



## The State of Play for Young People Across Australia

Young people are our most accurate barometer of how we are faring as a nation. Across Australia, many young people are facing complex, intersecting challenges that make it difficult for them to engage in education and training, find and keep a job, and participate in their community. We see these challenges manifest in worrying trends like those outlined below.

- [1 in 3 Australian young people report high or very high levels of psychological distress](#) and [1 in 4 young people aged 16-24 are living with at least one mental health disorder.](#)
- [Suicide is the leading cause of death amongst young people aged 15 - 24 years old. In 2020, death by suicide represented 31% of all deaths in this age group.](#)
- [At the time of the last Census, 28,000+ young people were homeless \(between the ages of 12-24\). This equates to about 1 in 4 of the total number of homeless people across Australia. It is also widely accepted that this figure is likely to be well underestimated, making the true number over 30,000 young people.](#)
- [41,700 young people aged 15-24 presented alone to a specialist homelessness agency in 2020-21. Around one third were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 3 in 5 had been previously assisted by an agency.](#)
- [1 in 5 Australian young people are disengaged from both full-time education and training, with over 20% leaving school without a Year 12 qualification.](#)
- [At the age of 15, 20% of young Australians are up to three years behind their more affluent peers in terms of achievement, because of socio-cultural disadvantage.](#)
- [1 in 10 young people aged 14-17 have recently used illicit substances.](#)

When we fail to address these challenges and meet their complex needs, these vulnerable young people can fall through the cracks of mainstream systems and are at risk of entrenched disadvantage that can affect the rest of their lives. This kind of lifelong disengagement ends up costing governments and communities \$1.2bn annually and \$50+ billion over a lifetime. ([Mitchell Institute, 2017](#))

In particular, when young people wind up in juvenile detention, there is a huge financial and psychological cost. Worse still, early contact with the justice system during adolescence means that there is a far greater likelihood that they will reoffend in the future, especially if they already experience disadvantage. Here's what we know:

- [UN data shows that Australia's growth rate in imprisonment is the third highest amongst OECD countries between 2003 and 2018 \(exceeded only by Turkey and Columbia\) \(Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2021\).](#)
- [Australia's age of criminal responsibility is just 10 years old.](#)
- [According to the Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 4,695 young people aged 10 and over were under youth justice supervision on an average day in 2020-21. Out of this 4,695, 84% were in community supervision and 16% - almost 800 young people - were in detention. A total of 4,266 young people were in detention at some time during the year.](#)
- [72% of young people \(nearly 3 in 4\) in detention on an average night in June 2021 were unsentenced and 83% of the young people in detention are between the ages of 10 - 17 years old \(Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2021\).](#)
- [Youth Justice Services asserts that the cost of detaining one young person is \\$1,900 per day and \\$693,865 over the course of a year \(2019-20\).](#)
- [The Australian Institute of Health & Welfare notes that 80% of young offenders exiting sentenced detention return within 12 months \(and 61% within 6 months\). They also note that young people who were released from a sentence lasting 9+ months were the most likely to return within 12 months \(85%\).](#)
- [A report released by the Australian Human Rights Commission showed that 77% of young people in NSW prisons have a mental health condition \(including substance use\) and that young people with mental health disorders and/or cognitive impairment are at least 6 times more likely to be in prison than those young people without disability in NSW.](#)
- [Over half of the young people in detention on an average day are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 89% are between the ages of 10 and 17. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are 20 times more likely to be detained as young non-Indigenous Australians. \(Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2021\).](#)



## BackTrack Is Our Solution

Based in Armidale NSW, BackTrack supports young people (aged 12 - 25 years old) who are having a hard time and are falling through the cracks of a mainstream system that doesn't meet their complex needs. We do whatever it takes, for as long as it takes, to keep kids alive, out of jail and chasing their hopes and dreams.

The young people we support aren't your mainstream, but among the most marginalised in our community. Through no fault of their own, they're disproportionately affected by:

- dropping out of school
- early and ongoing contact with the justice system
- homelessness and housing instability
- substance use
- geographic and social isolation
- poverty and multigenerational unemployment
- severe psychological distress, mental health conditions and suicidality

BackTrack founder Bernie Shakeshaft saw these young people being left behind in our society and knew they needed holistic, flexible and long-term support to get their lives back on track. With a shed, a passionate crew of volunteers and a mission to keep kids alive, out of jail and chasing their hopes and dreams, he established BackTrack in 2006. Sixteen years later, BackTrack has become nationally recognised for its unique, proven approach to engaging, educating, training and employing vulnerable young people.

BackTrack helps young people to develop work and life skills, engage in learning and training, prepare for employment and participate in their community. It achieves this through a combination of educational, training and diversionary activities, residential accommodation, supported employment and wraparound youth work.

## Our Methodology (The BackTrack Way)

**It starts with the right foundations:** BackTrack grounds its work in the Circle of Courage; a youth development model that draws on contemporary positive psychology and resilience research, alongside First Nations cultural knowledge and practices (originating in Canada). It identifies belonging, mastery, independence and generosity as the universal guiding values of a happy, healthy life. That's why everything we offer comes back to helping young people work toward these foundations.

**It's holistic:** BackTrack believes that you can't help a young person if you don't understand everything that is going on for them. That's why we ground everything we do in by strong, supportive relationships with every young person; relationships that are based on empathy, respect and a commitment to always 'look for the gold' in them. Taking a holistic view of their strengths, skills, challenges, interests and aspirations informs how we tailor the support we provide and determines the activities that are most appropriate and impactful for them. Importantly, we always start by 'doing first things first'; by meeting their highest priority needs (accommodation, mental and physical health referrals, court/legal support etc) so they are in a position where they can genuinely engage in what we have to offer at BackTrack.

**It's flexible and long-term:** BackTrack knows that everyone's needs are different, that growth happens inch by inch and there is no one-size-fits-all timeframe. That's why we hang in for the long haul, providing the support young people need at each stage of their journey. Participation in BackTrack is always 100% voluntary and we have an ethos of 'drawing in' rather than 'chasing'. Our team consistently tracks and measures the wellbeing and developing skills of each young person. This enables us to identify if they may need additional support to address a challenge or master particular work or life skills, and when they are ready to make a supported transition into training and employment within our social enterprise, BackTrack Works, or via an external opportunity.

**It fills a gap in the system and it is embedded in the community:** BackTrack was established to fill a gap for support that can cater to vulnerable young people who are experiencing complex, intersecting challenges. We saw them falling through the cracks that exist between different government and community agencies and schools. BackTrack has become a centralised source of support for a young person where they can have multiple needs met simultaneously and holistically. Where we don't have the relevant expertise, we are coordinating and working in collaboration with different services (accommodation, legal, health, drug and alcohol, family and community services). This also speaks to the importance of a whole-of-community approach; it takes a village to raise a child. To ensure that we can help as many young people as possible in the ways they need it most, we have relationships with schools, Indigenous organisations, local businesses and employment service providers, health, accommodation and community service organisations, police and local Council (the 'top end of town').

## What BackTrack Looks Like Today

### The Core Program

The Core Program is for young people typically between the ages of 12 - 18 years old. Based in Armidale, it is designed to help them develop their literacy and numeracy, employability, and work and life skills. It achieves this through a combination of:

- skill-based learning (focused on the practical application of literacy and numeracy in a wide variety of settings)
- hands-on vocational training across agriculture and farming, horticulture and natural resource management, dog training, animal care, metalwork and woodworking, and mechanics
- accredited training (such as white cards, skill sets and machinery operation), delivered in partnership with local Registered Training Organisations
- diversionary and community engagement activities



## What BackTrack Looks Like Today (continued)

### Warrah

'Warrah' is our residential home for BackTrack young people. This includes a main homestead for fully supported/supervised living and four tiny homes for young people to make the transition into semi-independent accommodation. Warrah offers the wraparound support and supervision they need to thrive in a genuine home environment, where they can develop strong and positive relationships with peers and adults, learn how to cook, clean and manage a household, and set themselves up for independent living down the track.

Our team works with each young person to assess their developing skills and readiness to make this transition. This may be into one of BackTrack's four tiny homes where they can build tenancy history, while still accessing flexible support as needed, or it may be via community or independent housing options.

### BackTrack Works

Established in 2018, BackTrack Works is BackTrack's social enterprise that delivers commercial services and community projects across agriculture, construction, fabrication, disaster recovery and asset maintenance to customers in the New England region and beyond. Our social enterprise model means that we are able to provide accredited training, traineeships and employment opportunities for young people who would otherwise lack the technical qualifications, soft skills, aspirations and networks to find and keep a job. We offer a real-world work environment where they can build their practical experience and still access flexible, wraparound support to overcome any personal challenges that arise.

BackTrack Works has employed 57 young people since its establishment in 2018, which includes 26 trainees/apprentices. To date, 88% of our trainees have completed or are continuing their traineeships. This retention rate is significantly ahead of the state average (which indicates that 46.7% of traineeship contracts are cancelled). In total, 27% of our cohort have transitioned into external employment to date. These results validate our unique, proven approach to training and employment and how vital it is to complement this with wraparound support to meet the complex learning and welfare needs of our young people.

### The Tracker Network

BackTrack continues to receive growing interest from individuals and organisations who want to replicate what we do in Armidale in their own communities. By demonstrating the impact and adaptability of BackTrack's methodology and service model beyond Armidale, we become a viable alternative to mainstream solutions that are failing our cohort of vulnerable young people. This allows us to engage in conversations and actions that will truly shift the needle for these young people in the areas that affect them most and connect with other stakeholders in our advocacy efforts.

Established by BackTrack, the Tracker Network is a collective of mission-aligned organisations that deliver holistic, flexible and long-term support for young people in their communities. Through the Network, we offer the tools they need to sustainably and successfully design, deliver and evaluate youth-focused programs, including peer-led mentoring, group coaching, referral pathways and a suite of training resources.

## Our Impact, According To The Research

- A 2022 study by Griffith University, Central Queensland University, University of NSW, University of Newcastle and Hunter Medical Research Institute has included a thorough (and conservative) cost-benefit analysis of BackTrack, applying the standards required by the NSW Government's Treasury Department. This validated that BackTrack has a return-on-investment of \$2.03 for every \$1 invested (with benefits such as improved productivity, cost savings from crime, reduced homelessness and reduced health utilisation).
- Simon Deeming, Health Research Economist at Hunter Health Research Institute, asserted that BackTrack is "thoroughly merited on economic grounds AND there are many other outcomes from the program that cannot be appropriately incorporated within an economic evaluation".
- A 2021 study by Griffith University, Central Queensland University, University of NSW, University of Newcastle and Hunter Medical Research Institute surveyed 282 Armidale residents in a discrete choice experiment. 75% preferred BackTrack over greater police presence and noted that they would be willing to pay up to \$150 per household for it per annum. This demonstrates strong community buy-in and likelihood that BackTrack or BackTrack-style programs would be similarly embraced in other regional communities.
- A 2015 joint evaluation from University of NSW (National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre), University of New England, Hunter Medical Research Institute and Central Queensland University demonstrated that BackTrack young people showed marked improvements across multiple risk factors after 6 months of program participation, as follows:
  - rates of severe psychological distress halved;
  - suicide ideation dropped by 40%;
  - weekly illicit drug use dropped by 25%
  - multiple suspensions from school dropped by 70%
- A 2014 research paper from University of NSW (National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre) and University of New England demonstrated that in the first 12 months after BackTrack was established, there was a 38% decrease in youth crime rates in Armidale. This impact was sustained over time, with a 19% decrease over an additional following 7 years. The same study also noted that participation had a positive, instantaneous impact on young people, attributed to a 'pro-social attitude, including a reformed identity that differs from their previous identity...centred on antisocial behaviour.'