

Case study 2:

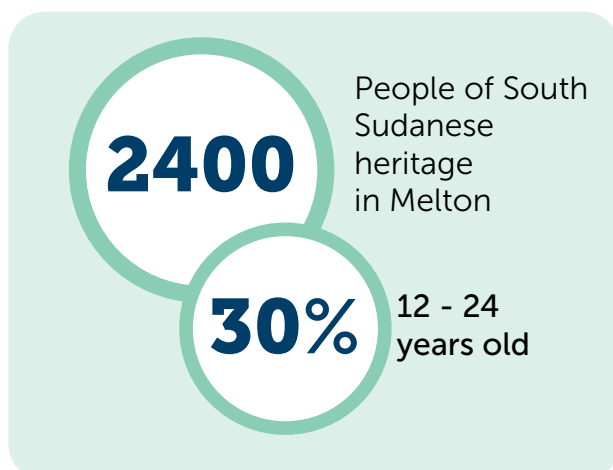
Social inclusion and impact on mental health and wellbeing - experiences of South Sudanese youth

The challenge

Social inclusion is a key factor influencing the mental health and wellbeing of young members of Melbourne's largest South Sudanese community, as highlighted in a forum conducted by NWMPHN and the City of Melton in August 2024.

Melton is home to almost 2,400 people of South Sudanese heritage, of whom 30 per cent are between 12 and 24 years old.

As part of the community engagement for its health needs assessment work, NWMPHN partnered with the local council to try to identify any barriers to inclusion, and health system service gaps, experienced by this cohort.



For NWMPHN, this was part of an effort to identify the unique needs of lesser heard voices within the region. The forum explored how this community group is impacted by social exclusion and identified actionable improvement areas highlighted by the participants.

Young members of the South Sudanese community were invited to take part through the African Youth Initiative, community liaison officers in local secondary schools, the State Government youth development program [FReeZa](#), and the council's own communication channels.

On the day, 26 participants arrived at the venue, the Melton Library and Learning Hub, exceeding expectations.

The forum was facilitated by two bicultural workers. The young people were asked to write down their responses to several questions designed to explore their experiences of social exclusion, and how these impacted their mental health and wellbeing.

Participants described social inclusion as having a sense of belonging and social connection. They felt they experienced barriers to achieving this and outlined the negative impact of social exclusion.



To describe this, they chose words such as “feeling left out”, “low self- esteem”, “stressed”, “isolated”, “tired”, “hurt”, “drained”, “emotional”, “misunderstood”, “unmotivated”, and “feeling vulnerable”.

These indicate that known risk factors for mental ill health – social isolation, lethargy, and emotional distress – are prevalent within the community.

Research indicates that adolescents are particularly affected by feelings of social isolation, putting them at increased risk of mental ill health (Filia et al., 2023). This too was reflected in words used by some of the participants. These included “suffering from depression”, “it makes you feel left out and depressed”, “sad”, and “anxious”.

The language suggests that some South Sudanese youth are experiencing mental ill health itself.

Having a space that is just for South Sudanese young people because we best feel comfortable when we are around people who look like us and share the same experiences as well.

Participant

The young people were encouraged to suggest possible ways in which to boost social inclusion. Ideas included improving transport options, facilitating more community events, improving targeted advertising of existing programs and facilities, and prioritising self-care.

Several participants reflected on experiencing racial discrimination, identifying “not feeling culturally safe” as a barrier to achieving social inclusion. This led to the idea of safe meeting spaces specifically for the South Sudanese community as a way of strengthening safety and identity.

Finding ways to talk about mental health was also identified as a key need.

Participants noted that mental health is often not talked about within South Sudanese culture, further suggesting that there is at times a lack of understanding. One participant stated, “mental health is an ongoing issue that a majority of [our] parents do not understand.”

It's important for parents and elders to have some awareness and understand what mental health is, otherwise it will always be a barrier young people face when navigating mental health services and avenues.

Female South Sudanese bicultural worker, aged 19



Our people are very soft spoken when it comes to health and well being. It's a sensitive matter we're working to address with youth and community programs.

Male South Sudanese bicultural worker, aged 23

Another suggested that events discussing health need be offered so that "parents can understand where [children] are coming from [and] implement healthy habits in the household".

Building culturally responsive mental health literacy education for families, counselling and treatment pathways is an important area for further investigation.

Results

The findings from the forum revealed the barriers to achieving good health and wellbeing faced by young South Sudanese residents.

Understanding these challenges is extremely valuable as it identified strengthening social connection and sense of belonging as a priority for this community. It also identified relevant and actionable strategies for improving mental health and wellbeing to young people in Melton.

City of Melton is integrating these lessons into new youth engagement projects. Insights from this project are important to helping NWMPHN understand the needs of the community..