

Schoolies Operation FAQ

Who is Encounter Youth?

Encounter Youth is not-for-profit, charitable organisation that is a positive influence on young people in the community. We support, advocate for and encourage young people with the social challenges they face and we mobilise volunteers from all over the state to do the same.

What is the 'schoolies' phenomenon and how did it start?

School leaver celebrations have been occurring across the country for over 35 years. Each year, at the end of Year 12 exams across Australia, thousands of young people gather at coastal regions to celebrate. In South Australia, school leaver celebrations have traditionally taken place at Victor Harbor, on the Fleurieu Peninsula.

How did Encounter Youth become involved with the school leaver celebrations in Victor Harbor?

In 1999, South Australia Police (SAPOL) invited a small group of volunteers to respond to the Year 12s celebrating at Victor Harbor. At that point, there were 10,000-15,000 young people celebrating in the region for over a week. With no additional services to support them, the environment was considered chaotic, dangerous and hopeless. The need for support within the community to assist the safety of Year 12s celebrating the end of their schooling saw the beginning of Encounter Youth. It is important to note that Encounter Youth did not start 'schoolies' but we responded to the community concern posed by the school leaver celebrations in South Australia. We continue to recognise that completing Year 12 is a significant milestone in a young person's life and is an achievement that deserves to be celebrated. Since we began our response in 1999, we have introduced proactive strategies to manage the Year 12's celebrations in Victor Harbor, and make them safer. Today, this response is known as the South Australian Schoolies Operation.

Who does Encounter Youth work with to respond to the school leaver celebrations in Victor Harbor?

The Schoolies Operation in South Australia is known as Australia's safest and shortest school leavers celebration. We mobilise over 550 volunteers from more than 45 church based teams for this operation. These volunteers are affectionately known as the Encounter Youth Green Team®.

Encounter Youth

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The Schoolies Operation is divided into four zones where our volunteers provide support to school leavers across the Fleurieu within the: Festival, Bus, Accommodation and Welcome (surrounding streets of Victor Harbor) zones.

As part of our collaborative, community based response, we facilitate two separate working groups. The first is the **Stakeholders Group**, which sees government and other community organisations from across the state collaborating together. The purpose of this group is to ensure the school leavers celebration is managed safely and the local community is not interrupted in their general services.

The second group within the Victor Harbor community is the **Working Group**. The purpose of this group is to discuss how as community we can work together to improve the social environment and make it a safer place to celebrate. This group is comprised of local members of the public, council members, emergency services representatives and accommodation providers.

What have been some of the major challenges to young people celebrating safely, and how has Encounter Youth responded to those challenges?

Challenge #1: Road Safety

Every November, there were a large number of young people travelling to Victor Harbor along the notoriously risky Victor Harbor road. There were many young people driving themselves in and out of the township of Victor Harbor. This additional traffic, combined with fatigue from celebrations and possibly alcohol and/or other drugs from those celebrations, created unsafe roads.

Encounter Youth's response

Today, Encounter Youth facilitates the Schoolies Festival™ with Principal Partner, the Motor Accident Commission (MAC). We manage the Free MAC Schoolies Festival™ Bus Service for Year 12s with the purchase of a Festival ticket. These free buses run from the Adelaide Central Bus Station to the Fleurieu, on the Friday before the Festival kicks off and back from the Fleurieu to Adelaide on Monday after the Festival finishes. In addition to this, we manage 25 buses from Encounter Bay to Goolwa, bringing school leavers in and out of the Victor Harbor township on the Friday, Saturday and Sunday night of the Festival. School leavers now have free, safe transport, and a good reason to leave the keys at home.

Another strategy that we have implemented to reduce the risk to school leavers has been roadblocks and speed limit restrictions. Coordinated with the City of Victor Harbor, the roads around the Festival site are closed each night and surrounding streets speed restricted. The only vehicles allowed within the event area are emergency services or the Free MAC Schoolies Festival™ buses. This helps to ensure the safety of school leavers in the vicinity of the Festival.



Challenge #2: 'Toolies' (the older crowd)

An older associated crowd has been known to gather along with the school leavers, often referred to as 'toolies'. Given the vulnerability and inexperience of those celebrating finishing school, this created large risks as some 'toolies' sought to take advantage of the school leavers vulnerability.

Encounter Youth's response

We have been strategic in implementing harm minimisation strategies to remove 'toolies,' who bring anti-social behaviour and safety concerns. A great example of a successful strategy was the decision to enclose the celebration space to make it a ticketed, fenced off area, exclusive to school leavers. We introduced Photo ID checks, wristbanding and security-controlled entrance to the Festival site to ensure the space was safe for school leavers to celebrate.

Challenge #3: Alcohol and/or other drugs

Australian culture often associates alcohol with celebrations and these cultural expectations are frequently passed down to young people. Thankfully, we are seeing more young people now than ever before choosing not to drink. However, excessive alcohol consumption during school leaver celebrations has the potential to cause significant harm, particularly for young people.

There is potential for harm from other drugs and we often get asked about how common illicit drugs are at the Festival. We know from our partnership with SAPOL that the majority of drug-related offences during the Festival involve non-school leavers and the vast majority of those celebrating choose to do so without illicit drugs. We continue to see that alcohol is the drug of most concern for young people, and the general population.

Encounter Youth's response

Encounter Youth partner with the City of Victor Harbor to ensure that the entire township is declared a 24-hour dry zone for the duration of the Festival. This means that it is an offence to possess or consume liquor in all public areas. People found with alcohol, or those drinking in the dry zone could be issued with a \$220 fine.

Whilst public areas are declared dry, the council cannot control alcohol consumption on private properties such as accommodation sites or caravan parks, so these areas require an alternative approach. Encounter Youth partner with the major accommodation providers across the Fleurieu through our Working Group, and facilitate discussions within the group about reducing alcohol-related harm in their sites. We station groups of Encounter Youth Green Team® volunteers within the major accommodation sites on rotating shifts 24 hours a day for the duration of the Festival. These volunteers provide a positive presence within the sites and importantly, provide referral to emergency or support services if required. Whilst our volunteers cannot prevent alcohol consumption in the accommodation sites, their positive interactions with young people can help reduce or prevent alcohol-related harm in those areas.