MAHI TŪTURU

The Landscape of Youth Work in Aotearoa

AraTaiohi
Peak Body for Youth Development in Aotearoa

AUT

> " **Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini**
>
> **This is not the work of one, but the work of many.**

FOREWORD

Youth development is the invisible scaffolding that supports rangatahi to thrive. When we do our jobs right, society sees young people at their best, and youth workers will only be known to the young person and their whānau. How can the sector prove our impact when we are invisible?

Mahi Tūturu shines a light on this invisible mahi and paints a holistic picture of Youth Work in 2025: the difference we make in the lives of young people, and the realities of our mahi.

In 2006, our previous research initiative, *Real Work* was named to highlight the value of Youth Work, with chapter one being headed 'is youth work a real job?'. Nearly two decades later, Youth Work is often undervalued and under resourced, despite significant advances in professional identity and young people's increased need for youth development relationships that honour their mana.

As outlined in the whakataukī, this report is the work of many who have generously contributed their voices and their stories. The vision of Ara Taiohi is to see an empowered ecosystem of youth development that supports young people to thrive; this too is a 'work of many' that includes whānau, hapū, iwi, government, philanthropy, communities, businesses and most importantly taiohi themselves. Youth Work is core to our vision, and *Mahi Tūturu* is in an invitation to understand a sector that unconditionally serves young people. It is a launch pad for youth workers to reflect on the changes of the last 20 years and the opportunities before us. Most importantly, it contains a wero to stakeholders to carefully consider how they value youth workers.

We are incredibly proud of this research, and the youth workers it represents.

Ngā mihi nui,

[signature]

Jane Zintl
CEO, Ara Taiohi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mahi Tūturu is a landmark study at a critical time for the youth development sector in Aotearoa. Since the publication of *Real Work* in 2006–which was a foundational snapshot of Youth Work–the social, political, and economic landscape has evolved considerably for both youth workers and young people. Despite this growth, there is a lack of comprehensive and up-to-date data on the actual practice of Youth Work in Aotearoa. The *Mahi Tūturu* research project was initiated to address this critical knowledge gap, so the sector is prepared for future conversations around its growth and development.

This research project was a collaborative effort between Ara Taiohi, the peak body for Youth Work in Aotearoa and the School of Education at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Guided by tikanga principles, the research was not only academically rigorous but also grounded in cultural integrity, whanaungatanga, and practices that uphold the mana of the sector.

The research questions guiding this research were:
1. Who is doing Youth Work in NZ, and what do they do?
2. What are the work conditions of youth workers?
3. What is the nature of training and support for youth workers?
4. What resourcing is needed in the sector to recruit, retain and train youth workers?

The research design employed a mixed-methods approach which resulted in the voices of 560 youth workers and managers being represented in the report, all of whom participated through the survey, wānanga, or interviews. Here we share a summary of insights and recommendations from the many voices of youth workers and managers across the motu.

The impact of Youth Work: What's happening now?

Youth workers are most likely to work with young people 12 and 17 years. Young people are more likely to be from low-income households and more likely to be medium to high needs. Youth workers most frequent description of young people is that they are highly resilient, creative and determined.

Youth workers make a difference by being present at critical times, providing pro-social groups and activities, and serving as an interface between young people and other services. Without the work that youth workers provide, health and justice systems (in particular) would operate less effectively. Government departments and communities would spend significantly more on managing the impact of insufficient support for young people.

Youth workers are highly skilled and ethical in their practice. They demonstrate this in several ways. Connecting with young people and building trust is at the core of what youth workers do. They are knowledgeable about youth development, and skilled at youth centred practice that is often culturally responsive.

Youth workers are most likely to work with young people in structured one-on-one time or structured small groups, and this differed from 2006 where large group Youth Work was most common, and one-on-one time was the least likely way to engage with young people. When not working with young people, most youth workers engage in administrative tasks, professional learning and networking.

Youth workers tend to work across a range of overlapping contexts such as Kaupapa Māori, education services, and mentoring. This often involves physical activity. They mainly work for community organisations and there are proportionately fewer people working in faith-based organisations than in 2006.

The evolving profession: What's changed?

Survey findings indicate that the Youth Work workforce is a diverse sector compared with both the general New Zealand population and the 2006 study of youth workers (Martin, 2006). Diversity is evident across a range of demographics. There are more female youth workers than male, and a number of non-binary youth workers. There has been an increase in the number of Māori youth workers, from 25% in 2006 to 38% in 2025, and Pasifika youth workers from 10% to 25%. There is more diversity than the general population in areas of ethnicity, religion and spiritual perspectives, and sexual identity.

Overall, there appears to be a trend toward youth workers moving from Youth Work into other occupations following a 3 to 4 year period. It also appears that the Youth Work sector is relatively less experienced than in 2006.

The future of Youth Work practice: What's next?

Ongoing professional learning and support was identified as a priority by youth workers, particularly in areas such as in cultural capability (Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring practices), mentoring, mental health, group facilitation; advocacy work; and experienced youth worker dual pathway training (practice lead or management). Furthermore, professional association membership is recommended by many youth workers with support for this from organisational leadership and funders; supervision and wellbeing support assured for those working with high to very high needs young people; and stability regarding the delivery of qualifications.

Funding concerns are a key stressor for youth workers, significantly more so than in 2006. More resources, including increased pay, are needed. Youth workers continue to be paid below the NZ median. Innovation and creativity are recommended to address this in a multisystemic approach.

A multisystemic, strategic approach is needed with a vision of growing networks for strengthening capacity, accountability, social cohesion, and advocacy practices. A national led strategy will include engagement, commitment and resources from Ministry of Youth Development, organisational leaders, funders and national and regional networks.

There is currently little shared agreement between practitioners, funders and policy makers about how the effectiveness and impact of Youth Work should be evaluated. In some cases, there are concerns about the integrity of data reported by organisations on actual impact. Funders, policy makers, sector leaders and organisations need to work together to determine a way forward for measuring impact across the sector.

Increased accountability is recommended, which may include mandatory professional association membership for some youth workers such as residential state care workers.

The future of Youth Work is likely to include strategic approaches to digital Youth Work practice, more specialized professional learning toward the needs of young people in a complex world, the development of critical youth development approaches, and a growing understanding of, and resourcing for, diversity and unity capabilities.

Mahi Tūturu not only documents the state of Youth Work in Aotearoa today but also amplifies the aspirations and realities of those on the ground. *Mahi Tūturu* seeks to inform advocacy efforts, shape better policy, and support a future where Youth Work is recognised and resourced to initiate the conversations within the eco-system around pathways to professionalisation.

SETTING THE SCENE

1

■ **What is the context for this research?**

❝ **Working in the world of a young person is like walking into Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory – colourful, fast moving, with a sense of danger around the corner. And, at no other time in a person's life could it be described as such.**
(Youth worker)

What is the heart of Youth Work practice and what difference do youth workers make as they journey alongside young people? How might the workforce be strengthened so that young people, whānau and communities thrive? These questions guided this research project, and different questions have been raised through the process. Always at the heart, has been concern for the wellbeing of young people, and the wellbeing of youth workers as they practice, what is in many ways, a sacred work.

In this report we explore the landscape of Youth Work in Aotearoa and share insights from the hundreds of youth workers who generously shared their ideas and wisdom. These insights helped guide our research work, enabling us to generate themes and recommendations for the future of Youth Work in Aotearoa.

Setting the scene

This research project sought to comprehensively capture the essence of Youth Work, as well as the conditions and resources needed to strengthen professional capacity and enable effective practice. Pay parity and other employment conditions, policy shifts, and a vast array of youth development issues all create unique challenges. Furthermore, Te Tiriti o Waitangi provides a uniquely Aotearoa context in which Youth Work is practiced. The bicultural foundation within a multicultural sector presents opportunities and shapes practice. A key aim of *Mahi Tūturu* was to explore the implications of the shifting landscape and provide insights that may inform the future of Youth Work. The findings from this research are essential to advocating effectively for improved conditions (including pay and resourcing) for youth workers, ensuring that the best Youth Work is available to all young people.

The youth development sector has grown significantly over the last two decades and community demand for competent, ethical and trained youth workers continues. Nevertheless, little is known about the current nature of Youth Work and the needs of youth workers. In 2006, *Real Work* was published as a landmark research project that showcased the state of Youth Work at that time (Martin, 2006). Nearly 20 years on, society has evolved. The issues facing young people, the youth development sector, and the consequent implications for Youth Work have all shifted (Deane et al, 2019). Looking forward, it is hoped the findings from this research will inform future practice and research in the field.

The overall aim of this research was to inquire into the state of Youth Work in Aotearoa.

The main research questions guiding this research were:

1. *Who is doing Youth Work, and what do they do?*

2. *What are the work conditions of youth workers?*

3. *What is the nature of training and support for youth workers?*

4. *What resourcing is needed in the sector to recruit, retain and train youth workers?*

What is Youth Work and why does it matter?

The practice of Youth Work is unique and distinct from other professional practices related to youth development. Ara Taiohi defines Aotearoa Youth Work as follows:

> **Youth Work is the development of a mana enhancing relationship between a youth worker and a young person,**
>
> **where young people actively participate, discover their power, and choose to engage for as long as agreed; and**
>
> **that supports their holistic, positive development as young people that contribute to themselves, their whānau, community and world.**
>
> (Ara Taiohi)

The findings of this report indicate that the practice of Youth Work, and the difference that Youth Work makes to the lives of young people is significant to their overall wellbeing and development. However, there are questions and challenges related to both the importance of and the practice of Youth Work that require further inquiry. This report seeks to explore these questions and challenges further and provides recommendations for ways in which the sector may be strengthened across a range of contexts.

Report overview

The report is based on three key areas of inquiry: What is happening in the sector? What does this mean for current and future policy and practice? Now what are the steps that the sector needs to take to move forward?

Following an outline of the inquiry approach, Chapters 3 to 5 of this report provides an overview of the Youth Work sector, particularly those employed as youth workers. There are some findings from the report that relate specifically to Māori who are practicing Youth Work, and other findings that have a focus on sector managers and leaders. Overall, the combined ideas weave together and highlight key ideas, persistent questions and recommendations for the future of Youth Work in Aotearoa.

In Chapters 3 to 5 findings are shared that provide insight into the following:

- Who is practicing Youth Work in Aotearoa?
  - What are their demographics?
    - How does this compare with the general population?
    - How does this compare with the workforce twenty years prior?
- Who are the young people that youth workers are supporting?
  - What are their demographics?
  - What are their strengths?
- What do youth workers do?
  - How do they keep young people safe?
  - What is the bicultural foundation of their practice?
  - What difference do they make?
  - What are their skills?
- What are the work conditions for youth workers?
  - What professional learning do they access?
  - What qualifications do they have?
  - What support do they receive?
  - What are their employment conditions?
- What are the perspectives of managers and leaders?

By mapping the landscape of the Youth Work workforce several important themes emerged, and these are presented and explored in Chapters 6 to 10. Each theme presents both new and persistent questions and challenges for the sector. Firstly, in Chapter 6 we provide a comparative overview of the evolving identity of Youth Work and explore the conceptual idea of the profession of Youth Work in Aotearoa.

Chapter 7 details the value of partnership, networking and collaboration. We explore the bicultural foundation of Youth Work expressed as a partnership practice. We then explore the value of networking and collaboration and consider what this means for future practice. The challenge of understanding and measuring the actual difference that Youth Work makes is presented as a key topic in Chapter 8. This theme raises vital questions for the future of the sector, including the importance of capturing meaningful data that further strengthens and supports an understanding of Youth Work practice.

In Chapter 9 the professional identity of a youth worker is explored, and ideas are shared for strengthening capacity and capability through ongoing professional learning, matters of accountability, and the funding challenge. We explore the future of Youth Work in Chapter 10 and examine possible future trends and practices that are responsive to a new generation of youth workers and young people in Aotearoa. We conclude the report by providing recommendations for policy makers, sector leaders, funders, researchers, youth workers and other stakeholders.

THE INQUIRY APPROACH

- **How did the inquiry happen?**

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From November 2024 to May 2025, the research team gathered insights from more than 560 youth workers and managers employed in Aotearoa. This equated to approximately 18% of the total workforce estimated to be 3015 in the 2023 Census[1].

Data was collected across a range of contexts including focus group wānanga, interviews and survey. Individual youth worker profiles were also gathered. Throughout this report various data findings are referred to. In this chapter we outline the inquiry approach which was a mixed methods study informed by Kaupapa Māori research principles (Hudson et al., 2010). Details regarding ethics, research design, data collection and analysis are described here.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach informed by Kaupapa Māori research principles guided the research. Mixed methods design included both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. This approach enabled an in-depth examination of the context being studied through a range of different sources.

Kaupapa Māori research was guided by tikanga based principles:

- **whakapapa**–relationships
- **tika**–research design
- **manaakitanga**–cultural and social responsibility
- **mana**–justice and equity.

Furthermore, the research design was informed by the values of whakapono–faith, tūmanako–aspirations, and aroha–awareness (Hudson et al., 2010). The tikanga principles and values were aligned with the engagement practices of Ara Taiohi and the Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Key to the process was the early and ongoing involvement of the Māori youth workers, which shaped both the methodology and engagement approach, ensuring that the voices of Tangata Whenua were present, reflected, and central throughout the inquiry.

Ethics

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was granted by the AUT Ethics Committee. There were a range of ethical considerations that reflected the mixed methods research design and Kaupapa Māori approach. Survey, focus group wānanga, and key informant interviews were used as data collection methods and each method had different ethical implications.

There were 17 small group focus groups that were held across the motu at seven different wānanga. Appropriate tikanga was followed according to respective mana whenua rohe groups. There was also a Māori youth workers focus group wānanga held in Ōtautahi Christchurch. For all wānanga, to ensure anonymity, there was no reference made to participant names in the research report. Care was taken to ensure all data was stored in secure and password protected online systems overseen the Principal Investigator at AUT.

The same anonymity was afforded to survey and key informant interviewees; however, interviewees were invited to make their names known in the report if they chose to be named. All participants were able to complete the survey with anonymity. At the end of the survey, participants could opt into a prize draw and if so, they were taken to a different survey link to leave their contact details. This survey link was untraceable back to any answers given in the survey; hence anonymity was assured.

It was important that the research team were able to bring together a combination of skills, experience, and background. The diverse range of team members and advisors helped ensure integrity and minimise bias in decisions around data collection, analysis and recommendations.

[1]Retrieved from Stats NZ, Aotearoa Data Explorer, May 2025.

The team members included:

- The Principal Investigator from AUT with a background in youth development and education
- A senior researcher from AUT with a background in social and alternative education
- A Māori researcher from Ara Taiohi and project manager
- A quantitative researcher, independent
- An experienced researcher, independent

The research team met regularly throughout a 12-month period and practiced reflexivity through self and group reflection to minimise researcher bias (Wilkinson, 1988). Furthermore, there were rigorous data collection and analysis processes in place throughout the research period. Additionally, there was a team of advisors from the Youth Work sector who supported research design and data collection decisions; as well as sense making from the data through analytical processes.

Research design

An exploratory mixed methods research design was employed to merge data after collection from the three different data sets (Gray, 2022).

Research design: Exploratory mixed methods
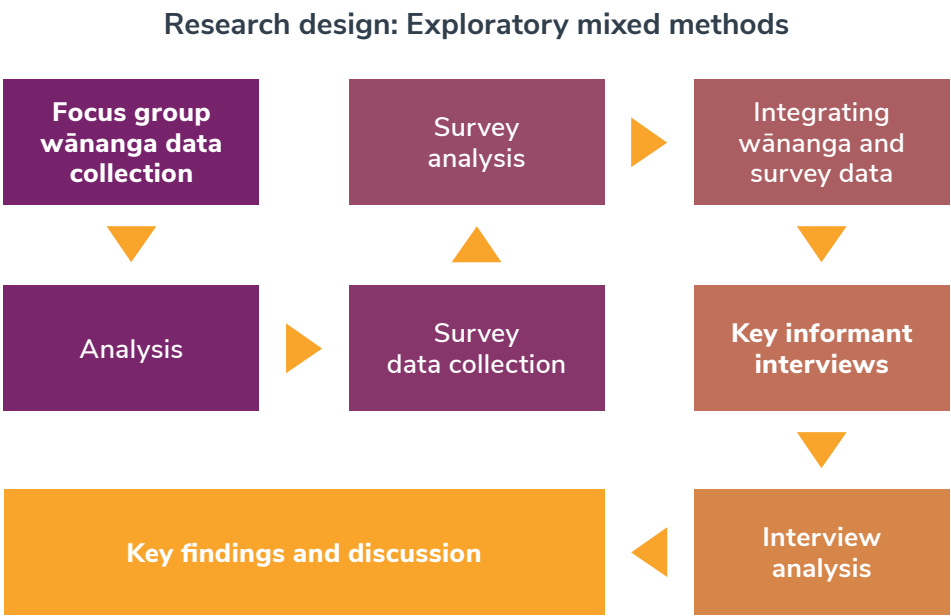
The research design unfolded through a mixed methods approach, integrating insights from regional wānanga, an in-depth national survey, and interviews with experienced youth workers. This multi-layered approach allowed the research team to listen deeply to diverse experiences, test assumptions, and surface patterns and tensions within the sector. Holding space for regional variation, cultural specificity, and intersectional identities was critical, particularly given the unique pressures faced by Māori, Pasifika, LGBTQIA+, and disabled youth workers and those working with marginalised rangatahi.

Firstly, data was collected through focus group wānanga and then analysed. Secondly, data that had been collected from the online survey was analysed. These two data sets were integrated through a comparison method of analysis. Following this, ten key informant interviews were undertaken. During the interviews, the research team probed further with interviewees to unpack some of the themes, trends and questions that had emerged from the focus group wānanga and the survey. This design allowed time for in-depth engagement with the sector through a range of different methods. Additionally, youth worker profiles were gathered, and they are shared in this report to show case and highlight practitioner views.

Prior to data collection, a literature scan was undertaken to explore current opportunities and challenges that exist for those working in the youth development sector both nationally and internationally. This information informed research design and planning.

Data collection

Through a range of data collection methods, youth workers and those in management roles in the Youth Work and/or youth development sector were invited to participate.

Focus group wānanga

A series of focus group wānanga across the motu were facilitated by the research team. An open invitation to attend wānanga was extended to those who practiced Youth Work within each host region. Wānanga took place over several months and included participation by a diverse range of youth workers. Regions where focus group wānanga took place were Murihiku Invercargill, Te Tai Tokerau Kaitaia, Ōtautahi Christchurch, Tauranga, Taranaki New Plymouth and Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. An additional focus group wānanga was also held in Ōtautahi with Māori youth workers. In total, 102 youth workers took part in 17 small discussion focus groups during seven wānanga. Participants ranged in their length of Youth Work service from less than six months to more than 40 years. Participants shared insights of Youth Work practice from their own experiences, and this included a wide range of Youth Work contexts. All those attending were practicing youth workers and/or in management roles working with youth workers and young people.

Each wānanga was approximately 3.5 hours in length and held in community facilities across the varied regions. Each focus group wānanga followed regional tikanga and after whakawhanaungatanga, the following pātai guided kōrerorero discussions which took place in small groups:

- What is our impact as youth workers, and how do we know?
- How might we get better at what we do, and what do we need for this to happen?
- Should the Youth Work sector have greater accountability AND/OR should use of the title youth worker have more protection?

Each of the research team members present facilitated a small group discussion related to the three questions. Data was collected through notetaking and artifacts such as photos of the completed activity sheets. Researchers took notes and, in some cases, audio recorded the conversations to better capture data. Furthermore, photos were taken of completed activity sheets as a record of the conversations.

Additionally, at each focus group wānanga a small number of youth workers were invited to share their profiles of practice with one of the research team. Youth workers were asked a series of in-depth questions related to their mahi and their professional motivation, and they were also invited to share any concerns they might have. Some of the youth workers' profiles are shared throughout this report.

Survey

An online survey was designed for youth workers and those working in management roles across the Youth Work and youth development sector. *Qualtrics* was used to host the online survey. The survey was designed by the research team with support from AUT and administered by Ara Taiohi through networks. Prior to the release of the survey, there was a period of testing by the research team, advisors and staff at Ara Taiohi. Following feedback changes were made and after several different iterations the survey was published. There were very few text-based questions, and most were multiple choice or Likert type questions. The survey branched into different areas, depending on the role of the participant completing the survey.

Survey sections and flow
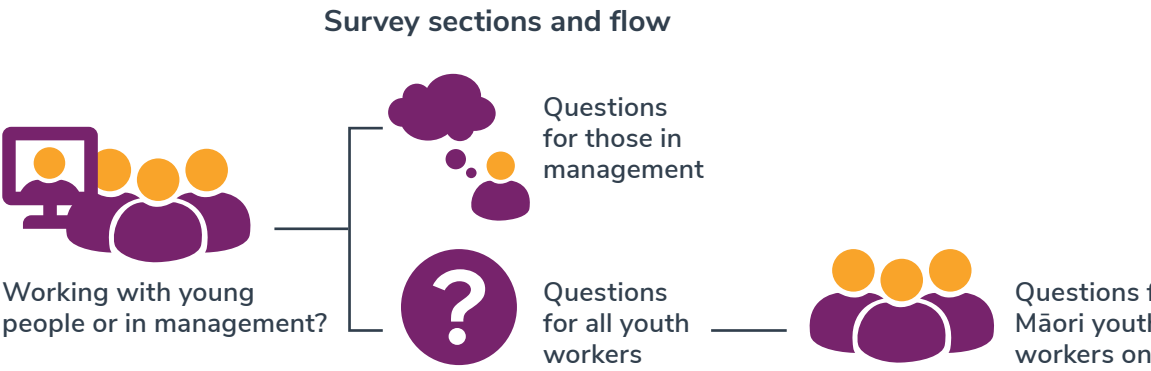
There was a different set of questions for youth workers, including additional questions for Māori youth workers. There was also a different set of questions for those in management and leadership roles within the Youth Work sector. The four main research questions were used as the foundation of the survey. A full copy of the questionnaire is appended to this report.

Key informant interviews

Key informants were purposively invited to take part in an online semi-structured interview. Participants were invited if they had five plus years of experience as youth workers, were currently in management roles, and had an in-depth understanding of the field of Youth Work. Furthermore, consideration was given to any specialised areas of practice, knowledge and experience. Ten participants were interviewed online, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The four main research questions guided the interview schedule; however, the questions were shaped by the initial data analysis from focus group wānanga and surveys. Participants were invited to share their insights related to emerging themes. Additionally, general questions were asked regarding current issues facing the workforce, and future trends for Youth Work practice.

YOUTH WORKER PROFILE

Jared Dixon

Operations Manager, Waitara Taiohi Trust

Now an operations manager at Waitara Taiohi Trust, Jared Dixon has 20 years of experience in the youth sector. Jared's journey into youth work is deeply personal. Having once struggled as a young person himself, he experienced the transformative impact of someone showing belief in his potential. That experience has driven him to walk alongside others and encourage young people in their strengths.

Since moving to the community nearly a decade ago, Jared has navigated both growth and challenges. He talks about his experience being a Pākehā working in a predominantly Māori space in Waitara and with rangatahi Māori in the region. He has embraced the discomfort as an opportunity to learn, reflect, and grow. To him, it has been the most beautiful challenge in the world.

An advocate for sector-wide improvement, Jared supports greater professional standards in youth work, including mandatory training and accountability structures. At the same time, he warns against bureaucracy that stifles creativity or creates barriers for grassroots organisations. In a sector where a lot of the work is done by volunteers and people with their hearts in the right place, he understands that it can be difficult to regulate and have too rigid standards. For him, real impact happens when good people are backed by good systems—with the right resourcing, support, and trust.

Jared also speaks about the tension he sees between those who deliver youth services and funders. To him, it doesn't feel right to put a price tag on the impact they are having with their rangatahi but he understands this is the way the current system works. Support for youth workers, more high-trust funding relationships, and sector-wide professionalisation and regulation are all things Jared would like to see in the youth work space.

Data analysis

Qualitative data was thematically analysed through a range of different methods. Firstly, at the end of each wānanga, the research team gathered to discuss their observations from the small group discussions. The team shared reflections and field notes from each of the small group discussions and key insights were recorded. This process was the first iteration of analysis. Following this, the data was revisited by the lead researcher and compared across each of the regions and groups. The aim of this comparison process was to ascertain possible similarities and differences. Finally, the comparative analysis was shared with the other research team members for sense checking.

The online survey data was analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics was primarily used to describe the findings from both text based and frequency and count based questions. Based on a total youth worker workforce population of 3015, the sample size varied depending on the different survey questions. Margins of error were calculated to determine the likelihood of responses being statistically significant. These findings are shared where appropriate throughout the report. It was hoped that the survey would yield a strong sample from both paid and volunteer contexts; however, there were insufficient responses received from volunteer youth workers to provide a representative sample from this part of the sector. This is an area for future research.

Thematic analysis was used to analysis the interviews following transcription. Following familiarisation of the interview data, the research team generated initial codes individually and searched for themes. Shared discussion as a team followed and emergent themes were reviewed together.

Through integrating different data sets, the mixed methods approach to analysis sought to:

- use the findings from one approach to inform the other (development),
- enhance, further clarify and elaborate (complementarity),
- explore any contradictions (initiation), and
- expand the breadth and range of inquiry (expansion) (Greene et al., 1989).

Different data sets were compared and contrasted to explore similarities and differences, thus expanding breadth of knowledge and understanding. This process was aided by research team memo notes and code creation toward overall theme generation.

Limitations

The strength of this research is the mixed methods approach that returned close to 560 different perspectives from a wide range of youth workers. There are two areas of concern. Firstly, the survey respondents sample size for some questions was too low to infer statistical significance. Relatedly, the sample size was too low to apply inferential analysis that could offer comparisons across different data sets. The second area of concern is the low numbers of volunteer youth workers who engaged in this project. Given their volunteer status and limited time available, this is not surprising. Nevertheless, it does leave a research gap and raises ongoing questions about the volunteer Youth Work sector.

Summary

By weaving together the varying perspectives of hundreds of youth workers we were able to map the landscape of Youth Work with reference to the guiding research questions. Data from survey, focus groups and interviews were integrated to generate key findings and themes. In the following Chapters (3 to 5) we share findings related to youth worker demographics, the practice of youth workers, the young people with whom they work, and the work conditions of youth workers. Chapters 6 to 10 explore a range of themes that emerged from the overall project.

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

- **Who is practicing Youth Work in Aotearoa?**

3

Youth workers

Who is doing Youth Work in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2025?

In the survey we asked several questions that helped to identify the demographics of the youth worker workforce. This included questions related to region, ethnic group, gender, sexuality, religion, age, and qualifications in a related field. Participants were then asked if they mainly work with young people or if they mainly work in a management role. There were additional separate questions for each group. Those who identified as Māori youth workers were also asked additional separate questions.

Important to the context of this research are findings from the 2023 Census. In 2023, 3015 people in Aotearoa identified their profession as 'Youth Worker'. This was an increase from 2379 in 2018 (up from 1983 in 2013)[2]. The Census was not able to report on volunteer information related specifically to volunteering as a youth worker. Additionally, only a small number of volunteer youth workers participated in the *Mahi Tūturu* survey, so little is known in Aotearoa about the nature of volunteer youth workers. This is an area requiring further research.

Therefore, the demographics shared in this chapter are from youth workers predominantly employed, and managers and leaders in the sector. The sample size for demographic questions is 425. Throughout this section we draw comparisons with *Real Work* findings to infer similarities and differences across the twenty-year period.

Region

In which region do you engage in the Youth Work sector most of your time?

425 participants responded to the question. Data indicates that Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland and Te Whanga Nui-a-Tara Wellington are regions with the highest numbers of youth workers (24% and 16%). A small number (4%) are engaged in national roles.

In which region do you engage in the Youth Work sector most of your time?

Region	%
Northland Te Tai Tokerau	4%
Auckland Tāmaki Makaurau	24%
Waikato	6%
Bay of Plenty Te Moana a Toi	10%
Gisborne Te Tairāwhiti	1%
Hawke's Bay Te Matau a Māui	4%
Taranaki	4%
Manawatū Whanganui	5%
Wellington Te Whanga Nui a Tara	16%
Tasman Te Tauihu o te Waka	1%
Nelson Whakatū	1%
Marlborough Te Tauihu o te Waka	2%
West Coast Te Tai Poutini	0%
Canterbury Waitaha	9%
Otago Ōtakou	4%
Southland Murihiku	5%
Nationally	4%

Figure 1: Youth workers by region

[2]Retrieved from Stats NZ, Aotearoa Data Explorer, May 2025.

Ethnic groups

Which ethnic group do you belong to? Select all that apply.

Participants could respond by selecting more than one ethnic group (Fig.2). Ethnicity categories were based on the Census so that we were able to make comparisons between data sets. The findings indicate that youth workers are ethnically diverse compared with the general population of Aotearoa New Zealand. For example, 58% (n=248) and 38% (n=163) of youth workers identity as NZ European and Māori respectively. Whereas in the 2023 Census of those 15 years and above, 80% identified as NZ European and 20% as Māori[3]. Similarly, while 9% of 2023 Census respondents over the age of 15 years identified as Pacific Peoples, in the Youth Work sector 20% ethnically identified as Pacific – twice as many as the broader population. 'Other' ethnicities were very wide ranging and included youth workers from the UK, Europe, Africa, South America and the Middle East.

Youth workers ethnicity
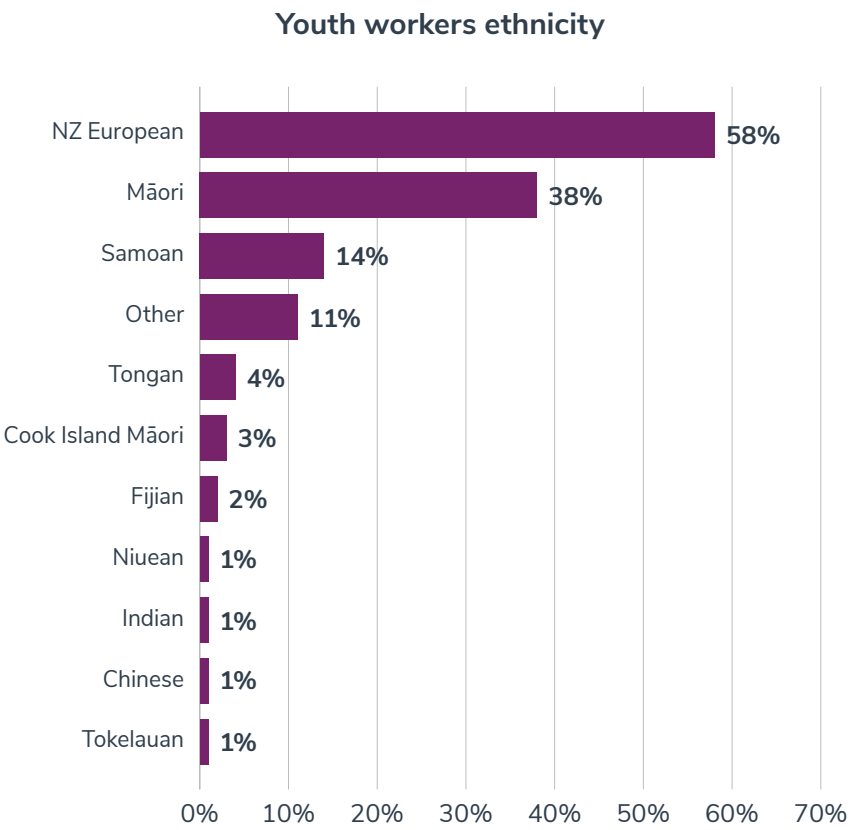
Figure 2. Ethnicity of youth workers

Perhaps not surprisingly, youth workers are more ethnically diverse now than in 2006. We reclassified ethnic data for the purpose of comparison between *Real Work* and *Mahi Tūturu* (see Fig.3). The findings indicate that while Pākehā/NZ European numbers are similar, the main changes are a growth in the numbers of youth workers who identify as Māori, Pacific and/or Asian.

Youth workers' ethnicity: comparison between *Mahi Tūturu* (2025) and *Real Work* (2006)

Proportion of respondents ■ *Mahi Tūturu* (2025) ■ *Real Work* (2006)

Figure 3. *Real Work/Mahi Tūturu* comparison of ethnicity

Gender

What is your gender?

Youth workers could identify as male, female, non-binary or prefer not to say. The survey found 71% (n=301) identify as female, 28% (n=118) identify as male, 0.5% (n=2) identify as non-binary and the remainder preferred not to disclose their gender. By comparison, in *Real Work* 52% were female, 44% male and 4% did not provide an answer. The reason for this shift is unclear, however the *Mahi Tūturu* findings are similar to the Census 2023 figures which show 71% of those working in the 'health and welfare support category' identified as female[4]. Further research is needed to gain greater insights here.

Sexual identity

Which of the following best describes how you think of yourself?

In the survey, 84% (n=344) of youth workers identified as heterosexual, 17% of youth workers identify as either bisexual 9% (n=37), gay or lesbian 3% (n=13), or other, including queer, pansexual, takatāpui, and asexual (Fig.4)[5]. Participants could select more than one response.In the 2023 Census, 4.1 percent of the usually resident population aged 15 years and over who responded reported a sexual identity other than heterosexual[6].

Youth workers' sexual identity
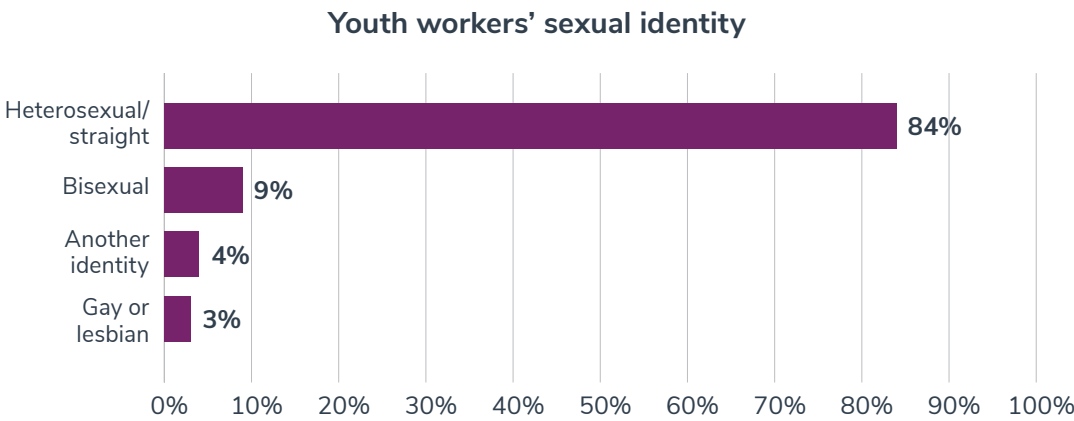
Figure 4. Sexual identities of youth workers

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[3]Retrieved from Stats NZ, Aotearoa Data Explorer, May 2025.

[4]In the 2023 Census, youth workers were classified under the occupation category of 'health and welfare support worker'. Data was retrieved from https://explore.data.stats.govt.nz/. 28% identified as male, and 0.5% identified as another gender.

[5]The categories made comparative analysis with Census data possible. https://www.stats.govt.nz/assets/News/Sexual-identity-standard.pdf

[6]Retrieved from: https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/2023-census-shows-1-in-20-adults-belong-to-aotearoa-new-zealands-lgbtiq-population/

Religion and spiritual perspectives

What is your religion or spiritual perspective? Select all that apply.

Youth workers could select more than one religion or spiritual perspective that they identified with (Fig.5). A total of 41% (n=175) of youth workers identified as Christian, and 30% (n=126) identified Te Ao Māori as their religion or spiritual perspective. Those who identified as atheist and agnostic were both 11% (n=46, n=45). While comparative data is not available from *Real Work*, it appears that there are now less youth workers involved in church-based Youth Work than in 2006. This is explored further in Chapter 4 section, Nature of Organisations.

Youth workers' religions and spiritual perspectives

Religion	%
Christian	41%
Te Ao Māori	30%
Atheist	11%
Agnostic	11%
Buddhism	1%
Muslim	0%
Other	8%

Figure 5. Religion and spiritual perspective of youth workers
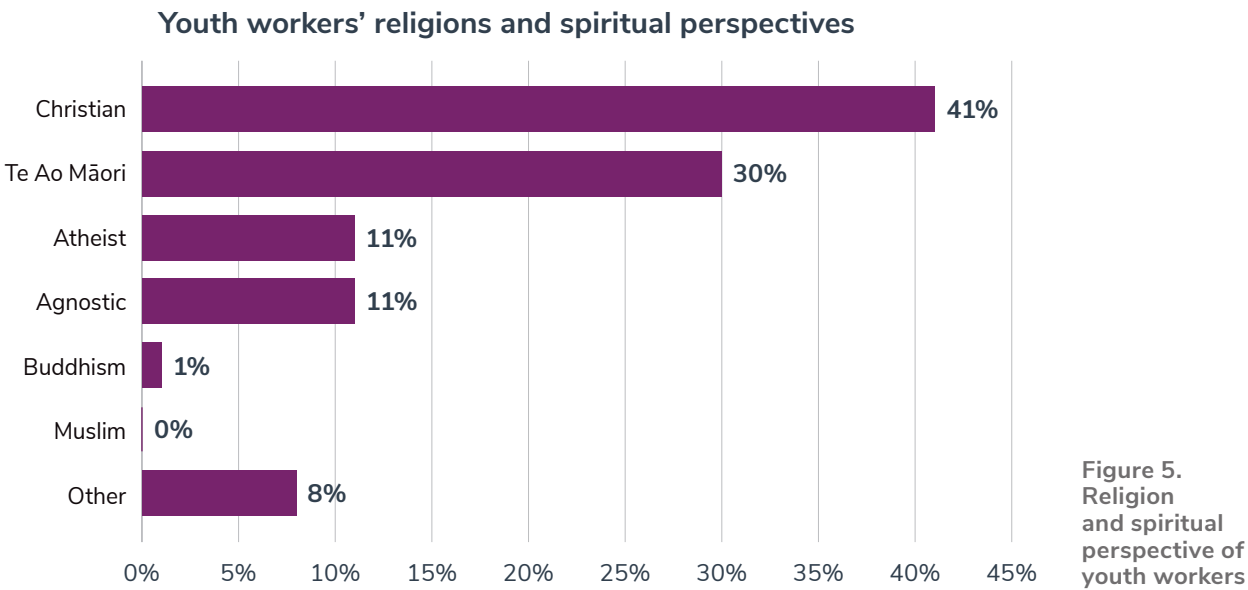
Age

How old are you?

Based on findings from the survey, it is reasonable to assume that the most common age of youth workers is in the 25 to 34 years range (39%, n=166), followed by those 35 to 44 years (25%, n=106) (Fig.6). Comparing this with *Real Work*, we can identify a similar trend. While there are different age categories between the two surveys, the trends are similar with 64% of youth workers in the current survey aged 25 to 44 (n = 272). One possible difference is that there are now more people who are working in the sector over the ages of 50 than in 2006.

Age of youth workers

Age	%
65+ years old	2%
55-64 years old	6%
45-54 years old	15%
35-44 years old	25%
25-34 years old	39%
18-24 years old	13%
Under 18	0%

Figure 6. Age of youth workers
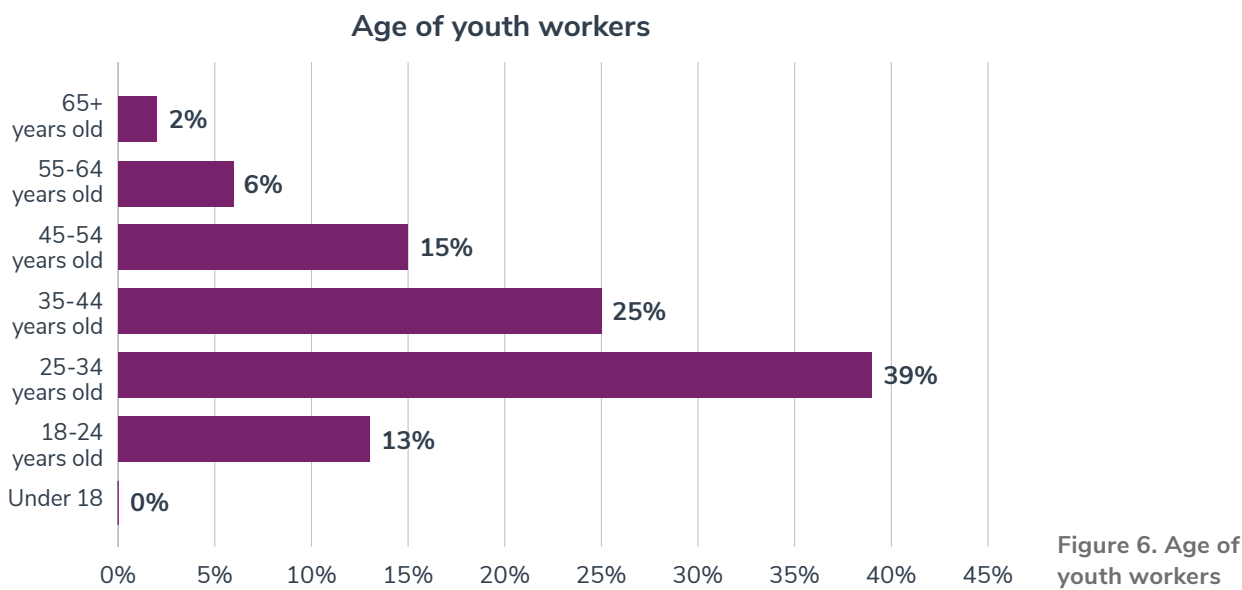
Qualifications

Participants were asked if they had completed formal qualifications in Youth Work, youth development, or a related field (Fig.7). This could include micro-credentials, certificate, diploma, or degrees at undergraduate or postgraduate levels. The survey found that 76% (n=164) of youth workers indicated they have completed a formal qualification in a related field (of n=217 who answered this question). The remaining 24% (n=53) do not have a qualification in a related field.

Three out of four youth workers have a formal qualification that relates to Youth Work, youth development or a related field. (76%, n=164)

Figure 7. Qualifications in a related field

Of those that have a formal qualification in Youth Work, youth development or a related field, 37%, (n=61) have a certificate as their highest qualification, 28% (n=45) have a degree as their highest qualification, and 24% (n=39) have a diploma. A small number 6% (n=10) have a postgraduate qualification. Qualifications as part of professional learning is discussed further in Chapters 5 and 9.

Summary: Who is practicing Youth Work in Aotearoa?

Survey findings indicate that the Youth Work workforce is a relatively diverse sector compared with both the general NZ population and the 2006 study of youth workers (Martin, 2006). Diversity is evident across a range of demographics.

Data indicates that compared with 2006, the Youth Work sector has an emerging gender diverse workforce. There are more female youth workers than male, and a number of non-binary youth workers. The percentage of female, male and non-binary youth workers is similar to the Census 2023 occupational category. There has been an increase in the number of Māori youth workers, from 25% in 2006 to 38% in 2025. Additionally, there has been a significant increase Pasifika youth workers from 10% to 25%. Overall, the Youth Work workforce is more diverse than the general population in areas of ethnicity, religion and spiritual perspectives, and sexual identities[7]. One trend from *Real Work* that was similar was the ages of those most likely to engage in Youth Work.

What does the diversity of youth workers mean for the sector overall? And what does this mean for young people, whānau and communities across Aotearoa? What are the political, structural, and relational implications of a diverse sector, and how might this shape practice in the future?

These are important questions for the future of Youth Work in Aotearoa, for the wellbeing of young people and communities, and for a social cohesion within society. These questions and related ideas are discussed further throughout this report.

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[7]Retrieved from Stats NZ, Aotearoa Data Explorer, May 2025.

YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

4

The practice of Youth Work is diverse and exists across a wide range of different contexts. In this section we draw on survey and focus group data to explore three key questions:

- **Who are the young people that youth workers are working with?**

- **What does Youth Work practice look like?**

- **What difference do youth workers make?**

Throughout this section we provide findings from youth workers and where appropriate, managers. We also make comparisons at times with the findings from *Real Work*.

Young people

Seeking to understand more about the work of youth workers, participants shared key insights about the demographics of the young people they work with, as well as their strengths. The data for this section was collated from both survey and focus groups.

Strengths of young people

What are the strengths of the young people with whom you work?

❝ **The young people I work with are some of the most driven, creative, and resilient people I've ever met.**

Young people have an incredible ability to adapt, to find new ways of expressing themselves, and to challenge systems that don't serve them.

Their strength isn't just in their ideas but in their willingness to act on them—to push for better representation, to tell their own stories, and to create spaces where others can do the same.

Young people bring fresh perspectives to problems adults have overcomplicated, and they approach the world with an urgency and clarity that cuts through noise.

Young people are deeply collaborative, supporting each other in ways that are both intentional and instinctive.

More than anything, young people have the courage to imagine something better and the determination to make it real.

(Youth worker)

Youth workers described young people first and foremost as resilient, many of whom have experienced significant challenges in their lives.

Below are some of the most common strengths listed by frequency of participants' responses:

- Resilience
- Creativity
- Determination
- Empathy and compassion
- Adaptability
- Honesty
- Resourcefulness
- Community-mindedness
- Courage
- Strong sense of justice
- Technological proficiency
- Cultural strengths.

It is important to note that youth workers consistently emphasised the individuality of young people and the diversity of their strengths. The following quote is from a youth worker and reflects the upmost respect for the young people they journey alongside.

" **Sheesh where do I start…**

Amazingly creative in a very understated nonchalant way from playing multiple instruments to fixing a car on the fly.

Honourably resilient – naturally able to roll with the punches and have taken the trauma they have grown up with all their lives and turned them into shields and armour.

Technological geniuses – this is their world, they understand apps, programs, streaming, analytics and getting the best out of their tech.

Honest – our young people can be brutally and/lovingly honest sometimes and it's needed because a lot of the times the grownups in their world are caught up in themselves and miss the beauty of what's in front of them, so our young people have a knack of bringing you back to earth, and making you see what really matters. Embrace it and don't dampen our young people's honesty.

(Youth worker)

Demographics of young people

Survey respondents were asked to share information about the young people they work with including their ages, household income, education and employment, and general needs. In the focus groups, participants were invited to share something about the nature of the young people with whom they work. Young people came from diverse backgrounds including rainbow youth, rangatahi Māori, Pasifika young people, young leaders, young people in care, and tertiary students. Of course, Youth Work serves a very broad range of young people in diverse contexts and communities. The aforementioned groups of young people were most frequently referred to throughout the focus groups. The following demographic details describe the nature of the young people engaged in Youth Work from those who completed the survey. The margin of error for these questions is approximately ±5% at the 95% confidence level.

Age: How old are the young people you work with? Select all that apply.

The most common age group that youth workers are working with is 15 to17 years (54%, n= 114) (Fig.8). The second most common age group was 12–14 years (28%, n=60).

How old are the young people you work with?

Figure 8. Age of young people
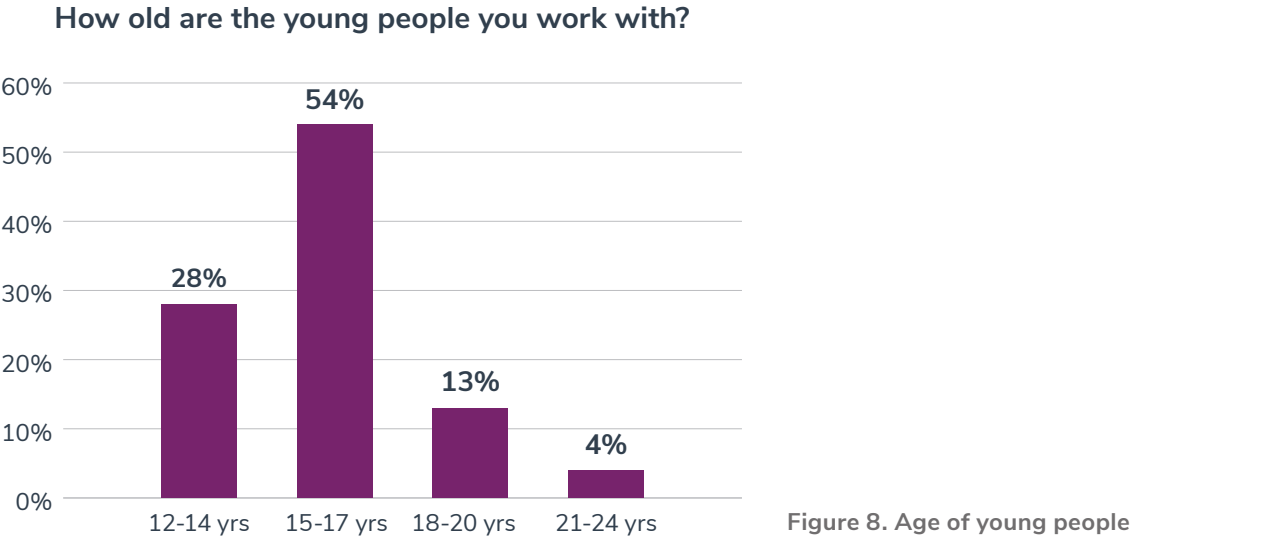
Household income and needs of young people

Survey participants were asked, '*What is the estimated household income for young people with whom you mainly work?*'

Youth workers could select more than one response (Fig.9). The most common responses were government beneficiaries (50%), minimum wage (40%), and unwaged (27%) and below the minimum wage (27%). Just 3% and 15% indicated high and middle incomes respectively while 23% of respondents were unsure.

Estimated household income for young people

Figure 9. Estimated household income
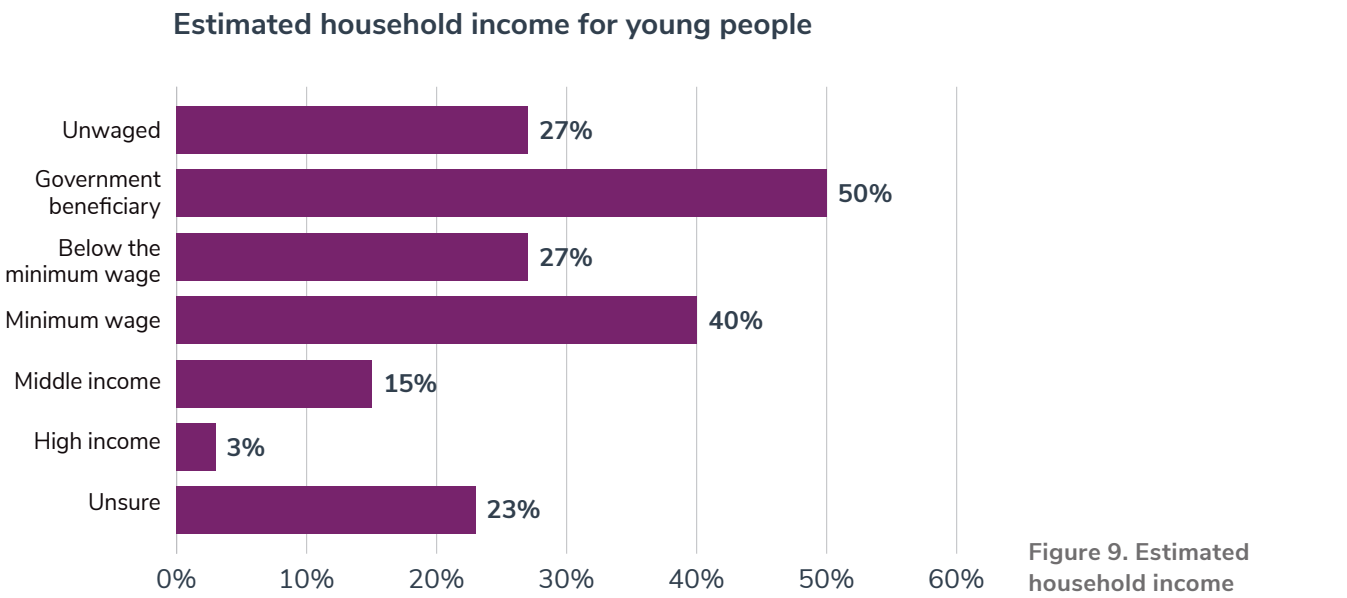
Figure 9 indicates that youth workers are primarily working with young people from unwaged, beneficiary and low-income households. This likely correlates with the high needs of young people with whom youth workers are supporting (see Fig.10). In the survey youth workers were also asked how they would describe the needs of the young people they work with. Their responses indicated that they typically work with young people whom they identify as having high needs (41%, n=85) or medium needs (35%, n=72). It was reported that 20% (n=41) of youth workers are working with young people with very high needs.

Responses to "How would you describe the needs of the young people you work with?"

(single answer only)
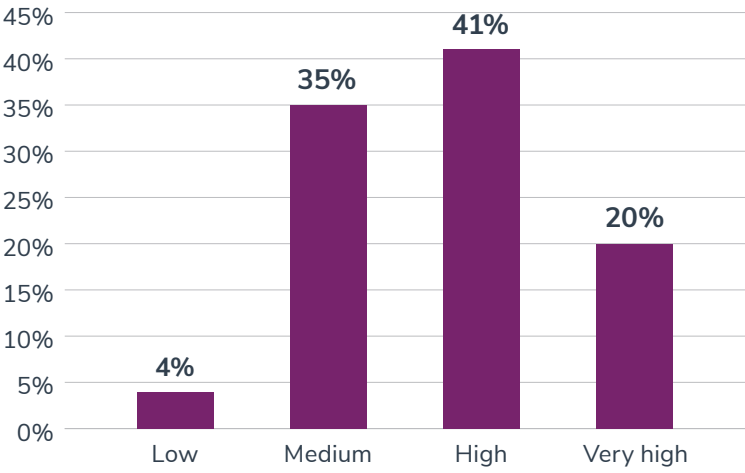
Figure 10. The needs of young people

The 'heat map' in (Table 1) shows that the young people whom youth workers support tend to be medium- to high-needs youth from low-income households. It should be noted that this represents youth workers' perceptions of the young people's household income and their needs, rather than measured first-hand data.

		Needs of young people		
		Low needs	Medium needs	High needs	Very high
Estimated income for young people's household	Unwaged	1%	9%	14%	12%
	Government beneficiary	1%	19%	28%	18%
	Below the minimum wage	1%	10%	15%	9%
	Minimum wage	1%	19%	22%	10%
	Middle income	1%	9%	7%	2%
	High income	1%	1%	2%	1%

Percentage represents proportion of the 162 youth workers who answered both questions

Table 1. Young people's needs and household income backgrounds[8]

Many young people have significant strengths and resilience, and this was evident in the quotes from youth workers who described the young people that they work with:

> **"** **They are the most potential holding with the least opportunities, yet they show an abundance of care for others when given any opportunity to feel safe and be acknowledged. They are the most resilient, most talented, and most curious young people you can come across, despite the amount of challenges they face regularly. I have not met any young person that has not shown such promise, regardless of the circumstances they are dealt, and all they need is more time, support.**
>
> (Youth worker)

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[8]The heat-map comparison table shows each combination as a percentage of the 162 respondents who answered both questions. For example, 28% (n=45) of those 162 youth workers work with mainly high-needs young people who come from government beneficiary households. The question about young people's household income allowed multiple responses, while the question about young people's needs asked respondents to choose which category their young people mainly fit into. The margin of error is around 6% for the orange figures, around 4% for the yellow figures, and around 2% for the light yellow figures.

The practice of youth workers

Youth workers shared information regarding the nature of their practice in response to several questions from the survey and from the focus groups. Some of the survey questions regarding the nature of organisations and contexts were asked of both youth workers and managers. These combined responses are shared below.

Working with young people

There is a very wide range of contexts where Youth Work takes place. Participants (both youth workers and managers, total responses n=398) could select more than one context in response to the survey question, *'In which contexts do you engage in Youth Work?'* (Fig.11).

The most selected responses were Te Ao Māori/Kaupapa Māori contexts (55%, n=219), education contexts (52%, n=207) and mentoring (47%, n=188). Sport and rec, NGOs, youth centres/hubs, and employment contexts (34% to 39%) were closely followed by youth justice, youth groups/clubs and Pasifika contexts (31% to 33%).

Contexts in which youth workers engage in Youth Work
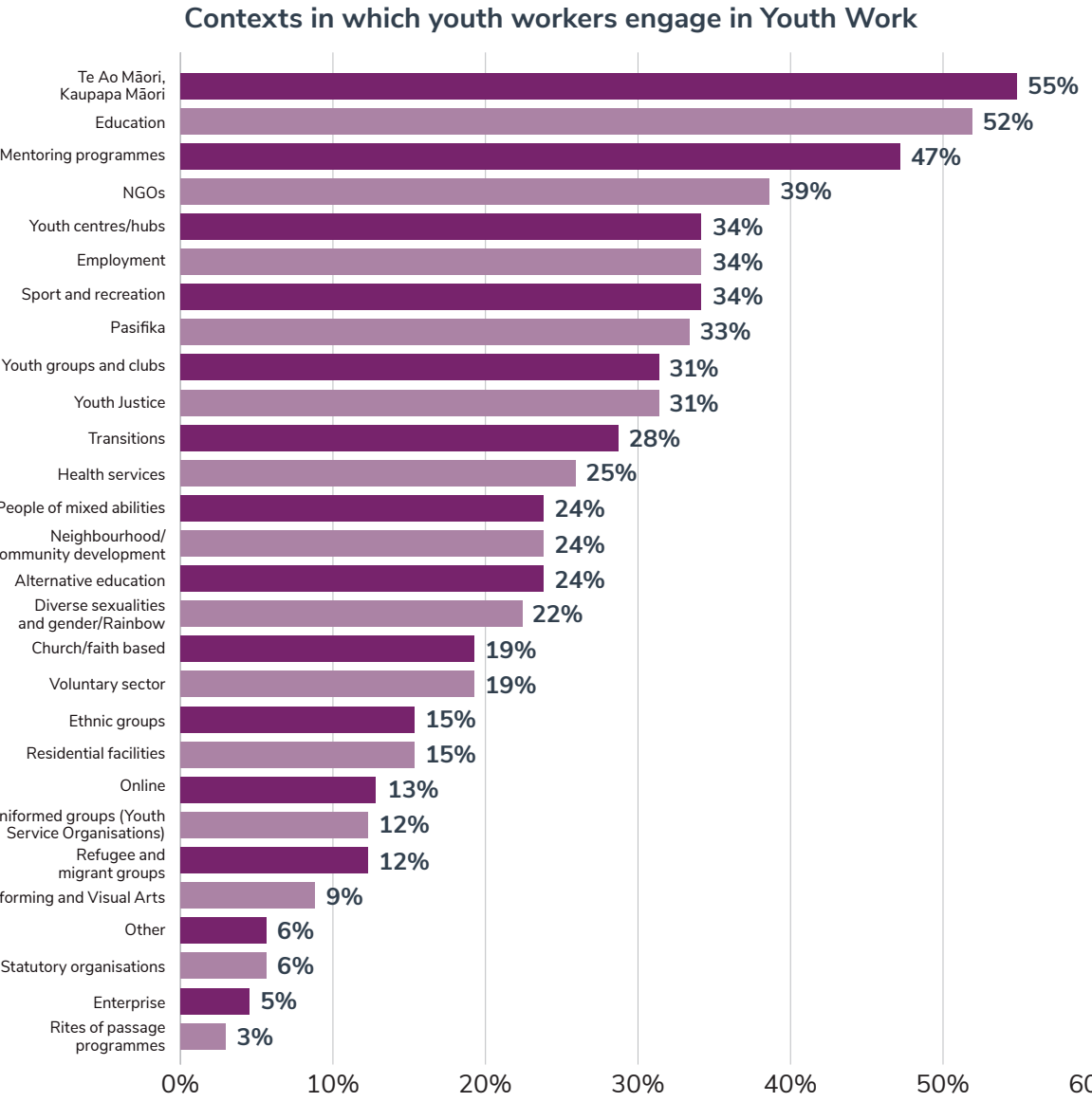
Figure 11. Context in which youth workers engage in Youth Work

Youth workers selected more than one category indicating there is an overlap across a wide range of services, programmes and contexts in which Youth Work takes place.

Participants (both youth workers and managers, total responses, n=339) were asked to describe the nature of their organisation (Fig.12). All participants could select more than one response to the question as there is often an overlap in the nature of organisations. Most respondents (73%, n=248) described their organisation as a community organisation. The next most frequent response was 17% (n=59) who described their organisation as faith based. Iwi or hapu-based organisations, central and local government agencies were also selected, although less frequently. A smaller number also indicated business, education and counselling services.

Nature of organisation (combined youth workers/managers)

Figure 12. Nature of organisations
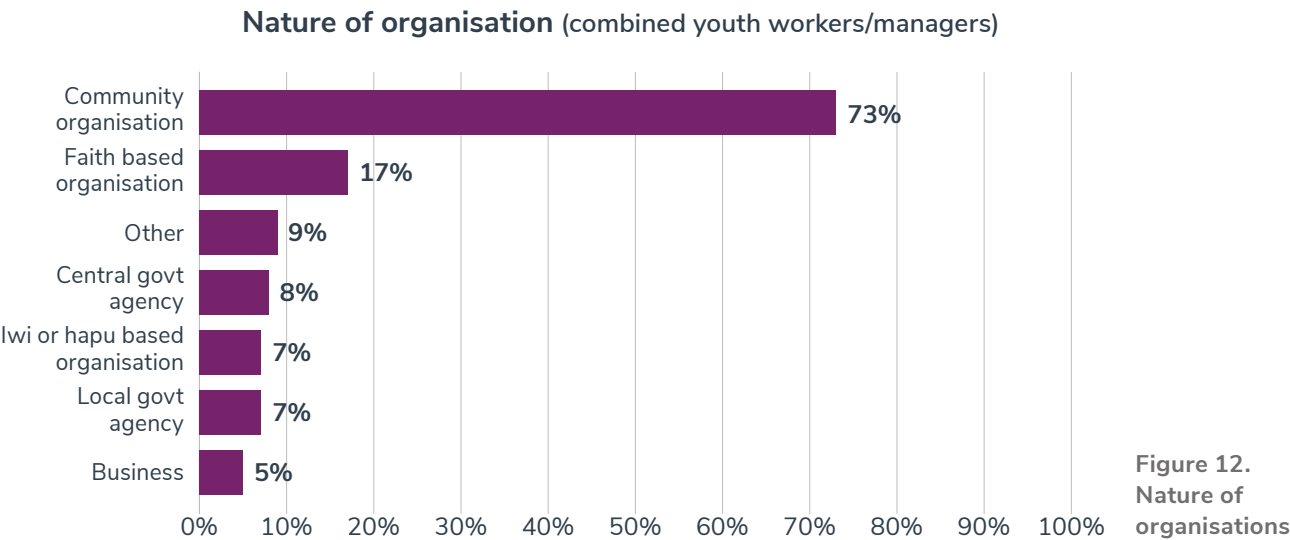
This finding varies significantly from *Real Work*. Figure 13 provides a breakdown of the nature of organisations comparing *Real Work* with *Mahi Tūturu*. *Real Work* also had a significant number of volunteer respondents. Overall, the findings indicate that there are proportionately fewer people working in faith-based organisations twenty years on.

Nature of organisation: comparison between *Mahi Tūturu* (2025) and *Real Work* (2006)

Figure 13. Nature of organisations comparing *Mahi Tūturu* and *Real Work*

■ *Real Work* 2006 (volunteers)   ■ *Real Work* 2006 (paid youth workers)   ■ *Mahi Tūturu* 2025 (all respondents)
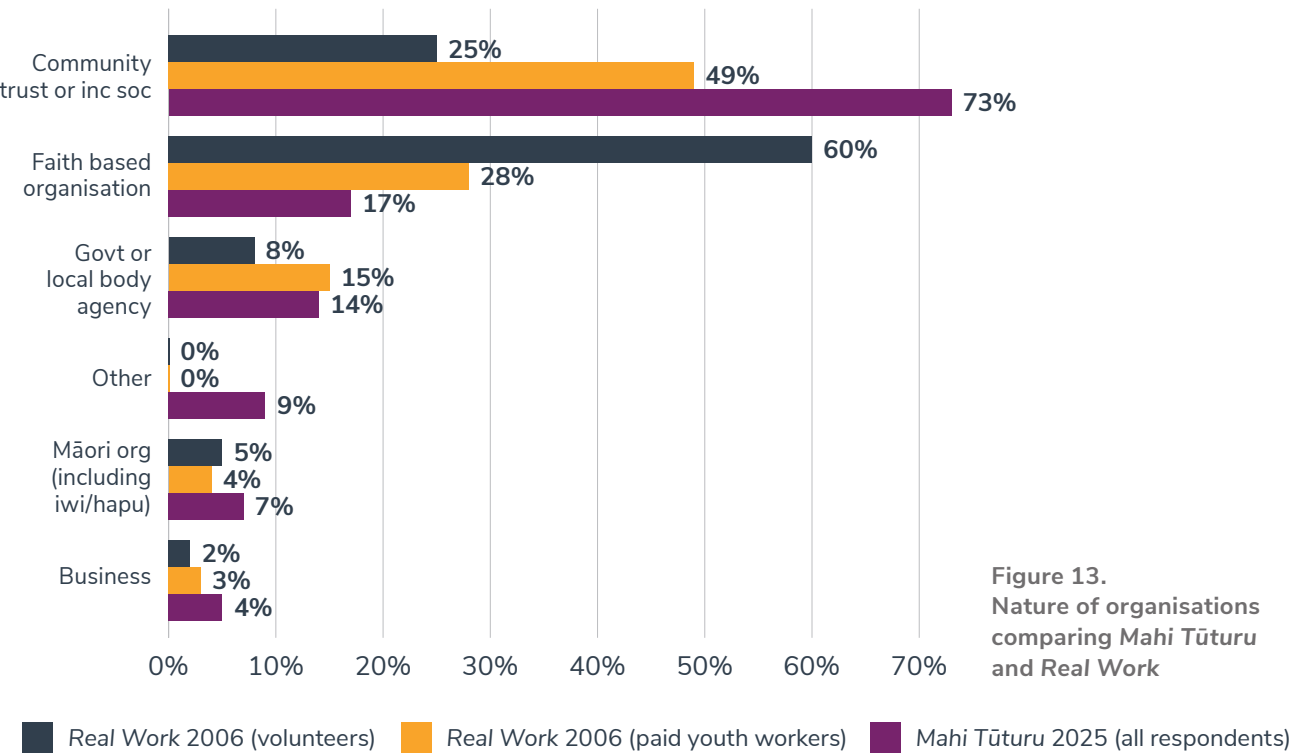
When asked how they use their contact time with young people, youth workers were provided with a range of possible responses including unstructured time, structured time either one-on-one, small groups, or large groups, and other (Fig.14). Youth workers could select more than one response, so the percentage totals exceed 100%. Structured one-on-one time between a youth worker and a young person was the most common response at 73% (n=206). This was followed by structured small groups (61%, n=172) and structured large groups (53%, n=150). Unstructured time is an important, intentional Youth Work practice, and includes a range of relationship-based activities that are often responsive to the needs of young people at the time.
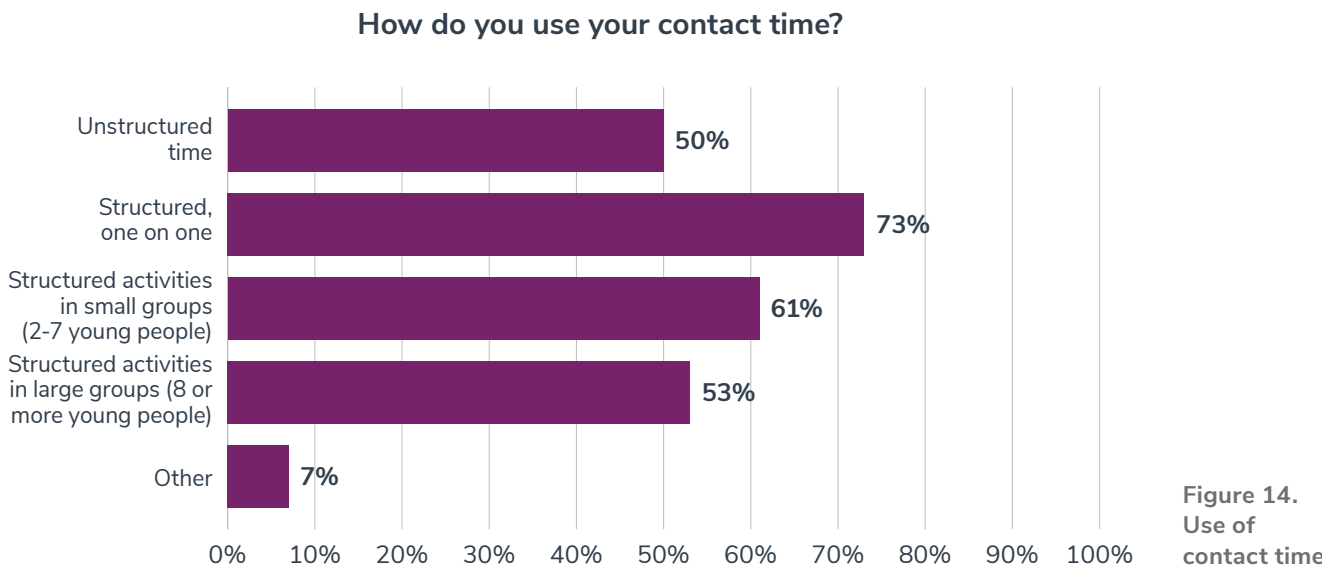
How do you use your contact time?

Figure 14. Use of contact time

The most selected response in *Real Work* was spending time with young people in large groups, and this was closely followed by small group activities. In fact, one-on-one structured time was the least selected option in 2006. This shift indicates that the nature of Youth Work has changed somewhat toward more one-on-one support and away from large group activities. This may be a consequence of less church and volunteer-based Youth Work than in 2006. Additionally, this may be a result of increased youth mentoring one-on one practices and contracts.

For the *Mahi Tūturu* survey, youth workers were also asked how they use their non-contact time when not with young people (Fig.15). Youth workers could select more than one response, so the percentage total exceeds 100%.

How do you use your non-contact time?

Figure 15. Use of non-contact time
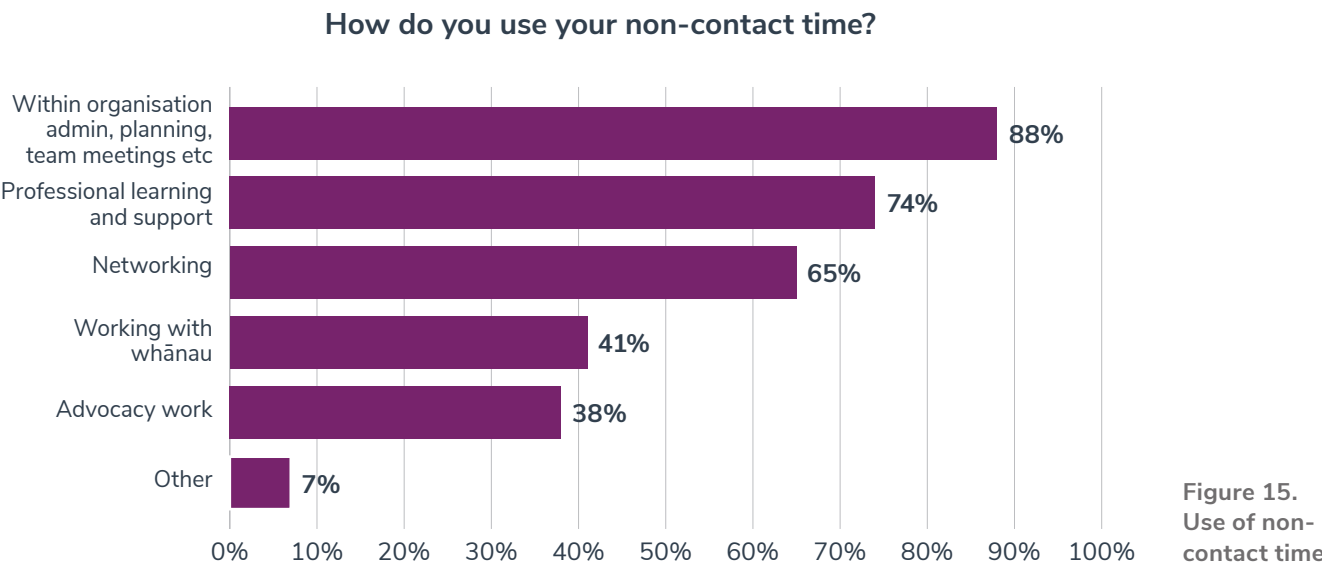
Most youth workers engage in administration tasks (88%, n=248). Many youth workers indicated that they are engaged in professional learning and support (74%, n=209) and networking (65%, n=185). Working with whānau (41%, n=115) and advocacy (38%, n=107) were also common activities.

There were two main questions asked of youth workers that related to physical activity, **'Do you use physical activity in your Youth Work practice?'** and **'What physical activities do you use?'**

If youth workers indicated that they did not use physical activity, they were asked for reasons as to why. Survey data indicates that more than 80% (n=227) of youth workers use physical activity in their practice and the most popular activities are informal games such as icebreakers as well as sport-based activities like basketball. Outdoor activities are very popular, including walking, tramping, and water activities like swimming and surfing (Fig.16).

Figure 16. Physical activity in Youth Work

Youth workers shared two main reasons why physical activity was not used with the young people in their organisation. The main reason was that physical activity was not related to the focus of their Youth Work practice, for example, a youth counsellor, or a transition work-ready youth coach. The other reason youth workers gave was that they are entirely youth centered in their approach—it is up to the young person what they want to do. For example, one youth worker noted, 'We do suggest taking clients to fitness groups but a lot of them don't want to go'.

Keeping young people safe

Managers and youth workers were asked about the ways in which they kept young people safe and/or their ethical practices. These responses are shared in this section. Matters of accountability linked to ethical practice and the safety of young people was a key topic for discussion during the focus group wānanga, and insights are shared further in Chapter 9.

Managers were asked to share the different ways in which their organisation seeks to create a safe environment for young people (Fig.17). They selected more than one response as several different factors apply. The three most common ways in which organisations keep young people safe are through recruitment (95%, n=90), upholding ethical relationships (91%, n=86) and child safety policies (86%, n=82). "Other" responses indicated that organisations place high value on child and youth safety training opportunities such as code of ethics , health and safety, outdoor education/ therapies, mental health and cultural capability.

How Youth Work organisations keep young people safe
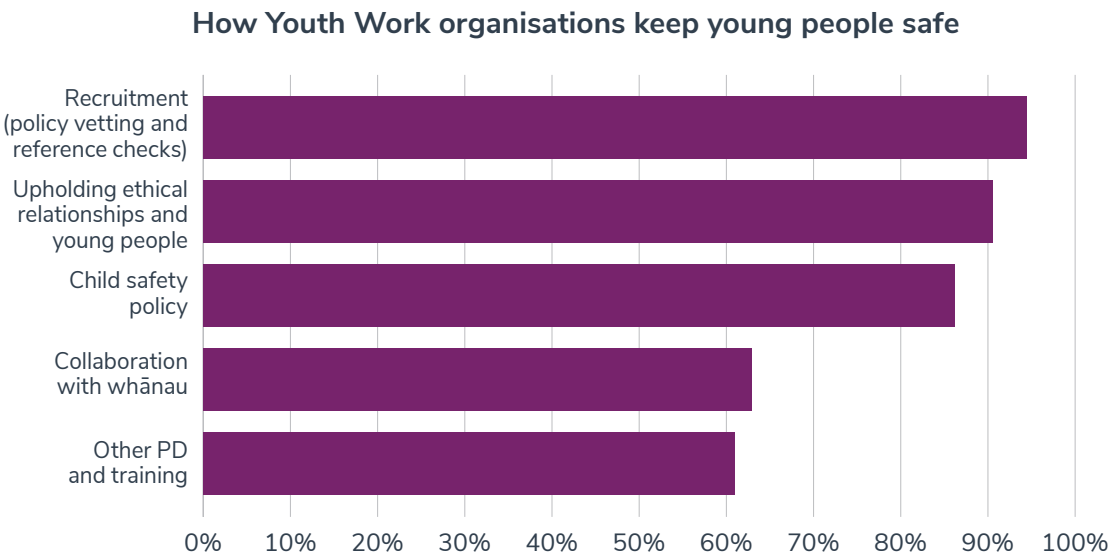
Figure 17. Keeping young people safe

⁹Code of Ethics for Youth Work in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Ethical practice

In the survey, youth workers were asked, **'What guides you in terms of good and ethical practice?'**

Youth workers gave multiple responses to this question (Fig.18). Code of Ethics (82%, n=176), organisational standards (76%, n=164) and Te Tiriti o Waitangi (74%, n=160) were the primary ways youth workers indicated their practice was guided ethically. Training (61%), supervision (50%) and mentoring (36%) were also common ways in which youth workers were supported to implement ethical practice.

What guides you in terms of good and ethical practice?
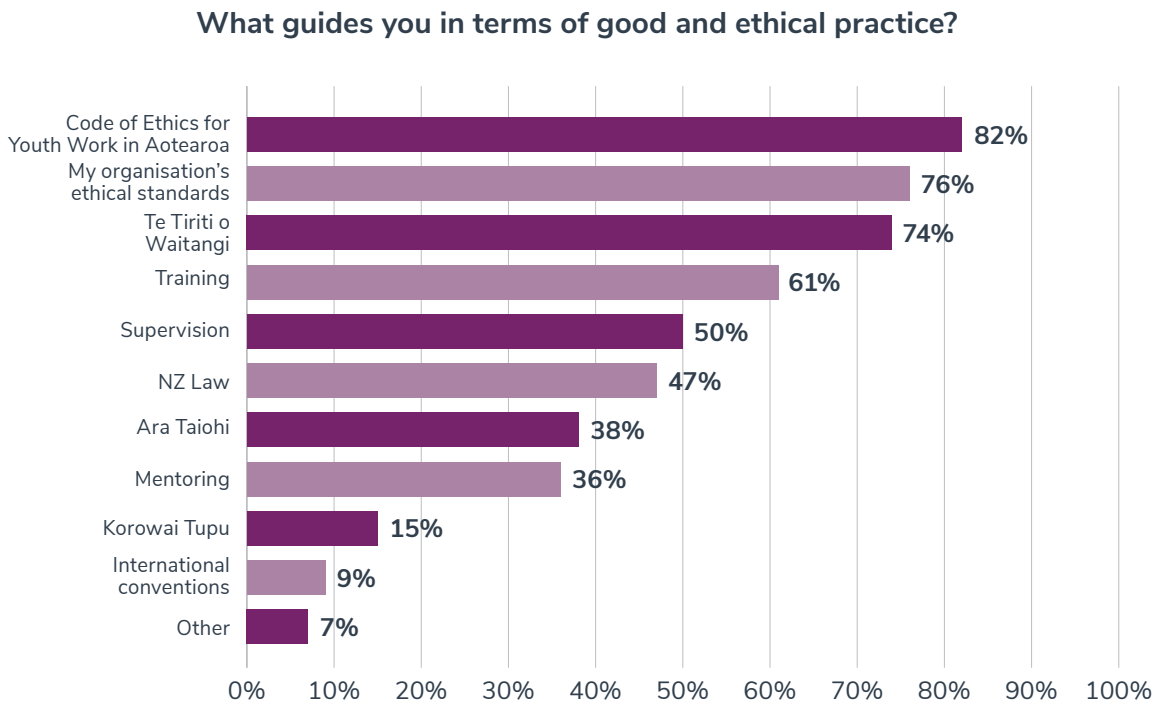
Figure 18. Ethical practice guidance

Perhaps one of the biggest shifts since *Real Work* is the numbers of youth workers whose practices are shaped by the Code of Ethics. In 2006, 27% had participated in Code of Ethics training, compared with 75% in 2025. It is worth noting that a national Code of Ethics did not exist in 2006, although there were regional variations based on the Canterbury Youth Workers Collective Code of Ethics.

A bicultural foundation of practice

Youth workers and managers were asked to describe how they and their organisations honoured Te Tiriti o Waitangi (total responses, n=303). Additionally, Māori youth workers were asked how Te Tiriti o Waitangi guides their organisation's policies and practices. While there are some differences in focus and perspective, the responses from managers and youth workers reveal a shared commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi and recognition of its importance in Youth Work practice. Most youth workers (95%, n=214) indicated they were either on a learning journey to embed Te Tiriti o Waitangi practices, or they were already engaged in Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring Youth Work practices.

A small number (5%, n=11) provided responses of 'sameness' such as 'we are all one', or 'everyone is equal'. They placed an emphasis on equality and sameness, rather than considering Te Tiriti o Waitangi practices as something unique and valued. This reflects an ongoing need for professional learning for all youth workers.

For most youth workers, there is a focus on ongoing learning and self-reflection, supported by organisational leadership. Youth workers discussed the need to address historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation. They shared ways in which they were embedding Te Ao Māori frameworks and Kaupapa Māori practices into their work. This includes a focus on building genuine relationships and working in partnership with iwi and hapū Māori.

Youth worker responses are clustered here into five practices that give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

▶ **Whanaungatanga - Relationship building and partnership.** Youth workers build genuine relationships with rangatahi Māori, whānau, and communities. They work alongside iwi and hapū to achieve better outcomes for young people.

▶ **Tikanga - Cultural capability.** Youth workers are committed to ongoing learning related Te Tiriti, Māori history, and tikanga as a priority; and ongoing learning in te reo me ōna tikanga.

▶ **Rangatiratanga - Empowerment and advocacy.** Youth workers support rangatahi Māori to connect with their whakapapa and cultural identity. They advocate for equitable access to services and opportunities. Youth workers centre Māori voices and perspectives in decision-making. They acknowledge the impact of colonisation and working to address disparities.

▶ **Manaakitanga and Kaitiakitanga - Respect and protection.** Youth workers incorporate te reo Māori, karakia, and waiata into practices and use Māori frameworks like Te Whare Tapa Whā for well-being assessments. They create culturally safe environments that respect Māori values and tikanga.

▶ **Organisational commitment to Kawanatanga and Tino Rangatiratanga.** The intent of Te Tiriti o Waitangi articles are embedded into policies and practices. Cultural training is provided for staff. Māori leadership is prioritised.

Managers provided similar text based responses to the question of describing how their organisation honours Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Only three managers indicated they had little to no awareness of practices honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Most managers (96%, n=95) articulated a strong commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi, but they also acknowledge that it is an ongoing journey:

❝ **It's very much a journey that we are still on. Some steps include: We are working toward cultural representation on all levels, including on our Board and employment. We ensure cultural supervision for our staff supporting Māori and/or Pasifika youth.**

(Manager)

There was also a strong emphasis on continuous learning, collaboration, and adapting practices to ensure they are culturally responsive. A small number of organisations are both Te Tiriti led and Kaupapa Māori organisations, and embed practices at all levels of organisational practice:

❝ **We practice all of our mahi through a Matauranga Māori lens, using taonga tuku iho, pūrākau and whakapapa kōrero to shape each conversation, activity and programme. We actively participate in the priorities of our whānau, hapū, iwi and wider hāpori that align with honouring Te Tiriti, He Whakaputanga & He Kingitanga.**

(Manager)

Overall, there were some differences between manager and youth worker responses, and these reflect the different roles that people hold. Managers tended to respond with organisational level actions and strategic applications such as policies, strategic plans and co-governance models. Whereas youth workers tended to provide individual and practice-based responses such as using te reo Māori with young people, and tikanga practices such as marae visits and culturally responsive relationship-based practices.

Māori youth workers were asked if Te Tiriti o Waitangi guided their organisations' policies and practices (Fig.19). In total 79% (n=55) either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that their organisations' policies and practices were guided by Te Tiriti o Waitangi. However, 21% indicated that their organisation was 'neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree'.

"Te Tiriti o Waitangi guides my organisation's policies and practices"

Figure 19. Māori youth worker perspectives
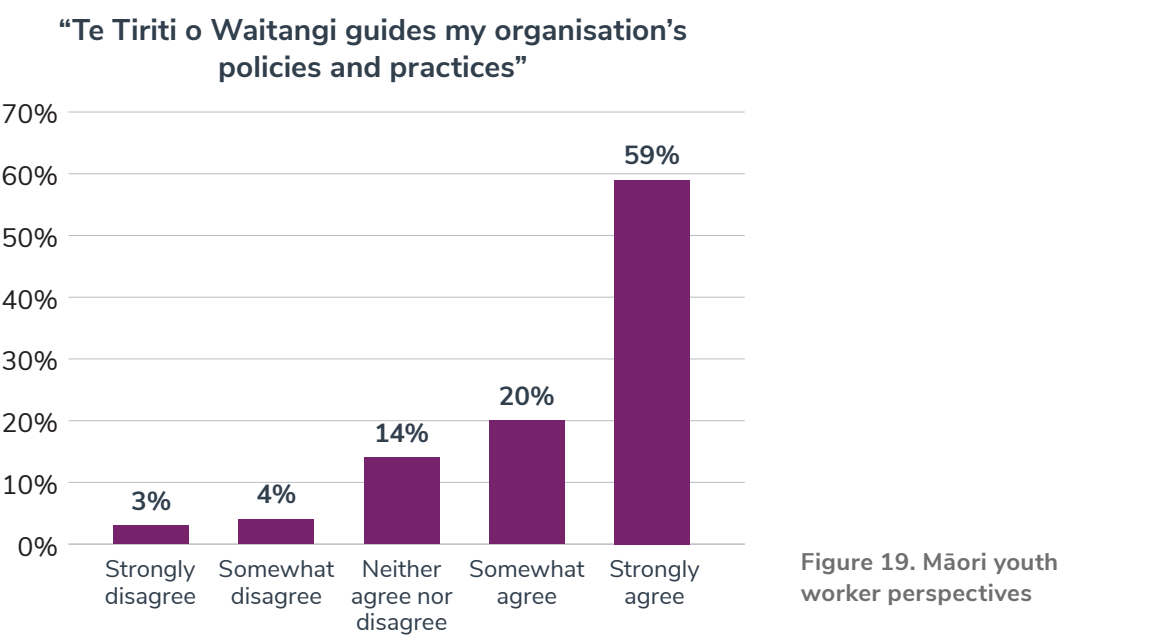
Overall, findings from this research study indicate that there is a strong commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi within the Youth Work sector in Aotearoa. Responses from managers and youth workers offered complementary perspectives on honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Managers described organisational support, while youth workers articulated a range of ways they could embed culturally responsive practices into their interactions with young people. It is evident that honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi needs to happen at all levels of an organisation, from governance and policy to direct service delivery. Both groups acknowledge that honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi is an ongoing journey with challenges, highlighting the need for continued learning, reflection, and improvement.

The difference that youth workers make

❝ **I think that I make a huge difference in young people's lives and have had young people say to me that "they wouldn't have survived without my support". I am helping young people access services and supports that they could not access and am helping them achieve goals that they did not think were possible.**

(Youth worker)

Youth workers in both the survey and the focus group wānanga were asked to share their views on the impact of their work. This data was integrated with survey responses. The findings indicate that there are three main areas where youth workers make a difference–being present at critical times, providing pro-social groups and activities, and serving as an interface between young people and other services. A more detailed discussion of these ideas appears in Chapter 8.

In this section we provide analysis for the survey responses to the question,
'What difference do you think you are making for young people?'

Youth workers often answered the question by stating their role, their tasks and the nature of their relationship with young people, or the way they relate with young people. Many youth workers found it harder to articulate in measurable ways the difference that their work makes to the lives of young people. As one participant noted:

> " I think it's often hard to exactly know the difference we're making – young people/people in general (me included) aren't always great at expressing this (or even necessarily realising the impact at the time)! So often I simply trust/remind myself that I have been invited into their waka for a season of their lives, so they have company/are not alone/having others to help them paddle when the waters are rough… and maybe I'm sowing seeds to help them head in a direction that is meaningful for them.

A small number of youth workers were able to share evidence-based research and evaluations of their work that indicate measurable differences:

> " We track our outcomes. From both a referrers perspective and a rangatahi perspective the average scores from each year pre and post the programme show improved:
>
> **Self confidence**
>
> **Emotional regulation**
>
> **Assertive communication**
>
> **Self-awareness**
>
> **Awareness of others**
>
> **Mental well being**
>
> **Engagement in education.**
>
> (Youth worker)

Some youth workers shared the way in which their work has saved lives:

> " I have saved lives, we are working with people who want to harm themselves, others or are at risk of being harmed in the primary mental health sector. We help to create a plan and connect them with the support they need. Other than that, we do a lot of work with anxiety, depression and generalised emotional regulation for young people.
>
> (Youth worker)

Overall, the key outcomes youth workers achieve with young people are supporting young people to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes to successfully transition to adulthood. Responses are clustered here:

Confidence | **Resilience (critical for success later in life)** | **Acts of generosity by contributing to communities** | **Achievement of goals**

Skill development (including for life, work, further study, relationships, leadership, agency, emotional regulation)

Wellbeing | **Empowerment** | **Ability to make good choices** | **Knowledge of Te Ao Māori and Mātauranga Māori**

Belonging (which is the foundation that enables learning and development to occur; less lonely/less isolated) | **Knowledge of self (strengths, interests, capabilities, whakapapa)** | **Achievement of NCEA**

Youth workers provided insight into the meaningful and reflective ways in which they engage with young people. Central to this practice was the ability to provide supportive and safe spaces through non-judgemental, reliable and consistent support:

> " In my role as a Schools Coordinator for [....], I believe I am making a difference for young people by creating safer, more inclusive environments where they can feel valued, supported, and free to express their authentic selves. By providing resources, facilitating workshops, and advocating for systemic changes, I empower schools to better support rainbow and takatāpui youth. This work fosters a sense of belonging and wellbeing, helping young people thrive both academically and personally.

Other ways in which youth workers provided specific support included:

▶ **Support empowerment and self-discovery.** Youth workers help young people to recognise their strengths, build confidence, and develop a sense of self-worth. They support young people in setting goals, making positive choices, and taking ownership of their lives. Youth workers helping young people to explore their identity, values, and potential was a recurring theme.

▶ **Facilitate connection and belonging.** Youth workers create opportunities for young people to connect with peers, build positive relationships, and engage with their communities.

▶ **Advocate and assist with access.** Youth workers often act as advocates for young people, helping them access services, resources, and opportunities they might otherwise miss. This can include support with education, employment, housing, and navigating various systems.

▶ **Promote positive development.** Youth workers help young people develop life skills, resilience, and emotional well-being. They encouraging healthy outlets, positive coping skills, and personal growth.

▶ **Cultural responsiveness.** For some youth workers, particularly those working with rangatahi Māori, honouring cultural identity and providing culturally relevant support is a core part of their work. This can involve connecting young people with their whakapapa and Te Ao Māori.

In essence, youth workers see themselves as playing a vital role in supporting young people's development, well-being, and connection to their communities. They strive to empower young people, create safe spaces, and advocate for their needs–ultimately helping them navigate challenges and build a positive future.

> **I believe I am making a real and lasting impact by creating a space where young people—especially those from former refugee and migrant backgrounds—can grow in confidence, express themselves freely, and feel a true sense of belonging. Through creative participation, I help them develop life skills like communication, leadership, resilience, collaboration and teamwork, which they carry beyond our organisation into their everyday lives at school, work and their communities. Seeing a young person step out of their comfort zone, take creative risks, and discover their potential is the most rewarding part of my work.**
>
> (Youth worker)

Understanding and measuring impact is a key theme that emerged from this research. These ideas are explored further in Chapter 7.

The skills of a youth worker

> **I think it can be hard to recognise the skills we have/feel valued for them. Especially when we often hone them through lived experience rather than formal training.**
>
> (Youth worker)

Both managers and youth workers were asked for text based responses to the question, **'What skills make Youth Work a standalone profession?'**

According to youth workers what makes Youth Work a standalone profession are relationship-based skills, practice-based skills, and knowledge and understanding. While the relationship itself was often seen by youth workers as the primary tool and service, there were several practice-based skills and knowledge areas that were acknowledged as important. Under each of the three key categories there are a cluster of different skills and knowledge areas.

Youth centred practice:
- Meeting young people 'where they are at' and journeying alongside them, often for an extended period of time
- Strengths based practice that includes a focus on the ability to work with young people to empower them
- Youth participation skills to foster youth empowerment and supporting their independence
- Role modelling and working as a mentor, guide or coach to support their development
- Advocating for the needs of young people through collaborating and networking with other organisations to support better outcomes for young people
- Holistic approaches that support the development of the whole person within the context of whānau and communities
- Culturally competent practice with a focus of Te Tiriti o Waitangi
- Ethical practice
- Facilitation skills and programme design.

> **The ability to bridge between education, health and social development, purely focused and catered to young people. Youth workers are the space between parents, counsellors and friends that young people can talk to, feel comfortable and reflect on their experiences.**
>
> (Youth worker)

Knowledge and understanding:
- Knowledge of youth development, frameworks and practice models
- Understanding the needs of young people
- Awareness of social issues affecting young people
- Awareness of networking and collaboration opportunities to support better outcomes for young people
- Policy and practice to support ethical practices
- Cultural capability (biculturalism and multiculturalism).

Relationship based skills:
- The ability to communicate, connect and relate effectively to young people. For example, the ability to build trust, active listening skills, and creating safe spaces for young people to feel heard.
- The ability to adapt to diverse situations
- The ability to work in non-judgemental ways
- Personal qualities including resilience, patience, honesty, flexibility, and empathy.

> **As youth workers, the relationship we create with a young person is the service and is absolutely at the heart of everything we do. We have great relationship skills - clear, youth centred communication; respect, honesty, trust building & repair skills.**
>
> (Youth worker)

Youth workers see their profession as distinct due to its emphasis on relationships, strengths-based practice, empowerment, and a holistic understanding of young people. As one youth worker shares:

> **Youth Work has its own degree, own code of ethics, strengths-based thinking, focused on building relationships and developing young people. Youth Work is a standalone profession as no other sector focuses on the holistic development and growth of young people's lives.**
>
> (Youth worker)

Youth workers highlighted the importance of adaptability, cultural competence, and advocacy, alongside essential personal qualities like empathy and resilience. Managers provided very similar responses to the youth workers. Any differences were subtle and related to the focus. Youth workers tended to focus more on practical, interpersonal skills directly related to their interactions with young people (such as active listening, rapport building, being present). Managers highlighted broader skills relating to advocacy and community understanding.

Regarding professional recognition, managers were more likely to frame Youth Work as a distinct profession with its own knowledge base and ethical framework whereas some youth workers expressed a feeling that their skills are not always fully recognised or valued. As one youth worker explained:

> " **This is my biggest annoyance. As someone who is about to complete a Master of Social Work, I feel as though skilled Youth Work far surpasses Social Work in regard to positive outcomes. It is more relational, it is more front facing, it is more real.**

Professional recognition and the integrity of Youth Work as a unique profession is explored further in the Chapter 9.

Summary: What do youth workers do?

There were three main areas of inquiry explored in this chapter: Who are the young people that youth workers are working with? What does Youth Work practice look like? What difference do youth workers make?

The findings from this research indicate that youth workers are practicing across a wide range of contexts, and this is in direct response to the needs of the young people with whom they work. It appears that young people involved in Youth Work are often coming from medium-to high-needs and low-income backgrounds. Youth workers reported young peoples' foremost strength as resilience in the face of adversity.

Perhaps then not surprisingly, Youth Work contexts are diverse. The most frequent responses to the question of context were Te Ao Māori, education, and mentoring. However, the range of contexts was very wide ranging. When working with young people, youth workers reported spending their time most often in structured one-on-one mentoring or small group contexts. Ethical practices are primarily guided by the Code of Ethics, ethical standards set by organisations, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

The impact of Youth Work and the unique skills of a youth worker were explored in this chapter. The findings provide helpful insights into the skills required for effective Youth Work practice, as well as an understanding of the difference that Youth Work makes. Findings indicate that youth workers struggled to articulate the difference that they make, and they often answered the question by stating their role, their tasks and the nature of their relationship with young people, or the way they relate with young people. These ideas are explored further in Chapter 8.

While there are some differences in focus and perspective, the responses from managers and youth workers reveal a shared commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi and recognition of its importance in Youth Work practice. Most youth workers indicated they were either on a learning journey to embed Te Tiriti o Waitangi practices, or they were already engaged in Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring Youth Work practices.

In the following chapter we seek to explore further the role of the youth worker, through an understanding of their work conditions including matters of employment, training and support.

WORK CONDITIONS

■ **What are the work conditions for youth workers?**

This chapter explores support for youth workers, including professional learning and supervision, as well as their wellbeing needs and employment conditions. Additionally, we explore manager responses to organisation-focused questions such as funding streams, and support for youth workers.

This chapter is based upon the integrated findings from the three data sets (survey, focus groups and interviews). Where possible, we also comparatively discuss differences with *Real Work*.

5

Professional learning

In the survey, youth workers were asked to share their experiences of professional learning through formal and informal training, areas that they would like to receive more training in, and barriers that exist when seeking to access training.

Overall, 78% (n=168) of youth workers indicated that professional learning is an expectation in their organisation. Of the remainder, 12% (n=26) indicated that professional learning was not an expectation, and 10% (n=22) were unsure. The following questions were asked to provide more detail on the nature and experience of the professional development undertaken:

Have you attended workshops that relate to Youth Work, youth development or a related field? If so, which workshops have you attended? In the future, what training (if any) would you like to attend? What are the barriers to accessing training?

A total of 92% (n=200) of youth workers have attended training that relates to Youth Work, youth development or a related field (Fig.20). Of those who indicated yes (n=200), they could select more than one response from a range of responses. The most frequently attended workshops were Code of Ethics (75%, n=149), Te Tiriti o Waitangi (58%, n=116), Child Protection (55%, n=110) and Mana Taiohi (54%, n=108) training. Youth workers also attended workshops on supervision (47%, n=93) and Response Ability Pathways (RAP) (32%, n=63). Other workshops listed included topics relating to mental health and youth wellbeing, and mentoring.

Which workshops have you attended?
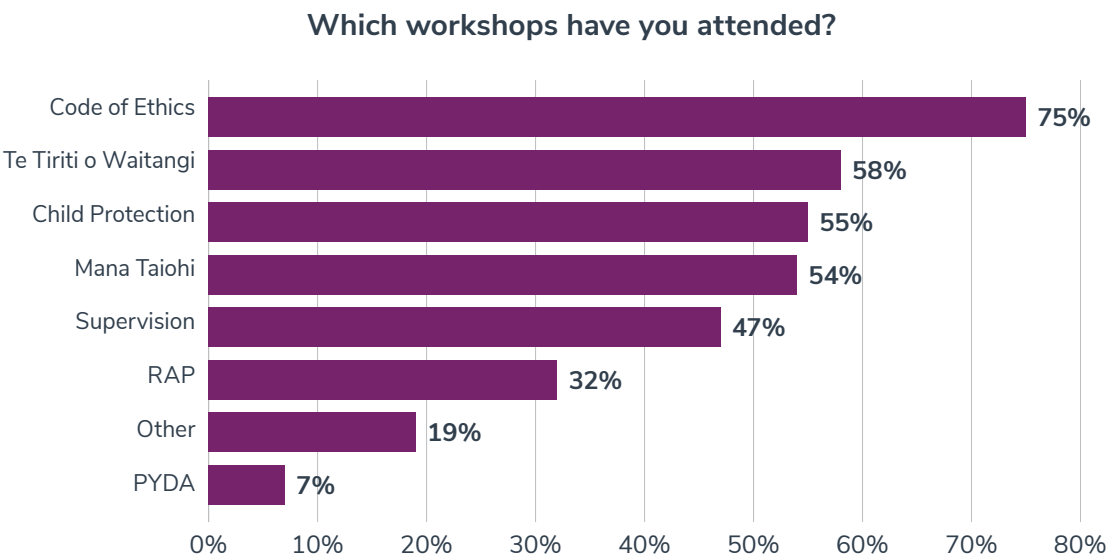
Figure 20. Workshops attended[10]

The survey indicated 75% (n=163) of youth workers would like to participate in further training related to Youth Work and youth development and a range of topics were suggested. Bicultural capability within an Aotearoa context was the most requested training. This included a range of responses all linked to Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring practices. Mentoring, mental health and group facilitation were the next most requested training. Youth workers have indicated that they would like to learn more about group facilitation so they can effectively engage groups of young people in learning and development opportunities. An increase in one-on-one Youth Work practice was indicated in Chapter 4, and mentoring training may be in response to this growth in practice. Furthermore, a rise in social anxiety and other mental health concerns among young people may be one of the reasons why youth workers are seeking more specialised training in mental health. These factors may indicate a need for more social learning contexts in small and large group settings.

—
[10]PYDA is a reference to *Positive Youth Development Aotearoa.*

Overall, the topics requested are listed below with the *most requested ones first:*

- Cultural capability (Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring practices)
- Mentoring
- Understanding neurodivergence
- Sexuality and relationships
- Advocacy
- Positive Youth Development approaches
- Rainbow youth
- Pasifika
- Youth in crisis
- Group facilitation
- Trauma informed practice
- Youth Justice
- Code of Ethics
- Ecotherapy, outdoor therapy
- Youth participation
- Mana Taiohi
- Housing

A further training need of advocacy work was identified through this research. In interviews with key informants, concerns were shared about the skilled advocacy gap, and the need to strengthen this Youth Work practice across a range of contexts including advocacy for the individual and group needs of young people, as well as sector wide advocacy for issues impacting both young people and at times the Youth Work sector. As one interviewee shares:

> " **Advocacy is fighting and you gotta learn how to fight and dance. We hardly ever did this as youth workers. We used to pass it to the social workers. But we need to advocate now. Diversity of young people means we need a broad spectrum of understanding and knowing what this means for our role as advocates.**

Advocacy is discussed as a key purpose of networking and collaboration in Chapter 7.

When asked what the barriers were to accessing training, participants could provide more than one response to this question (Fig.21). The main barriers to accessing training were time (68%, n=146), financial (59%, n=127), and a lack of regional training access (44%, n=94). Other barriers included travel (25%, n=53), relevance of training (21%, n=45), and organisational support (17%, n=37). These barriers are similar to *Real Work*, where time and finance were the main two factors that limited youth workers ability to access training.

Barriers to accessing training

Figure 21. Barriers to accessing training

Qualifications

As previously outlined in Chapter 3, participants were asked if they had completed formal qualifications that are related to Youth Work, youth development, or a related field. This could include micro-credentials, certificate, diploma, degree or postgraduate level study. The survey showed 76% (n=164) of youth workers indicated they have completed a formal qualification in a related field. The remaining 24% (n=53) do not have a qualification in a related field (Fig.22).
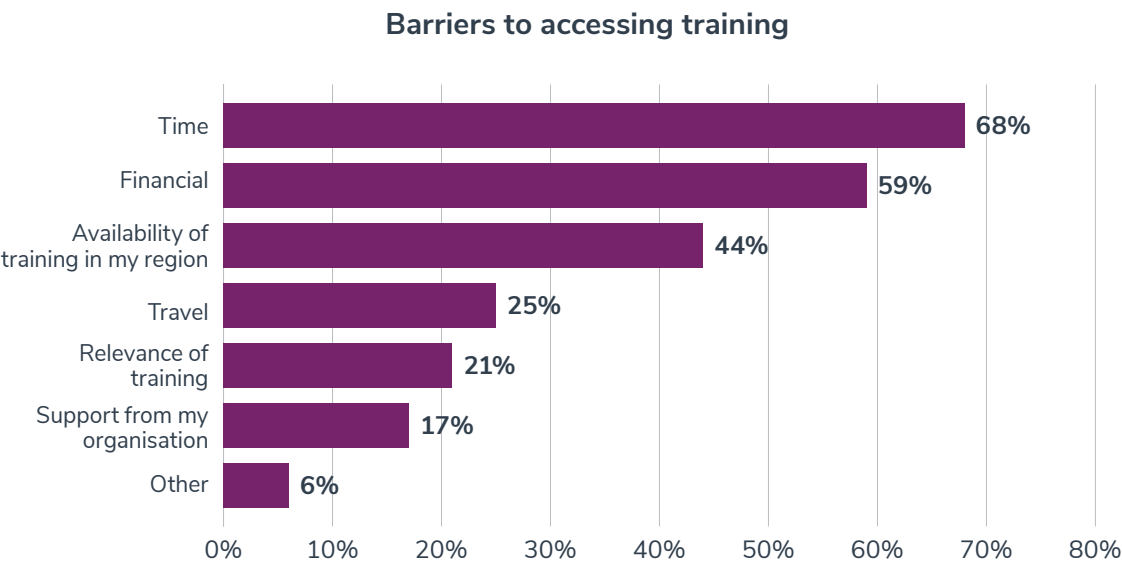
Of those that have a formal qualification in Youth Work, youth development or a related field, 37%, (n=61) have a certificate as their highest qualification, 28% (n=45) have a degree as their highest qualification, and 24% (n=39) have a diploma. A small number 6% (n=10) have a postgraduate qualification.

Highest qualification
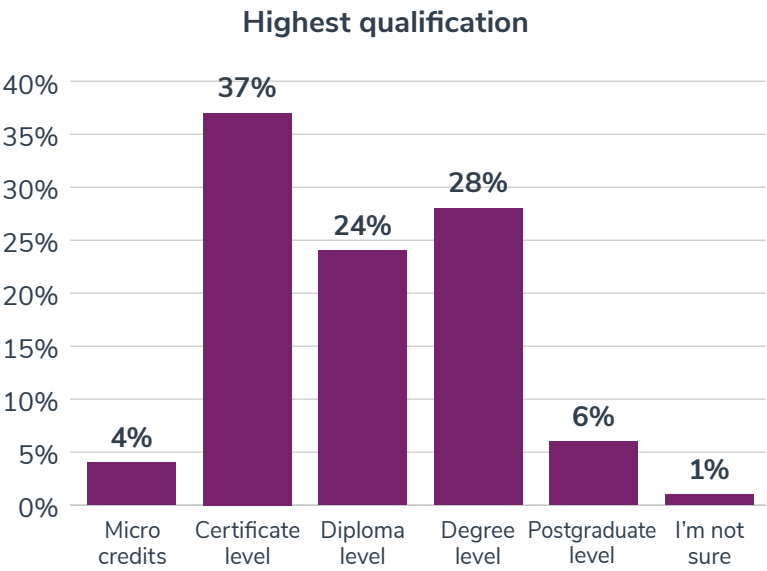
Figure 22. Highest qualification in a related field

When asked if they received financial or other benefits as a result of completing training[11], 61% (n=100) of youth workers indicated that they have not received any benefits, 21% (n=34) were unsure, and 18% (n=29) indicated they had received benefits. Benefits listed included increased pay (50% of those who responded 'other' indicated increased pay as a benefit), being employed in a role requiring a qualification, and study benefits while working. Further discussion regarding qualifications is in Chapter 9.

Youth Work practice support

Do you receive support in your Youth Work practice? Select on that apply.

Youth workers (n=217) could provide more than one response to this question. Many youth workers indicated that they receive support through more than one avenue (Fig.23). Supervision (71%, n=153) and mentoring on the job (51%, n= 110) were the most common forms of support that youth workers received. 64% (n=138) indicated that they receive support from a network including regional (27%, n=58) and Ara Taiohi (19%, n=41). 8% (n=17) received support from *Korowai Tupu, the Professional Association for Youth Work in Aotearoa*. Other responses included peer support, and informal or formal training.

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[11] 163 people responded to this question.

Support received by youth workers
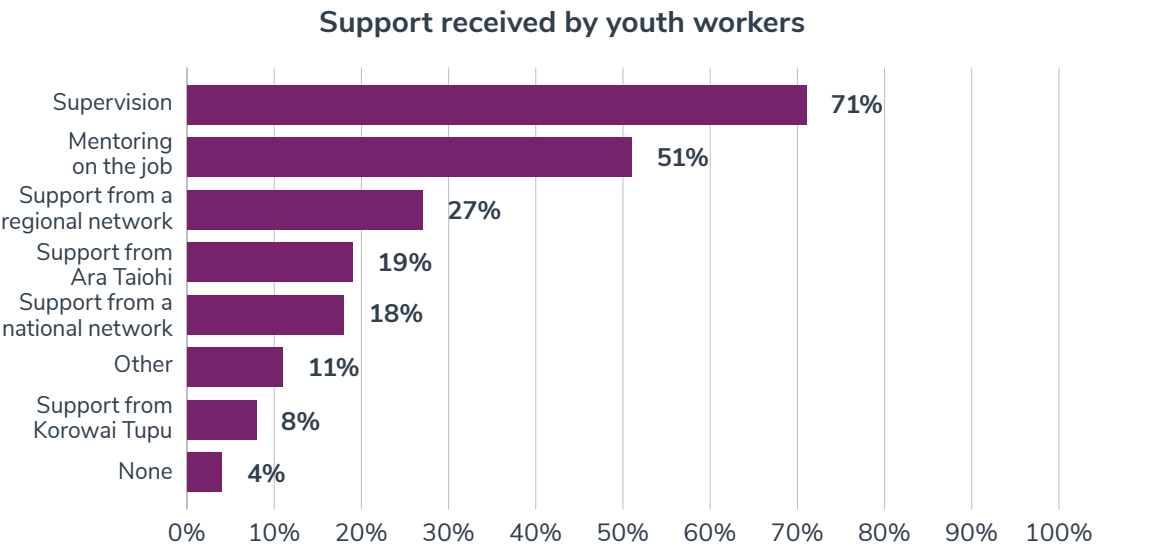
Figure 23. Youth Work practice support

Relatedly, managers were asked to indicate the ways in which their organisation provides support for youth workers (Fig.24). They were able to select more than one response. Training (77%, n=89) and supervision (74%, n=85) were the most frequently selected responses. This was closely followed by networks and peer support (70%, n=80), mental health and wellbeing support (68%, n=78) and flexible working environments (64%, n=74).

Organisational support provided to youth workers
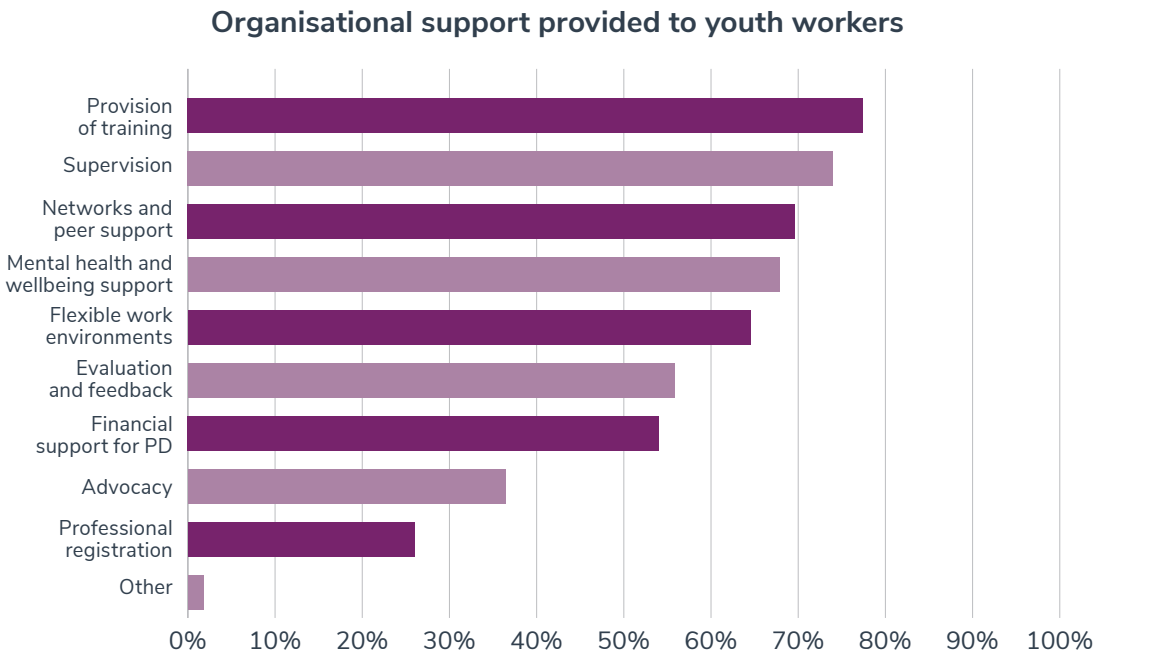
Figure 24. Organisational support for youth workers

Māori youth workers were asked to share whether they were supported by their organisation to access Kaupapa Māori professional learning. In total, 72% of Māori youth workers strongly agreed (53%, n=38) or somewhat agreed (19%, n=14) that their organisation supported them to access kaupapa Māori professional learning and support. However, 11% somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Supervision is a requirement of *Korowai Tupu* and the Code of Ethics and therefore there are professional Youth Work expectations related to the provision of support. Youth workers are invested in ethical and professional practices as we will see throughout this report and therefore investment is needed to ensure safe and professional practice is provided. However, there are also budgetary constraints that impact on the level of support possible. These ideas are discussed further through his report.

Wellbeing and support

Youth workers were asked several questions related to stressors at work, wellbeing and provision for their needs. The following questions were asked:

What is the most stressful part of your role? Is your personal wellbeing affected by your work? And does your organisation make provision for your wellbeing needs?

Māori youth workers were also asked if their wellbeing needs as Māori are supported by their organisation. 83% (n=58) of Māori youth workers indicated that their wellbeing needs are supported by their organisation. However, 10% (n=7) indicated that they either somewhat disagree or strongly disagree.

Regarding stress in the workplace, youth workers could select more than one response. The most selected responses were interrelated and included funding (58%, n=122), remuneration (pay) (41%, n=87) and a lack of time (39%, n=82). In 2006, funding was a stressor for significantly less respondents (around 20%) compared with 58% in 2025. In 2006, a lack of time was the main stressor. In 2025, challenging ethical dilemmas (27%, n=57), government policy (26%, n=55) and job insecurity (24%, n=51) were also stressors for many youth workers.

Youth workers in the *Mahi Tūturu* survey could include text responses related to the emotional stress of working with young people in crisis (20% of youth workers work with young people with very high needs). Some of the responses were really concerning and highlighted the stressful nature of some Youth Work contexts as these youth workers share:

> **I have had to take a day off after violent abuse and threats to kill. The role can sometimes become overwhelming because of the mental health of some of the folk I work with.**

> **We never know what we're walking into. We have no control over what we're faced with each day, and we need to be able to roll with it. While remaining completely level-headed.**

> **Such a variety of roles/responsibilities within my role to juggle. The emotional toll of the work I do/the challenges rangatahi I support face.**

Others reported stress that came from their organisation, management teams and leadership. These quotes were examples of many:

> **Bullying. Tall poppy syndrome, nepotism.**

> **Lack of support from management (the support sounds good on paper). I feel worn out a lot of the time.**

> **When my workload is high, I am very tired from work and need to use my personal time to rest and recover.**

In total, 47% (n=94) of youth workers indicated that their wellbeing was affected by their work, 37% indicated that their wellbeing was not affected by their work, and 16% (n=33) were unsure. With a margin of error of ±7% at the 95% confidence level, the takeaway here is not that more youth workers said yes than no; rather, that around half of youth workers claim their wellbeing is affected by their work.

Those who indicated they were affected provided a range of reasons and similar to the responses to stressors, wellbeing was impacted by workload and poor management, and young people in crisis. Poor management included incidents of racism and prejudice, bullying, a lack of support and not understanding the role of youth workers. The following quotes are from four different youth workers:

> **Stress, fear of reprisals in doing the right thing which may not be policy (written by those not at the coal face i.e. theoretical).**

> **Yes because you go home and think about the clients that are really struggling or the ones that are homeless.**

> **Rangatahi's shitty situations – often feeling helpless yet responsible. Bringing baggage home can be stressful.**

> **I have been physically assaulted more than once. I've had to directly intervene when young people are trying to commit suicide. Being reminded of my own trauma. Constantly having days when I don't have a moment to sit down – let alone eat. Most of the time the only support I have available are emergency services and my own experience.**

There were several very concerning responses to questions related to stress and wellbeing in the workplace. The findings suggest that supervision and other wellbeing supports need be assured by employers, especially for those working with very high needs young people. Additionally, training for managers and team leaders in leading others and supporting staff is critical if youth workers are able to continue to work in emotionally and physically safe environments.

Supervision

> **You would have to be a robot not to be affected, however it's because supervision is so solid for me it's managed constantly by making sure I remain reflective and intentional in my practice.**
>
> (Youth worker)

Youth workers were asked a range of questions relating to supervision. Most youth workers were in supervision, with only 20% (n=44) indicating that they are not in any form of supervision at all[12] (Fig.25).

Figure 25. Four out of five youth workers receive supervision

—
[12] 215 people responded to this question.

There has been an increase in external supervision since 2006. Of the 87 people who told us about the type of supervision (i.e. they chose at least one of these two options), 66% (n=57) have internal supervision and 72% (n=63) have external supervision, with 38% (n=33) choosing both options. This is an improvement from 2006, when 55% of youth workers indicated they were in external supervision (Martin, 2006).

Of the 125 people who told us how regular their supervision is, 87% (n=109) have supervision regularly (6 or more sessions per year). The remaining 13% (n=16) have fewer than six supervision sessions per year.

Of the 98 who told us about how their supervision is funded, 80% (n=78) told us their employer pays; 5% (n=5) pay for their own supervision; and 18% (n=18) have their supervision gifted to them.

Overall, the findings indicate that most youth workers who completed this survey were in regular supervision, and this was mixed between internal and external supervision. Most of the youth workers who completed this survey were in paid roles and they have indicated that most often their employer pays for their supervision.

YOUTH WORKER PROFILE

Sarah Finlay-Robinson

Incommon New Zealand/ Scope Aotearoa

Sarah Finlay Robinson works as a youth work contractor operating under her own banner, In Common New Zealand. With a career spanning over two decades, Sarah brings expertise in Youth Work, training, supervision, research, and youth participation to a wide range of contracts across Aotearoa. She is passionate about creating systems and spaces that amplify young people's voices and rights, particularly within the care and youth advocacy sectors.

Sarah's youth development journey began in 2003 when she was working at Horizons and overheard a conversation between rangatahi who were sharing stories about their experiences in care. She realised that beyond the skills they were there to learn, there was another level of connection and meaning to their interactions. She came away from that experience as a strong advocate for the power of storytelling as a way for young people to process and connect. She also realised that young people need spaces where they can advocate for change in the things that impact them most. Since then, she has worked across government, tertiary, and community sectors to support youth-led advocacy and system transformation.

A consistent challenge Sarah has faced has been pushing back against outdated thinking. She rejects the idea, still held by some, that bringing young people together could lead to negative behaviour, or that youth advocacy should align with formal political models rather than personal development. Sarah remains that all young people deserve a space to connect, have the right to be heard, and should be allowed to challenge the systems that impact them.

Sarah sees Ara Taiohi as an organisation committed to helping youth workers explore their practice, work ethically, have access to training, and be supported in the sector. She sees advocacy and capacity building as two key parts of what Ara Taiohi does.

"Having this professional recognition brings accountability and transparency. As I begin work with young people and other youth workers and organisations, I'm clear about my ethical practice, confidentiality and the process for when things go wrong. And that through all this a mana-enhancing approach is taken with young people at the centre of the mahi. That's key. There's safety in knowing how we'll work together and work through the tough stuff in a restoratively".

Employment conditions

❝ **As a youth worker we are more likely to be burnt out as a lot of the time we do not work our contracted hours, instead we usually work much more and sometimes without pay.**

(Youth worker)

In total, 87% (n=191) of youth workers (i.e. not including managers) indicated that they were mainly in paid work, while only 13% volunteered (Fig.26). It is likely this says more about the challenges of engaging the volunteer sector with this survey than a true representation of the paid vs volunteer balance within the Youth Work sector. In fact, there is little known about the Youth Work volunteer sector in New Zealand. Neither the Stats NZ, nor *Volunteer NZ* have specific information related to volunteers in youth development or Youth Work. Therefore, in this section we will only be talking about youth workers in paid work.

In this section of the survey, paid youth workers responded to a range of questions related to their employment conditions including whether they were in permanent and fixed term roles, details about their job description, how many hours they were employed per week, how long they had been employed, whether they were paid by salary or hourly rate, and what pay rates they were on.

Most youth workers were employed in permanent roles 75% (n=141), 8% (n=33) were employed on fixed term contracts, and the remainder were either casual or unsure (Fig.27).

Nearly all youth workers employed indicated that they have a job description (97%, n=182). While 97% of all youth workers employed had a job description, only 56% (n=102) of those youth workers indicated that their job description reflected the work that they do (Fig. 28). A further 40% (n=73) indicated that their job description was somewhat a reflection of their work. The remaining 4% indicated that their job description was not a reflection of their work.

Typically, youth workers indicated they were employed 31 to 40 hours per week (56%, n=106) (Fig. 29). In total, 14% (n=26) of youth workers were employed more than 41 hours per week and 14% (n=27) were employed 21 - 30 hours per week. Approximately 70% of paid youth workers work more than 30 hours per week.

13%
87%

Are you mainly in paid work or do you mainly volunteer?

■ Paid work   ■ Voluntary work
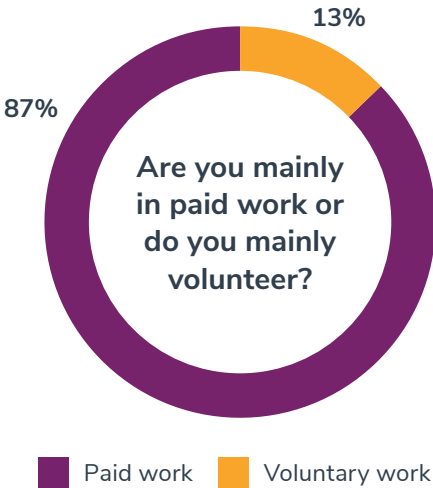
Figure 26. Youth workers in paid work or volunteer

75%
5%
3%
18%

Are you in a permanent or fixed term role?

■ Permanent   ■ Fixed term
■ Unsure   ■ Casual
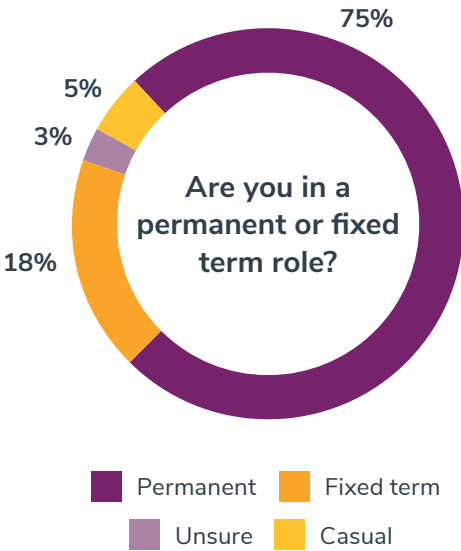
Figure 27. Permanent or fixed term role

40%
56%
4%

Does your job description reflect your work?

■ Yes   ■ Somewhat   ■ No
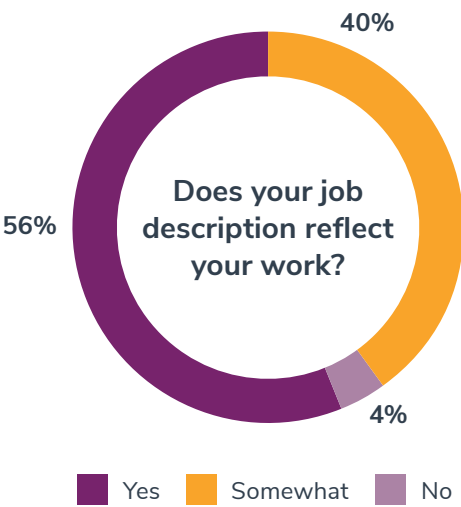
Figure 28. Job description reflects work

During a typical week, how many hours are you employed as a youth worker?
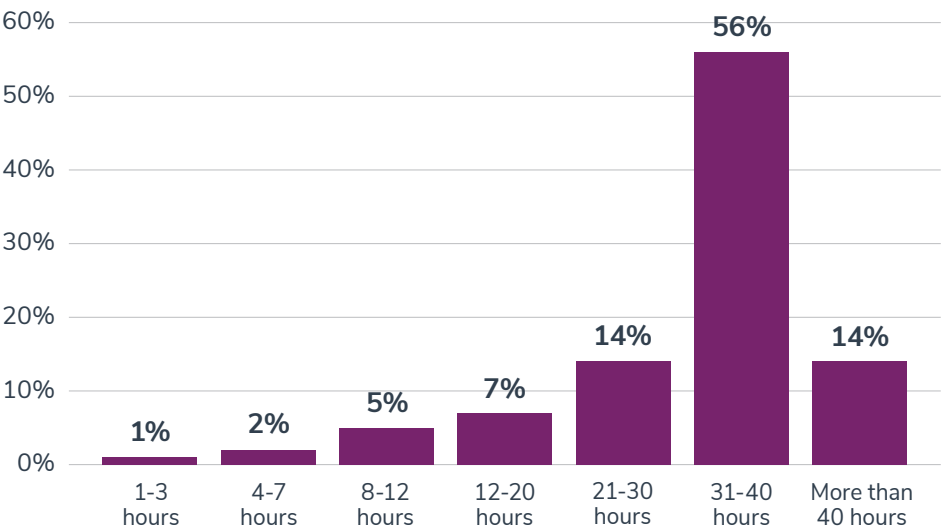
Figure 29. Hours employed

Length of service

When asked how long youth workers had been employed for, 40% (n=75) of youth workers indicated the 1 to 3 year period (Fig. 30). There were less youth workers employed in the 4 to 6 year period (21%, n=39).

How long have you been employed as a youth worker?
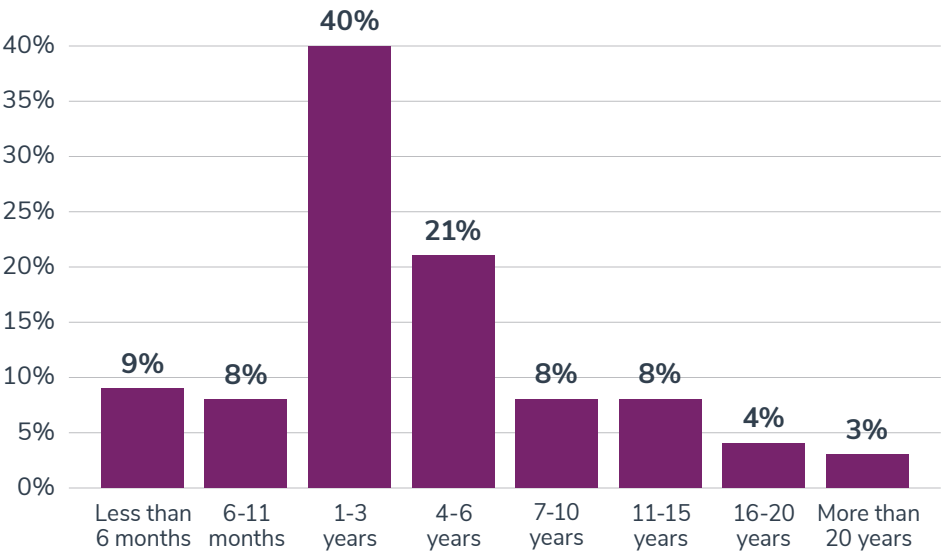
Figure 30. Years employed as a youth worker

Experience comparison between *Mahi Tūturu* and *Real Work*
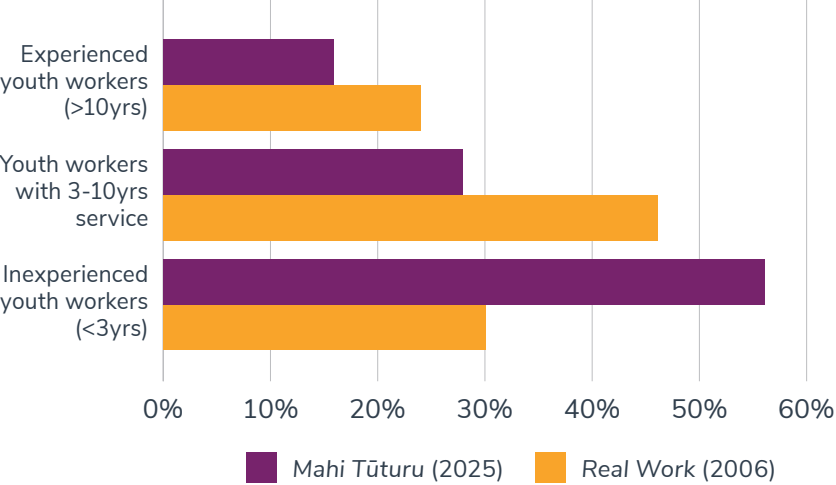
Figure 31. *Real Work/Mahi Tūturu* comparison of ethnicity

If we call 'more than 10 years' 'experienced', then 24% of the 2006 workforce were experienced, whereas in 2025, only 16% might be called 'experienced'. Additionally, if we consider 'less than three years' inexperienced, we see that 30% of the 2006 workforce were inexperienced compared with 56% in 2025. Figure 30 provides a comparative overview. Overall, it appears that there are more people who are currently serving who have less experience and the years of those staying longer has decreased. While it is unclear why youth workers are less likely to stay in the workforce, possible reasons for this may be due to pay conditions. Another contributing factor could be the suggested decline in volunteering. This trend requires further examination.

Pay

55% (n=104) of employed youth workers are on salary and the remaining 45% (n=85) are employed on an hourly rate. Participants were asked to share their income, with those employed on part-time contracts being asked to share their full-time equivalent.

For youth workers on salary[13], 27% (n=25) were employed on more than $70 000 per annum, and 22% (n=21) were employed in the range of $66 000 to $70 000 (Fig. 32). At the other end of the scale, 12% (n=11) declared a rate of less than $48 000. At the time of the survey the New Zealand minimum wage was $23.50 per hour[14], equivalent to $48,880 per year at 40 hours per week.
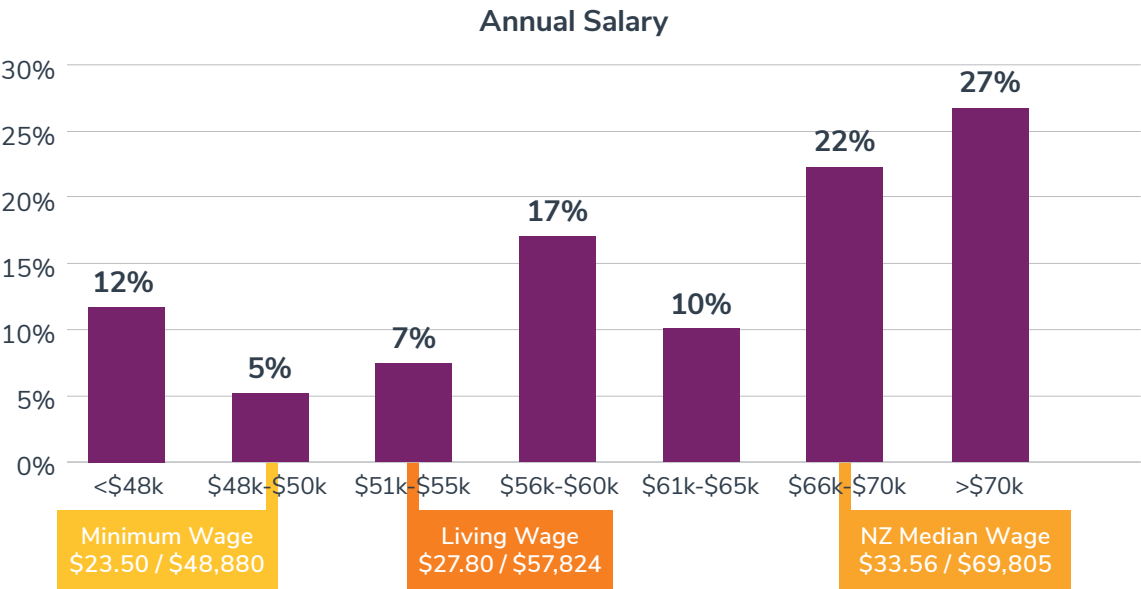
Figure 32. Annual salary of youth workers

[13] 94 respondents shared their salary range.
[14] Retrieved from https://www.mbie.govt.nz/about/news/minimum-wage-set-for-2025

For youth workers on an hourly rate, the lower end of the pay range was even more pronounced (Fig. 33). The most common pay bracket was between $23 and $28 per hour (41%, n=35)—less than the New Zealand living wage, calculated as $27.80 per hour at the time of the survey[15]. This group was followed closely by the next lowest pay bracket, with 39% (n=33) declaring a rate between $29 and $33.
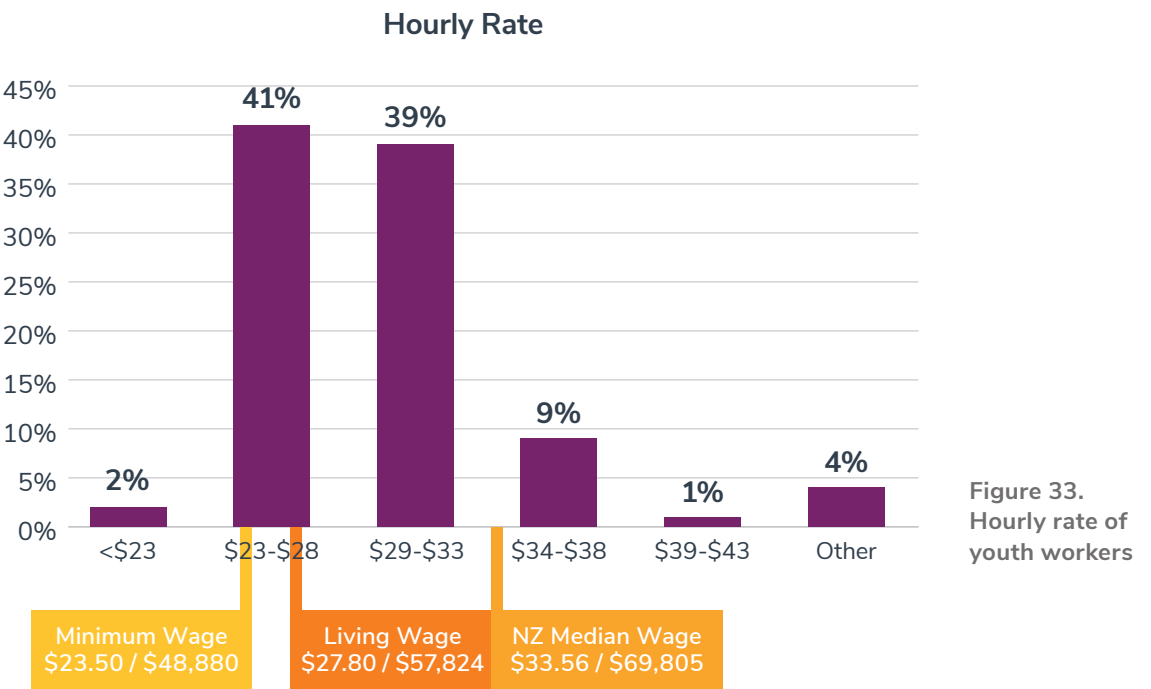
Hourly Rate

Figure 33. Hourly rate of youth workers

Comparing youth workers' pay to the national average, the findings suggest that the majority of youth workers are paid below the New Zealand median. Youth workers' median salary is within the $61 000 to $65 000 bracket, and their median wage is in the $29 to $33 per hour bracket. The wage and salary median for all NZ workers in 2024 was $33.56, equivalent to $69,805 at 40 hours per week (Aotearoa Data Explorer, Stats NZ).

This is consistent with the findings of previous surveys of the Youth Work sector. *He Taanga Manawa* in 1989[16], *Real Work* in 2006, and *Stepping Stone* in 2015[17] all found that pay rates in the Youth Work sector were lower than the NZ average of the time. It needs to be noted that there was a low sample size for all surveys. Further research in this area is needed to develop a greater understanding of the paid employment conditions of youth workers.

Youth Work managers and leaders

Specific survey questions were asked of Youth Work managers and leaders and findings from these questions are shared here and/or embedded in other sections of this report. Overall, there were 119 organisation managers and leaders who responded to this survey. All the interviewees were also in management and leadership roles, and their perspectives were an important part of the data integration analysis process.

Managers were asked about the nature of their organisations and the work they do to support youth workers and young people (Fig. 34). Most managers indicated that their organisations work with more than 100 young people annually (80%, n=91). 34% (n=39) of organisations are working with or indirectly supporting more than 1000 young people annually.

[15]Retrieved from https://www.livingwage.org.nz/min_wage_2025
[16]As cited in *Real Work* (Martin, 2006).
[17]Ara Taiohi (2015). Stepping Stone: A step on the pathway to professionalisation.

In a typical year, how many young people does your organisation work with?
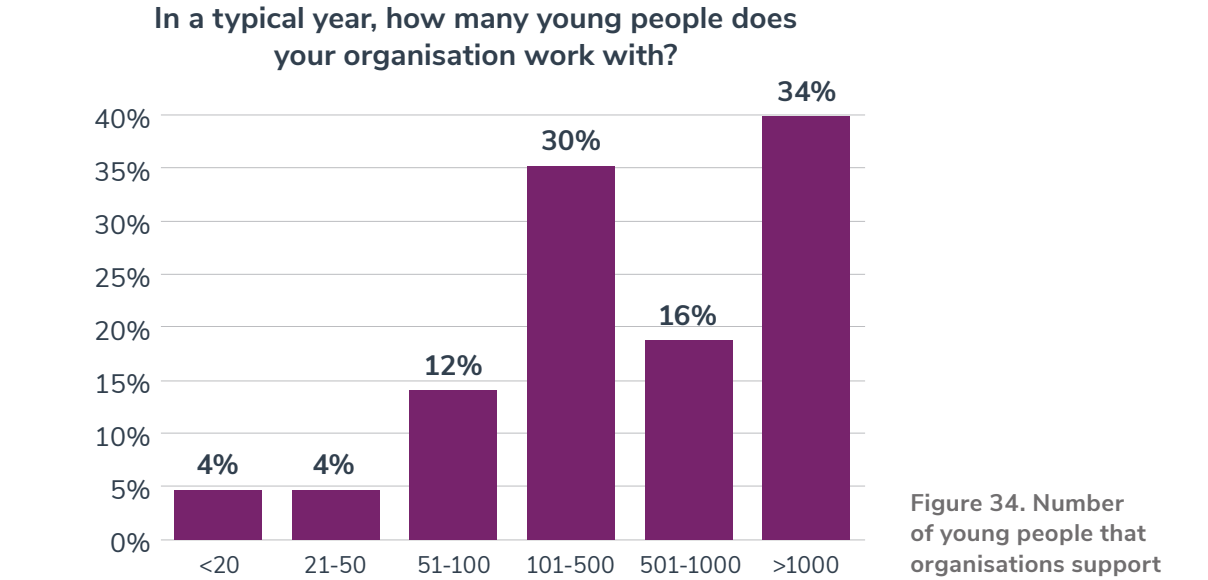
Figure 34. Number of young people that organisations support

Managers were asked to indicate funding sources to support their Youth Work practice (Fig. 35). Managers could select more than one source of funding. The most likely source of funding is philanthropic grants (47%, n=54). Ministry of Social Development (37%, n=43) and local councils (35%, n=40) were also identified as frequent fund sources, as well as Ministry of Youth Development and the gaming industry. In addition to those listed in Figure 34 below, 'other' sources of funding identified by managers were membership levies, fundraising, private practice, self-funding and donations. The graph below represents funding sources, not proportions of funding from each source.

Funding sources for Youth Work organisations
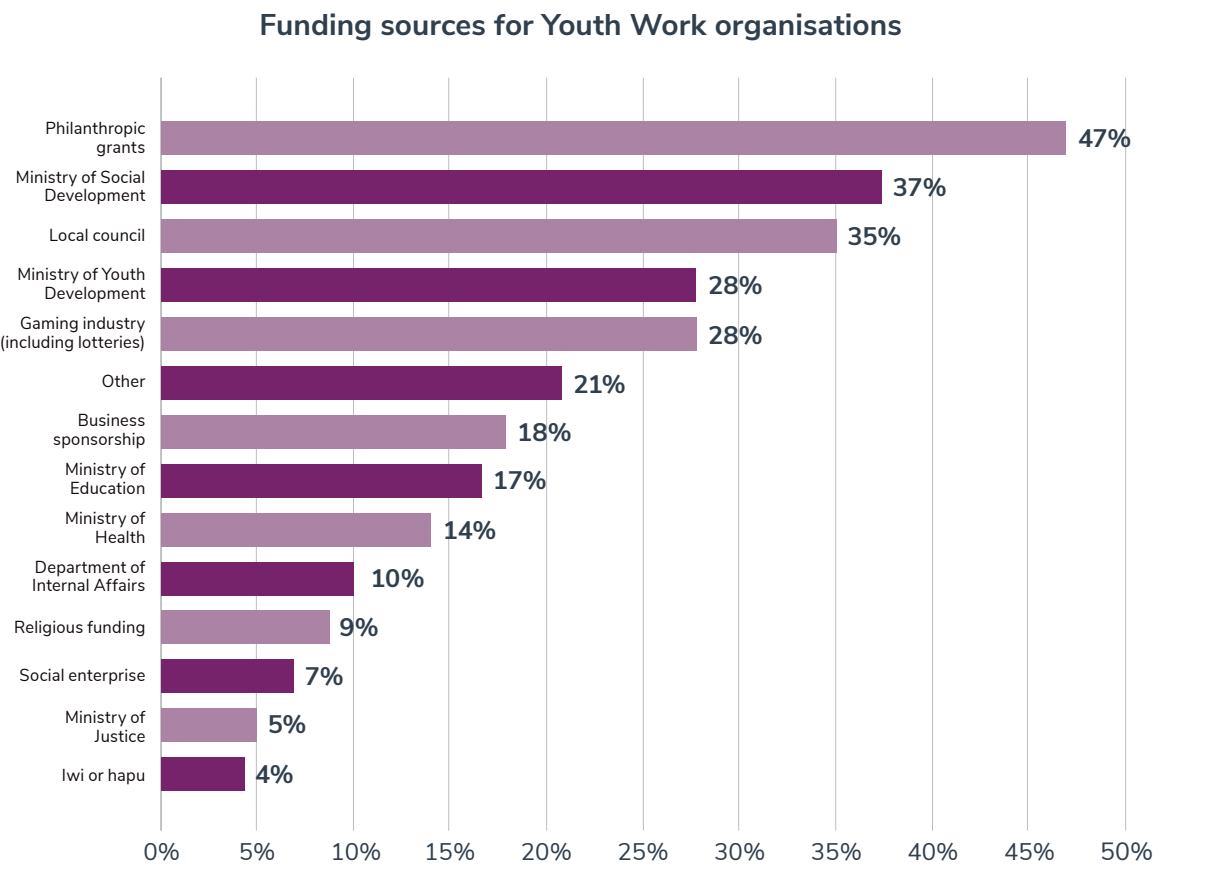
Figure 35. Who funds Youth Work?

Managers were asked what youth worker support is lost due to budget constraints. This was a text-based question, and managers provided a range of responses. Youth worker support that was most likely to be lost due to budget constraints was professional development. Supervision was also significant. However, many managers recognised how critical these support avenues were for supporting ethical and effective Youth Work practice. Additionally, the precarity of contract work and short-term funding was highlighted as a major source of stress for youth workers. Not all organisations shared that there were budget implications, and a number indicated that professional learning was critical to safe practice and therefore an essential part of the budget. When asked what was lost, one participant indicated:

> **Nothing – we prioritise training and professional development as we see it is vital to ethical and effective Youth Work.**

Other participants shared some of their concerns:

> **Membership of professional bodies, attendance at regional and national hui, conferences and training. Capacity to release staff for PD.**

> **Due to budget constraints, we have lost access to regular supervision and limited opportunities for professional development, impacting the support and growth of our youth workers.**

Overall, the main areas impacting by budgetary constraints are shared below.

- Professional development
- Funding and job security
- Membership and registration
- Wellbeing supports
- Supervision
- Training and resources
- Staffing levels

The primary concern is that without access to professional development and supervision, the safety and wellbeing of young people and youth workers may be compromised. One recommendation is that greater consideration be given to supporting professional association membership in order to strengthen capacity and capability across the sector.

Summary: What are the work conditions for youth workers?

In this chapter we explored findings related to support for youth workers (including professional learning and supervision), well-being needs and employment conditions. Additionally, we explored manager responses to organisation-focused questions related to support provisions and funding implications.

Below are some of the key takeaways.

Professional learning and support

- Youth workers highly value professional learning. The most common training accessed is Code of Ethics, Te Tiriti o Waitangi and bicultural kaupapa, Child Protection and Mana Taiohi (in list order). Also, workshops on supervision, RAP, mental health and youth wellbeing, and mentoring are well attended.
- Advocacy training would benefit youth workers and build confidence in their work at the interface of other services, and in interdisciplinary fields.

Summary *continued*

- The most common barriers to accessing training are time and finances.
- Support for youth worker practice is likely to be in the form of training, supervision, mentoring and networking. Mental health and wellbeing support and flexible working environments were also support practices noted by managers. For many Māori youth workers, this includes Kaupapa Māori related training.
- The most requested training topics are cultural capability (Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring practices), mentoring, mental health, group facilitation, understanding neurodivergence, trauma informed practice, and sexuality and relationships (in list order).

Stress and supervision

- The main stressors in list order were funding, remuneration (pay), and a lack of time. Challenging ethical dilemmas, government policy, and job insecurity were also indicated.
- There are serious concerns related to some youth workers who shared significant emotional stress of working with young people in crisis (20% of youth workers are working with those who have very high needs).
- Some youth workers shared significant concerns about bullying and racism from those in management and leadership roles.
- It is recommended that all youth workers working with young people with high and very high needs are assured supervision and other wellbeing needs.
- Most paid youth workers are in regular supervision, and this is mixed between internal and external supervision and most often the employer pays for supervision.

Managers and leaders

- Funding for Youth Work comes from philanthropic grants, Ministry of Social Development, local councils, Ministry of Youth Development and the gaming industry (in list order).
- When faced with budgetary constraints the two areas of support for youth workers that are most likely to be cut are professional learning and supervision. This does raise concern for the wellbeing and safety of youth workers and therefore indirectly, young people in their care.
- In addition to training and supervision, support practices provided for youth workers included mental health and wellbeing support, and flexible working environments.
- It is recommended that support for youth workers' membership to a professional association (such as *Korowai Tupu, the Professional Association for Youth Work in Aotearoa*) be provided.
- However, it is recommended that training for managers and team leaders is provided to ensure youth workers are safe in their practice.

General

- Little is known about the volunteer sector, and most participants in this research were paid employees.
- It appears that the workforce is less experienced than in 2006. It is likely there are less volunteers now than in 2006.
- Initial data suggests that youth workers are still poorly paid compared to national averages, and further research is needed to explore this further.

OUR EVOLVING IDENTITY

6

- ■ **What has changed since 2006?**

- ■ **What is the professional foundation of Youth Work?**

In this chapter we explore these ideas further by considering what has changed since *Real Work*. We share a brief exploration of the profession of Youth Work within Aotearoa as this is important to set the scene for the remainder of the report.

What has changed since 2006?

There are a range of significant changes that have occurred in the workforce, including both demographics, practices and the nature of organisations. For example, regarding the nature of organisations, findings from both *Mahi Tūturu* and *Real Work* indicate that there are proportionally less youth workers engaged in faith-based organisations twenty years on, with less volunteers across the sector.

Mahi Tūturu findings also indicate that the Youth Work workforce is a much more diverse sector compared with both the general NZ population and *Real Work*. Compared with *Real Work* there are now more female youth workers than male, and a number of non-binary youth workers. There are also more Māori and Pasifika youth workers than in 2006. Additionally, the Youth Work workforce is more diverse than the current general population in areas of ethnicity, religion and sexual identities[18]. One demographic trend from *Real Work* that was similar was the ages of those most likely to engage in Youth Work. The strength of the sector as a diverse workforce is explored further in Chapter 10.

Findings from *Real Work* and *Mahi Tūturu* suggest that there is now a less experienced workforce. A comparative analysis suggests that there are more people who are currently serving with have less experienced, and the years of those staying longer has decreased (see Chapter 5 for further details). Data from the focus groups and interviews suggest that youth workers are less likely to stay in the workforce at present due to pay conditions. Another contributing factor could be the suggested decline in volunteering.

Comparing youth workers' pay to the national average, *Mahi Tūturu* findings suggest that many youth workers are paid below the New Zealand median. This is consistent with the findings from *Real Work* (2006) and *Stepping Stone* (2015) who found that pay rates in the Youth Work sector were lower than the NZ average of the time. It needs to be noted that there was a low sample size for all surveys. Further research in this area is needed to develop a greater understanding of the paid employment conditions of youth workers.

So what are some of the practices that differ now compared with twenty years ago? There are seven key factors related to Youth Work practice that have differed significantly, and these relate to time spent with young people, young peoples' needs, ethics, supervision, stressors, Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring practices, and networking and collaboration.

1. Time spent with young people.

The most selected response in *Real Work* was spending time with young people in large groups, and this was closely followed by small group activities. One on one structured time was the least selected option in 2006. Twenty years on, data indicates that the opposite is true. In 2025, youth workers indicated that one on one structured time with young people, followed by small group interactions were more common than large group activities. It has been suggested elsewhere that this shift may be driven by contracting requirements such as mentoring. Furthermore, a decline in church youth group activities may be the reason for less large group-based Youth Work.

2. Young people in crisis.

Youth Work in Aotearoa has a long history of journeying alongside young people in crisis. Integrated data findings from this study indicate that it appears that young people involved in Youth Work are more likely to have medium- to high-needs and come from low-income backgrounds. Very experienced youth workers and managers have observed an increase in the number of young people requiring specialised support, and this indicates a need for more in-depth training for youth workers. This is discussed further in Chapter 10.

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[18]Retrieved from Stats NZ, Aotearoa Data Explorer, May 2025.

3. Ethics informing Youth Work practice.

Perhaps one of the biggest shifts since *Real Work* is the numbers of youth workers whose practices are shaped by the Code of Ethics. In 2006, 27% had participated in Code of Ethics training, compared with 75% in 2025. Furthermore, 82% of youth workers indicated that Code of Ethics guides their Youth Work practice. While this does still indicate ongoing training is required, there are nevertheless significant gains that have been made in this area.

4. Supervision.

Another area of practice shift has been that of supervision. 80% of youth workers in *Mahi Tūturu* indicated that they were in some form of supervision. Specifically, there has been an increase in external supervision since 2006 from 55% to 72% in 2025.

5. Stressors.

Lack of time and lack of funding were the most selected responses for both *Real Work* and *Mahi Tūturu*. However, while 21% indicated a lack of funding as a stressor in 2006, this number was significantly higher in 2025 at 58%. Furthermore, the numbers of youth workers who are working with high and very high needs young people appears to have increased with experienced youth workers now indicating that there is a need for more specialised training in this area.

6. Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership.

Managers and youth workers reveal a shared commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi and a recognition of its importance in Youth Work practice. Most youth workers indicated they were either on a learning journey to embed Te Tiriti o Waitangi practices, or they were already engaged in Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring Youth Work practices.

7. Networking and collaboration.

With an increasingly diverse sector and the option of shared virtual spaces, the nature of networking has evolved. Networking and collaboration are highly valued by youth workers and this is explored further in Chapter 7.

The professional foundations of Youth Work in Aotearoa

> " Youth Work has its own degree, own code of ethics, strengths-based thinking, focused on building relationships and developing young people. Youth Work is a standalone profession as no other sector focuses on the holistic development and growth of young people's lives.
>
> (Youth worker)

Profession, professional and professionalisation are all terms used to describe Youth Work to some extent or another. This research project sought to understand the issues facing youth workers and so before exploring these issues in the following chapters, it is first important to define key terms and concepts that help us to make sense of the meaning and practice of Youth Work.

> **Youth Work practice *is* professional. The inherent nature of Youth Work practice makes it a profession. While the word profession 'means different things to different people... at its core is an indicator of trust and expertise'[19].**

On the website of *Korowai Tupu, the Professional Association for Youth Work in Aotearoa* there is a clear statement of what is professed–'We profess to young people, their whānau and the community that we will form genuine relationships that promote positive youth development'. A profession, such as Youth Work includes an ideal of service and responsibility, ethical practice, and legal obligation (Tapper and Millet, 2015). So, whether a youth worker is a volunteer or is employed they are engaged in professional practice that has at its core: service, ethical practice, and legal obligations. Taking this concept further professionalisation is defined as 'the action or process of giving an occupation, activity, or group professional qualities, typically by increasing training or raising required qualifications'[20].

Therefore, it can be said that professionalisation is the process of strengthening the practice of Youth Work in Aotearoa through (1) professional learning activities such as training, mentoring/coaching and supervision–all of which acknowledge bicultural foundations within a multicultural society; (2) professional accountability activities such as professional association membership[21], and adhering to the Code of Ethics for Youth Work in Aotearoa New Zealand; and (3) system wide strategic change approaches at the legislative, sector wide policy and structural levels.

Throughout this report we unpack the key ideas that have been shared by youth workers, with a particular focus on ways in which the sector as a profession may be strengthened further.

Specifically, we critically explore key findings in the areas of:

- partnership, networking and collaboration
- understanding and measuring impact
- professional support for youth workers
- accountability
- funding challenges.

[19]https://www.psc.gov.au/research-library/professions/what-profession
[20]Definition from the Oxford Dictionary.
[21]Such as professional membership to Korowai Tupu, the Professional Association for Youth Work in Aotearoa.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

■ **How might youth workers move forward together as a sector?**

7

A strength of the Youth Work sector in Aotearoa is the diversity of youth workers and this is an incredible opportunity to positively influence intersectional and cross-cultural conversations and practices in communities.

In Chapter 10 we explore what this might mean for the practice of Youth Work together as a sector, as well as in modelling cross-cultural engagement with/between young people. In this chapter we focus on three areas that contribute to a diverse and unified profession. Partnerships, networking and collaboration are critical elements to effective Youth Work, and in Aotearoa there has been a long history of weaving these into practice. Despite the challenges facing the sector, youth workers repeatedly expressed an interest in these practices. In this chapter we firstly explore the bicultural foundation of Youth Work expressed as a partnership practice. We then explore the value of networking and collaboration and consider what this means for future practice.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership practices

Findings from this research indicate that there is a strong shared commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Most youth workers (95%) and managers (96%) indicated they were either on a learning journey, or they were already engaged in Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring Youth Work practices. Bicultural capability within an Aotearoa context was the most requested training by youth workers, and Te Ao Māori/Kaupapa Māori was the most identified context for the practice of youth worker. The commitment to a shared journey of authentic partnership from Tangata Tiriti and Tangata Whenua was evident throughout the written text based responses[22].

Honoring Te Tiriti o Waitangi through authentic partnerships is a developing practice within the Youth Work sector.

For youth workers and managers, this was identified in the five areas:

■ **Whanaungatanga - Relationship building and partnership**

■ **Tikanga - Cultural capability**

■ **Rangatiratanga - Empowerment and advocacy**

■ **Manaakitanga and Kaitiakitanga - Respect and protection**

■ **Organisational commitment to Kawanatanga and Tino Rangatiratanga[23].**

Moving forward together begins as a sector with an ongoing commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and authentic partnerships that create a bicultural foundation within a multicultural society. Youth workers have shared their commitment to this kaupapa, and ongoing professional learning is needed to continue to strengthen capability. Networking and collaboration will play an important role in this commitment.

The value of networking and collaboration

The findings from this research indicate that there is a shared understanding of the value of networking and collaboration. Aside from administration and professional learning, networking was indicated as the third most common way youth workers spend non-contact time while at work. Furthermore, Youth workers indicated that they receive support this way (through regional networks, Ara Taiohi, and/or Korowai Tupu, the Professional Association for Youth Work in Aotearoa).

[22]For further information see Chapter 4, A bicultural foundation of practice.
[23]Outlined with examples in Chapter 4.

Youth workers shared ways in which networking in particular, provides better opportunities for young people to access services that are targeted to their needs:

> **Every relationship that a young person has with the youth worker is a protective factor in their life. We know that not every youth organisation can be everything to every young person and that we've got a number of youth organisations that specialise in things, and networking creates this connection. The tighter the weave of the kete, the tighter it holds our young people. The more connected a young person is, the better.**

> **If you're a manager or a youth worker, you're more likely to refer them to an organisation where you formed a relationship with that organisation and there's, you know, someone and there's a trust. You trust them. Networking creates this...to gain connections.**

Furthermore, many youth workers shared the ways in which networking provided them with the opportunity to grow in their professional practice, and to receive support from others. As one youth worker notes, '*I think often after coming together with other youth workers, just being around so many people who love young people and want them to thrive, I thought there's always just a tingling sensation in my fingers, I just want to thank [those] who hold space*'.

There were two other main benefits to networking and collaboration that were expressed by youth workers. Some youth workers shared the ways in which networks provide an opportunity for resource sharing and knowledge sharing between different organisations. And others discussed the opportunities networks provide for collaborating on collective advocacy projects. The Wellington regional network is an example of this most recently where they have begun to work on collective sector wide advocacy projects. These ideas align with the Mahitahi (collaboration) clause within the Code of Ethics which indicates that 'youth workers build relationships and networks with other youth workers in order to gain collegial support and to share experiences, skills and knowledge'. The goal is collaboration, and networks are one tool which supports collaboration.

A changing landscape

> **It is becoming more competitive in the current climate. So, what does collaboration look like in these environments?**
> (Youth worker)

Feedback from this research suggests that the nature of networking has changed somewhat from a regional and national focus to online shared virtual networks, identity-based network practices, and internal networks for large youth development organisations. Historically, engaging in regional networking was common practice for youth workers, and while this still exists in some regions, many of the networks identified in the 2006 report no longer operate.

Increased competition and limited resources have also contributed to shifts in the sector. Interviewees and focus group participants all reported an increased competitive environment that has led to reduced networking and collaboration. As one interviewee notes, 'We know that collaboration is important but lots of our core funding sources are overtly competitive. It creates division and competition in the sector'. Similarly, other interviewees share their concerns:

> **It feels like we are becoming even more competition based. We've become more isolated. Maybe we need to revisit the value? And we've got Teams now right? So it's become less personal, and more transactional.**

> **It's become incredibly transactional and much more limited because of funding contracts.**

> **What we've noticed that in the current climate is the desire to connect and collaborate has diminished as people move into a competitive environment. If you don't have anything, you tend to collaborate with those who don't have something. Those who have got something, they seem to be less willing to kind of interact and share at the risk of losing something.**

Division and competition in the sector appear to have been exacerbated by both limited resources and the growing number of young people with very high needs. While many participants recognise the value and importance of networking and collaboration, they were also conflicted when faced with the urgent needs of young people they were working with. As one interviewee explains, '*But when it comes down to it, one, if there's a young person in front of them in crisis, right? That's their priority and two, the reporting and the day-to-day the BAU is their job. And so when networking and collaboration sits outside of the BAU[24] it's really hard to justify*'.

Youth workers expressed concerns about the risks of fragmentation and polarisation that may contribute to division in the sector. Identity based networks are recognised as important for strengthening Youth Work practice in diverse contexts (such as faith-based groups, Māori and Pasifika youth workers networks, and rainbow networks). Additionally, many participants suggested that regional networks are also important as they provide spaces for youth workers from different backgrounds and practices to come together:

> **How can we network more? The more that people specialise into their approach, the more siloed or fragmented we might become. We do need diversity – because this addresses the needs of young people. But how do the different groups talk together?**

What works?

Many youth workers shared networking and collaboration practices that have and continue to be very successful, particularly where there is a focus on shared training, and the opportunity to collaborate on advocacy projects. Collective advocacy can be very effective and one interviewee explains how, '*we developed some guidelines about what we advocate for. We were able to translate this into our network. There is definitely an opportunity to grow this, but it comes from capacity*'. Another interviewee describes the critical work of collective advocacy to the sector, '*If we don't get movement advocacy, then we can't understand individual advocacy. And we have to nurture that, and you have to be brave. If 80% of those in care are Māori, then we have to advocate at the structural, political level*'. Networks and collaborations provide the ideal platforms for strengthening advocacy skills, especially developing the skill of collective advocacy.

In addition to advocacy work, networks provide the opportunity for establishing and sustaining collaborations related to specific projects. Reflecting on a regional model of collaboration, one interviewee notes:

> **I think that where networks work really well is when there is a core group that are collaborating, and others that are network members. Collaborators are working together on a few projects, but networks are for connections.**

Historically, it has been noted that networks are better when they are run by youth workers for youth workers. Additionally, Ara Taiohi are playing a key role in weaving together the sector at the national level, and this has further possibilities for future networking and collaboration.

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[24]BAU = business as usual.

YOUTH WORKER PROFILE

Stacey Hughes

Community Catalyst Te Rourou o Aotearoa Foundation

Stacey Hughes is a passionate advocate for youth development and believes in the transforming power of strengths-based approaches for young people. His journey in the sector began at 17 as a volunteer with Youthline Southland. At 21, he graduated with a Bachelor of Teaching and set out to make a difference for his community.

His path has included teaching in alternative education, disability support, youth justice, and sexual violence prevention programmes. His work, like that of many others, has been consistently challenged by the loss of funding to programmes and difficulty bringing authentic whai wāhitanga into systems not yet ready to facilitate it. This tension between Youth Work and corporate expectations is an ongoing challenge. Stacey has seen an inflexibility from corporate spaces to truly work with young people in an authentic way, characterised by an inability to adapt to their needs. It comes down to philosophical differences, he says, which lead to spaces that say they want whai wāhitanga but are unable to adapt their systems to facilitate it.

Now a Community Catalyst at Te Rourou, Stacey supports the wider sector, sparking critical conversations about good practice, policy, and youth-led initiatives. His role is to increase the impact of the community sector in Invercargill by creating connections, fostering co-operation and collaboration and strengthening the partnerships between community organisation. In short, this role's impact is in building a sector that is greater than the sum of its parts.

He believes true accountability in Youth Work should rest with those who do the mahi and hold the mana—not through top-down regulation, but via a sector-led body with autonomy, flexibility, and advocacy power. Throughout his youth development journey, Stacey has remained committed to a strengths-based practice, focusing on the potential and voice of young people, especially those failed by mainstream systems.

What does this mean for future practice?

> **The tighter the weave of the kete, the tighter it holds our young people. The more connected a young person is, the better.**
>
> (Youth worker)

Questions have been raised about how youth workers can move forward together through shared values, beliefs, principles and foundations of practice. Effective networking and collaboration provide spaces for kotahitanga, and the strengthening of the profession. Furthermore, the growing commitment to a bicultural foundation for the sector, provides a pathway forward to working in partnerships. Reflecting on this need interviewees asked a range of questions:

> **How do we invest in the Va – the spaces in between? Collaboration is about the Va, the spaces in between and competition pushes against this. This could be the number one issue for the sector for the next decade.**

> **There is a cost with networking and often organisations are in contracts to deliver services and programmes. Collaboration and networks are costly, and the challenges of contract obligations don't allow time for this. How do you remunerate and acknowledge people with enough time to do this work? We need to make more room for this.**

> **We got a little bit of support from Council to host trainings and gatherings. But who holds the networks? Because it takes time, logistics.**

An investment in this area of youth worker practice is likely needed in the future. A comprehensive and strategic approach to strengthening networking and collaboration is recommended as a way forward.

Youth workers suggested a multisystemic systems change approach including sector leaders, funders and organisational leaders, suggesting the need for:

- agencies and organisations to establish collaborative policies and processes
- funders to understand the importance and value of collaboration and prioritise resource flow toward increased networking and collaboration
- regional networks to work more closely with Ara Taiohi and *Korowai Tupu*, the *Professional Association for Youth Work in* Aotearoa to strengthen practice.

Summary: How might partnerships, networks and collaboration be strengthened?

Partnerships, networking and collaboration are at the heart of effective Youth Work practice. Moving forward together begins with an ongoing commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and authentic partnerships that create a bicultural foundation within a multicultural society. Youth workers have shared their commitment to this kaupapa and networking and collaboration will play an important role in this commitment. Findings from this research indicate that youth workers recognise the value of partnerships, networking and collaboration and are also cognisant of the current barriers and challenges.

The following points provide a summary of key ideas and recommendations.

- Honoring Te Tiriti o Waitangi through authentic partnerships is a developing practice and ongoing professional learning is needed to strengthen capacity.

- Youth workers are cognisant of the value of networking and collaboration. These practices strengthen sector-wide capacity, provide opportunities for peer learning, resource sharing, and collective advocacy. All of these factors have the potential to lead to better outcomes for young people.

- There has been a shift away from regional networking and collaboration. This is mainly attributed to increased competition and reduced funding opportunities, and an increase in urgent practice for young people in crisis.

- A growing trend toward identity based networks (often virtual) provides opportunities for strengthening practices with similar groups of young people. The risk is that youth workers become more siloed through identity based practices.

- A multisystemic, strategic approach is needed at a national level with a vision of growing networks for strengthening capacity, accountability, social cohesion, and advocacy practices. A national led strategy will include engagement, commitment and resourcing from MYD, organisational leaders, funder and national and regional networks.

UNDERSTANDING OUR IMPACT

■ **How might youth workers better understand and measure impact?**

Understanding and measuring the impact of Youth Work are vital practices if we are to take seriously the work and the profession of youth workers.

In this chapter, we build on the findings from the survey question discussed in Chapter 4, '*what difference do you think you are making for young people?*' We describe the practice of Youth Work and consider ways in which the impact of these practices might be better understood, evaluated and measured.

The difference that youth workers make

❝ I strive to bring a fresh perspective and positivity into their lives, especially for those who may not have experienced that before. Many of our young people carry trauma and face significant challenges, and I support them in unpacking these struggles, building their confidence, and empowering them to embrace who they truly are.

(Youth worker)

The first section of this chapter focuses on how youth workers describe what they do, and the differences they believe they are making in the lives of the young people they work alongside. These questions were put to youth workers attending focus group wānanga. This was also a question asked in the survey (see Chapter 4). The findings from both data sets are integrated into this section.

Each focus group consisted of youth workers from different organisations who were asked to create a visual representation of the services currently being provided for young people in communities within their region.

As an approach to understanding the impact of their work, the groups were asked to reflect on what would become apparent to others if those services were no longer available. They were encouraged to think from the perspectives of what whānau, the wider community, other professional services, the media, and politicians would notice. Their responses were collated and compared, and initial themes were identified. These themes were then compared to the written responses provided through the survey.

Based on the responses of the youth workers, this section identifies three broad contexts where Youth Work largely 'happens' in 2025. The section concludes with a discussion around how the value and impact of their work can be more effectively understood and evaluated.

A key finding from the focus group activity was that without the work that youth workers provide, our health and justice systems (in particular) would operate less effectively. Government departments and communities would spend significantly more on managing the impact of insufficient support for young people. Youth workers who are on the ground in communities suggest that this would be evidenced by an increasing youth crime rate, resulting from a rise in the factors that drive it. These include homelessness, addictions, disengagement from education, and young people who gravitate to gang involvement. Alongside crime, mental health also has a cost, both financial and in terms of harm done. Social issues such as isolation would drive up levels of self-harm, and harm to others as more young people turn their disengagement against themselves or against their communities.

In seeking to understand how youth workers are making a difference, and how this has changed since *Real Work* in 2006, responses from the focus groups and the online survey have captured a national picture of the sort of support that youth workers provide, and the difference that this makes. While connecting with young people and building trust remains at the core of what youth workers do, most youth workers operate across three broad areas of engagement with young people–being present at critical times, providing pro-social groups and activities, and as an interface between young people and other services.

Being present at critical times

❝ **Saving lives, quite literally. I've worked with young people who came into our programmes severely depressed and suicidal, and throughout our time together they've found whanau and support. Several have credited our work with saving their life.**

(Youth worker)

Many youth workers described their approach as being a regular presence in the lives of young people and available to engage with them at their point of need. This approach reflects a growing understanding of Youth Work as strengths based (and place based) rather than deficit based practice. All young people need some extra support from time to time, and they shouldn't have to get themselves into a crisis before they receive it.

Examples of place-based Youth Work include a growing number of youth workers who are based in schools (including Alternative Education programmes), youth centres, and youth health spaces. Youth workers connect and build trust with a wide number of young people and often act as a triage point for a young person who is struggling, providing relational support 'in the moment' and helping them to connect with other support services as they need it.

To counter the question that young people who have been referred to programmes regularly ask ('why have I been sent here?'), many youth workers in these contexts also offer programmes around generic themes (self-esteem, leadership, outdoors activities etc.). While these have value in themselves, they also create opportunities to identify young people who need some extra support without creating embarrassment or a deficit label around their situation.

An interviewee used the term 'transactional youth work' to challenge what she felt was an over-simplistic view of the purpose of Youth Work (such as 'stopping youth offending') in the design and resourcing of youth services. These approaches ignore the complexity in many young people's lives and represent short 'bottom of the cliff' interventions, rather than ensuring that all young people have access to the support they need when they need it.

Longitudinal studies of human development have identified several key early factors that have a big influence on where a young person eventually ends up in life, even if their home situation, or other factors in their lives, are difficult (see for example Werner & Smith, 1992; Bronfenbrenner 2005). This research consistently indicates that the presence of at least one trusted and supportive adult (other than their parent/s) is a critical factor in helping most young people get through a tough time, and in influencing the choices that they make.

Every parent knows what it is like when one of their kids 'gets stuck'. They sometimes need a voice and some extra support from someone outside of the parental relationship to help them move on. For young people who don't have access to a wider network of support, a temporary crisis can sometimes turn into longer term patterns of unhelpful behaviour. As one youth worker noted, their involvement gives a young person who is struggling with anxiety or depression a reason to get out of bed and get out of the house:

❝ **Our program has also proven to help rangatahi work on their social skills or even just give them a routine to get them out of their whare. Us navigators notice such a difference in their confidence and resilience from when they started and when they finish working with us.**

Brendtro and Brokenleg (2019) suggest, instead of asking 'what's wrong with today's young people?', we could instead ask 'where are the adults in their lives?' The focus groups identified that without Youth Work, communities would not be as safe and emergency services and the justice system would be much busier through increasing levels of suicide, and harm to self or to others. Aotearoa already has one of the highest rates of youth suicide in the world, if less youth workers were present in the lives of young people, it would likely be worse.

Providing pro-social groups and activities

Many youth workers facilitate pro-social groups as part of their work. These are social spaces where young people can interact with others through structured and informal activities (programmes) that are usually led or guided by a small team of youth workers. These activities allow a young person to explore identities, find supportive peers and gain confidence through extending their network of friendships. Church youth groups, uniformed groups, sports clubs and outdoors programmes all have long traditions of providing social spaces which meet these needs.

However, since *Real Work* it appears that an increasing number of initiatives have emerged that are focused on supporting specific sectors of the youth population. Identity based groups provide activities and support for groups of young people with specific support needs, and those who regularly experience feeling marginalised or overlooked. Examples that were provided through the research data included: young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, international students, (state) care experienced youth, the disability sector, and rainbow youth. One participant shared their experience of supporting rainbow young people:

❝ **So, whether even as a rainbow young person, not engaging with a service because they're not sure how safe it is…Communities aren't really equipped to do that, and youth workers are.**

In 2006, many of the youth groups that supported cultural identity were located in church and faith based programmes. Today many schools, and most tertiary campuses include (for example) Pasifika student support groups. These groups are often led by a youth worker, and they play a key role in helping young people stay connected with their culture while supporting them to navigate the wider systems of health, education and employment. As one youth worker comments:

❝ **Creating a space where young people—especially those from former refugee and migrant backgrounds—can grow in confidence, express themselves freely, and feel a true sense of belonging. Through creative participation, I help them develop life skills like communication, leadership, resilience, collaboration and teamwork, which they carry beyond [the programme] into their everyday lives at school.**

As the youth worker above alludes to, the developmental needs of young people are primarily social in origin: the need to belong, to become good at something, and to be given responsibility. Alongside education, sports and cultural involvement, activities that engage young people provide a positive social context in which these developmental needs can be met. When these needs are not met through positive social interactions, a young person is more likely to try and meet them in ways that are harmful to themselves and/or others.

Findings from *Mahi Tūturu* suggests that a significant number of youth workers facilitate pro-social group activities as part of their role. These activities range from weekly and (school) holiday programmes, to sports, culturally focused and outdoors activities. In these contexts, young people are not only being helped by a youth worker, but they are also learning from and supported by peers as well.

As an interface between young people and other services

Mahi Tūturu survey data has revealed that a significant number of youth workers now work as part of multidisciplinary teams that bring together therapeutic, welfare, health or educational services. Many of these services operate on an appointment basis, for example with a counsellor, health practitioner or social worker. Within these teams, youth workers are often asked to build connections and trust with the young people involved, and work in a support role. Within a support role, youth workers are connecting young people with services, helping them get to appointments, supporting the implementation of plans, and managing what happens between appointments. Supporting young people to access services is at the heart of interface practices, as one participant describes:

> **I think that I make a huge difference in young people's lives and have had young people say to me that "they wouldn't have survived without my support". I am helping young people access services and supports that they could not access and am helping them achieve goals that they did not think were possible.**

Several focus groups noted that youth workers in these roles are often undervalued by other professionals. This was also something that was shared by key informant interviewees. One of them notes:

> **This is my biggest annoyance. As someone who is about to complete a Master of Social Work, I feel as though skilled Youth Work far surpasses Social Work in regard to positive outcomes. It is more relational, it is more front facing, it is more real. Again, there are average youth workers as well as average SW's. It is annoying that I see youth workers being treated as lower on the totem pole despite often knowing and understanding the most of about a young person.**

When focus group participants considered what the landscape would look like if their work wasn't being done, they identified issues such as:

- more young people falling between the cracks (unable to access services)
- a decline in engagement with and trust of professional services
- a growing disconnect between therapeutic services and the worlds of the young people they serve
- increasingly siloed services.

In short, trying to manage interventions using only intermittent appointments in clinical settings would be much less effective. Youth workers play a key role in supporting what happens between the appointments. In the current environment when many services are stretched and over-subscribed anyway (for example access to counselling), they ensure that young people are at least receiving some level of support while they wait for an appointment.

As part of their interface work in the spaces between the worlds of young people and other services, many youth workers reported that they also play an important advocacy role in helping those services become more accessible to and responsive to the needs of the young people they serve. Advocacy is occurring at the individual and structural systemic levels.

> **Youth workers often act as advocates for young people, helping them access services, resources, and opportunities they might otherwise miss. This can include support with education, employment, housing, and navigating various systems.**

> **By providing resources, facilitating workshops, and advocating for systemic changes, I empower schools to better support rainbow and takatāpui youth.**

Whether in education, welfare or therapeutic sectors, too many young people who are struggling with what is going on in their lives report being re-traumatised by the services that they turn to for help (Bloom and Farragher, 2011). Youth workers in advocacy and interface roles, not only support young people to engage with professional services, but they often also work to keep them safe in those services. Their work is critical, as one participant shares:

> **I have saved lives, we are working with people who want to harm themselves, others or are at risk of being harmed in the primary mental health sector. We help to create a plan and connect them with the support they need.**

Understanding and measuring impact

There is a growing trend within Aotearoa to engage in social return on investment (SROI) evaluations to provide impact measures for Youth Work programmes and services. This is an emerging practice. Across a region within Australia, a recent study reported that the social return on investment for Youth Work was estimated to be $2.62 for every $1 of investment. The report suggested that Youth Work delivers a significant return on investment for the community (Deloitte 2022). This finding and recent SROI reports within Aotearoa raise vital questions for the future of the sector, including the importance of capturing meaningful data that further strengthens and supports an understanding of Youth Work practice.

There is currently little shared agreement between practitioners, funders and policy makers about how the effectiveness and impact of Youth Work should be evaluated and measured. There are also concerns about the accuracy of certain measures that are used, equity concerns related to the affordability of research studies, and ethical concerns related to placing financial value on relationship based practices.

In this research project, when the focus group participants were asked to discuss the effectiveness of their work, much of the evidence they provided was anecdotal:

> **I think it's often hard to exactly know the difference we're making young people (me included). We aren't always great at expressing this or even necessarily recognising the impact at the time!**

YOUTH WORKER PROFILE

Penny Prescott

Facilitator Youth Champions Project

From her first youth work experience as a holiday programmes volunteer to her current work on the Youth Champions Project, Penny Prescott has always been passionate about supporting young people and those who work alongside them. She is a passionate youth development advocate whose background spans psychology, law, restorative justice, and community-led systems change.

Her journey began with studies in psychology and law, originally envisioning a career as a defence lawyer for Māori. After working in international teaching, restorative justice work, and student support roles, she discovered her true passion lay in helping young people thrive by improving the systems around them. This led her to Rerenga Awa, where she worked to enhance the conditions and capabilities of youth workers.

These days, Penny works on the Youth Champions Project, through the Collaborative Trust based on positive youth development principles. The project trains anyone who interacts with young people - youth workers, counsellors, social workers, and even corporate employers, on how to implement positive, bicultural youth development in their everyday practice. The programme takes people through a framework of positive youth development and then encourages them to apply it to their unique spaces.

Penny sees the youth development space filled with people who have hearts for young people and genuinely want to make a difference. The issue, she says, is how the government perceives the value of the work they do. She also acknowledges that it can be difficult for youth workers to find the time and support for their own professional development and collaboration with other youth workers and organisations.

Penny believes that the work Ara Taiohi does is vital in translating the realities of youth workers to the government in order to influence policy and funding. Her hope is that Ara Taiohi will continue to grow as both a voice at the top and a practical support for those on the ground.

Some long serving youth workers have also noted that the struggle to attract funding in what is a competitive environment has created an incentive for some organisations to simply tell funders what they want to hear:

> **There are stories about organisations that aren't being honest about their impact. There's these great narratives about work, but it's not even true. If we're telling all these positive stories, but it's not the real story.**

There is pressure to demonstrate clear short term outcomes for funders and policy makers—or 'bang for buck' as one youth worker called it. We find ourselves back where we were in 2006. Where government funding agencies require statistical reporting that often has little to do with actual change and positive outcomes for young people, and community organisations have to come up with their own stories and measures of success. This is particularly evident when government policy has been introduced in response to social issues that have been amplified through the media. The 2024 'Boot Camp' legislation[25] is a recent example of this approach. It comes from a mindset that the public (and politicians) want to see 'something done about' kids who are causing trouble.

[25]The Oranga Tamariki (Responding to Serious Youth Offending) Amendment Bill.

One interviewee explains:

> **If you think about the pressure we've had on the boot camps, the public is really awake to this idea of measuring impact. If young people are reoffending, then the programme hasn't worked. So, we need to have our own metrics of success that we can clearly measure and communicate. And we have to be able to say, don't do boot camps, do this instead. And the 'this', needs to be more than building relationships.**

Despite the complexities of measuring impact in the lives of young people when there are so many variables, the interviewee quoted above notes the importance of having an agreed set of metrics that sit alongside the relational work that youth workers do. If we are to find our way forward into an agreed set of standards and performance measures that evaluate the impact that Youth Work makes toward better outcomes for young people, it will need to be driven by recognition and buy-in from two key groups. Firstly funders (government, philanthropic and the business community) and secondly, those who provide the services, both the larger national organisations and grassroots community groups. Until then, most groups will continue to just tell their own stories.

Summary: How might youth workers understand and measure impact?

Being able to articulate the difference that youth workers make is critical for the growth of the sector. Funders looking to support evidence-based practice, are seeking to better understand who is doing what, and how effective they are at supporting better outcomes for young people. Findings from this research suggest that sometimes youth workers struggle to clearly articulate the actual measurable difference Youth Work makes.

In this summary, we highlight the key points and include recommendations.

- This research found that there are three main areas where Youth Work is effective and these include being present in times of crisis, providing pro-social groups and activities, and as an interface between young people and services.

- Most youth workers can describe what they do and the difference that they make in narrative form.

- In Aotearoa there is an emerging trend to engage in SROI studies that seek to demonstrate measurable impacts of Youth Work programmes and services.

- There are some concerns including accuracy of certain measures, equity concerns, affordability and ethics of 'measuring' relational, community based practices.

- There is currently little shared agreement between practitioners, funders and policy makers about how the effectiveness and impact of Youth Work should be evaluated.

- In some cases, there are concerns about the integrity of data reported by organisations on actual impact.

- Funders, policy makers and Youth Work sector leaders need to work together to determine a way forward for measuring impact across the sector.

- Organisations may benefit from collaborating with others to develop a tool(s) for measuring impact.

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT FOR YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

9

- What professional support is needed to strengthen practice?
- How might accountability practices be strengthened?
- What do we do about the funding challenge?

Based on findings from this research, in this chapter we explore a range of different ways that the profession and practice of Youth Work might be strengthened further.

We have discussed elsewhere the value of Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership practices, networking and collaboration, and evaluating and sharing stories of impact. In this section we will delve deeper into specific training and support needs, accountability matters, and discuss the inevitable challenge of funding.

Valuing the profession

While there are challenges that persist in the sector, there are also strengths that offer hopeful possibilities for growth moving forward. There is a confidence among many in the workforce who are aware of the value and unique contribution that Youth Work makes. A confidence in the profession of Youth Work was more likely to be expressed by managers and team leaders who had interdisciplinary work experiences. One interviewee notes, 'We need to be acknowledging the value of Youth Work in our community and sector. As a country, we've got to start valuing Youth Work. Firstly, in youth development, and then Youth Work as the profession'. Managers were able to understand (by comparison to other professions) the unique value of the profession of Youth Work. As one Youth Work manager explains, 'I have to spend time explaining to [interdisciplinary] management that many of their concerns could be navigated well using Youth Work frameworks and ethics that the Youth Work sector in Aotearoa have spent a long time developing'. Strengthening the profession begins with a belief in the unique value and contribution of Youth Work to the field of youth development, and to the lives of young people, whānau and communities. As one interviewee explains:

> **We have to as a society recognise the absolute power of youth workers. I would not go, as a manager, to certain meetings without taking a youth worker with me because they would just bring relationship in. We need to change the narrative to realise the future power of youth workers. We have to build their confidence, their self esteem to show up in the room with the other professionals. So that they turn up to the rooms that they don't want to go to. So they're in the room first. There's some marketing that has to happen here.**

Future focused professional learning

Strengthening the profession requires an ongoing and strategic approach to professional learning. In this section and in the following chapter, we bring together ideas for other areas of future professional learning and sector development requirements. In Chapter 10, the need for a sector wide strategy for digital Youth Work is discussed. We consider the limits of positive youth development and suggest the need for more critical justice approaches to youth development. In an age of increasing polarisation, we continue the discussion related to diversity and unity that was introduced in Chapter 6. Finally, we give further thought to the future needs of young people facing uncertain futures and societal pressures. But first in this section, we consider current practice needs before turning to the issue of accountability.

Experienced youth workers understand that the nature of Youth Work as a profession requires praxis (learning, action and reflection). One interviewee describes the interplay between professionalisation and ongoing learning in this way:

> **Professionalisation creates a safe space for the profession, because there is a code that you are working toward. But how do you keep that alive in your practice if you're not doing reflective practice, you don't have a good supervisor, you're not professionally developing with new research and training?**

Continual professional learning is non-negotiable in the profession of Youth Work. The profession is a *practice* that requires ongoing development that includes regular supervision and training.

Current professional learning opportunities are often provided through the medium of workshops and/or on the job training. In fact, for paid youth workers, after time on admin tasks, their second most common activity (when not working with young people) was professional learning. While 76% of youth workers indicated they have completed a formal qualification in a field related to youth work, 28% were at a degree level[26]. At the time of writing this report there were a small number of tertiary level providers that offered specific degree level qualifications, but there have often been changes in formal qualification pathways that make planning ahead for study over several years difficult. Many youth workers have reported that at times it has been difficult to access formal qualifications training that is consistent, affordable and accessible. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that non qualification driven professional learning is highly valued in the sector. There appears to be greater flexibility that is suited to many youth workers. *Korowai Tupu, the Professional Association for Youth Work in Aotearoa*, has been responsive to this need within the sector, recognising that professional learning has many different pathways.

Throughout this report we have indicated areas of training need, both specifically requested by youth workers and managers, or inferred based on integrated data analysis. There is widespread commitment to ongoing professional learning in already existing topics such as ethical practice (Code of Ethics training) and youth development.

In addition, we highlight here additional or exceptional requests:

- The most requested specific training topics were cultural capability (Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring practices), mentoring, mental health and group facilitation[27].

- Advocacy training for youth workers was also suggested as a key way in which youth workers might strengthen their practice, especially in interdisciplinary teams or roles requiring interface with other services.

- In response to the need for increased networking and collaboration in the sector, professional learning and support for those interested in collaborative approaches would be beneficial[28].

- Understanding the difference Youth Work makes, and evaluating and measuring impact is a significant area of professional learning required. This is critical in an era where there is increased policy engagement with social returns on investment. Professional learning in this area will also strengthen the profession through increased confidence and more certainty about the actual, measurable difference Youth Work makes in the lives of young people and communities.

- Digital Youth Work and critical justice approaches to youth development (including developing intercultural capability further) are discussed in Chapter 10.

- Training opportunities within the sector have tended to focus on entry level topics. Experienced youth workers in the field have specifically requested more advanced training to extend their skills and knowledge. This is explored further here.

There is strong interest in providing support for strengthening practice for experienced youth workers through dual pathways of management or practice leadership. Some have requested professional learning be developed through formal (postgraduate) learning and others recommended informal learning through advanced, specialised training workshops or in communities of practice. Managers and organisational leaders also recognised this as an important pathway to leadership and management roles either as practice leads or as managers:

❝ **We need to invest more in practice leadership roles. There are great practitioners that could have practice lead positions. Around lifting the practice of youth workers. Social Work and other social services have practice leads. Socialising good practice is a key part of what is needed.**

[26] Further details are available in Chapter 5.

[27] Further training needs are discussed in Chapter 5.

[28] See Chapter 6 for a full discussion on networking and collaboration.

Recognising these two pathways (practice leads and management) as both highly valued is an important way in which the sector workforce may be strengthened. Not all experienced practitioners want to enter organisational management roles. Many practitioners would like to remain in a practice role and recognising the value of this is honouring to the sector.

Building pathways for emerging leaders who could move into organisational management or team management roles was also raised by participants as a further need:

❝ **There needs to be an openness to bringing in emerging leaders into key places. Are the most relevant people around the table? How do we succession plan and make space for new leaders to come through? How are we investing in the next generation of Youth Work leaders? Because context practice changes.**

❝ **Succession planning is hard and we need to be really intentional about.**

Youth workers in both the survey and focus groups expressed concerns about management and leadership at times. Perhaps most troubling were the disclosures of bullying, racism and a lack of understanding and support toward staff, as well as reports of unethical practices related to young people. There appears to be an urgent need to ensure training, support and accountability at the organisational, management and governance levels of youth development organisations. This is an area of concern that requires further investigation and a sector wide strategy for improved management practices.

YOUTH WORKER PROFILE

Isabel Lemanutau

Senior Engagement Specialist – Mana Mokopuna the Children's Commission

Isabel's Pasifika identity shapes every aspect of her Youth Work. She leads with connection, seeing young people in their full context, honouring their whānau, culture, and lived experience. With empathy and aroha, she helps young people feel safe within themselves.

With 15 years of experience across governance, management, and frontline roles, Isabel also names the institutional barriers that hinder authentic connection, calling for leadership to value relational ways of working.

Manaaki plays a central role in her practice as a cultural bridge for talanoa, care, and connection. Isabel recognises that every Taiohi comes from a wider story, and she prioritises engaging with whānau to build deeper understanding.

She names institutional barriers that undermine authentic connection and calls for management to better respect relational ways of working.

Accountability, for Isabel, is an essential way to ensure youth workers remain grounded, reflective, and well-supported. She sees it as part of a broader ethic of care that nurtures both the young people and the youth worker. Her work is rooted in culture, guided by connection, and driven by justice.

Isabel is a co-chair of the *Korowai Tupu* advisory group. Her mahi in advocacy extends to members of the professional association of Youth Work in Aotearoa and she continues to offer her voice, advocacy of others and strategic mind in this space.

Accountability

> **❝ I think any accountability will be better than no accountability. There needs to be wider sector accountability – not self-accountability.**
>
> (Youth worker)

In Chapter 6 we discussed the multiple dimensions of the professional foundation of Youth Work. Throughout the report we have shared many ways in which youth workers are responsibly and reflexively engaged in ethical practice. In this section we explore accountability as one key component of professional practice. There is no doubt that the critical and persistent question of ethical practice and accountability in Youth Work practice requires ongoing reflection and action. Young people are vulnerable to harm in the care of workers who are not held accountable and the Youth Work sector in Aotearoa has and will continue to work tirelessly to ensure safety for all young people. In this section of the report, we reflect on the varying views of youth workers regarding the current context and practice, and we discuss implications for future practice.

The current context

There is no doubt overall, that youth workers and managers have both an understanding of, and commitment to greater accountability. Findings from the survey indicate that 82% of youth workers are guided by the Ara Taiohi Code of Ethics and 75% have participated in Code of Ethics training. This is compared to just 27% in 2006 (Martin, 2006). Additionally, managers reported organisation wide accountability practices including recruitment (95%), upholding ethical relationships (91%), and child safety policies (86%). In addition to individual and organisational levels of accountability, *Korowai Tupu, the Professional Association for Youth Work in Aotearoa* continues to support youth workers in their ethical practice through a range of services. The current context indicates that there is strong evidence of accountability measures in place. However, there are also challenges and other opportunities to explore and these are critically examined in this section.

The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (RCI) (2025) found that in state and faith-based organisations 'the people who worked or volunteered in care residences and institutions were often inadequately vetted, trained or supervised'…and that 'most of the factors that led or contributed to abuse and neglect during the Inquiry period continue to persist'. Alongside people from other professions and sectors, youth workers were among those directly involved in what the report has described as 'our national disgrace'.

This section of the *Mahi Tūturu* report is partially framed as a response to the findings of the RCI. Focus group wānanga participants and interviewees were asked specific questions related to matters of accountability. Additionally, in the survey, youth workers and managers were asked about ethical and safe practices. All data sets were integrated in the analysis process and these ideas are shared in this chapter.

Within the focus group wānanga participants were invited to share their views on the current systems of accountability, and how they could be improved. Participants were invited to share their perspectives across a continuum of varying levels of accountability. The continuum ranged from individual and/or organisation accountability, sector led and/or increased government regulation (terms 1 – 2 – 2.5 – 3 were given for where people positioned themselves). Focus group participants shared their views, and following this, questions of accountability were also put to the key informant interviewees.

Layers of accountability
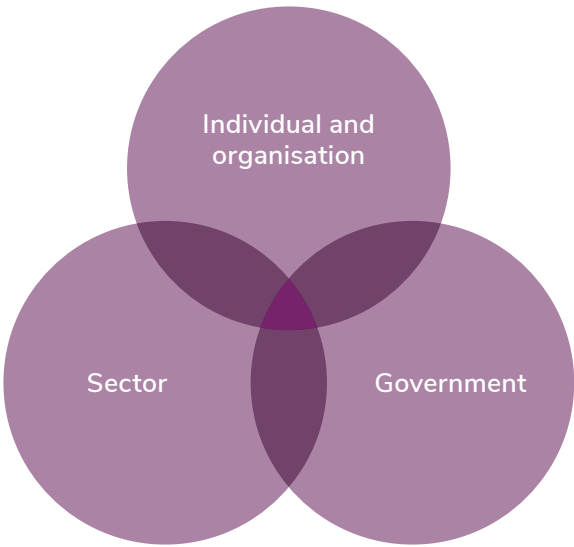
All youth workers in the focus group wānanga acknowledged that individual and organisation levels of accountability are critical to safe and ethical practice and they were also concerned about the limitations of this without other layers of accountability. Most youth workers indicated support for accountability to a sector-led body to strengthen the profession, and their own professional practice. They expressed concern, sometimes, for current barriers to professional association membership such as a lack of organisation support and funding barriers. Additionally, there was strong interest in what became known as 'option 2.5'. This was explained as accountability to a sector-led body that was backed up by government legislation. However, opinions within the different groups varied, sometimes quite strongly, about how involved the government should be. There were some regional differences. Youth workers in Southland were more strongly positioned at option 3, and many in Christchurch were at response 2.5. Those from Northland, and Māori youth workers in general were much more likely to indicate 2 with a regional structure for accountability supported by a national body.

Key informant interviewees were asked to share their views related to ethical practice and in particular the question of where accountability ought to be foremost. All interviewees agreed that individual and organisational levels of accountability were critical to safe practice, and this is reflected in survey responses from managers and leaders. Their views differed somewhat regarding self-regulated sector led and government regulation level accountability. In this section we explore these ideas further.

Many participants expressed concerns related to the idea of government regulation that might not necessarily lead to better Youth Work practice and safer environments for young people:

> **❝ Legislation means you become compliance focused, rather than relational focused. It becomes about risk mitigation. We don't want the youth sector to become overburdened by legislation. And just because there is legislation it doesn't mean there is good practice. Extra legislative requirements hasn't increased quality.**

> **❝ In some residential facilities, training and staff development processes are really poor. But they are places of high compliance. So that is a systemic institutional issue, this is not about youth workers and accountability.**

Some youth workers were concerned that the Youth Work sector might become 'overburdened by legislation' that 'doesn't mean there is good practice'. They suggested that a greater understanding of models of youth development practice would lead to more significant improvements in both practice and safety for young people. This view was explained by one of the interviewees when discussing their experience of working in a residential state setting:

> " There are a lot of really well intended workers in residential settings, who don't have any frameworks or models to work from. Their practice is so varied and [is] not guided by youth development frameworks. When you come from community Youth Work, you come from an understanding of [models of] Youth Work. But in residential settings, you see it is much more about legislation, compliance, policies, all of that stuff. A very compliance driven space. People come from care, or control and compliance. There is [a] conflict and tension between these two.

It is important to note that residential settings are complex and challenging. Youth Work is a voluntary profession, and there is no choice for young people in these residential contexts. Code of Ethics practice indicates that, 'Where engagement with a youth worker is imposed on the young person (by the Court or otherwise), the youth worker must explain to the young person the meaning and consequences of this. Youth workers in this situation will work towards gaining the young person's trust and agreement to develop a Youth Work relationship'[29].

Relatedly, some youth workers expressed interest in exploring ways that the profession of Youth Work might be protected by honouring the name, youth worker. There are current challenges about the title youth worker being used in residential state contexts by those who are neither experienced nor trained in the field of Youth Work. These concerns were also shared by interviewees who had heard firsthand, stories of unethical and unsafe practices occurring within residential state settings:

> " I do think we need mandatory registration for those like Oranga Tamariki workers, state led workers… and those working in residence. There continue today to be so many abuses and stories of neglect by workers toward young people in care. There are hundreds of state care staff, who have Youth Work in their title, getting paid more than qualified youth workers and are doing really terrible jobs.

The concerns raise critical questions for the evolution of the Youth Work sector. Questions such as how accountability might work? Who should be accountable? How increased accountability might be resourced? In the following section we discuss these ideas in greater detail.

Implications for future practice

> " I'm a really big fan of partial mandatory registration. I think all state-based youth workers should be registered with Korowai Tupu. I think there are people who do Youth Work – it's so broad like volunteers, so it's really different to Social Work in that way. It would be really hard to implement anything like the Social Work Registration Board do.
>
> (Youth worker)

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[29]From Code of Ethics, Whakaaetanga matatika | Informed consent 5.2.
Retrieved from: https://arataiohi.org.nz/career/code-of-ethics/mauri-o-te-taiohi/

The comment above indicates support for a system of mandatory registration for youth workers who are employed in government agencies, and particularly for those working in residential facilities. However, this approach risks creating a two-tiered system of standards. The Youth Work sector in this country includes a large number of people who work with young people on a voluntary or a casual basis. For example, people who volunteer as mentors, or as youth group leaders in churches. An interviewee notes that this is one of the key differences between Social Work (which has mandatory registration) and Youth Work practice, and this difference makes mandating registration for the whole sector much more complex:

> " There is an amazing amount of volunteer-based Youth Work that is getting a return on investment ten-fold more than the Youth Work practice that is purely transactional, tick box work. Youth Work needs to keep working on diversity of practice and knowing what holds us together. The chasing of professionalisation might be a risk to grass roots practice. Uninformed, centralised views versus diversified, decentralised with the same core foundations.

YOUTH WORKER PROFILE

Anna Bragg

Practice Lead Number 10

A desire to get things done, commitment to values-led mahi, and an unfailing passion for empowering rangatahi are at the centre of Anna Bragg's 20-plus years in the youth development sector. After graduating from occupational therapy in 2001, Anna went on to study outdoor adventure therapy before getting her first paid job in Youth Work as an instructor for Project K. Since then, she has worked in a variety of roles, always coming back to working with rangatahi, particularly around mental health. She is now the practice lead at Number 10, a one-stop shop in Invercargill where youth between the ages of 10-24 can access programmes and services.

Anna has seen a lot during her two decades in the sector and now has the added perspective of supporting youth workers at Number 10. In her current role, Anna navigates the complex challenges of increasing youth needs, long waitlists, and limited resources. Her duty to supporting her youth workers and ensuring they don't get burnt out is often at odds with increasingly high-needs and complex referral cases. This is not an easy space to navigate, and Number 10 has a long wait list of youth work needing to be done in the community.

Anna also sees tension between community needs and rigid funding models that require services to bend to external priorities. She would rather see a model where programme delivery is entrusted to those who do it and know it works, rather than needing to plan programmes around funder requirements.

Despite these challenges, Anna remains committed to the kaupapa, dreaming of clearer pathways into the profession and advocating for internships, supervision, and sector-wide collaboration. Anna describes Ara Taiohi as innovative, authentic, and approachable. She acknowledges the important role Ara Taiohi plays in supporting youth workers and expresses hope for the future of the sector. Her reflections highlight a deep appreciation for the organisation's commitment to strengthening youth development in Aotearoa.

There is a need for–and youth workers are requesting–a balanced approach to accountability that not only sits with the individual practitioner and organisations, but also a sector led-wide body supported by government legislation. Responding to this need for balance around accountability, in 2018 Ara Taiohi launched *Korowai Tupu*, a professional association for youth workers. As explained on their website, *Korowai Tupu, the Professional Association for Youth Work in Aotearoa* uses the root meaning of the term 'professional' for youth workers who 'profess to young people, their whānau and the community that we will form genuine relationships that promote positive youth development'.

In an effort to be inclusive of both paid and voluntary youth workers, *Korowai Tupu* is positioned as a self-regulating, voluntary association which aims to sit between the present system of individual responsibility, and mandatory registration. At the time of writing this report, *Korowai Tupu* had approximately 200 members. Each member is vetted through an application process that focuses on a demonstrated commitment to training, support, and standards of safety.

Korowai Tupu has several measures in place to encourage and strengthen sector-wide accountability. For example, the website allows an interested party to enter a person's name and find out if they are currently a member or not. However, despite a range of approaches to foster sector-led accountability, there currently appears to be little appetite among government agencies (and other funders) to require or even enquire about membership for the people who are being engaged to work with young people through the contracts they resource. One recent exception to this is the *Ministry of Youth Development* who have begun to ask about membership (in 2025). This is a small and positive move to see one funder recognise and value the importance of *Korowai Tupu*. Ensuring support and positive action from other key funders, organisation leaders, and key sector stakeholders is likely to further strengthen growth for professional association membership and the profession overall. However, it seems that further change is unlikely to occur unless it is driven by funders and government agencies who prioritise a demonstrated commitment to professional and safe practice as part of their application and approval process.

As *Korowai Tupu* continues to develop, there are several important questions, including the pathway that growth in accountability ought to take. This question can be illustrated by comparing the roles of the *Teaching Council* and the *Post Primary Teachers' Association* in the education sector. The former is a standards setting and regulatory body, the latter operates is a union, advocating for its members. Can these roles be contained within a single organisation? If not, then which should *Korowai Tupu* be developing toward?

There is also the question of payment and costs, especially for volunteers. Youth workers in this research expressed concerns about membership and registration costs. Increased compliance also increases costs. As a comparison, registration in the *Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers* (ANZASW) currently costs $445 annually (for a full membership). This is on top of registration for a practicing Social Work Certificate, which costs an additional $750 per year.

Yet another pressing concern related to sector-wide accountability is that of responsibility. Some youth workers expressed concern for their organisation managers' commitment to the profession through supporting membership. As one participant explains:

> ❝ **The obligation should be on organisations to make sure that people are safe, rather than on individual youth workers.**

Additionally, there are concerns related to current practices which leaves accountability for safe practice primarily as a responsibility of either the individual or of their employing organisation.

Further change must ensure care and connection remains at the heart of Youth Work practice. Without staying true to this kaupapa, we risk simply adding costly layers of regulatory compliance, without actually making young people any safer. Overall, findings from this research indicate that there has been significant investment sector-wide into strengthening the profession of Youth Work. This is occurring through a commitment to ongoing professional learning and ethical practices. However, there are costs involved leading to pressures on the sector. We explore this further in the next section.

The funding challenge

> ❝ **Funding continues to be adhoc. I don't see it changing in the future.**
> (Youth worker)

As indicated in chapter 5, the sector continues to be sustained primarily by philanthropic grants. Other funders include the Ministry of Social Development and local councils, as well as Ministry of Youth Development and the gaming industry. Funding is a major contributor to stress in the sector (in fact it was identified by youth workers as the primary stressor). Concerningly, while 21% of youth workers indicated a lack of funding as a concern in 2006, this number is significantly higher in 2025 at 58%.

A number of youth workers perceived that this was in part, due to an increase in the number of youth organisations competing for scarce funding sources, although there isn't currently available data to support this view. While there is more government contracting now than in 2006, MYD hasn't really increased all that much over a 34 year period. One interviewee explains that MYD '*had a fund of around 8 million back in 1991 and it's only just gone up to…It's now around 12 million*'. Additionally, the Youth Worker Training Scheme has not increased since it was introduced in the 1980s.

Experienced youth workers and organisational leaders have indicated that there is now significantly more funding pressure on the sector:

> ❝ **Funding is my biggest concern. Huge funding losses led to impact on service delivery, pressure on caseloads. We have never gone out to look for young people but now more than ever we just can't cope with the demand.**

> ❝ **There is a lot more youth organisations and there are constantly more charities. There is always a new kid on the block and there is more competition in the funding space. Any big government contracts go through a competitive tender process. There are more people competing for less funding.**

The pressures are being compounded not just by an increasingly competitive environment, but also through the way '*philanthropy are funding*', one youth worker explains. Adding to this pressure is '*a dependency on government funding*'. Interviewees in this research have indicated that in fact, very little has changed in the funding landscape over decades. If the current trajectory continues, then there will be even more pressure on an already stretched sector. There have been small pockets of innovation, and perhaps this is where future attention needs to go:

> ❝ **There is a desire for sustainability and self-reliance within the sector. There are opportunities to offset with social enterprise, but most attempts haven't generated enough income to be self-sustaining.**

> ❝ **The government has a particular way of talking about things, and youth workers have a way of talking. If youth workers can learn the language without compromising. You need to be able to articulate what you are doing in a way that ticks boxes. In the end everyone is wanting the same outcomes – what is best for young people. So it is knowing how to communicate this.**

> ❝ **Our strength is that good work comes from our community. We need to get more creative…we need to diversify our fundraising activities and develop skills to make this successful and connected to this is sharing stories of impact.**

The suggestions above are seeking to consider alternative ways of approaching the funding challenge. Ideas such as further fostering of social enterprise, shifting the approach to government funding applications, and a willingness to creatively diversify fundraising activities. A multisystemic systems change approach to reimaging sector-wide funding could offer innovation in a 'stuck area' of the sector. Perhaps innovation may be fostered through professional learning opportunities such as communities of practice and collective 'think-tanks' that break down competition barriers and foster collaboration. However, it needs to be noted that there is a need for greater investment. Findings from this report, and from SROI and evaluation reports in the sector indicate that this investment is critical, not just to sustain the sector, but importantly to better outcomes for young people.

Summary: What professional support is needed for youth workers?

The evolving identity of Youth Work in Aotearoa requires a shift in the way we perceive the sector and adaptation to the way Youth Work is practiced. This has implications for strengthening the profession through an ongoing focus on professional learning, accountability practices and funding matters.

Here is a summary of key ideas from this chapter, including recommendations.

- There is confidence, especially among managers and leaders, about the value and unique contribution of Youth Work. It is recommended that this be fostered further sector wide, to grow confidence, especially among less experienced youth workers who are engaged in interdisciplinary teams.

- Continual professional learning is non-negotiable and an integral part of the profession of Youth Work.

- It is recommended that sector leaders, funders and organisation managers invest in the profession through ensuring an increased uptake in membership to *Korowai Tupu, the Professional Association for Youth Work in Aotearoa.*

- In addition to the professional learning requests from youth workers discussed in Chapter 5, it is recommended that training opportunities for experienced youth workers and managers with two pathways for professional learning be fostered: one for practitioner leads and one for managers.

- Given the persistent challenges of funding, it is recommended that further investment is made into the sector.

- A multisystemic systems change approach to sector wide funding could offer innovation through an exploration of creative possibilities.

- Most youth workers indicated support for accountability to a sector-led body or in some cases a sector led body that was backed up by government legislation.

- A key challenge is ensuring that greater accountability through over-regulated compliance based systems does not occur as this is likely to jeopardise evidence based best practice in Youth Work. Any accountability practice needs to place strengths based, culturally responsive, caring relationships at the centre.

- It is recommended that some consideration be given to exploring further protection of the name, *Youth Worker*. This is to ensure that the profession is recognised as one with integrity.

- There is some support for a system of mandatory registration for youth workers who are working with young people in state residential care. Therefore, it is recommended that this be explored further.

- There is a multisystemic approach needed to further strengthen accountability that is strategic and involves sector leaders, funders and government agencies.

THE FUTURE OF YOUTH WORK IN AOTEAROA

- **What is the future of Youth Work in Aotearoa?**

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In the previous chapters we shared ways in which the workforce might be strengthened further, and our discussion has focused on key themes of networking and collaboration, understanding and measuring impact, accountability, and strengthening practice through future focused training and funding.

In this chapter we extend thinking further to consider future based questions:

What is the future of Youth Work? What are the current and future societal trends that will shape the sector? What are the implications for practice?

Key informant interviewees were asked these questions. Drawing on their responses and overall research findings, as well as national and global trends, here we provide a snapshot overview of the possible direction of Youth Work in the future. The themes we introduce here are the future of digital Youth Work practice, uncertain futures for young people, critical youth development approaches, and diversity and unity in the future of Youth Work. There isn't scope to deep dive into each of the themes presented here, but rather these are introduced and are an invitation to ongoing discussion. The themes apply across all aspects of the sector and relate to young people, society, policy and practice.

The future of digital Youth Work

❝ How do we use technology ethically to help young people connect, develop skills and thrive?

(Youth worker)

All of the interviewees discussed the use of AI, technology and virtual platforms, and they all had concerns and questions. Their responses suggested that while some practices are used and understood, there are also gaps in skills, knowledge and ethical understanding. Interviewees asked:

❝ How do we create as a society where you create your value from – your value and your worth?

❝ So, it's not about how many likes you got. How do we counter this as youth workers?

❝ What does Youth Work look like in a digital world?

❝ Are we early adopters of technology?

Digital Youth Work is not a replacement for in person Youth Work (Herranz & Schwenzer, 2004). Rather, it is in this postdigital world, both a current reality and a future likelihood. Digital Youth Work is a term used to describe the various ways in which current Youth Work is practiced and enhanced through the ethical application of a range of digital platforms and virtual tools. An example one interviewee shares is being able to apply digital practice with young people where they are at, '*Doing Youth Work is meeting young people where they are – just meeting them where they are*'.

For many youth workers there is an element of the unknown unknowns evident and with rapid digital changes and the rise of generative and other forms of AI, there is a need to become more informed and confident about the vision, direction, policy and practices of digital Youth Work. As one interviewee shares, '*it's not going anywhere. We need to adapt to it*'. Another interviewee agrees, '*like learning to navigate this space*'.

A recent research project that explored digital Youth Work in Europe recommends that national strategies be developed that supports digital Youth Work practice (Herranz & Schwenzer, 2004). This might include recommendations for practice, resource creation, ethics, training for youth workers, and suggestions for funders and policy makers. By analysing 64 cases across 41 countries, the researchers were able to develop a comprehensive overview of current and future possibilities. We recommend exploring this further at national strategic and grassroots practice levels.

Uncertain futures for young people

❝ If young people are the anxious generation, then they need people around them that are not anxious and are helping to build resilience.

(Youth worker)

Taking a strengths-based approach to Youth Work sometimes means there is a reluctance to name challenges, such as the phenomenon of 'the anxious generation' which may be interpreted as a deficit view of young people. Nevertheless, the future of Youth Work is likely to be more cognisant of responding to the needs of young people who are anxious and uncertain about their futures. Experienced youth workers and leaders in this research, shared stories of increasingly challenging complex needs:

❝ Mental health, anxiety, abuse – it is becoming something that is out of our skill gap and not really recognising it. We just can't keep up. And the same with protecting young people through secure data bases.

❝ And the same with small groups, large groups. Young people are struggling with large groups. Like with camps and even food on camps with kids in care and their dietary needs. You never want to stop camps because of food, but it's tricky.

Haidt (2024) has named the levels of anxiety and mental health concerns as an 'epidemic' for young people. With the rise in global crisis, including unknown unknowns of AI and ongoing climate change it is likely that the future for young people is increasingly uncertain. So, what does this mean for the future of Youth Work practice? What training is required now and will be needed in the future for youth workers to be able to engage effectively with young people in crisis? There are suggestions currently about the need for more specialised training for youth workers in the area of mental health, and findings from this research indicate that this is something that would be beneficial for youth workers. Furthermore, youth workers have requested more training in group facilitation as a recognition of the needs of pro-social influence and peer group interactions, rather than a current trend to see a continued focus on one-on-one Youth Work practice.

Critical youth development approaches

All youth development approaches have limitations and opportunities. The most dominant youth development approach in Aotearoa over the last twenty years has been positive youth development. Shaped by practice at the time, in 2002 the *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa* (YDSA) was released[30] and impacted sector wide practice. Informed by the YDSA, *The Positive Youth Development in Aotearoa*[31] is a collection of different models and frameworks that youth workers have used over many years. The YDSA was critiqued for its Western orientation by Māori scholars (Ware, 2009; Deane et al., 2019). Mana Taiohi has emerged partly in response to this critique[32]. There are other, related critiques of a solely positive youth development approach that do not include opportunities for critical engagement with oppressive and inequitable societal issues (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Positive youth development approaches have historically been situated within functionalist, humanistic paradigm that is concerned with preparing young people for society status quo. Interviewees raised concerns about this:

❝❝ **The humanistic model has oppressed young people. Youth participation - whai wahitanga - is our gateway into climate and critical action. Instead of locking kids up in a boot camp, get them participating in society.**

❝❝ **And the global issues of climate change. And giving thought to eco-pedagogies. Why aren't we doing more on this? Why aren't we taking this more seriously? Supporting young people to take climate action.**

Historically in Aotearoa, one interviewee notes:

❝❝ **Youth workers [have been] prophetic. The key difference between Social Work and Youth Work is that Social Work is an arm of government policy. Youth Work [can] be a critical voice into government policy. [Many of] the roots of Youth Work in Aotearoa are political activism. A lot of people involved in those movements early on, were also youth workers and this is an important legacy that we should recognise. It also means though, that if you are not in the centre, then there will be less resources. Youth workers ought to be supporting the marginalised.**

Interviewees have issued provocations to consider Youth Work as a form of critical, political action for a more just, sustainable and equitable society. Current global shifts are significant and include greater geopolitical instability and polarisation, fragile ecosystems and climate change, increased migration flow, financial crises, and warnings of future global pandemics. There is an invitation–perhaps a call–to broaden our understanding of youth development approaches. There is an opportunity to lean into critical youth development approaches that afford greater opportunities for youth workers to engage critically with young people–fostering social justice and action.

Inspired by Paulo Freire, Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) proposed a social justice model of youth development. Since that time other critical models and approaches have been developed globally. Within Aotearoa, models grounded in Kaupapa Māori have emerged[33]. There isn't scope here to unpack what critical approaches to youth development exist within Aotearoa and what they could do, but findings from this research suggest that this would be beneficial to addressing complex issues for future practice. Perhaps one simple action might be to begin to recognise Youth Work activism for better futures, as one of the interviewee suggests, '*How we might recognise those who have been active in supporting causes that are aligned with the values of Youth Work? Is there a space for recognising, celebrating and promoting youth workers*'?

Diversity and unity in the future of Youth Work

❝❝ **The diversity of youth workers is something that might challenge us in the sector.**

(Youth worker)

Earlier in this report we posed the following questions: What does the diversity of youth workers mean for the sector overall? And what does this mean for young people, whānau and communities across Aotearoa? What are the political, structural, and relational implications of a diverse sector, and how might this shape practice in the future? A strength and opportunity for the Youth Work sector in Aotearoa is the diversity of youth workers and this is an incredible opportunity to positively influence cross-cultural conversations within Aotearoa. Being able to engage ethically in relationship with others who share different viewpoints is needed more than ever in an increasingly polarised socio-political environment. However, there are also challenges and risks inherent within such a diverse sector. **Making space for diversity to flourish and fostering unity across the sector are two potentially divergent pathways that require convergence for the strengthening of the sector, and for the wellbeing of young people and communities.** If we as a workforce are able to engage, network and collaborate across differences then we will be able to model this effectively as we journey alongside young people. One interviewee captured the essence of the challenge of diversity here:

❝❝ **People are becoming more polarised. Even within our sector. There's a lack of meaningful conversation taking place. And so, when people make claims, what has informed that? Siloing is an issue. And so who holds the relationships between different silos? How can we network more? The more that people specialise into their approach, the more siloed or fragmented we might become. We do need diversity – because this addresses the needs of young people, but how do the different groups talk together?**

As discussed in Chapter 6, there is an increase in identity-based Youth Work practice, including networks, and while this offers opportunities for strengthening identity related Youth Work, there is also a risk of siloing and polarisation of the sector as one interviewee shares, '*There is a portion of the population who is not accessing services because of the sense of belonging they find within a certain tribe. How does an increasingly politicised population of young people influence how they view organisations and what services they engage with*'? The interviewee points out that some young people are reluctant to access services that might not be safe such as rainbow young people afraid to engage in some church based programmes or services, or conversely young people not wanting to engage is services that promote inclusion for all. The phenomenon of the rise of identity-based groups and increased polarisation is not unique to Aotearoa.

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[30]Ministry of Youth Affairs. (2002). Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa. Retrieved from https://www.myd.govt.nz/documents/resources-and-reports/publications/youth-development-strategy-aotearoa/ydsa.pdf.

[31]Wayne Francis Charitable Trust. (2011; 2021). Positive youth development in Aotearoa. Weaving connections: Tūhonohono rangatahi.

[32]Mana Taiohi evolved from the principles of youth development previously expressed in the YDSA. It is informed by the voice of young people and people who work with young people, Aotearoa based literature into positive youth development, and a Te Ao Māori worldview.

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[33]Deane, Dutton and Kerekere (2019) in the review of youth development research explore this further.

Social diversity and unity concerns are also echoed globally. Gruden (2025) at a recent conference on the future of Youth Work explains, 'In times of polarisation and uncertainty, Youth Work is not a luxury — it is a necessity. It empowers young people to reclaim their space, shape their futures, and safeguard the values of democracy, human rights, and dignity for all[34].'

Within our Aotearoa Youth Work sector, we have a unique opportunity to model and practice unity across differences. The findings from this research indicate that there is a solid commitment by youth workers to build on a bicultural foundation of Youth Work practice within a multicultural society. The survey responses from managers and youth workers revealed a shared commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi and recognition of its importance in Youth Work practice. Most youth workers indicated they were either on a learning journey to embed Te Tiriti o Waitangi practices, or they were already engaged in Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring Youth Work practices. With this foundation there is both the opportunity and the need to deepen the Youth Work practice of cultural capability in order to strengthen unity in diversity within the sector, and for the ultimate benefit of young people and communities. Innovative programmes that encourage cross cultural/cross worldview work ought to be developed in the future. As one interviewee suggests:

> **I think what would be incredibly powerful is more programmes that bring diverse groups of young people together and journey. Narratives are becoming more divided. Like cis pākehā men are young and isolating themselves, focusing on political ideology and engaging in online spaces.**

> **If we are creating safe spaces, we are creating controlling spaces, not courageous. Courageous spaces say everyone is welcome and if we disagree we can be courageous about how we engage. But then we need youth workers with these skills.**

Progammes such as the Puawai[35] and resources such as the Mosaic Cards[36] invite intersectional engagement and cross-cultural conversations among young people. For youth workers to expand on diversity and unity work toward social cohesion, there is more training programmes and resources needed in this area.

Summary: What is the future of Youth Work?

In this chapter we have introduced four themes related to the future of Youth Work. We did not have scope here to deep dive into each theme, but rather we have provided snapshot insights based on the views of interviewees and other research participants.

Here are a few key points and recommendations for ongoing discussion and practice:

- Digital Youth Work is a term used to describe the various ways in which current Youth Work is practiced and enhanced through the ethical application of a range of digital platforms and virtual tools.

- It is recommended that a national strategy be developed that supports digital Youth Work practice. This might include recommendations for practice, resource creation, ethics, training for youth workers, and suggestions for funders and policy makers.

- Youth workers are concerned with the rise in the numbers of young people with very high needs.

- It is recommended that is more specialised training for youth workers in the area of mental health and in group facilitation as a tool for increasing resilience for young people.

- Positive youth development has been critiqued for its Western, humanistic foundations.

- It is recommended that there is sector wide engagement in developing critical social and environmental justice focused youth development approaches for addressing complex issues in the future.

- Making space for diversity to flourish and fostering unity across the sector are two potentially divergent pathways that require convergence for the strengthening of the sector, and for the wellbeing of young people and communities.

- It is recommended that more resources and programmes grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi for both youth workers and young people are developed to strengthen cross-cultural engagement and practices.

[34]Retrieved from https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/european-youth-work-convention-set-to-accelerate-the-future-of-youth-work-in-europe
[35]Retrieved from https://leadershiplab.co.nz/projects/puawai/
[36]Retrieved from https://arataiohi.org.nz/publications/mosaic-cards/

CONCLUSION AND RECOM- MENDATIONS

A summary of key findings and key recommendations can be found in the executive summary.

In this chapter we offer some concluding thoughts and a comprehensive list of recommendations for youth workers, managers and organisational leaders, sector leaders, government and policy writers, funders, and researchers.

11

This research would not have been at all possible without the funders who supported this project and the hundreds of youth workers and managers who took time to engage with the survey, focus group wānanga and interviews.

Throughout the research process, we were inspired by the depth of passion, wisdom and commitment from youth workers and leaders. Stories of significant stressors and challenges, as well as hope and transformation were shared with us. Our hope is that through the shared stories, recommendations made in this report will activate changes to strengthen the profession and the sector as a whole.

The strength of this research is the mixed methods approach that returned close to 560 different perspectives from a wide range of youth workers. In every research project there are limitations, and we offer caution in two areas. Firstly, for some of the survey questions, the samples sizes were too low to infer statistical significance. We recommend further research be undertaken in some specific areas to inquire further. The second area of concern is the low numbers of volunteers who engaged in this project. Given their volunteer status and limited time available, perhaps this is not surprising. The Census was not able to return volunteer information related specifically to volunteering as a youth worker, so little is known in Aotearoa about the nature of volunteer youth workers. Nevertheless, it does leave a research gap and raises ongoing questions about the volunteer Youth Work sector. This is an area requiring further research.

Forming this report was not a linear process. It involved iterative cycles of kōrero, reflection, and sense-making. From hosting wānanga steeped in local tikanga to analysing data through both statistical and thematic lenses, the team continuously asked: What does this mean for the sector? What is needed now? Advisors from across the Youth Work ecosystem, including funders and practitioners, were engaged throughout to ensure findings were grounded and relevant. The result is a research report that not only documents the state of Youth Work in Aotearoa today but also amplifies the aspirations and realities of those on the ground. *Mahi Tūturu* seeks to inform advocacy efforts, shape better policy, and support a future where Youth Work is recognised and resourced to initiate the conversations within the eco-system around pathways to professionalisation.

Recommendations

Youth workers

- Commit to continual professional learning, understanding that this is non-negotiable and an integral part of the profession of Youth Work.
- Continue to strengthen bicultural practices that give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi within an increasingly multicultural society.
- Continue to engage with ethical training, practices and supervision.
- Commit to the profession through membership with *Korowai Tupu, the Professional Association for Youth Work in Aotearoa.*
- Consider engaging in future Youth Work practices such as digital Youth Work, critical justice approaches to youth development, and practices that strengthen diversity and unity.
- Consider ways to network and collaborate, especially across differences in ways that create shared learning and advocacy.
- Upskill in areas of advocacy, and knowledge and articulation of the impact of Youth Work.

Managers and leaders

- Commit to funding and supporting continual professional learning for youth workers, understanding that this is non-negotiable and an integral part of the profession of Youth Work.
- Participate in accountability practices including existing avenues such as Scope (for organisation leaders).

- Consider ways to engage with *Korowai Tupu, the Professional Association for Youth Work in Aotearoa* for the professional growth of youth workers in your organisation.
- Continue to commit to Te Tiriti o Waitangi honouring practices.
- Commit to professional training suited to youth workers in management and leadership roles, including training to strengthen understanding and support for youth workers so they are safe in their practice.
- Consider ways to more actively support networking and collaboration across regional and national contexts (as well as identity groups where appropriate).
- Work collaboratively with others to upskill in understanding and measuring impact.
- Consider creative ways to work with others to innovate fundraising practices and advocate for increased investment across the sector.
- Understand issues in the future of Youth Work such as digital Youth Work, critical social justice approaches, and areas of diversity and unity across differences.
- Ensure provision of supervision and other wellbeing needs for all youth workers and prioritise provision for those working with young people with very high needs are.
- It was agreed by many that increased compliance does not necessarily make young people safer. Therefore, it is recommended that all youth workers effectively implement youth development practices.
- There is confidence, especially among managers and leaders, about the value and unique contribution of Youth Work. It is recommended that this be fostered further sector wide to grow confidence, especially among less experienced youth workers who are engaged in interdisciplinary teams.

Sector leaders

- Consider support for the strengthening of stability in the delivery of qualifications.
- A comprehensive and strategic approach to strengthening networking and collaboration is recommended as a way forward. Youth workers suggested a multisystemic systems change approach including funders and organisational leaders. This may include a strengthening of national-regional connections for isolated regions; the need for actor-network maps (who is doing what and where) for some regions; and equipping and resourcing youth worker led networks.
- Work collaboratively with others to develop training opportunities for experienced youth workers and managers with two pathways for professional learning to be fostered: one for practitioner leads and one for managers.
- Given the persistent challenges of funding, it is recommended that a multisystemic systems change approach to sector wide funding could offer innovation through an exploration of creative possibilities and advocacy for increased investment.
- Funders, policy makers and Youth Work sector leaders work together to determine a way forward for measuring impact across the sector. Work with organisations and funders to support collaborative development of tool(s) for measuring impact.
- There is support for increased accountability to a sector wide body with some degree of increased government legislation. This requires strategic thought and sector leadership to determine ideas for a way forward.
- There is some support for a system of mandatory registration for youth workers who are employed in government agencies, and particularly for those working in residential state settings. Therefore, it is recommended that consideration be given to mandatory registration to a professional organisation such as *Korowai Tupu* for those working with young people in state residential care.
- Consideration is given to the protection of the term Youth Worker. This is to ensure that the profession is recognised as one with integrity.

Government and policy writers

- There is some support for a system of mandatory registration for youth workers who are employed in government agencies, and particularly for those working in residential state facilities. Therefore, it is recommended that consideration be given to mandatory registration to a professional organisation such as *Korowai Tupu* for those working with young people in state residential care.
- Consideration is given to the protection of the term Youth Worker. This is to ensure that the profession is recognised as one with integrity.
- Funders, policy makers and Youth Work sector leaders work together to determine a way forward for measuring impact across the sector. Work with organisations and funders to support collaborative development of tool(s) for measuring impact.
- Increase investment in Youth Work.

Funders

- Understand the importance and value of collaboration and prioritise resource flow toward increased networking and collaboration. A comprehensive and strategic approach to strengthening networking and collaboration is recommended as a way forward. Youth workers suggested a multisystemic systems change approach including funders and organisational leaders.
- Prioritise a demonstrated commitment to professional and safe practice as part of supporting the sector through funding of professional association membership and consider shifting processes to reflect support such as through the application and approval process.
- Given the persistent challenges of funding, it is recommended that a multisystemic systems change approach to sector wide funding could offer innovation through an exploration of creative possibilities.
- Funders, policy makers and Youth Work sector leaders work together to determine a way forward for measuring impact across the sector.

Researchers

Further research is recommended in the following areas:

- Exploring the volunteer sector of Youth Work as little is known about this in Aotearoa.
- Gathering and sharing evidence of pay conditions for youth workers, as the sample sizes were low in this study and further inquiry is needed.
- Contribute to the much needed work of understanding and measuring impact.
- Support the sector in developing networking and collaboration further.
- Contribute to research in the future of Youth Work.

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