

# Truancy hits a high mark

Suzan Delibasic  
Rebecca Borg

## Year 7 students miss 1 million days in class

Victorian student absences have skyrocketed in the past five years, with experts blaming teacher shortages, poor mental health and the aftermath of Covid-19.

A Saturday Herald Sun analysis of year 7 absences by local government area has revealed children missed a staggering 1,136,946 days in 2023 – up 41 per cent compared to 805,924 days in 2019.

Academics have warned the situation will only worsen if teacher shortages, staff stress and behavioural issues aren't addressed.

Wyndham, in Melbourne's

west, recorded the largest number of student absences last year (76,071) – a surge of 83 per cent compared to five years ago.

This was followed by Hume, on the city's northern fringe, which had an increase of 72 per cent in days off. Casey, Ballarat, Knox, Whittlesea, Mornington Peninsula, and Greater Geelong also recorded a rise in year 7 students missing class.

Amid the rise in absences, there was also a slight increase in the number of students who completed year 7, with 44,435 children enrolled in 2023, compared to 43,824 in 2019.

The data comes after the Herald Sun revealed more students were dropping out of school in Victoria than at any point in the past decade.

But a Department of Education spokesman said Victoria's student attendance rates continued to lead the nation.

"Growth in student enrolments in Casey, Wyndham and Greater Geelong over the past five years has averaged over 17 per cent, which has caused growth in the total numbers of absent days in those areas."

Australian Catholic University Inclusive Education expert

Dr Matthew White said truancy, "school can't" and heightened vigilance against spreading illness were among the many factors prompting students to avoid the classroom.

Dr White said there were impacts on students who struggled with school attendance.

"Immediately, missing school leads to lower academic performance, reduced literacy and numeracy skills, reduced academic self-efficacy and increased disengagement," he said.

"In the medium term, absenteeism is linked to psychological issues such as anxiety,

depression and social isolation, as well as behavioural problems including substance use and involvement in the juvenile justice system."

Australian Catholic University educational psychology and exceptional learning professor John Munro said stress and anxiety levels as well as a lack of self-confidence and self-esteem were also driving absences.

"The data is consistent with students having less confidence in their capacity to cope and to interact successfully in real-life social situations," he said.

"Schools need to recognise

that the learning profiles of some students have changed following lockdown."

Victorian Student Representative Council chief executive Julia Baron said there was a wide range of compounding issues causing student absences.

"This includes whether schools are accessible for students, how safe they feel going to school, levels of anxiety and the impacts of their mental well-being," she said. "It's important for parents and schools to support students to re-engage."

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## Anger at slogans on MCG

Carly Douglas

The Melbourne Cricket Club is reviewing its security protocols after pro-Palestine activists projected "anti Semitic" slogans on the MCG during last week's State of Origin game.

As thousands of rugby fans crowded outside stadium, protesters projected messages including "No to Jewish Supremacy" and "Israel is an apartheid regime that has been ethnically cleansing Palestine for 76+ years" on the external wall of MCG near Gate 2 – outraging the Jewish community.

Executive Director at Zionism Victoria Zeddy Lawrence said the stadium should not be used as a "canvas for corrupting the truth and inciting hate".

"Targeting the spiritual home of Australian sport, the anti-Israel activists have shown yet again that they'll seize any opportunity to spread disinformation by distorting history and disseminating highly offensive anti-Zionist and anti Semitic slurs," he said.

An MCC spokesperson said four individuals who used a projector to display the images were moved on by police.

"We are now working closely with police and our security team to ensure that these incidents do not reoccur and are reviewing our security protocols," they said.

"We ... regret any distress this incident may have caused."



Demons and Tigers fans Alexis, 11, Ron Issko, James, 9, and Barry Helfenbaum.  
Picture: David Caird

## AFL fan numbers a fine result all round

Jordan McCarthy

This year's AFL season is setting attendance and membership records off the back of the strong form of Victoria's biggest clubs.

Record crowds have attended games, including more than 413,000 fans flocking to round 1 and more

than 408,000 attending the Anzac round.

AFL Fans Association president Ron Issko said excitement was palpable among fans, leading to average crowds of 38,464 – the biggest in history.

"The fans love their clubs so much they will sacrifice to watch them, whether it be in

the face of cost-of-living issues, whether it be going at times that they don't find convenient, because of the passion for their clubs," he said.

With 13 clubs still alive in the finals fight, more fans than ever are dreaming about September glory.

"There's six premierships

points separating third from 13th," Mr Issko said. "That's the first time it's happened later than round 8, and we're in round 16.

The big Vic clubs being at the pointy end of the ladder helps, too.

"It doesn't surprise me that we have high average attendance when you've got

Carlton, Essendon and Collingwood – three of the top five big drawing clubs – up there in the top eight," Mr Issko said.

Memberships are also strong with Carlton, Geelong, Greater Western Sydney and Port Adelaide at record highs. The Blues lead with 103,948 members.

## Gorilla back in the midst

A man behind the alleged theft of Garry the gorilla from a retirement community in St Helena, in Melbourne's north east, was charged with the statue-napping along with a number of other offences on Friday morning.

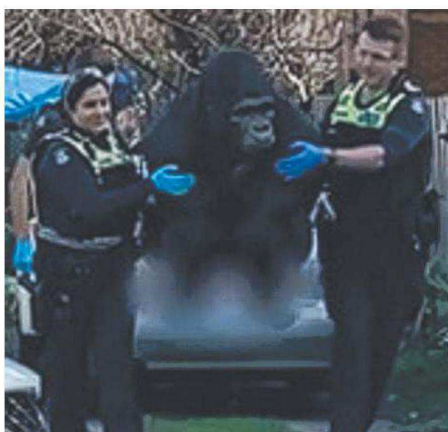
The much-loved gorilla statue, allegedly stolen from the retirement village on June 6, was discovered at a Reservoir address on Monday.

The silverback was back in

his old habitat on Wednesday after being found in one piece when a 33-year-old Heidelberg Heights man made himself known to police over the incident.

The man was interviewed then charged on Friday with the gorilla theft, as well as handling stolen goods and driving while disqualified.

The man is due to face Heidelberg Magistrates Court on August 30.



Police have recovered Garry the gorilla.

## Two lawyers in hot water

Lucy Callander

A pair of women who work at a Melbourne law firm are facing serious charges after allegedly giving a fake document to a Frankston court.

Frankston Crime Investigation Unit detectives have charged an 34-year-old Abbotsford woman and a 25-year-old Lalor woman with perverting the course of justice, attempt to pervert the course of justice, and use a false document.

The charges are in relation to an al-

leged incident where a false document was tendered to the Frankston Magistrates' Court on September 26 last year.

Further details about the case where the false document was allegedly used have not yet been revealed.

It is not known which case, if any, the charges relate to.

The pair were arrested on December 19, 2023 and June 25, 2024.

They have been summonsed to appear at Melbourne Magistrates' Court at a later date.