



Supporting the mental health of young carers

POLICY REPORT

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Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pay respect to their Elders past and present. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

We wish to acknowledge the young people from Orygen's Youth Advisory Council (YAC) for their valuable contributions to this project. Young people played an important role in shaping the content and development of this policy report.

KEY CONTRIBUTORS

Orygen would like to acknowledge and thank those who participated in consultations for this report. This report was informed by insights shared by members of Orygen's Youth Advisory Council, as well as stakeholder consultations and a Policy Lab ([access the Policy Lab report here](#)).

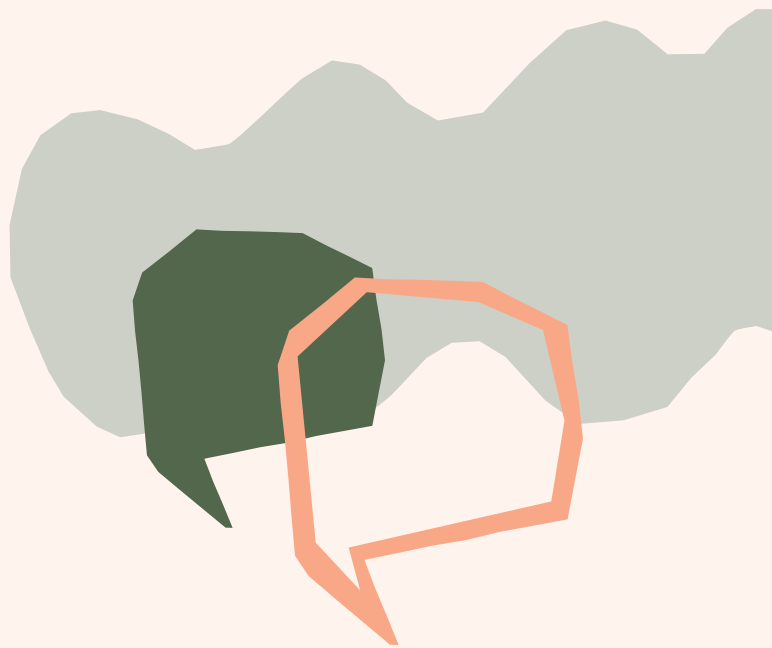
While this report has been shaped by these contributions, the findings, analysis and recommendations presented are Orygen's own and reflect our independent conclusions. They do not necessarily represent the views of all individuals or organisations who contributed to the report's development.

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NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

While many young people with caring roles and responsibilities do not identify with the term 'young carer', this policy report uses the term 'young carer' for clarity and consistency.

Although young carers are often grouped together, they are a diverse cohort with varied experiences, identities and support needs. This report recognises that there is no single young carer experience, and that policy and service responses should reflect this diversity.



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A word from our Youth Advisory Council

This report began with Orygen’s Youth Advisory Council, which identified the mental health and wellbeing of young carers as an issue they wanted Orygen to explore. Here they outline their initiative and what they hope this report will achieve.

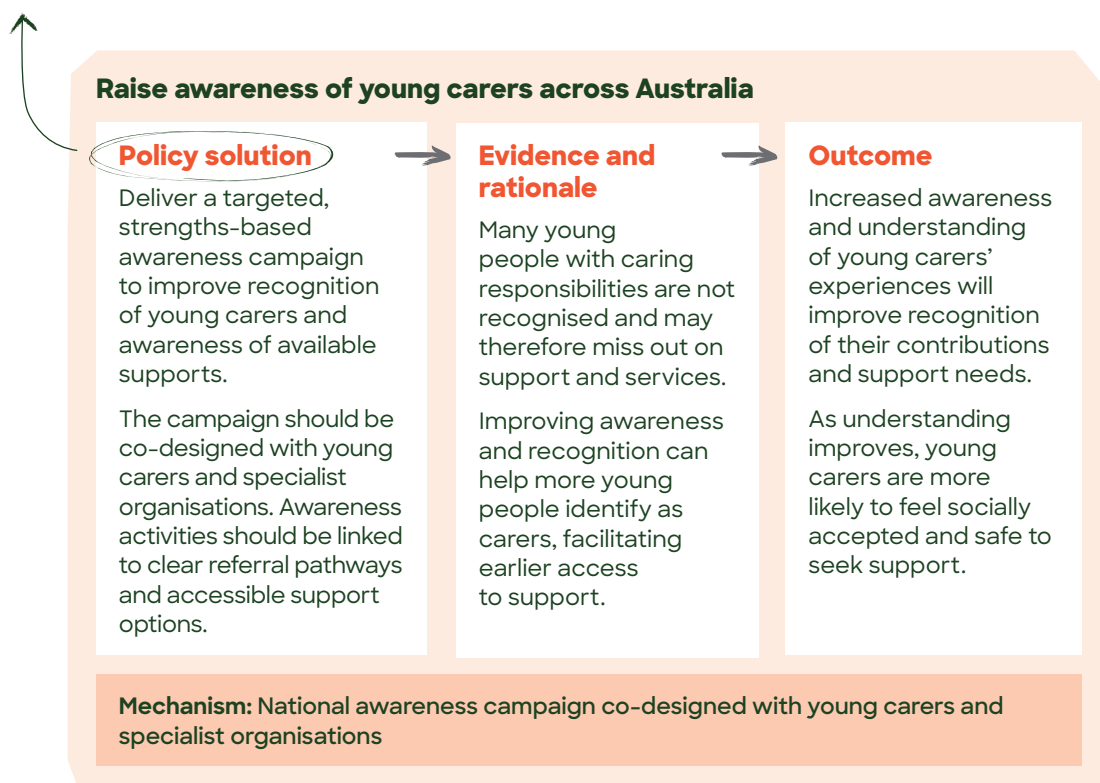
As the Youth Advisory Council (YAC), we chose to focus on young carers because they are an often-overlooked group of young people who take on significant responsibilities while also navigating education, employment, relationships and their own wellbeing. Balancing these responsibilities can have a substantial impact on their mental health and wellbeing, with many young carers experiencing stress, social isolation and barriers to accessing the support they need. Despite this, the experiences and mental health needs of young carers are not always well understood or reflected in the policies, programs and services that affect them.

Through this project, we wanted to raise awareness of the impact that caring can have on young people’s mental health and wellbeing, amplify the voices of young carers and advocate for policies that recognise their experiences, and respond to their needs.

We hope this report encourages policymakers, service providers and communities to recognise that supporting young carers means supporting their wellbeing, relationships and opportunities to participate in the things that matter to them. Young carers should have access to timely mental health support, peer connection, and services that understand the unique challenges they face. With the right support, young carers can feel recognised, connected and supported, and have the opportunity to pursue their own goals and aspirations.

This report also demonstrates the value of genuine youth participation in policymaking. The YAC’s involvement, alongside the experiences and insights shared by young carers and organisations across Australia, has helped ensure these recommendations are grounded in lived experience. As you read this report, we invite you to consider how we can better support the mental health and wellbeing of young carers, so they are able to thrive both as carers and as young people.

We hope that the awareness campaign leads to fewer young carers in Australia feeling isolated, allowing them to shift away from the narrative or title of being a ‘young carer’ to a young person who is pursuing their own goals and opportunities.



Executive summary

Young carers in Australia can experience significant and often hidden impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. While caring can foster resilience, empathy and a sense of responsibility, evidence shows that young carers experience higher rates of mental ill-health and suicide risk than their non-caring peers, and these impacts extend into adulthood. These outcomes are shaped by the intensity and nature of caring responsibilities, as well as broader factors including educational or employment disruption, financial pressure, social isolation and limited access to appropriate support.

Despite growing policy recognition, many young carers remain unidentified and unsupported. Young people may not recognise themselves as carers, while schools, health and community services may lack the awareness, tools and workforce capability needed to identify and respond to their needs. Existing initiatives, such as Carer Gateway and the Young Carer Bursary Program, provide valuable assistance, but demand for support continues to exceed available resources and current service models are often not designed around the developmental needs and circumstances of young carers.

A more coordinated and youth-centred approach is needed to address these gaps. Carer organisations, mental health services, education settings and communities each have an important role to play, yet young carers and their families too often hold the responsibility for identifying their caring role and navigating support. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action across government and service systems to ensure young carers are identified earlier, connected with appropriate support and are able to access services that meet their needs.

This policy report identifies three priority areas for action:

- Improving the identification of young carers
- Increasing access to developmentally appropriate mental health support
- Strengthening the capacity of systems and workforces to respond to young carers

Key recommendations include:

- Expanding tailored, developmentally appropriate supports
- Strengthening workforce capability to identify and respond to young carers
- Ensuring young carers have a meaningful voice in shaping carer policy



Key issues and solutions

Young carers are disproportionately at risk of mental ill-health and experience mental health risk factors more frequently than their peers. Without adequate recognition and support, these challenges can have long-term impacts on the mental health, wellbeing and future opportunities of young carers.

Young carers often remain hidden and face distinct barriers to formal support.

This is influenced by a range of factors, including stigma, limited recognition of their caring role and a lack of age-appropriate supports that are culturally responsive and tailored to different forms of caring.

There is a need to improve awareness and understanding, including supporting young carers to self-identify as carers and access services and supports.

Efforts to inform young carers about the potential mental health impacts of their role and available sources of support are needed.



Policy solutions

Recognition and identification

Embed young carer awareness within existing school-based wellbeing programs.

Include young carers as a priority equity cohort under the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement.

Embed young carer identification into school enrolment processes nationally.

Deliver an awareness campaign to improve recognition of young carers and awareness of available supports.

Programs and service access

Increase the Young Carers Bursary Program funding to reflect demonstrated demand.

Establish a stream dedicated to young carers within Carer Gateway.

Young carer participation and workforce capability

Establish a National Young Carer Advisory Group for young carers aged 12–25.

Commission a flexible, needs-based young carer peer workforce across youth mental health and community services.

Commission and fund the development of a young carer training module for mental health and other health professionals.

Young carers

A young carer is a young person under the age of 25 who currently provides, or intends to provide, informal (unpaid) care, assistance or support to a family member or friend.⁽¹⁾ Caring responsibilities typically exceed age-appropriate expectations (e.g. dispensing medication). This distinction sets young carers apart from other young people who may assist with ordinary household tasks.⁽²⁻⁴⁾

Caregiving is diverse and may include domestic tasks, assistance with daily living, emotional support, and the organisation or coordination of household and care-related activities. Care can be episodic or ongoing, and the needs of the care recipient may remain stable or fluctuate over time.⁽⁵⁾ Young people may be caring for more than one person in the household.

Hidden caring

In 2022, there were an estimated 391,300 young carers in Australia, an increase from 235,300 in 2018. Most young carers undertake primary caregiver roles, providing most of the support to the person they care for.^(6, 7) Evidence from the *Growing Up in Australia* longitudinal study found that 40 per cent of 14–15-year-olds reported spending time caring for a family member.

Research indicates the prevalence of young carers in Australia is significantly underreported, with rates likely to be much higher than estimated. Obtaining accurate population estimates remains challenging. Young carers are less likely than adult carers to disclose their caring responsibilities or be identified by services.⁽⁸⁾ Many young people providing care do not self-identify as ‘young carers’, particularly when caring responsibilities are normalised within families or when the support they provide, such as emotional support, is not perceived as care. Additionally, most prevalence estimates rely on national census data or large-scale surveys where definitions of caring can vary across surveys (e.g. restricted to caring for a disabled adult or an older relative) and adults are typically the primary respondents. Adults may not recognise or report the caring roles that young people perform, further contributing to underreporting.^(9, 10)

Priority populations of young carers

Some groups of young people are more likely to be carers and be unidentified within the broader young carer population.⁽¹¹⁾ Evidence indicates these young people also experience specific mental health risks and barriers. This includes:

- First Nations young people⁽¹²⁻¹⁴⁾
- Multicultural young people^(12, 13, 15, 16)
- Young people from LGBTQIA+ communities.^(12, 17)

Policy context

The identification of young carers in policy has increased in recent years, with formal acknowledgement included across both state and territory, and federal policy frameworks. International governments have also considered the needs of young carers, with the UK, Norway, Canada and Sweden developing policy responses to young carers. An international comparative review found the UK had the most advanced approach, with specific legislation to protect and support young carers.⁽¹⁸⁾ Australia remains at an ‘intermediate’ level, providing partial rights and protections at both state, territory and national levels. However, support for young carers is inconsistent and varies across regions, institutions and services.⁽¹⁹⁾

In the UK, the Care Act 2014 and Children and Families Act 2014 entitles young carers to regular assessments of their capacity to provide care, including consideration of the impact of caring responsibilities on their wellbeing, education and development. In comparison, Australia’s Carer Recognition Act 2010 acknowledges children and young people as carers but does not mandate any protective practices or supports.^(20, 21)

While young carers are recognised within broader carer policy frameworks, they are not consistently identified as a priority population within youth mental health policy. Similarly, young carers, and carers more broadly, have not been the focus of suicide prevention strategies or initiatives, despite their recognised risk of suicide in the National Carers Strategy. Embedding suicide prevention within carer strategies would support the development of targeted suicide prevention policy initiatives for young carers.

National Carer Strategy 2024-2034

The National Carer Strategy 2024-34 provides a coordinated approach to support unpaid carers. The strategy contains targeted initiatives for young carers, including increased funding for the Young Carer Bursary Program and Young Carers Network. Notably, it is the first national strategy to acknowledge the mental health needs of young carers. This progress builds on findings of the 2023 *Inquiry into the Recognition of Unpaid Carers* and the 2022 *Senate Select Committee on Work and Care*, which both drew attention to the distinct mental health needs of young carers.

The 2025 Carer Wellbeing Survey found that more than half of young carers in Australia (53%) did not feel supported by the government and almost half (49.7%) reported that they were unable to navigate government systems to access the support they need. While young carers were engaged during the development of the Strategy, there is no dedicated, ongoing youth-specific advisory mechanism to ensure their lived experience informs implementation, monitoring and evaluation. There is an opportunity for the Australian Government Office for Youth to establish a National Young Carer Youth Advisory Group, providing young carers with the opportunity to guide implementation of the strategy. Recruitment to this group should include representation from priority populations of young carers.

Establish a National Carer Strategy Youth Advisory Group

Policy solution

Establish a National Young Carer Advisory Group for Young Carers aged 12-25 to guide implementation of the National Carer Strategy.

Evidence and rationale

Partnerships with young carers better ensures that their needs are met. Young people should be involved in the implementation and reporting on young carer initiatives within the National Carer Strategy.

The Senate Select Committee on Work and Care identified that without understanding young carers experiences, institutions are limited in their ability to identify support needs, plan services, allocate resources and assess outcomes.

Outcome

National Carer Strategy implementation is informed by young carers' lived experience and responsive to the needs of diverse young carers.

Young carers have an ongoing voice in national policy, leading to more effective support.

Mechanism: Department of Social Services in collaboration with the Office for Youth fund and coordinate an advisory group.



Mental health and wellbeing

Caring responsibilities profoundly shape the lives of young people. Evidence demonstrates that while caring can have positive outcomes for young people, such as close relationships, a sense of purpose and resilience, caring responsibilities can also adversely impact both daily life and long-term opportunities. Caring responsibilities can lead to social isolation, increased stress and anxiety, disrupted education or employment, physical strain, and a lack of sleep. (22–27) These impacts can also extend to the broader family unit, contributing to heightened family stress and conflict, shifts in family roles and financial strain. (28)

Young carers are at increased risk of mental ill-health and suicide and, on average, have poorer mental health outcomes than their non-caregiving peers. (12, 29) They are more likely to report a mental health condition (19.2% compared with 11.3%) and experience high to very high levels of psychological distress (43.0% compared with 28.2%). Findings from the Little Dreamers Young Carer Survey revealed that young carers consider mental health to be the aspect of life most impacted by their caregiving responsibilities. (1) This aligns with ABS data, which found that 18.9 per cent of young carers had been diagnosed with a stress-related illness due to their caring role.

While caring at any life stage can present challenges to wellbeing, differences in mental health outcomes are most pronounced among young carers, with 70.8 per cent reporting high to very high levels of psychological distress. (30–32) These rates are higher than those for older carers. (17) Young carers must manage caring responsibilities during a critical period of physical, emotional, and mental development. (5) In addition to these developmental pressures, young carers may face related stressors that further compound their risk of mental ill-health, including parental intoxication, school bullying and financial hardship. (17, 33)

Early caregiving experiences are predictors of mental health inequalities later in life. (34) Australian longitudinal evidence found that adolescents with caring responsibilities at ages 14–15 had increased levels of psychological distress by ages 18–19. (35) Another study found that young people who provided care for at least six months at ages 16–17 were 86 per cent more likely to report suicidal or self-harming behaviours at ages 18–19 than their non-carer peers. (36) These results reinforce the need for early, effective support systems that protect the mental wellbeing of young carers and reduce future health inequalities. Without adequate support, the mental health impacts associated with informal caring may place young carers at a disadvantage relative to their non-caring peers. (12)

Contributing factors for mental ill-health risk

Young carer mental health outcomes and help-seeking are shaped by the intensity and type of care they provide, socio-environmental factors and systemic barriers to recognition and support.

Time and intensity of caregiving

The time and intensity of caregiving responsibilities have a direct impact on the mental health of young carers. Greater caregiving demands are consistently associated with poorer psychosocial and mental health outcomes, with evidence of a dose-response relationship between hours of care provided and mental wellbeing. (37) Young carers providing more than 20 hours of care per week report the lowest levels of mental wellbeing. (22, 38) This is concerning given 62 per cent of young carers undertake ‘heavy’ (20–49 hours) or ‘very heavy’ (50+ hours) caregiving duties each week. Young carers providing over 20 hours of care each week not only devote substantial time and energy to their responsibilities but may face heightened stress and worry, compounding the impacts on their mental health. (39)



Time and intensity of caregiving – educational impacts

Intensive caregiving responsibilities limit opportunities to participate and succeed in education.(22, 40) Evidence shows that 28 per cent of young carers miss school at least once per week due to their caring role, with a further 39 per cent absent one to three times per month.(22) Caregiving responsibilities are also associated with poorer academic outcomes. Young carers aged 14–15 record significantly lower Year 9 NAPLAN scores than their peers without caring responsibilities, with the largest impacts occurring when caring exceeds five hours per week. These educational disparities were found to be attributable to the caregiving role and living in a household with a person with disability, even after controlling for early school readiness and vocabulary at ages 4–5.(10)

The impacts of caregiving persist into higher education. In 2024, caring responsibilities led 18 per cent of undergraduate students and 20.4 per cent of postgraduate students to consider leaving their studies.(41) Most reported that lack of time due to caring (90%) and worry about their caring role (89%) negatively affected their studies, with over half (53%) also reporting mental health challenges. Nearly half provided more than 40 hours of care per week, and a further 34 per cent provided 20–39 hours weekly.(40) These findings highlight the need for targeted policy interventions that address both the intensity of caregiving and its impacts on young carers' mental health and educational participation.

In response, Carers Australia has recommended that young carers be included as a priority equity cohort under the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034*. This would enable schools to access dedicated funding and implement structured supports to improve educational engagement and outcomes for young carers.(42)

Include young carers as a priority equity cohort under the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement

Policy solution

Include young carers as a priority equity cohort under the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034.

Develop complementary guidance for schools on providing targeted mental health and wellbeing supports for young carers.

Evidence and rationale

Young carers experience persistent educational disadvantage. Targeted policy intervention is required to address these inequities and prevent longterm disadvantage.

Recognising young carers as a priority equity cohort would enable schools to access dedicated funding to deliver tailored supports and strengthen systems.

Outcome

Young carers are formally recognised within school funding, planning and reporting frameworks.

Schools are better equipped to identify and support young carers.

Improved attendance, educational engagement and wellbeing outcomes for young carers.

Mechanism: Department of Education Better and Fairer Schools Agreement. Department of Health, Disability and Ageing develop complementary guidance.



Young carer bursary program

The Young Carer Bursary Program (YCBP) provides financial assistance to young carers to reduce the need for part-time work while studying and managing caring responsibilities. While the number of recipients has increased in recent years, demand for the bursary consistently outweighs supply. The 2026 YCBP received almost 5000 applications for 1600 Bursaries.(43)

The bursary is the only financial support available to some young carers.(42) Most YCBP recipients were able to reduce work hours and experienced improvements in independence, school attendance, study time, academic performance and educational engagement. Interviews with young carers found the bursary provided improvements to wellbeing, health and social participation. Cost-benefit analyses estimate returns ranging from \$1.90–\$4.90 for every dollar spent, which is likely an underestimate given unquantified wellbeing gains.(43) Carers Australia has recommended expanding the program to 5,000 bursary recipients per year from the 2027–28 program year.(42)

Increase funding for the young carer bursary to meet growing demand

Policy solution

Increase funding to expand the Young Carer Bursary Program to 5,000 bursaries per year from the 2027–28 program year.

Evidence and rationale

Demand for the bursary exceeds supply, leaving eligible young carers without support.

Evaluation evidence demonstrates its educational, financial and wellbeing benefits, as well as a positive return on investment.

Outcome

Increased access to financial support for young carers.

Improved educational engagement and attainment.

Improved wellbeing and participation outcomes.

Mechanism: Department of Health, Disability and Ageing and Department of Social Services make a joint budget submission to increase funding.

Social isolation and exclusion

The National Carers survey found that 73 per cent of young carers reported being socially isolated or highly isolated, the highest rate across all age groups.(17) Caring responsibilities limit opportunities for young carers to participate in social, recreational and community activities.(4, 27, 28, 49, 50) Many young carers feel disconnected from peers and perceive their life trajectories as out of step with typical peer experiences.(4, 28) Financial challenges, along with reduced participation in education and employment, can further increase the risk for social isolation among young carers. These reduced opportunities restrict access to supportive peer networks, which are critical protective factors for young carers' wellbeing.(49)

While online platforms can provide alternative avenues for connection and peer support, evidence of their effectiveness in reducing isolation and improving wellbeing among young carers is mixed. Some studies indicate they facilitate connection with peers with similar caring experiences, while others suggest online support alone is insufficient to address social isolation and exclusion.(51–53) These findings highlight the need for online supports to complement accessible in-person services and community-based interventions.(51)

Life transitions - young adult carers

As young carers navigate the transition into emerging adulthood, they may lose access to support, experience financial barriers or pressures and struggle to balance caring responsibilities with education or employment.(18, 54–56) These overlapping pressures can increase stress and psychological distress, with potential long-term impacts on educational attainment, workforce participation and overall wellbeing.(12, 57–59) Nearly four in five young adult carers aged 16–24 (79%) reported that the mental health impacts of their caring responsibilities have disrupted their education and career pathways, and only 26 per cent believed they will have the same opportunities as their peers in adulthood.(60) This is consistent with research demonstrating that young people aged 16–25 who provide care are less likely to be employed, had lower earnings from paid employment, and reported poorer mental and physical health than young people who did not provide care.(56)

While emerging evidence suggests that coordinated transitional support can improve wellbeing and reduce the impacts of caring responsibilities, the evidence base for effective support models for young adult carers during key life transitions remains limited.(16, 48) Stakeholders emphasised that this remains a critical support gap.

Improving existing supports for young carers

Young carers network and carer gateway

The Young Carers Network (YCN) is a national online platform designed to raise awareness, provide tailored resources and administer the Young Carer Bursary program. It also plays a key navigation role in directing young carers to Carer Gateway for access to supports and services. Carer survey data indicates that just over half of young carers have interacted with the YCN (25.8% currently engaged and 29.6% previously), while nearly half have never accessed the platform, suggesting potential barriers related to awareness, accessibility and relevance.

The 2024 evaluation of the Carer Gateway program found that young carers were underrepresented among service users and identified challenges related to accessibility, age-appropriate service design, awareness and the lack of ongoing, long-term support for young carers. Intake and needs assessments were better suited to adults, making it difficult for young carers to navigate available supports. Limited after-hours contact services and counsellors, and long wait times exacerbated these issues, particularly for young carers balancing school and intensive caring responsibilities. Night-time is often a particularly stressful period for young carers, especially for those who are primary carers, reaffirming the need for more flexible service hours.(61)

Stakeholders echoed these concerns, noting that Carer Gateway could be improved to better meet the needs of young carers. They recommended incorporating youth-designed features, such as an online chat-based entry point, to improve accessibility and engagement. This aligns with recent evidence showing that modifying adult service models has been ineffective, while youth-designed approaches implemented within the broader Carer Gateway framework have demonstrated success. (62) Young carers themselves supported this approach, emphasising the importance of flexible support options and age-appropriate language and information tailored to the diverse ages and developmental needs of young people with caring responsibilities.(63)

Implement developmentally appropriate youth service models within Carer Gateway

Policy solution

Establish a dedicated Young Carer stream within Carer Gateway, supported by a national awareness campaign.

This would include:

- Funding the development and implementation of youthdesigned service delivery models
- Targeted mental health resources and support for young carers
- Delivering a national awareness campaign, codesigned with young carers

Evidence and rationale

Existing carer support systems are mostly designed for adult carers and are often not well aligned with the developmental needs, preferences and circumstances of young carers. This can limit accessibility and engagement of available supports.

Outcome

Increased awareness of, and engagement with, Carer Gateway and the Young Carers Network among young carers.

Improved service system accessibility for young carers.

Reduced barriers to support and improved wellbeing for young carers.

Mechanism: Department of Health, Disability and Ageing to inform content on health aspect.





Improving identification, awareness and support

A range of structural, service and workforce barriers and gaps impact the ability for young carers to access and engage with formal mental health support.(61) Young carers report that services often do not understand the young carer role, overlooking the mental health impacts.(26, 63) These barriers are exacerbated by low rates of self-identification among young carers, stigma and a tendency for many to minimise their own support needs.(21, 27, 58, 64)

Fragmented data collection and inconsistent reporting practices are a barrier to informed policy development, service planning and funding decisions for supporting young carers.(34) When young carers are not identified, their experiences and needs remain hidden and unaddressed. Ongoing national data sources that support improved identification and outcomes are required.

Identification

Schools and higher education settings play a critical role in early identification; however, many young carers remain unrecognised in these settings.(13, 16) While 85.1 per cent of young carers cared for someone while attending school, less than half (49.2%) reported that the school knew about their caring role.(17) Similarly, at university, one in four young carers (25%) did not disclose their caring responsibilities. Under-identification is driven by limited awareness among educators and low rates of disclosure, often because young carers are not asked or perceive no benefit in coming forward.

Systematic identification at application or enrolment would improve visibility and access to support.(40, 62) In Victoria, the Department of Education has introduced a 'young carer' identification tick-box within school enrolment forms, supported by referral and support pathways. This data is updated annually, enabling the identification of young people who take on caring roles throughout their schooling.

Improved identification of young carers in education settings would generate valuable data to inform policy and service planning, while also enabling earlier intervention to reduce the mental health and educational impacts of caring responsibilities.(16, 27, 40) Where a young carer is identified, an assessment of caring intensity (including hours of care and types of tasks) should be undertaken, with supports scaled according to level of need.

Introduce a nationally consistent young carer identifier in school enrolment and information systems

Policy solution

Drawing from the Victorian model, introduce a nationally consistent young carer identifier in school and tertiary education enrolment and student information systems, supported by referral pathways and routine reporting.

Evidence and rationale

The Victorian model demonstrates the feasibility of embedding a 'young carer' identifier in enrolment processes and international examples highlight the value of linked data in understanding outcomes over time.

Current under-identification reflects both low disclosure and limited proactive identification, reinforcing the need for consistent, system-wide approaches.

Outcome

Improved identification will enable earlier intervention, better access to supports, and stronger data for policy and planning.

Improves the capacity of wellbeing services to proactively identify and support young carers.

Analysis of linked data can provide insight on young people's experiences and outcomes across multiple dimensions of wellbeing, and over time.

Mechanism: Department of Education in partnership with state and territory governments.

Awareness

Research suggests that young carers tend to have low engagement with formal support services and often rely on informal supports such as peers and social media.(27) While potentially valuable, these supports are generally not equipped to meet the needs of young carers, particularly for those experiencing significant mental health challenges.(64) The lack of engagement with formal supports is largely attributable to low awareness of existing services and unclear referral pathways among young carers and those who support them, including schools and health professionals.(28, 64, 65) Additionally, many young carers are unable to access carer-specific supports due to not identifying as a young carer, or not being identified by those around them.(58)

Proactive efforts to identify and inform young carers about their role and sources of support are needed.(15, 58, 64) Young carers emphasise that clear, age-appropriate information about caring responsibilities and support options, particularly during school years, is critical for earlier identification and help-seeking.(65) Embedding young carer awareness within existing schoolbased health and wellbeing frameworks would strengthen the capacity of schools to identify and respond to young carers, while improving recognition, help-seeking and connections to appropriate supports.

Established young carer and carer organisations are well placed to lead awareness efforts in partnership with local communities. Stakeholders expressed strong support for employing young carer organisations to deliver education and to connect them with the mental health system and other supports. Evidence-based programs, such as the Young Carers Program in Western Australia already demonstrate effective approaches to improving awareness and support. Evaluation of the program indicates significant improvements in awareness of the young carer role and available supports.(64)

Embed young carer awareness within existing school-based wellbeing programs

Policy solution

Investigate the need to embed awareness of young caring roles, and their impact on mental health and wellbeing, within existing school-based wellbeing programs, with content co-designed and delivered in partnership with lived experience and carer organisations.

Evidence and rationale

Young carers are often underidentified in school settings, contributing to unmet mental health and wellbeing needs and reduced engagement.

Schools already deliver multiple wellbeing programs, providing an opportunity to integrate young carer awareness.

Outcome

Increased awareness and capability among school staff to recognise and respond to young carers.

Increased knowledge and awareness among young carers to self-identify and seek support.

Strengthened referral pathways for young carers.

Mechanism: Department of Health, Disability and Ageing in partnership with the Department of Education.



Workforce training and development

There is increasing recognition that caring responsibilities are a determinant of health outcomes and that professionals require education and training to better identify and support young carers. Building workforce capability among mental health professionals and other health professionals to identify and support young carers is essential for improving their engagement in mental health treatment. (5) Young carers are more likely to engage with support when services are youth focused, carer informed and responsive to their circumstances, including an understanding of their caring role and the needs of the care recipient.(21) Evidence demonstrates that this includes knowledge of the risk factors associated with caring roles (e.g. tiredness, social isolation).(5, 34, 66, 67)

Targeted training strengthens practitioners' ability to identify and respond appropriately to young carers, with practitioners themselves emphasising the need for dedicated young carer training initiatives.(67) Young carer education is not embedded into professional development education for mental health and other health professionals. The development of a training module would provide professionals with evidence-informed guidance and information on supporting young carers. Additionally, as many young carers attend appointments with the people they support, broader awareness – not just those working with young people – would facilitate earlier recognition and intervention.

Improved workforce training must be complemented by practical tools that support the routine identification of young carers. For example, existing intake and assessment forms can be adapted to include questions about caring responsibilities, assisting practitioners to recognise young carers and connect them with further support services if required.(26, 68)

Training module for mental health and other health professionals

Policy solution

Commission and fund the development of a young carer training module for mental health and other health professionals focused on:

- Identifying and supporting young carers
- Understanding the interaction between caring responsibilities and mental ill-health
- Equity considerations, including for multicultural and First Nations communities
- Referral and support pathways

Training should be co-designed with young carers and carer organisations and be embedded within continuing professional development frameworks.

Evidence and rationale

Young carers are frequently unrecognised within health and mental health systems, limiting opportunities for early identification and support.

Many health professionals report limited understanding of young carers' experiences, including the impact of caring responsibilities on mental health.

A nationally consistent training approach would strengthen workforce capability to identify and support young carers earlier and connect them with appropriate supports if required.

Outcome

Increased skills, knowledge, recognition and access to ongoing professional development within the mental health and health sector.

Mechanism: Department of Health, Disability and Ageing to commission and fund training.



Peer support

There is an opportunity to strengthen mental health support for young carers through a dedicated peer workforce. Evidence indicates that young carers benefit from peer support delivered by trained workers with lived experience, whose experiential knowledge can both improve engagement and wellbeing, and foster hope and inspiration among young carers.(69) Benefits from peer worker roles in mental health include reduced stress, isolation and stigma, as well as improved care navigation and connections to other support services. (70) Peer worker roles would help reduce well-documented barriers young carers face in accessing and sustaining employment.(71) Peer support roles offer a viable employment pathway for young carers, with young carers reporting that exposure to peers in professional roles not only helped them recognise the value of their own skills but also made career success feel more attainable.(69)

Summary

Young carers are an integral part of Australia's care system, providing essential support to family members and friends while navigating their own education, relationships and transition to adulthood. Yet their contributions often go unrecognised, and too many young carers experience preventable impacts on their mental health and wellbeing. Young carers should not have to navigate the challenges of caring alone. With stronger recognition, earlier identification and access to age-appropriate support, young carers can be better supported to maintain their mental health and wellbeing, remain engaged in education and employment and participate in the opportunities that are important to them. Through coordinated action across governments, education settings, health services and communities, Australia can build a system that recognises young carers, responds to their needs and reduces the long-term impacts of caring on mental health, education and future opportunities.

Commission a flexible, needs-based young carer peer workforce

Policy solution

Primary Health Networks (PHNs) commission a flexible, needs-based young carer peer workforce by embedding trained peer workers with lived experience of caring across existing community and youth mental health services.

Evidence and rationale

Embedding peer workers in existing services would provide carer-informed support options for young carers.

Peer workers can help to reduce stigma and improve awareness within existing services of young carers and their support needs.

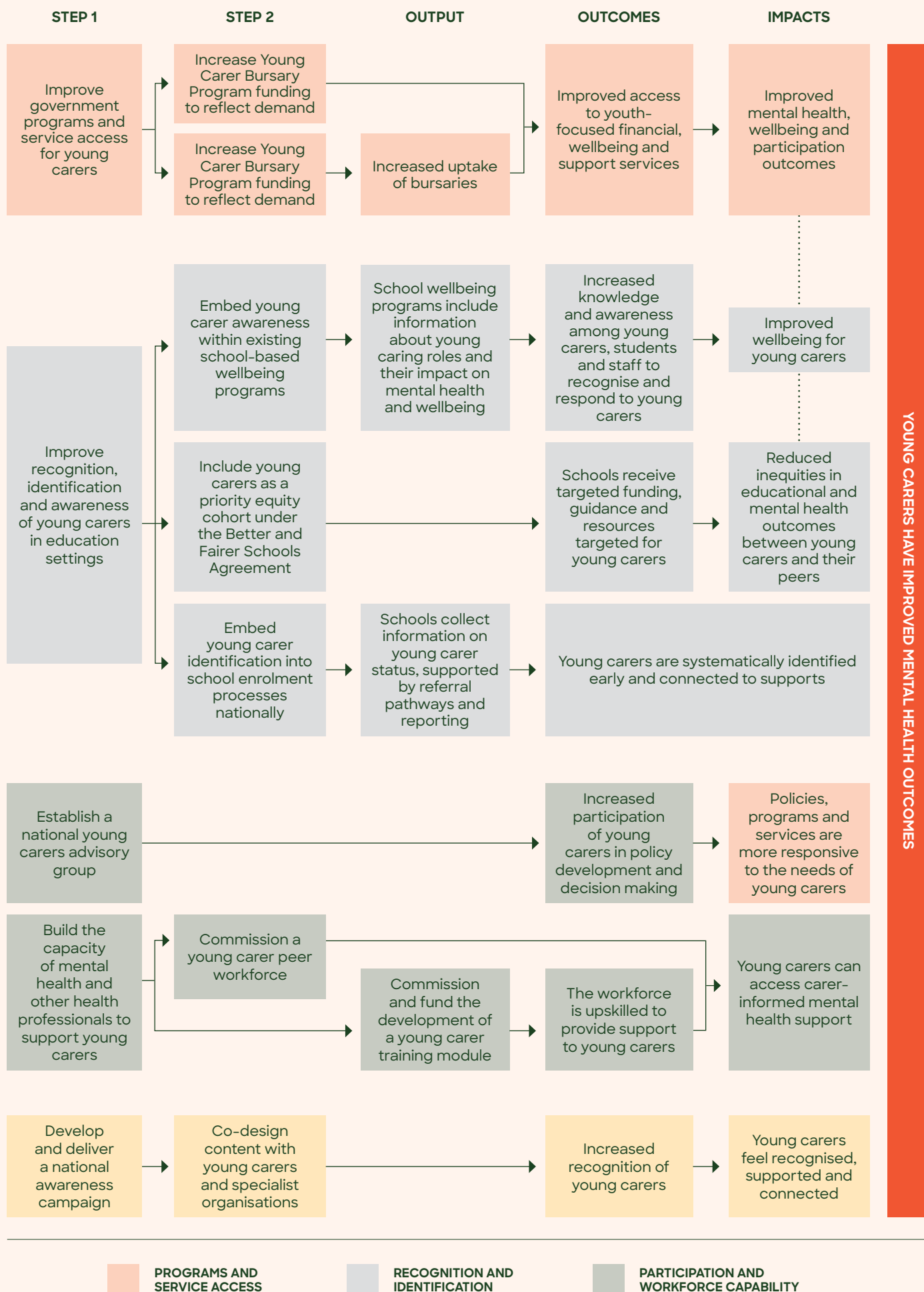
Outcome

Increased access to peer-based mental health support for young carers.

Reduced stigma and greater awareness of young carer needs within existing services.

Mechanism: Primary Health Networks.

THEORY OF CHANGE





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Suggested citation: Bulluss, A. Supporting the mental health of young carers: Policy report. Melbourne: Orygen 2026.

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