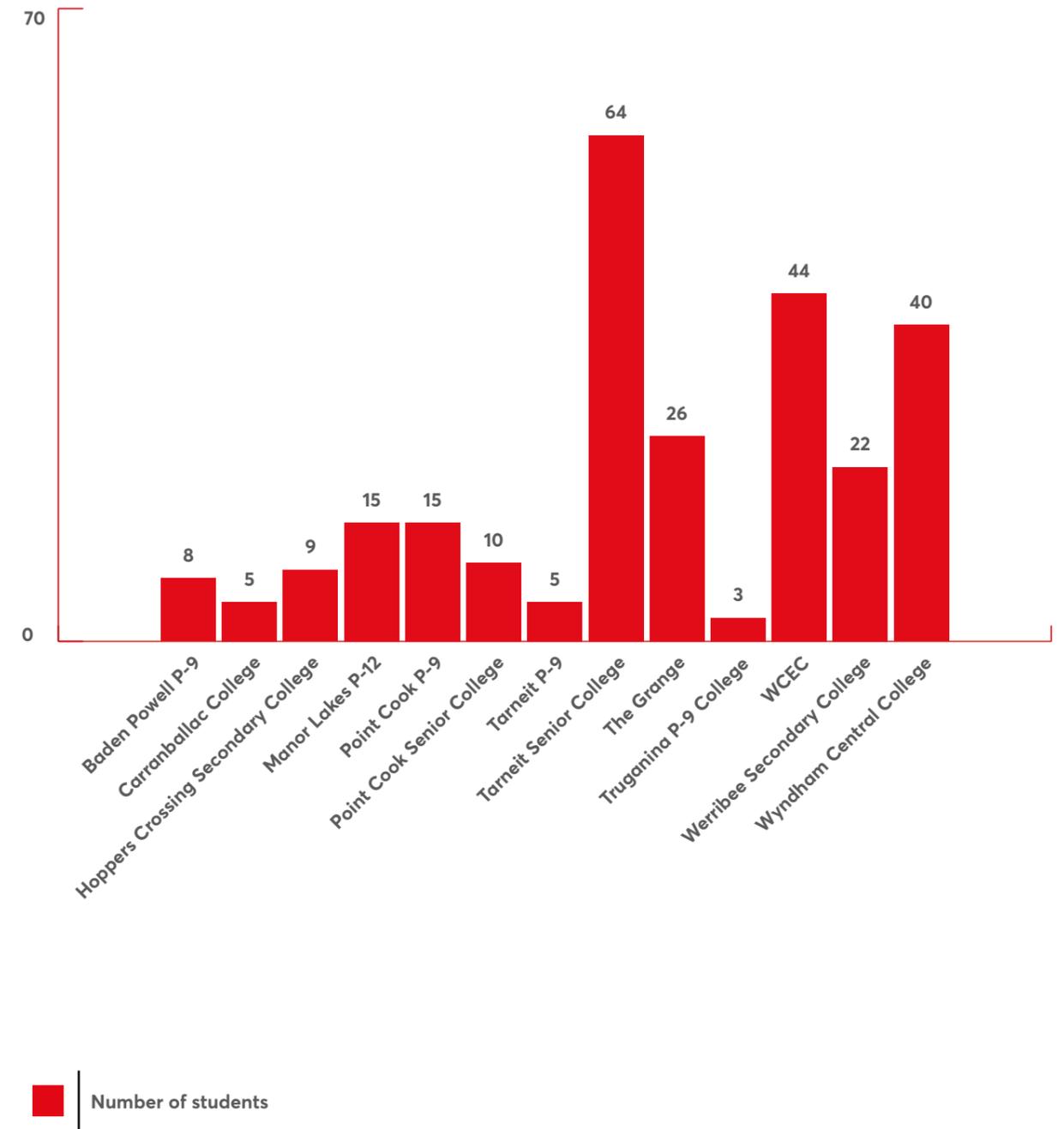
The program had an excellent rate of participation with 266 students from 13 schools accessing the program through their school wellbeing team.

PARTICIPATING STUDENTS

Of the 266 students who participated in the program in 2019, almost a quarter were enrolled at Tarneit Senior College. The four schools who participated in the Schools Myki Pilot in 2018 (Tarneit Senior College, The Grange, Wyndham Community and Education Centre ('WCEC') and Wyndham Central College) accounted for almost two-thirds (65%) of all students involved in the program in 2019. Only 13 students (or 7% of the total number of students on the program from these four schools) participated in both the pilot program and the program in 2019.

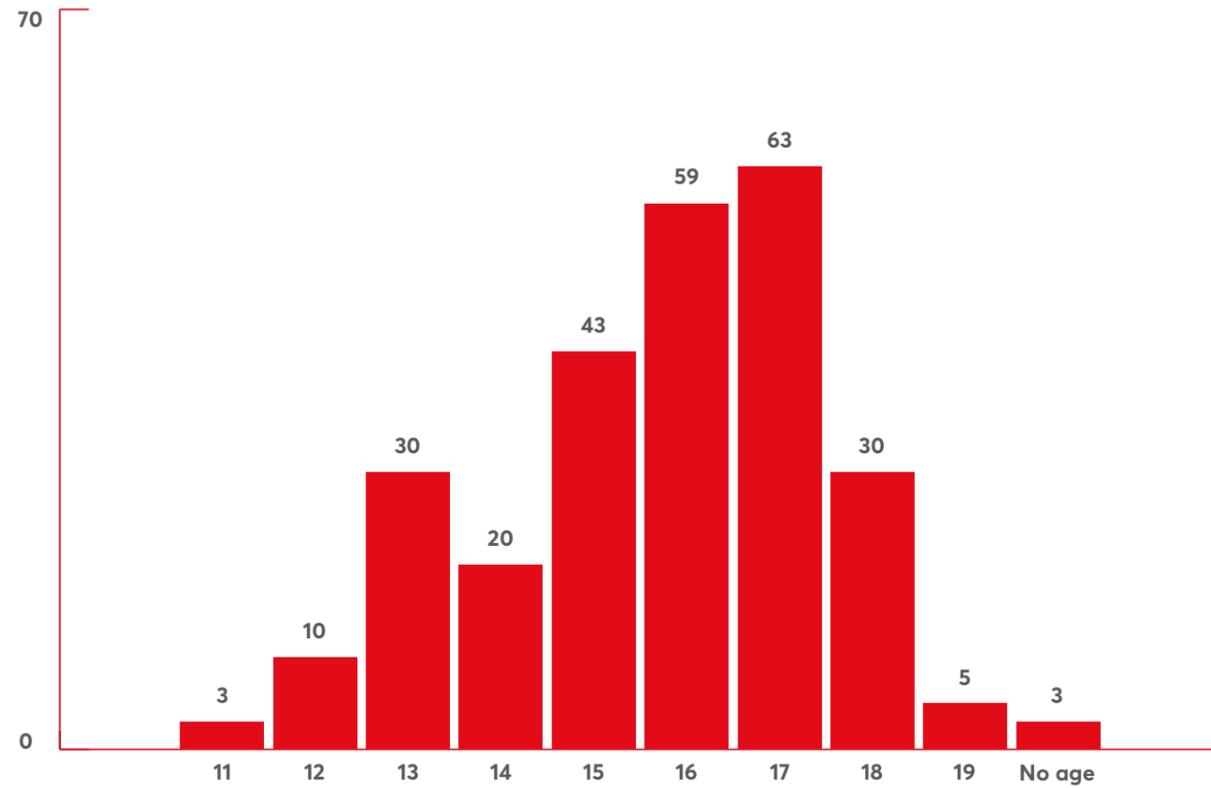
The split of male and female students was roughly even (49% male and 51% female). The most common age of students when receiving their first travel pass was 17. Almost two-thirds of students were aged 15 to 17 years.

Number of participating students by school



The number of students joining the program spiked in May when students from several schools joined the program and received their first travel passes.

Number of participating students by the age they received their first pass

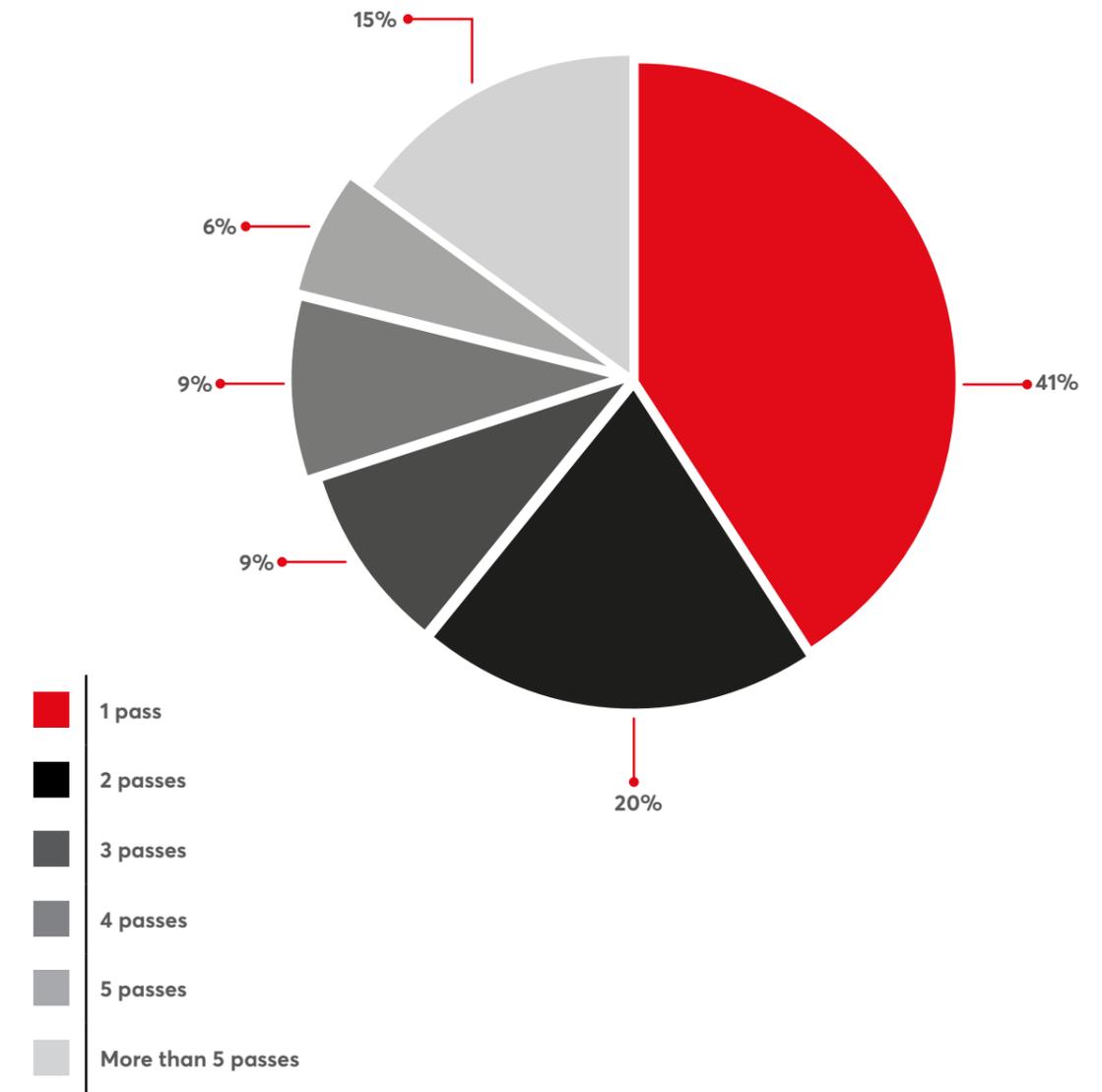


■ Number of students

Most students received more than one travel pass through the program (59%). Almost 40% received three or more passes. Given that each pass lasts one month (approximately four weeks) and the average school term is 10 weeks, the rate of reissue suggests that at least 40% of students engaged in the program over more than one school term. One fifth of students (21%) received five passes or more through the program.

The number of students who joined the program each month was fairly stable, with very low numbers towards the start and end of the year. There was a large spike in May, when several schools joined the program such as Baden Powell P-9 and Carranballac College. One school withdrew from the program citing that most of their students walked to school and that they had alternative measures available for vulnerable students as its justification.

Number of students by the number of passes they received in 2019



"747 travel passes were distributed throughout 2019 to 266 participating students."

TRAVEL PASSES

A total of 747 travel passes were distributed throughout 2019 to 266 participating students.

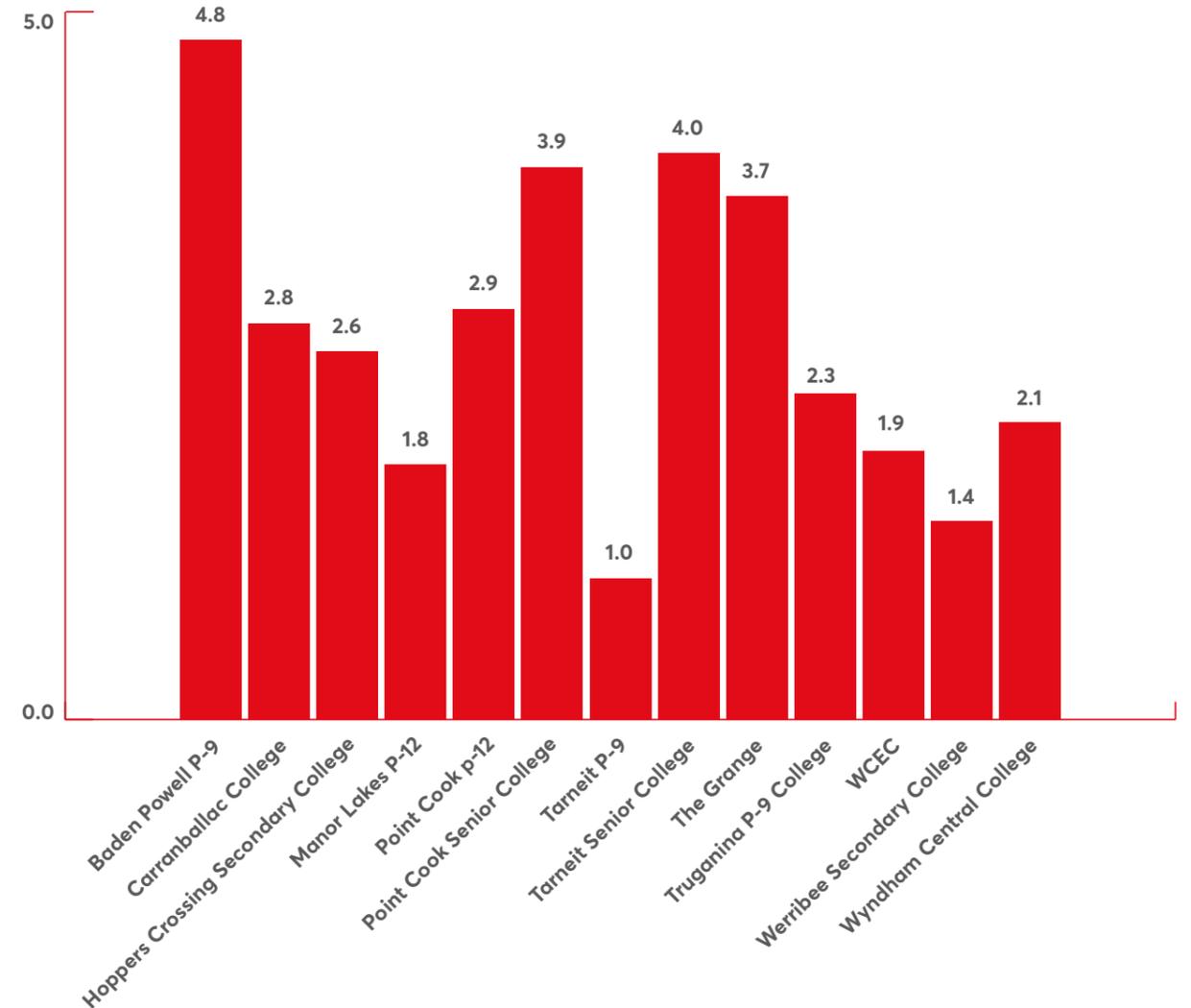
Students from Tarneit Senior College accounted for 35% of all travel passes distributed. Tarneit Senior College had the largest number of students participating (64 students) and ranked second in terms of the average number of passes per student. In contrast, Tarneit P-9 and Truganina P-9 College each only accounted for only 1% of all distributed passes.

Male students received more passes per student on average than female (3.0 passes per student for males and 2.6 for female students). The number of travel passes issued to each student varied significantly across schools. Baden Powell P-9 had the highest average number of passes per student at 4.8, while students at Tarneit P-9 were issued with only one pass each on average.

The average number of travel passes distributed varied significantly across schools. Baden Powell P-9, Tarneit Senior College, Point Cook Senior College and The Grange all distributed at least 3.7 travel passes to each student (on average), compared to less than two passes per student (on average) for Tarneit P-9, Werribee Secondary College and Manor Lakes P-12.

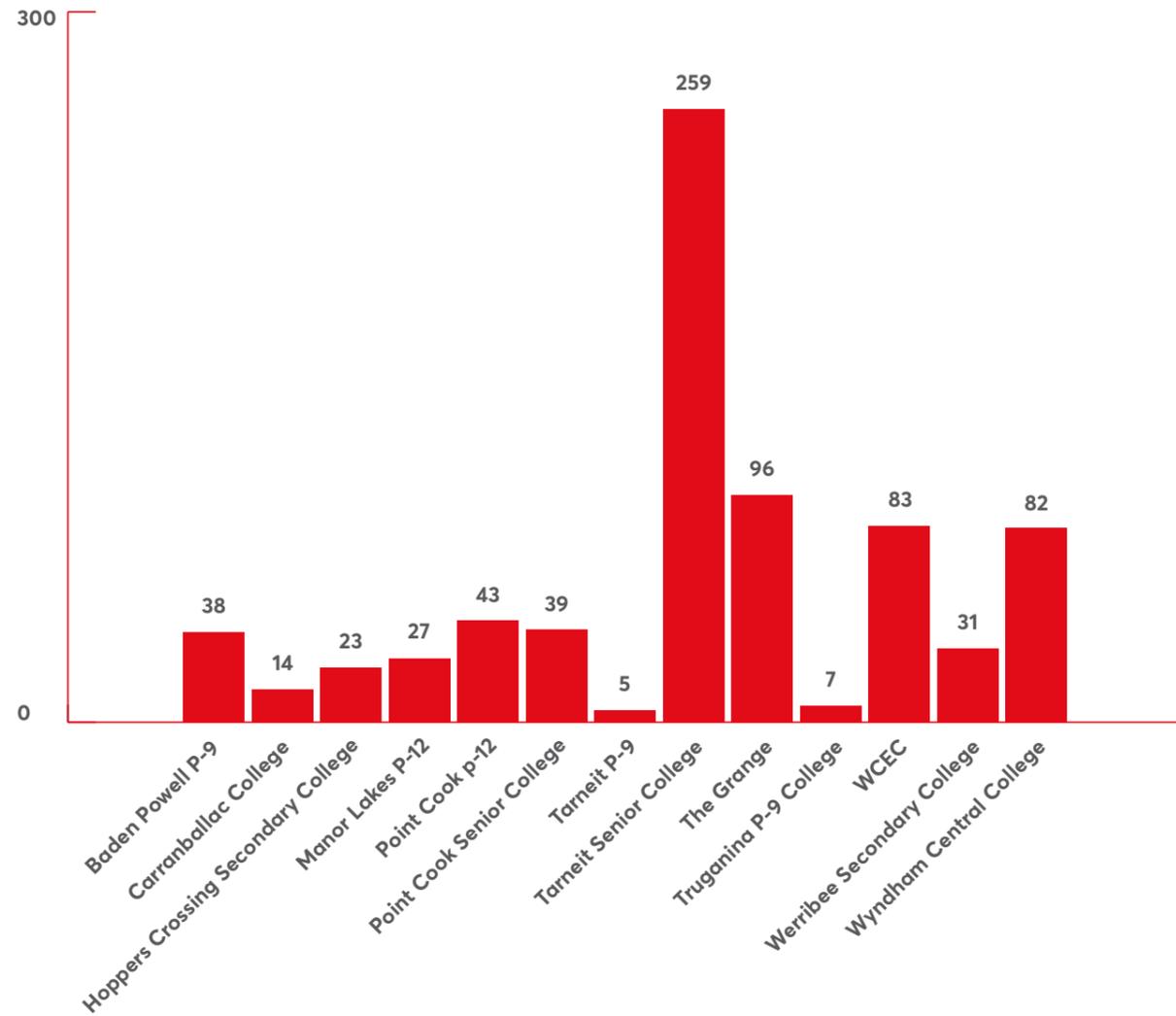
The number of travel passes issued each month was fairly consistent from May to November ranging from 8% to 13%. The number issued reduced in December to 6% of total passes being distributed in each month, which is to be expected as many students finished up for the year.

Average number of travel passes per student by school



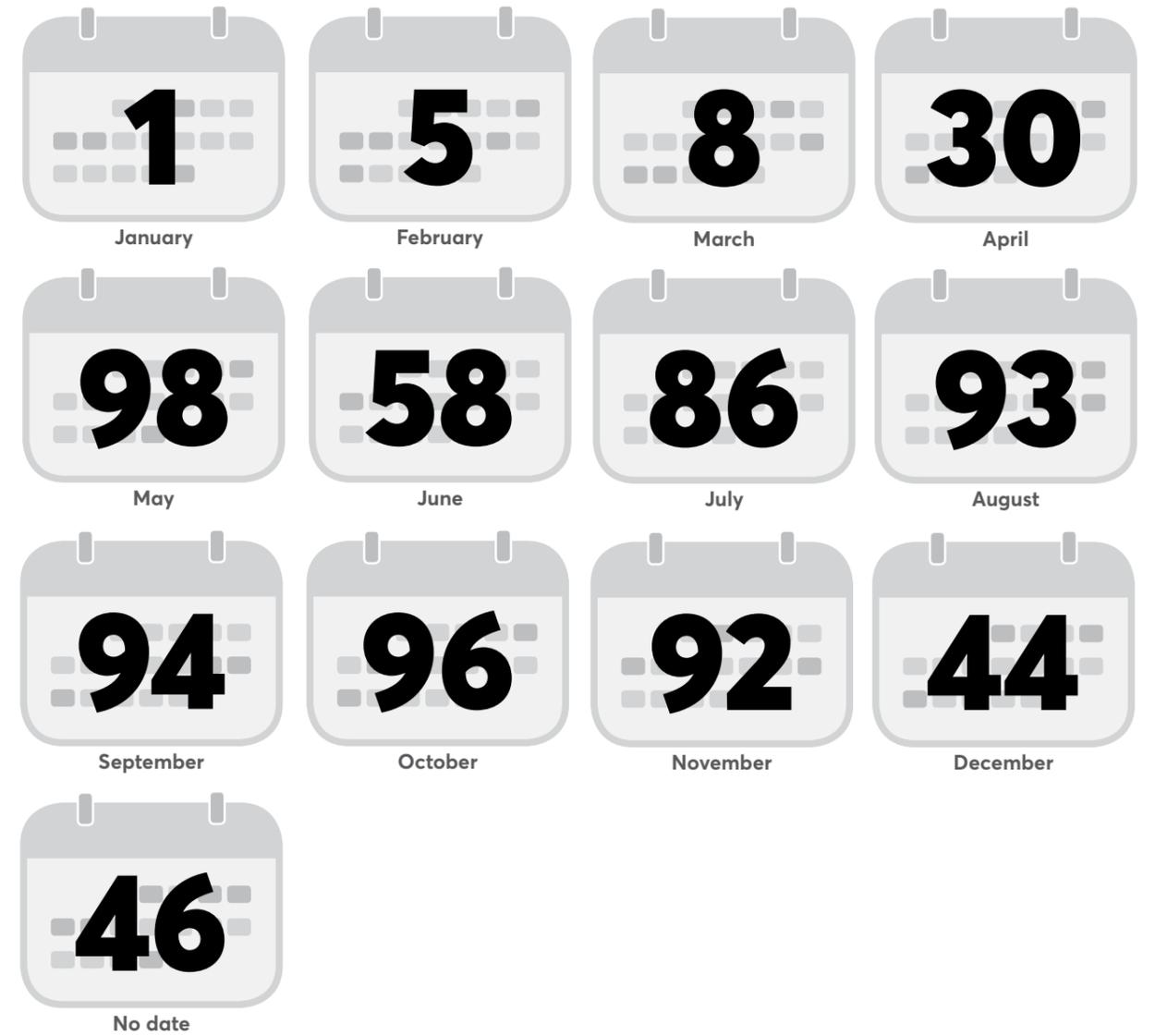
■ Number of students

Number of travel passes by school



■ Number of students

Number of travel passes issued each month



ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Most participating students met the eligibility criteria of 'Financial Hardship' (76%), followed by housing related criteria (including living out of home, couch surfing or homelessness) (15%). Almost 8% of students indicated that they were experiencing family violence. (More than one criterion can apply to an individual student.)

The eligibility criteria varied significantly across schools. For example, students from The Grange and Wyndham Central College accounted for 70% of all students who were identified as facing issues related to family violence. Further, only students from Baden Powell P-9 were identified as being in a single parent family, and similarly only students at WCEC were identified as meeting criteria related to Centrelink. This variation suggests a limitation in the data as eligibility criteria was recorded differently by each school, including, in some cases, failing to record eligibility in accordance the eligibility criteria set out by the program (e.g. Centrelink or Health and Wellbeing).

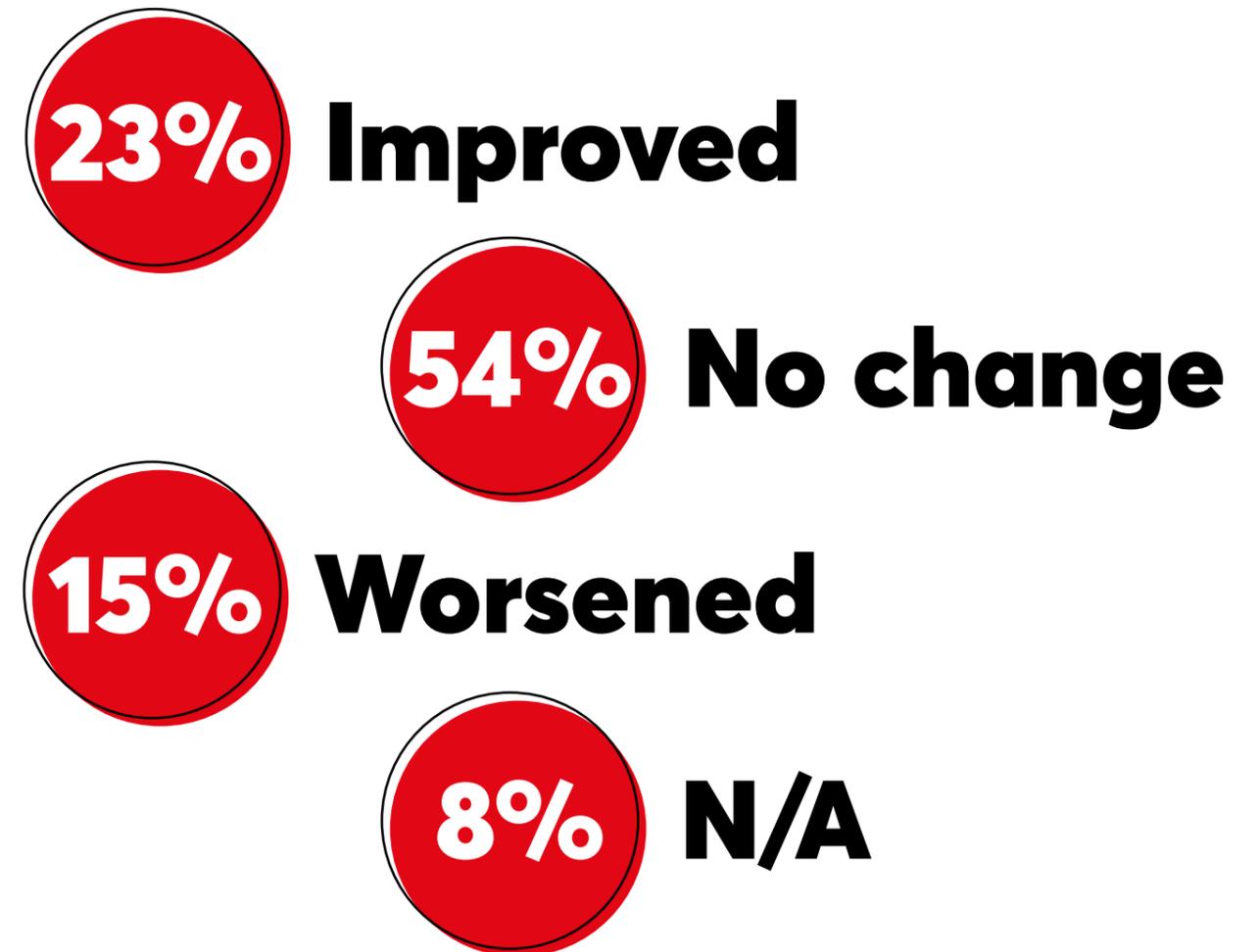
Most students only met one eligibility criteria throughout the program. However, 22% did meet two or more criteria at least once during the program, showing that some students experience multiple challenges. 31% of students who satisfied multiple criteria came from WCEC, suggesting that these students may be experiencing more complex disadvantage compared to students at other schools (or that staff at WCEC recorded this data in a different way than other schools).

Eligibility Criteria	Unique Students	% of all Students
Financial Hardship	203	76.32%
Couch surfing or housing instability	41	15.47%
Family Violence	41	7.74%
Single Parent Family	4	0.76%
In receipt of Centerlink	17	3.22%
School Program	6	1.14%
Health and Wellbeing	2	0.38%
Other	12	2.28%

ATTENDANCE AND PUNCTUALITY

23% of participants improved their school attendance while participating in the program. More students (54%) did not experience a reported change in attendance; this is also a positive outcome given the disadvantage those students were experiencing at the time, which could have led to reduced attendance. The data suggests that gender does not influence the likelihood of improving attendance. The school attended, however, could be a relevant factor. Several schools maintained consistent attendance when comparing their last recorded attendance figure with their baseline figure.

When analysing the number of passes issued and the impact on attendance, of the 23% of students that reported an increase in attendance, there appeared no obvious relationship between the number of travel passes issued and attendance. In fact, students with only one travel pass recorded were the least likely to have reduced school attendance and were almost as likely as students with more than five passes to improve their attendance (21% compared to 26% respectively). Students who received three passes were most likely to improve their attendance (28%). In terms of eligibility criteria, students whose eligibility stemmed from receipt of Centrelink were more likely to improve their attendance (and all attended WCEC). Students experiencing family issues were more likely to experience reduced attendance compared to those with housing or financial issues.



% | Impact of participation attendance

Impact of number of travel passes on attendance

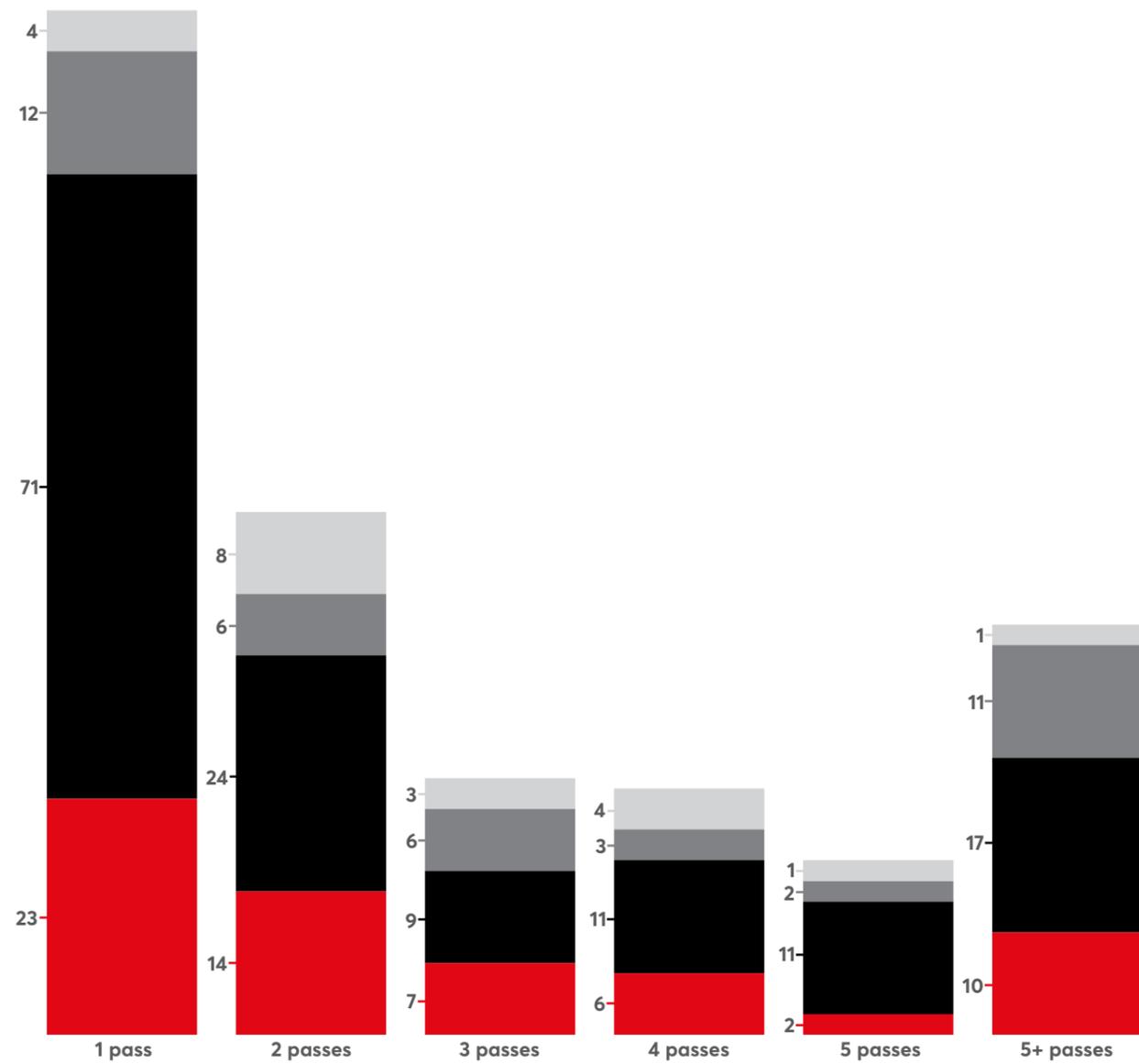
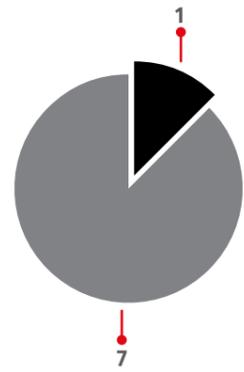


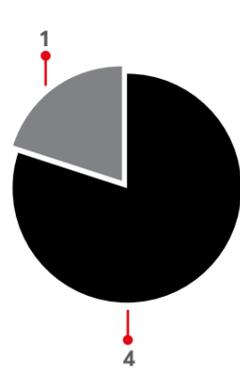
Photo by Christina wocintechchat.com

There were five schools that maintained attendance rates. Four schools reported that at least one of their students improved their attendance. WCEC had the most students improve their attendance (32 students or 73%) while The Grange had 15 students (58%) improve their attendance. Wyndham Central College reported that nine students reduced attendance and only one improved attendance. Baden Powell P-9 had seven students with reduced attendance and no students with increased attendance.

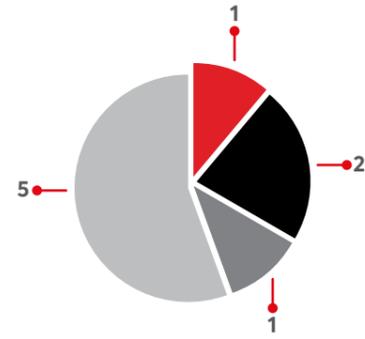
Significantly, reasons for reduction in attendance that prevented students attending school were attributable to health, and other wellbeing and social issues. It should not be surprising that some students' attendance worsened due to housing, health, financial and family circumstances given the significant disadvantage experienced by students attending disadvantaged schools.



Banden Powell P-9



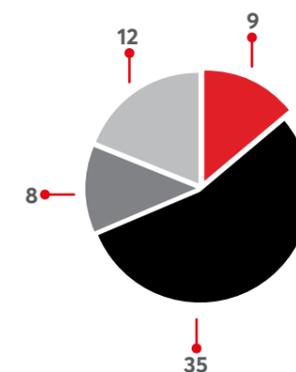
Carranballac College



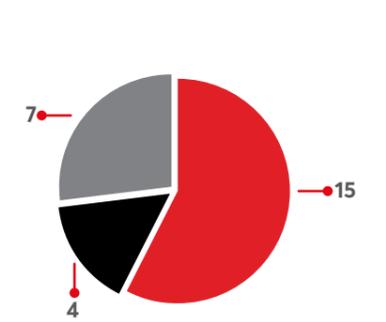
Hoppers Crossing Secondary College



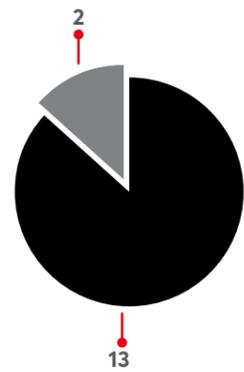
Tarneit P-9



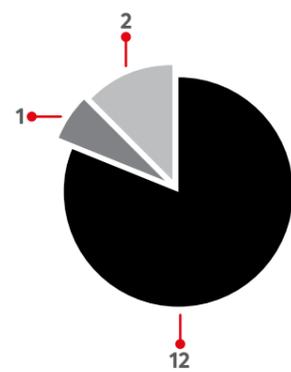
Tarneit Senior College



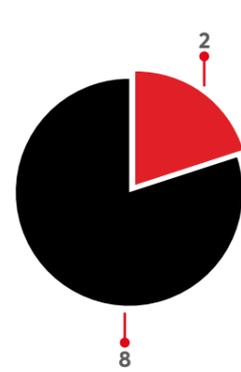
The Grange



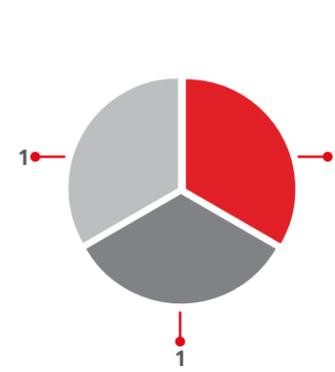
Manor Lakes P-12



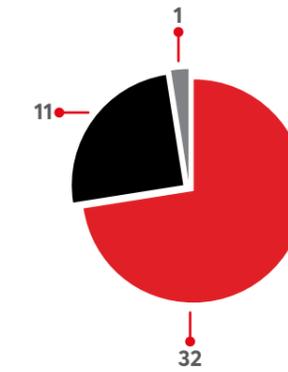
Point Cook p-12



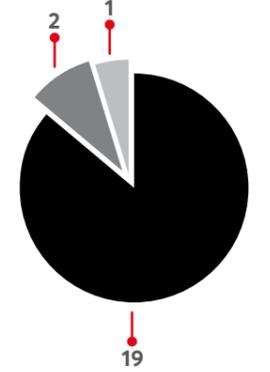
Point Cook Senior College



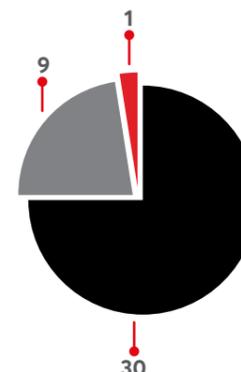
Truganina P-9 College



WCEC



Werribee Secondary College



Wyndham Central College



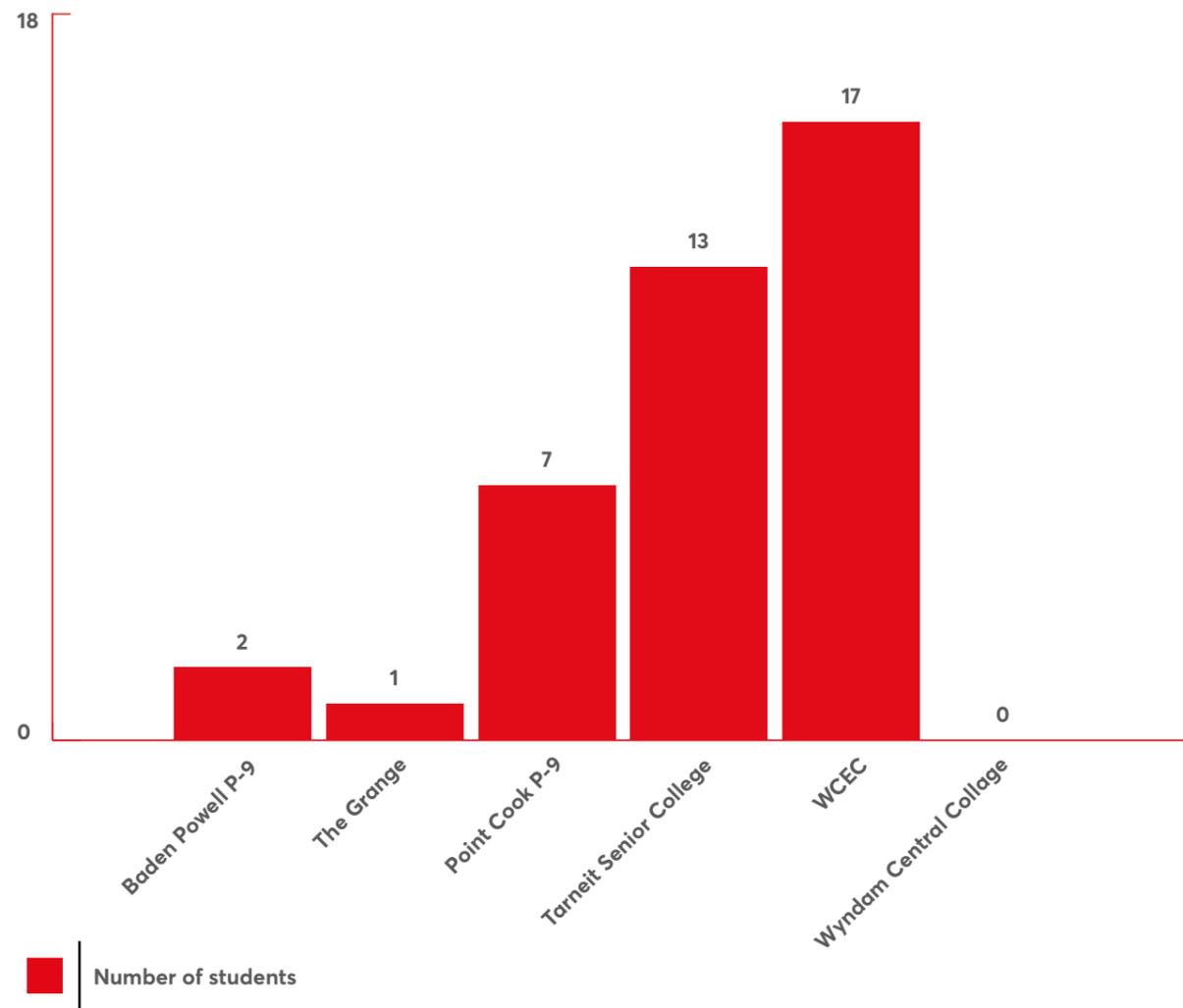
There were few cases of students significantly improving or worsening their attendance at school, with only 2% of students improving their attendance by 20% (equivalent to one day of school per week) or more. Similarly, students experiencing lower attendances rates of 20% or greater only accounted for 4% of cases.

When dividing the student population into four categories of pre and post attendance rates (0–25%, 26–50%, 51–75%, 76–100%), very few students shifted from one of these attendance categories up to the next category. 40 students did, however, improve their punctuality, keeping in mind that this data point was not captured for all schools.

Only a select number of schools captured data on punctuality improvements. For each school, the number of months during the reporting period that students' punctuality improved was examined. 75% of students who improved their punctuality came from either Tarneit Senior College or WCEC. 13 students from Tarneit Senior College improved their punctuality, which only comprises 5% of students from Tarneit Senior College who participated in the program. Moreover, 47% of students from Point Cook P-9 managed to improve their punctuality.

Although modest, these improvements in attendance and punctuality remain significant outcomes and demonstrate that travel assistance can lead to improved attendance and punctuality rates for vulnerable students.

Number of students who improved punctuality



ENGAGEMENT WITH EXTERNAL SERVICES

Almost half of all students (48%) engaged with external services during the program. The most common was mental health (15% of all students), followed by Centrelink (12%), DHHS and generalist youth services (8% respectively).

The external services used by students varied significantly across schools. For example, mental health services were the most commonly reported external service for Baden Powell P-9 and Hoppers Crossing Secondary College, while other schools reported a large proportion of students using Centrelink, DHHS or Youth Programs. Tarneit Senior College, The Grange, WCEC and Wyndham Secondary College reported that their students engaged a greater diversity of external services than other schools.

Types of External Service	Total Uses	As %
Mental Health	40	15%
Disability	1	0.4%
Centerlink	33	12%
Alcohol and Other Drug Services	2	0.8%
Children and Family Services	14	5%
Youth Programs	20	8%
General Community Services	7	2.6%
Legal/School Lawyer	8	3%
DSS (Reconnect)	10	3.8%
DET (Navigator)	5	1.9%
DHHS	20	8%
Other	9	3.4%
None	138	52%

Note: values do not equal 100% as some students engaged multiple services.

ENGAGEMENT WITH WELLBEING SERVICES

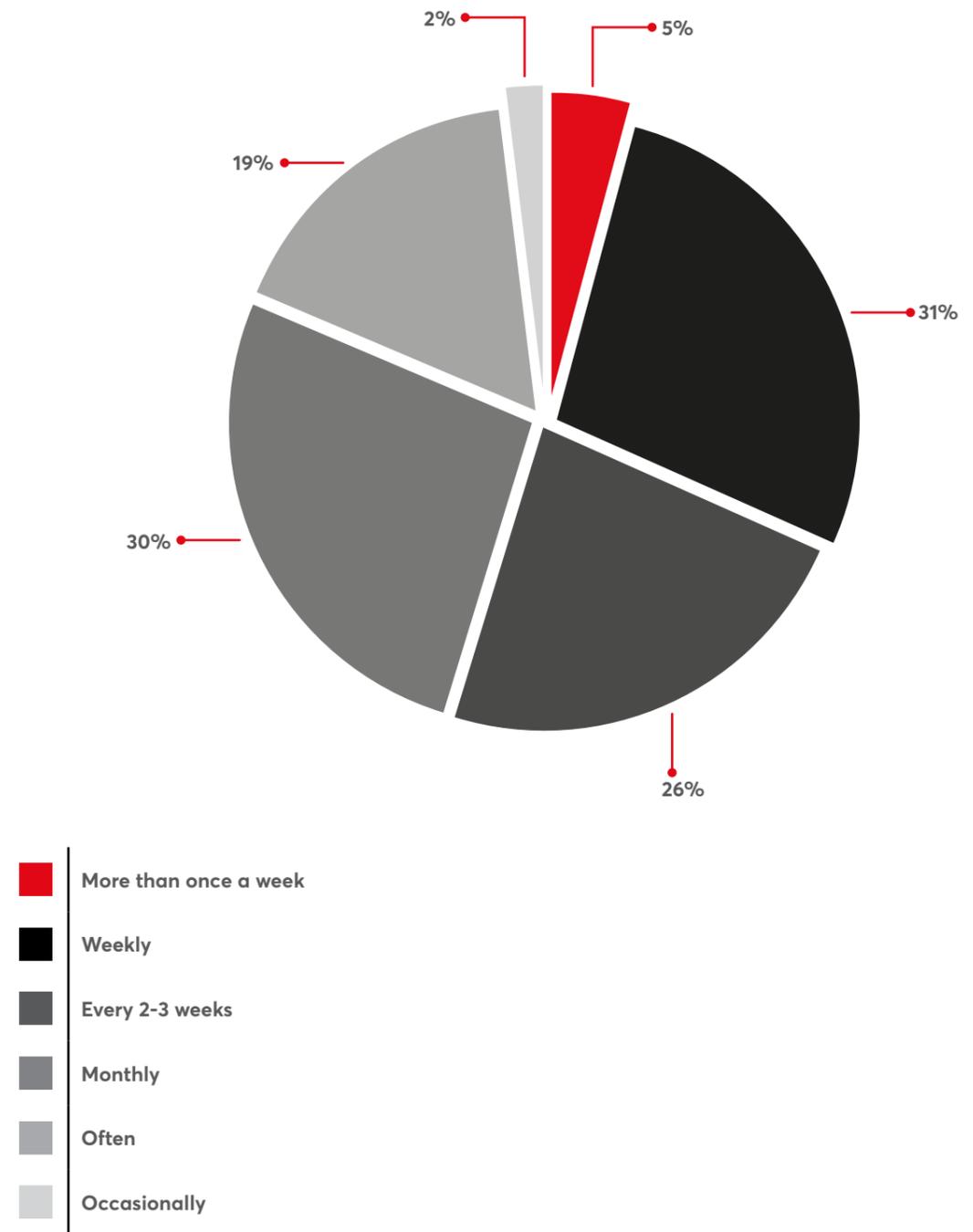
Most students involved in the program also engaged with their school's internal wellbeing services (86% overall). This result is not surprising as those students who are eligible to participate in the program are more likely to already be working with school wellbeing teams to access additional supports within school since being engaged with a school wellbeing program was a requirement for participation in the program. More than one third (36%) of students who engaged their school's wellbeing team did so once a week or more. Another 26% engaged with their school's wellbeing team once every two to three weeks.

In most schools, all of the participating students engaged their school's wellbeing team. Two schools reported that only about 60% of students engaged their wellbeing teams (Tarneit Senior College and Manor Lakes P-12). The data provided by those schools does not shed light on why these figures are lower.



Photo by Christina wocintechchat.com

Proportion of students who engaged with school wellbeing services



INCURRENCE OF FINES BEFORE AND DURING THE PROGRAM

The proportion of students receiving public transport fines dropped from 13.5% (36 students) in the 12 months prior to the program, to 0.8% (two students) during the program; a 12.7 percentage point difference. One student received a fine for forgetting to carry their travel pass on the day in question. Another student received a fine for having their feet on the seat since their foot was injured and bandaged. Therefore the fine does not relate to the failure to carry a valid ticket. One student also received an official warning during the program.

This finding demonstrates that the program contributed to the prevention of public transport fines for participating students and that most students want to go to school if they are given the chance. Students below the age of 18 can receive a fine of \$83 for failing to produce a valid ticket (or \$248 for students over 18). A fine could have a significant impact for students who are facing financial hardship, unstable housing and difficult family circumstances, or other vulnerabilities.

Of the 36 students who received public transport fines in the 12 months prior to the program, 10 received only one fine, four received two fines, and eight received three or more. The vast majority of students who had received fines prior to the program—particularly multiple fines—came from WCEC, suggesting the increased vulnerability of students at this school.

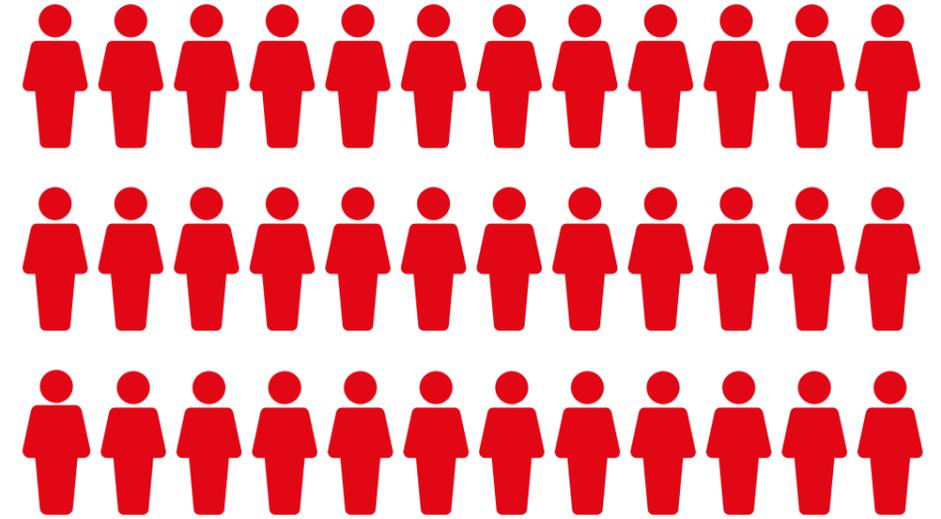


Photo by Nate Watson

Proportion of students who received public transport fines

In the last 12 months prior to the program

36—13.5%



During the program

2—0.8%



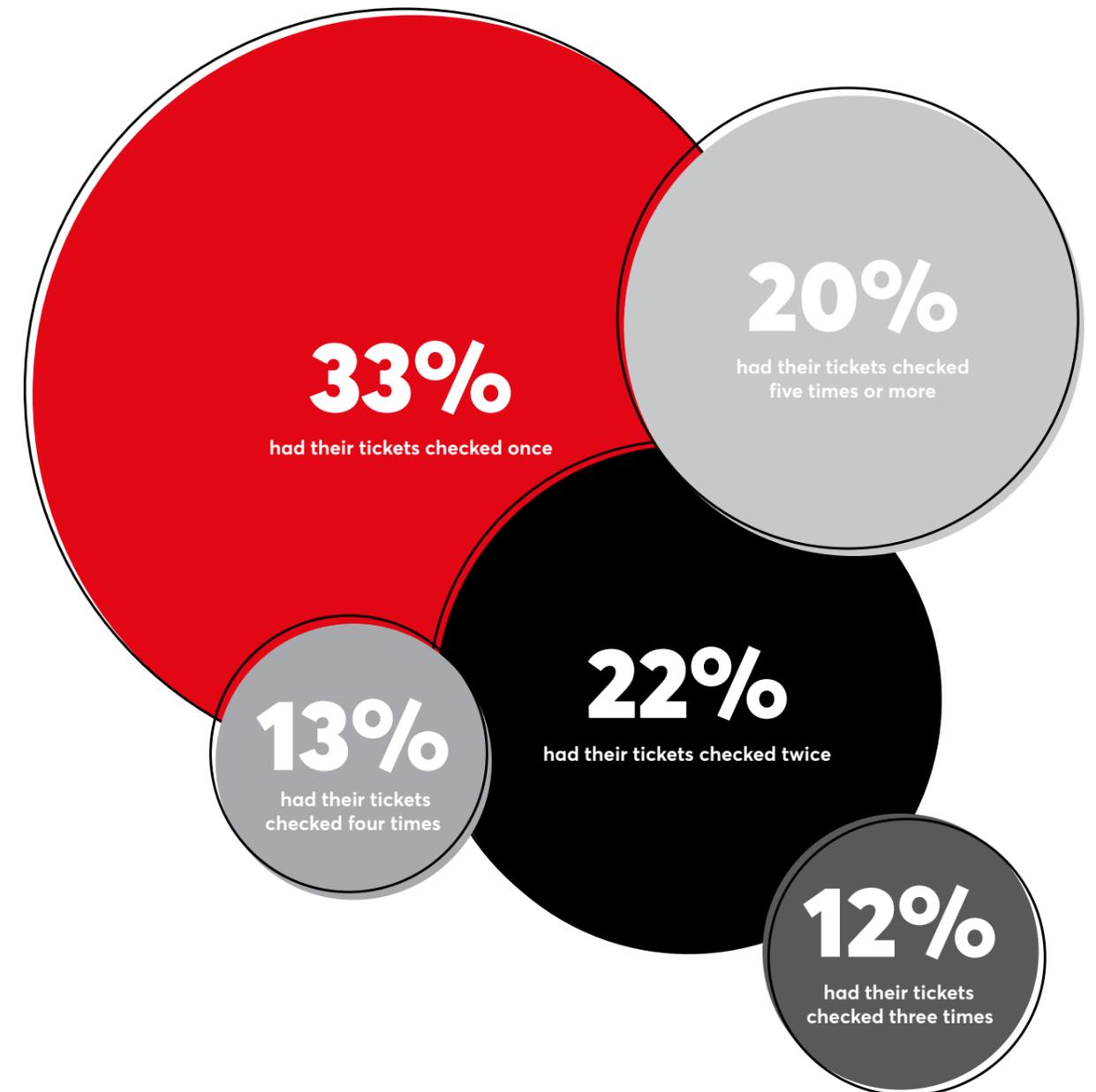
 Students

TICKET CHECKING BY AUTHORISED OFFICERS

Almost half of students had their tickets checked at least once during the program (45%). Of those who did, one third had their ticket checked only once, but one fifth had their tickets checked five times or more.

Students from some schools were more likely to report that their tickets were checked, but the reasons are unclear from the data. Approximately 80% of students at Tarneit P-9, Tarneit Senior College and The Grange reported having their tickets checked. Only 0–5% of students at Hoppers Crossing Secondary College, Werribee Secondary College and Wyndham Central College reported having their tickets checked. This difference could be due to differences in reporting across schools, or differences in rates of ticket inspection across the public transport routes taken by students at different schools.

For students who had their tickets checked, how many times were they checked



PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED TRAVELLING WITH A TRAVEL PASS

The vast majority of students involved in the program did not report facing any problems using their travel pass on public transport. Only 3% of students reported that they had any problems. Students from The Grange were much more likely to report problems (19%). However, the data provided by The Grange does not provide any insight on why this figure is higher.

A number of incidents occurred during the program that give cause for concern. These incidents reflect poor training of transport staff with respect to the functionality of the travel pass and poor engagement with vulnerable students. We raised these issues with the Department through the Steering Committee and all incidents were investigated. Some of these are discussed in the following case studies.

AMER

A student from one of the participating high schools was provided with a travel pass by his school psychologist. However, while at Sunshine Railway Station, a public transport officer took the pass from him and told him that he could not use it on trains and it was for buses only. The officer was rude to the student and threw the pass in the bin.

Following this incident, V/Line staff and Metro staff in the western area of Melbourne were given an update on the vulnerable persons pass.

MARIJANA

At the start of June 2019, Marijana, a high school student from a participating high school, was exiting Hoppers Crossing Railway Station and about to catch a bus. When she passed through the Myki barrier gate, a male Authorised Officer ('AO') asked her about her travel pass. She stated that she had received it from school. He told her that it is a fake ticket and that she was not telling the truth. He told her to not use it again or she will receive a fine.

This interaction impacted Marijana's confidence using the travel pass. It also increased her stress levels as she was travelling to school by bus and did not want to be late.

MICHAELA

Michaela, a high school student from another participating high school in Wyndham, was issued with a travel pass after she was kicked out of home by her grandparents.

In July 2019, Michaela was travelling to work. She showed her travel pass to the public transport staff at the Myki barrier gate at a station in the City Loop Station and was waved through. At the same time, there were four AOs on duty, and one waved her over. The AO asked to see Michaela's travel pass and ID, which Michaela provided. The AO then began to ask Michaela questions about where she had gotten the pass. Michaela explained she had been issued it at school, and when pressed further said it was issued by her school counsellor.

The AO asked whether Michaela had a Myki card, and where she was going. Michaela said she did not have a Myki card and was headed to work. The AO called a second AO over and asked, "Do we accept these?" The second AO said the travel passes are accepted but then said Michaela's card was out of date, even though it was still current and valid.

The AO said they might have to fine her, and recorded her details. They asked to see Michaela's ID for her address. Michaela explained she no longer lived at the address on her ID (Michaela had been referred to a women's refuge for family violence issues). She had to ask twice for the fine not to be sent to the address on her ID.

The station was crowded throughout this interaction. Michaela said the experience was embarrassing and stressful. She was late to her shift at work because of the interaction with the AOs.

A later PTV investigation of this incident resulted in the report of non-compliance being withdrawn, and so Michaela was not issued with a fine. Nevertheless, the incident was stressful and traumatising for Michaela.

MARTY

Marty has an intellectual disability, lives in financial hardship, and came to Australia as a refugee. English is not his first language.

In late June 2019, Marty boarded a bus headed for Werribee. There were three AOs on board. They commenced checking passengers' Myki cards. Marty was approached by a male AO, who asked to see his Myki card. Marty explained he did have a Myki card but there was no money on it. He offered up his travel pass instead.

The AO said, "Mate, this only lasts one week". Marty explained the travel pass lasts for a month, and he has one week left on it. Marty then explained that it was issued by his school and offered to show his student ID card to the AO. The AO asked for his address and told Marty that he was going to be fined. He then asked to see Marty's student ID card, which Marty produced. The AO said that he was going to call the school to ask about the travel pass. The AO then read the travel pass again and said, "Wait, this is for a month, sorry mate". He gave the travel pass back to Marty and told Marty next time he should "just put money on his Myki Card" because that's "better".

This exchange took place in front of the other passengers on the bus and Marty found it extremely stressful.

Following the first two incidents, and after incidents three and four occurred but before they were reported, a new staff advisory was issued by PTV on 16 July 2019, which provided guidance on the passes. The advisory highlighted that they are issued to vulnerable people and so care and understanding should be exercised. PTV also contacted operators requesting that staff were made aware of the advisory. Staff advisories are raised in AO team meetings to ensure that they have been read and understood.

Prior to the July advisory, the only information that had been provided to staff about the seven and 30 day travel pass trial was a staff advisory in December 2018. The Department of Transport said they were keen to resolve this issue and that the welfare of students on the program was paramount. Nevertheless, there were no accountability measures implemented for the AOs and Conductors involved in these incidents.

Following the July advisory, a further incident occurred where a student was told to throw away his travel pass and exit the bus by an AO. After exiting the bus, the student was left stranded in between home and school with no way to get to school. This serious incident was thoroughly investigated. PTV found that there had not been any malfeasance or mistakes by AOs involved. Nevertheless, the student maintained his version of his story, and reported feeling stressed and intimidated by the experience.

Although only five out of 266 students (1.9%) were involved in these serious incidents, the incidents indicate a lack of thorough training for AOs and public transport staff about the travel pass product, and a lack of skill in communicating with young people and vulnerable passengers. More should be done by the Department to rectify these serious issues. Otherwise the risk—and the eventuality for these students—is that vulnerable students and others will be made to feel intimidated, stressed and traumatised. As discussed below, these incidents suggest that transitioning back to issuing Mykis would be a safer and more sustainable option if this program was to be implemented permanently.

LIMITATIONS OF THE DATA

The analysis presented in this report faces a number of inherent limitations due to inconsistencies in data entries that were difficult to interpret, and uncertainties about the reliability of some data entered by schools.

Some of the key areas of uncertainty related to the following issues:

- The same student ID number was used for different students on many occasions. Where possible different students were disaggregated and new ID numbers used (identifying the same students using criteria such as school, gender, age and responses to questions). However, it is possible that the same student has multiple ID numbers even in our recoded data.
- Students had entries for the same pass over multiple months. This situation sometimes made it difficult to determine which month's data to use for which pass, as a pass is only valid for one month. This ambiguity was further problematised by some passes not having a travel pass issue date.
- The same travel pass number was sometimes used for different students, which was disaggregated where possible. Furthermore, some students did not have their pass ID numbers listed. These passes were assigned new ID numbers so that every pass had a unique value.
- A total of 46 passes fell into the 'no date' category due to the date travel pass issued field not being populated. The lack of date limited our analysis for questions that involved looking at trends over the course of the year.
- Students sometimes received multiple passes in the same month and was often unclear why.
- The question 'school attendance prior to the program' was answered inconsistently for some students.

"Students are happ[ier] to ask for help knowing [the program] is available to them."

KEY FINDINGS FROM SURVEYS AND MONTHLY FEEDBACK

YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO GO TO SCHOOL

Lack of affordable transportation is a frequently cited barrier to regular school attendance.⁴⁵ This program has shown that many vulnerable young people want to attend school and will attend school if they are given a free and accessible way to get there.

Simply put by student participants in the program:

- "I can go to school now and don't worry about finding money for my Myki";
- "Easy to use, makes it easier to get around —especially to and from school";
- "[Having the travel pass] is less stress off a[n] already stressful year"; and
- "I don't have to worry about getting a fine or [getting] kicked off the train [or] bus when using public transport to get to school."

80% of students surveyed said the travel pass made it easier to get to school, and 58% said it was easier to get to important appointments.

INCREASED ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL

All members of the school wellbeing teams surveyed agreed that the provision of travel passes helped vulnerable young people attend school. As demonstrated above, data collected by the schools during the program showed that around a quarter of students who participated in the program increased their attendance or punctuality rate, and many increased attendance and punctuality rates remained consistent throughout the program.

The personal stories of how the travel passes changed the way that students travelled to school are perhaps more compelling than the statistics. It was reported of one student that "he is not coming to school late now that he has a valid travel pass to access the bus instead of walking a long distance to school". It was also reported that another student's "attendance has always been good, however, the travel pass has made the trip to and from school much easier as he no longer has to walk such a long distance each day". School wellbeing teams also noticed that "some students are more punctual to school and are attending more days than previously".

Students also reported being able to attend specific events or excursions because of the travel pass: "I was able to go on the excursion because I had the travel pass".

YOUNG PEOPLE WILL TRAVEL LAWFULLY ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT WHEN EQUIPPED TO DO SO

The students who participated in the program reported that they travelled compliantly and presented their travel pass when asked by public transport staff. School wellbeing staff at one school observed that "[the travel pass means] young people being able to access travel to get to school, [y]oung people [are] not attempting to travel illegally and there are [fewer] referrals to [the] school lawyer for Myki fines".

Students reported getting into the habit of remembering to bring their travel pass with them everywhere they went: "sometimes I didn't have my pass with me, but now I keep it in my phone case all of the time".

These reports are a significant finding given the large number of fines issued to participating students in the twelve months prior to their participation in the program.

"Easy to use, makes it easier to get around —especially to and from school."

YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL BETTER ABOUT TRAVELLING ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT WITH A TRAVEL PASS

More than 90% of student participants surveyed either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that they felt more positive about using public transport when they had the travel pass. 85% said they felt better about going to school when they had the travel pass. 92% of students said they felt good about using public transport when they had the travel pass. These reports are in stark contrast to only 36% of students reporting they felt good about using public transport before the program. One school wellbeing staff member noted that "all students reported a positive impact on their wellbeing and anxiety about using public transport" from being equipped with the travel pass.

Students surveyed also noted that having a travel pass made them feel more positive about interacting with AOs and bus drivers, and they were less stressed about getting fines. 48% of students said they felt stressed about using public transport before the program. A number of students noted that they were less fearful of being stopped by AOs during the program, stating that the best thing about the travel pass was:

- "Not worrying about ticket inspectors";
- "Not being stressed about getting a fine";
- "Not being worried about getting kicked off the train/bus when using public transport"; and
- "I am able to avoid getting picked up by the PSOs".

These results were confirmed by wellbeing staff, who reported that "it has been invaluable to know that the students are feeling more positive about travelling on public transport, which is allowing them to focus on the academic aspects of school". Further, "students report[ed]... a reduction in stress relating to catching public transport".

⁴⁵ See, eg, Alameda County Public Health Department, *Getting on Board for Health: A Health Impact Assessment of Bus Funding and Access* (Research Report, May 2013) 14; David Sapp and Jeremy Blasi, *Counterproductive and Wasteful: Los Angeles' Daytime Curfew Pushes Students Away From School and Diverts Resources Away From Real Community Safety* (Research Report, American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, February 2012) 6–7.

YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO ESCAPE FAMILY VIOLENCE AND RESPOND TO UNSAFE HOUSING

The program helped vulnerable young people escape difficult situations. 20% of surveyed students stated that the travel pass helped them leave home when it was unsafe. 15% stated that the travel pass made it easier to find somewhere safe to sleep. Wellbeing staff confirmed these results with 50% of surveyed staff stating that the travel pass assisted vulnerable students to leave home when it was unsafe. 25% of staff surveyed stated that the travel pass assisted vulnerable students to find somewhere safe to sleep.

The evaluation findings also suggest that the program assisted students to generally be able to move around more freely, attend appointments, see friends, complete errands, and engage in other pro-social activities. One student reported, "now I can go anywhere without having to worry about finding money for my Myki". It was also reported that "the students were pleased that this was a cost they no longer had to think about or consider". A school wellbeing staff member observed that "[students] have found it useful to move around to get groceries and meet up with their friends and social workers, which has helped their wellbeing, yet save on costs".

STRONGER ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOL WELLBEING TEAMS

School wellbeing teams reported that they had increased capacity to assist vulnerable young people through the provision of an additional resource. All members of the school wellbeing teams surveyed agreed that the program built their capacity to support vulnerable youth, with one commenting that "[t]his program is empowering me to provide real financial aid to needy students who cannot access resources and support due to distance and lack of money previously". Another stated "[the program] is a powerful tool for our wellbeing team to directly intervene and help struggling families out financially".

School wellbeing teams also experienced increased engagement with young people through provision of the pass. One wellbeing staff member commented, "students who have not previously engaged with wellbeing services are accessing wellbeing support more often... The [travel pass] check-ins have helped to establish trust and rapport with students who were previously unsure of getting wellbeing support". Another school observed that "students continue to be thankful for the opportunity to have a travel pass; they are getting into the habit of remembering when their pass is due for renewal and come and see me to collect a new one" and "students are now getting better at remembering when they need to get a new travel pass each month; this is great, they remind me before I remind them". Issuing new travel passes to students provided the wellbeing team with the opportunity to check in with the student and monitor any existing or new wellbeing issues they may have had.

"[Students] are connecting more with the counsellor due to the regular check-ins required for the... program."

INTERNAL REFERRALS

School wellbeing teams serve as a referral point to an increasing number of services that are available within schools. Following from this program, internal referrals were made to school counsellors, social workers, visiting psychologists, school nurses, school lawyers and GPs.

All members of the school wellbeing teams surveyed agreed that the provision of the travel pass helped vulnerable youth to access services. The regular appointments between the students and wellbeing team encouraged students to engage on an ongoing basis to address wellbeing issues. As noted by one wellbeing staff member, "[students] are connecting more with the counsellor due to the regular check-ins required for the... program". Further, it was observed that "students are happ[ier] to ask for help knowing [the program] is available to them".

EXTERNAL REFERRALS

As part of the program, school wellbeing teams facilitated external referrals to a number of support services including Orygen, Whitelion, Centrelink, Centre for Multicultural Youth, Melbourne City Mission, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Headspace, Wyndham Uniting Care, Foundation House, and Werribee Support and Housing. 33% of students surveyed said it was easier to get help from services when they had the travel pass, and 58% said it was easier to get to important appointments.

TRAVEL PASSES VERSUS MYKI CARDS

In 2019, after the establishment of the 'vulnerable persons product' or travel pass, this program provided students with 30-day travel passes instead of Mykis. This differs from the pilot. Travel passes do not require a concession ID to be carried and cannot be touched on or off.

We were initially concerned that students may feel stigmatised for carrying a different travel product rather than the ordinary Myki. This concern was not borne out in a significant way. There was general support for the travel pass, with most wellbeing staff observing that the program was working well and that students were grateful for the support. One wellbeing staff member noted that "students are really proud of the fact that they have this pass—I have heard them talk about it with other students and they talk positively about it".

However, another wellbeing staff member responded in the survey by stating that "issuing Mykis would be great so that the students have the same format of 'ticket' as all other young people and aren't then identified as being somehow different". No students reported feeling singled out or stigmatised due to the type of travel product and this was monitored carefully. Nonetheless, the incidents described above—involving poorly trained public transport staff who lacked understanding of the functionality of this product—resulted in students facing disadvantage as a result of carrying the travel pass rather than a Myki. In the event that the program continues to use travel passes, public transport staff should develop greater awareness of the product. This understanding would prevent the types of incidents described above if the travel pass becomes more widely used. Nevertheless, WEstjustice recommends that Mykis be provided to students instead of travel passes should the program continue.

Wellbeing staff were surveyed about their preferred duration of entitlement for students to travel for free. Although some respondents said that a one-monthly entitlement worked well, others suggested longer timeframes. Some suggested quarterly or once per term because this time period is an "easier time-frame to keep track of in the context of a school" or so that "students can access more long-term support". Some wellbeing staff recommended half yearly or yearly passes, and one staff member recommended a product with an ongoing entitlement, because of the complexity of the issues faced by vulnerable students. These differences also suggest that a Myki is the more appropriate product because it can be provided for longer periods of time.



Photo by Fabian Mardi

“It is a fantastic initiative, and I deeply hope the program is continued and expanded.”

WELLBEING TEAMS SHOULD ADMINISTER MYKI CARDS OR TRAVEL PASSES

Wellbeing team members largely agreed that it was beneficial for students to be able to access the travel pass through their school wellbeing team. The involvement of the school wellbeing team allows the team to be aware of the students' situations and allows the team to monitor students' use of the travel passes. Moreover, school wellbeing team involvement strengthens the school's bond with students to be able to support them. One wellbeing staff member surveyed stated they believed teachers should also be able to provide travel passes because wellbeing teams are under-resourced and home-room teachers know their students well.

While the administration of initiatives like this program place an increased demand on school wellbeing teams, there was overwhelmingly support for this initiative. One staff member said, *“it is a fantastic initiative, and I deeply hope the program is continued and expanded”*, with many others echoing this sentiment. Another wellbeing officer noted that many younger students were also in need of a similar product: *“we are greatly appreciative [of] this service and would love to see it extended to some of our younger students who travel with their older siblings”*.



RECENT ANNOUNCEMENTS

The State School Relief has received philanthropic funding to provide half yearly Mykis to students at all high schools across the state. This initiative was, in part, based on the success of this program and the preceding pilot.

The impact of COVID-19 and the State School Relief's project has led to the Steering Committee for this program deciding not to extend the program throughout 2020. Rather, support has been given to the State School Relief project.



The Travel Assistance Program has been a practical and affordable way to help vulnerable young people travel to and from school. As explained by one student participant in the program, "I found it easier to travel, I had no stress".

Further, collaborating with the Department of Education and Training and schools to facilitate this program and encouraging students to access their school's wellbeing teams to participate in the program has fostered an increase in internal and external referrals to support services for vulnerable young people.

The Victorian government should consider creating a free and accessible pathway of travel for all school-aged vulnerable young people. School age children are legally required to travel to school and legally required to travel on public transport with a valid ticket. For many disadvantaged young people, compliance with these two laws is a mutually exclusive proposition.

Other jurisdictions, such as NSW and London, allow for school students to travel to and from school for free. However, free travel arrangements do not have the added benefit of enabling a young people to escape family violence or other hardship by moving between houses to find somewhere safe to sleep.

If we are genuine in our attempts to provide young Victorians with a quality education, which in turn will lead to employment pathways and opportunities for further qualifications, then we must take into considerations the barriers to education. Transport poverty is a significant impediment to education while being a relatively simple and affordable problem to fix. This report provides evidence and the narrative for the current Victorian government to lead reform on transport poverty for vulnerable young people.

"I found it easier to travel, I had no stress."

