

# Sentencing in Victoria 2013–14 to 2022–23

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This statistical report presents data on sentencing practices in Victoria in the decade to 30 June 2023. The data includes the number and gender of people sentenced each year, the types of offences people were sentenced for, the types of sentences people received, and the imprisonment or detention lengths and fine amounts imposed in the Supreme Court, County Court, Magistrates' Court and Children's Court.

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## Contents

Key events influencing sentencing practices in Victoria	1
Terminology in this report	2
Supreme Court	3
County Court	7
Magistrates' Court	12
Children's Court	17
Reading the data	22

# Acknowledgement of Country

The Sentencing Advisory Council acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters on which we live and work, and we pay our respects to them, their culture and their Elders past and present.

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# Key events influencing sentencing practices in Victoria

Sentencing in Victoria is governed by a combination of legislation and common law.<sup>1</sup> The following are some of the important changes to sentencing legislation and common law in the decade to June 2023. These are likely to have contributed to some of the changes in sentencing practices in Victoria during the 10-year period:

**2014:** suspended prison sentences are no longer available for offences committed on or after 1 September<sup>2</sup>

**2014:** the Court of Appeal delivers a guideline judgment in *Boulton* in relation to community correction orders (CCOs)<sup>3</sup>

**2017:** the High Court says that current sentencing practices should be just one factor to take into account in sentencing, not a controlling factor<sup>4</sup>

**2017:** some offences are classified as category 1 and category 2 offences, making a prison sentence presumptive or mandatory<sup>5</sup>

**2017:** the Children's Court Youth Diversion Service is rolled out across Victoria<sup>6</sup>

**2018:** some offences are classified as standard sentence offences, requiring courts to consider a numerical sentence that represents the middle of the range of objective seriousness for the offence<sup>7</sup>

**2018:** the maximum term of a youth justice centre order is increased from 3 years to 4 years<sup>8</sup>

**2020–2023:** COVID-19 significantly affects court operations, resulting in fewer cases being sentenced, more serious cases being prioritised, greater sentencing discounts being given to reflect the harsher conditions of prison, and enhanced guilty plea discounts being given to reflect the value of guilty pleas in clearing court backlogs.<sup>9</sup>

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- 1 For example, the sentencing of adults is governed by the *Sentencing Act 1991* (Vic) while the sentencing of children is governed by the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic).
  - 2 *Sentencing Amendment (Abolition of Suspended Sentences and Other Matters) Act 2013* (Vic).
  - 3 *Boulton & Ors v The Queen* [2014] VSCA 342.
  - 4 *DPP v Dalgliesh (a pseudonym)* [2017] HCA 41.
  - 5 *Sentencing (Community Correction Order) and Other Acts Amendment Act 2016* (Vic).
  - 6 *Children and Justice Legislation Amendment (Youth Justice Reform) Act 2017* (Vic).
  - 7 *Sentencing Amendment (Sentencing Standards) Act 2017* (Vic).
  - 8 *Children and Justice Legislation Amendment (Youth Justice Reform) Act 2017* (Vic) s 52(2).
  - 9 *Worboyes v The Queen* [2021] VSCA 169.

## Terminology in this report

**Principal offence:** the *principal offence* is the most serious offence in a case. Offence seriousness is measured by the offence that received the most severe sentence or, alternatively, according to the National Offence Index.<sup>10</sup>

**Principal offence type:** principal offence types are categories of offences according to the offence types in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' standard offence classification. For example, if a principal offence is murder, the *principal offence type* is a homicide offence (ANZSOC 1).<sup>11</sup>

**Principal sentence type:** the *principal sentence type* is the most severe sentence type in a case, according to the sentencing hierarchy in sections 5(4)–(7) of the *Sentencing Act 1991* (Vic). If a court imposes one type of sentence – for example, imprisonment – in the case, that sentence is the principal sentence. In most instances, if a court imposes more than one type of sentence in the same case – for example, both imprisonment and a fine – the *principal sentence* is imprisonment. The one exception is combined orders of imprisonment with a CCO, which in this report are represented separately from imprisonment only, due to their increasing prevalence.

**Total effective sentence:** the total effective sentence is the sentence imposed for all charges in a case and applies at a case level. Where a case involves multiple charges, the total effective sentence will be either the same as or longer than the principal sentence.

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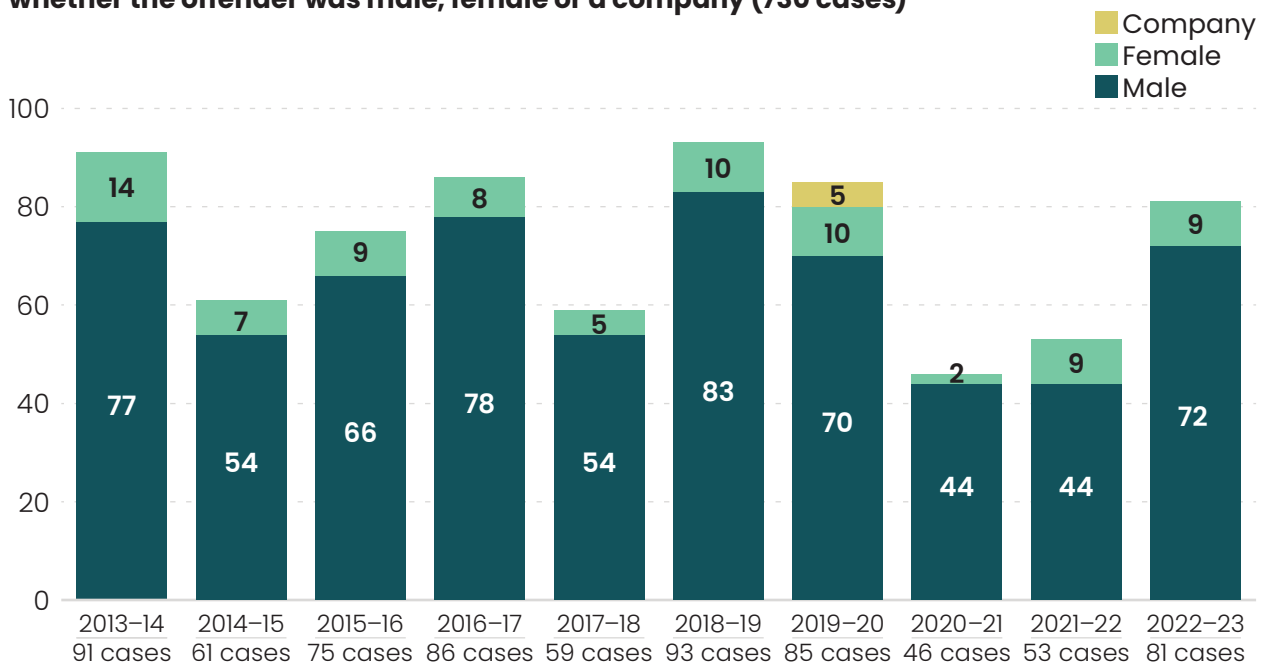
<sup>10</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Offence Index (NOI)* (abs.gov.au, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Classification Structure* (abs.gov.au, 2023).

# Supreme Court

In the 10 years to June 2023, there were 730 cases sentenced in the Supreme Court (Figure 1). The offender was male in 642 of those cases (87.9%), the offender was female in 83 cases (11.4%), and the offender was a company in 5 cases (0.7%).

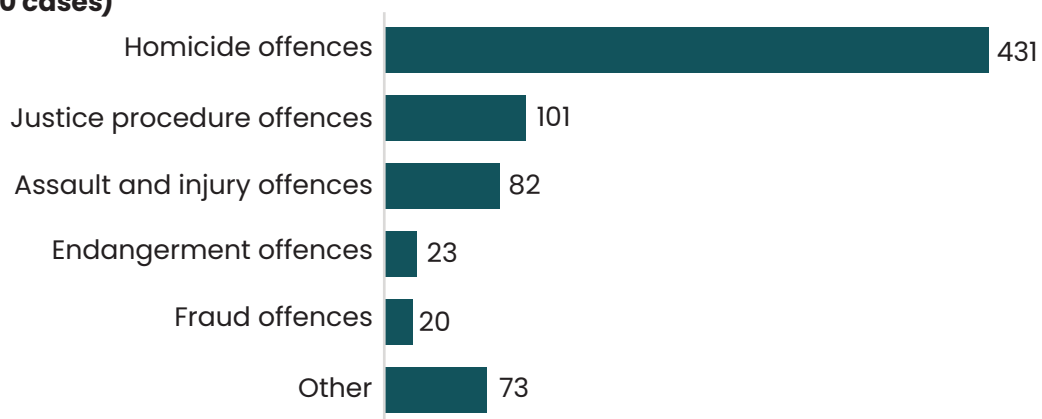
**Figure 1: Number of cases sentenced in the Supreme Court, by financial year and whether the offender was male, female or a company (730 cases)**



A homicide offence was the most common principal offence type sentenced in the Supreme Court (59.0% of cases) (Figure 2). Of the 431 homicide cases, the most common offence was murder (205 cases).<sup>12</sup>

**Murder was the most common homicide offence in the Supreme Court (205 cases)**

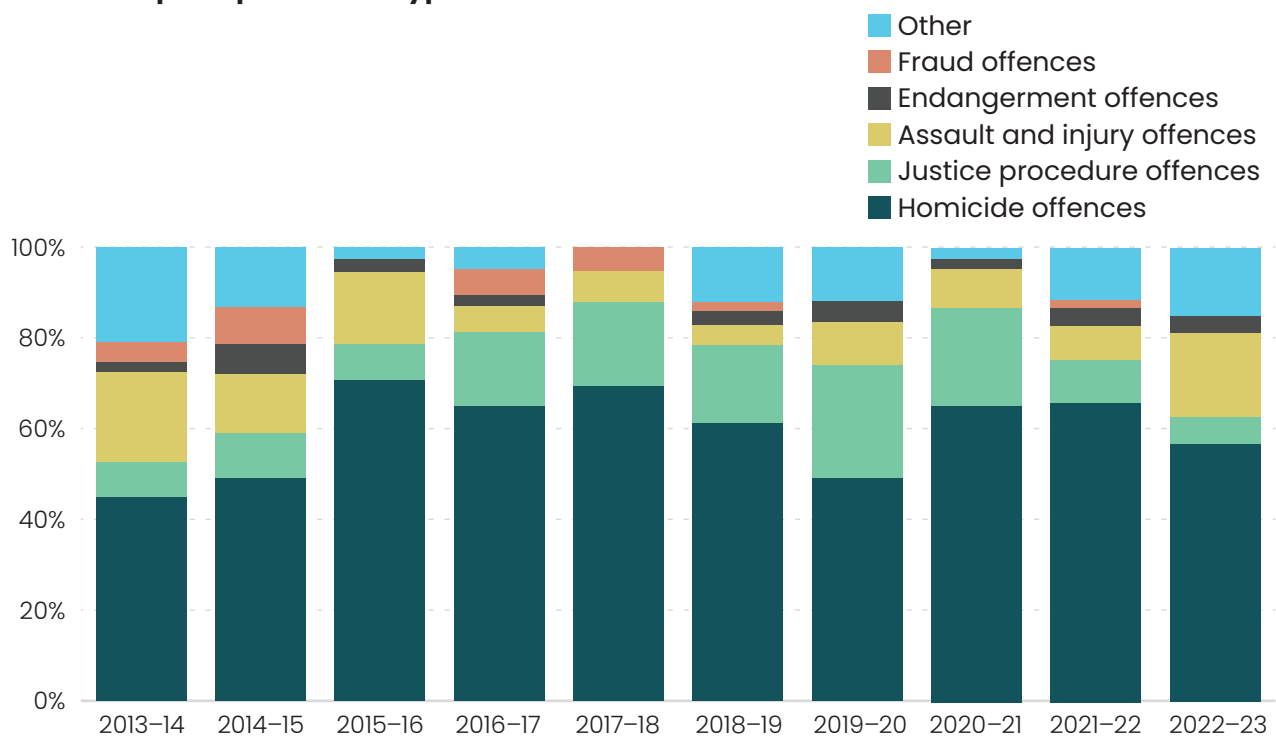
**Figure 2: Number of cases sentenced in the Supreme Court, by principal offence type (730 cases)**



<sup>12</sup> Murder is a common law offence, with a maximum penalty of life imprisonment: *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) s 3.

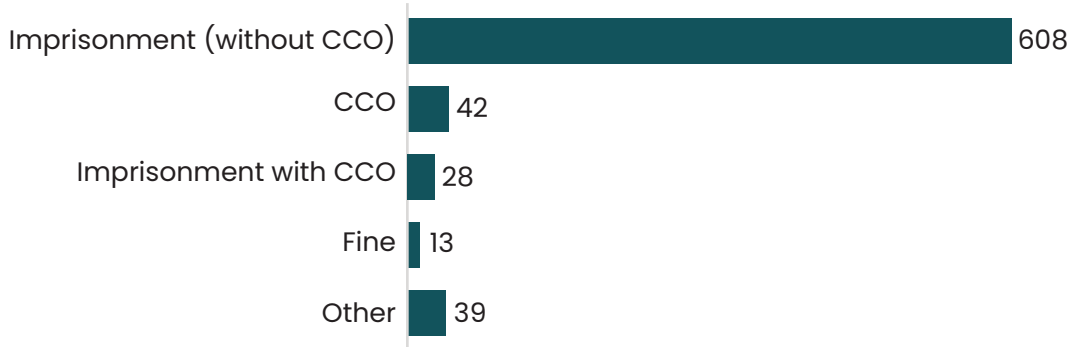
Homicide offences were the most common principal offence type each year, ranging from 45.1% of cases (in 2013–14) to 70.7% (in 2015–16) (Figure 3). From 2016–17 to 2021–22, justice procedure offences were the second most common principal offence type, ranging from 9.4% of cases (in 2021–22) to 24.7% (in 2019–20). In 2022–23, assault and injury offences were the second most common principal offence type (18.5%).

**Figure 3: Proportion of cases sentenced in the Supreme Court, by financial year and principal offence type**



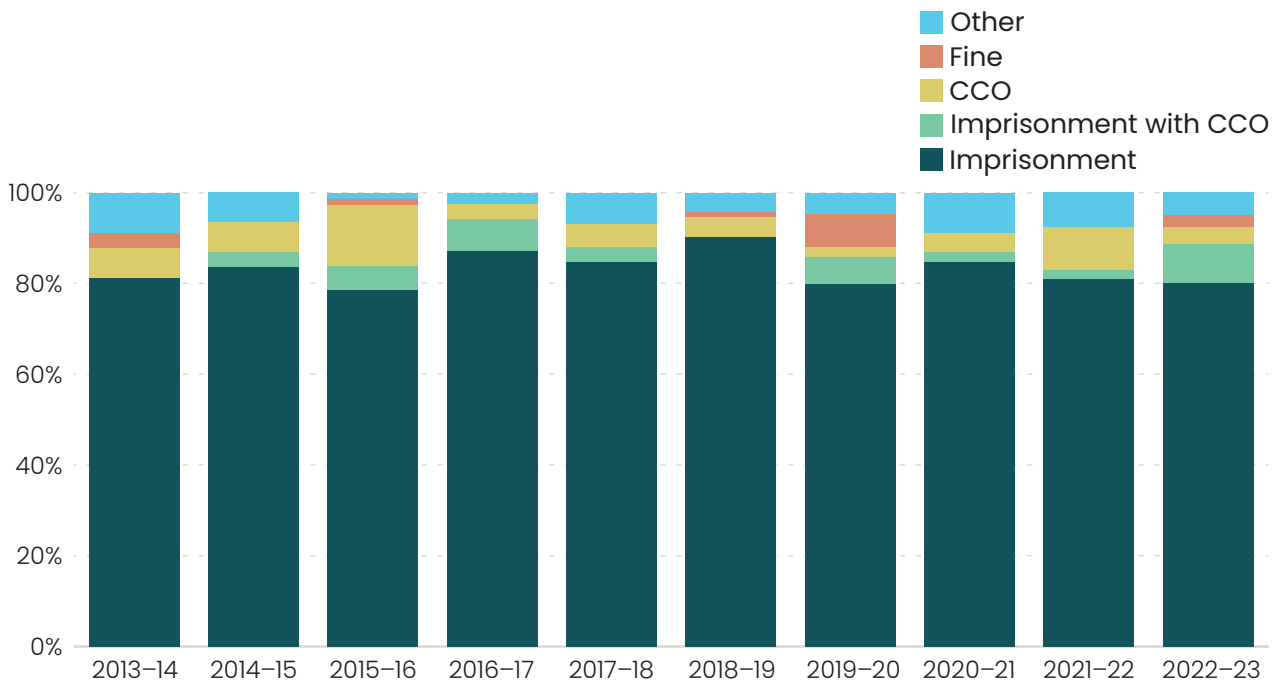
Imprisonment (without a CCO) was the most common principal sentence type in the Supreme Court (608 cases or 83.3%) (Figure 4). The remaining principal sentence types were CCOs (5.8% of cases), combined orders of imprisonment with a CCO (3.8%), fines (1.8%) and *other* sentence types (5.3%).<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 4: Principal sentence types in the Supreme Court (730 cases)**



During the 10-year period, the proportion of cases receiving imprisonment without a CCO ranged from 78.7% (in 2015–16) to 90.3% (in 2018–19) (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Principal sentence types in the Supreme Court, by financial year**

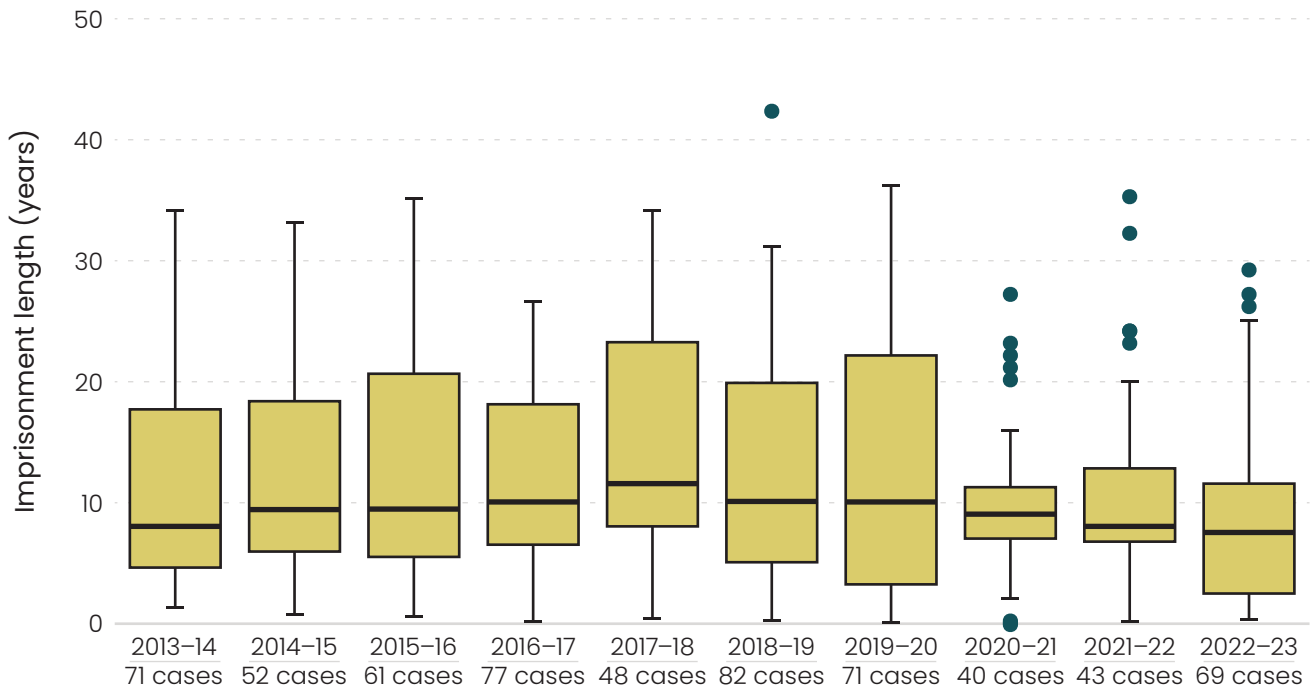


<sup>13</sup> The 39 *other* sentence types were 13 adjourned undertakings, 10 youth justice centre orders, 9 suspended sentences, 5 Commonwealth orders, 1 youth supervision order and 1 probation order.

Imprisonment (with and without a CCO) was imposed in 636 cases in the Supreme Court during the 10-year period. Figure 6 uses box plots to represent the range of imprisonment lengths for the total effective sentence in those cases, including the minimum, median and maximum imprisonment lengths imposed.<sup>14</sup>

Imprisonment lengths ranged from 10 days to life imprisonment.<sup>15</sup> The median length (excluding life sentences) was 9 years, and the average length (excluding life sentences) was 11 years and 9 months. The median length ranged from 7.5 years (in 2022–23) to 11.5 years (in 2017–18).

**Figure 6: Box plots of imprisonment lengths (excluding life sentences) in the Supreme Court, by financial year (614 cases)**



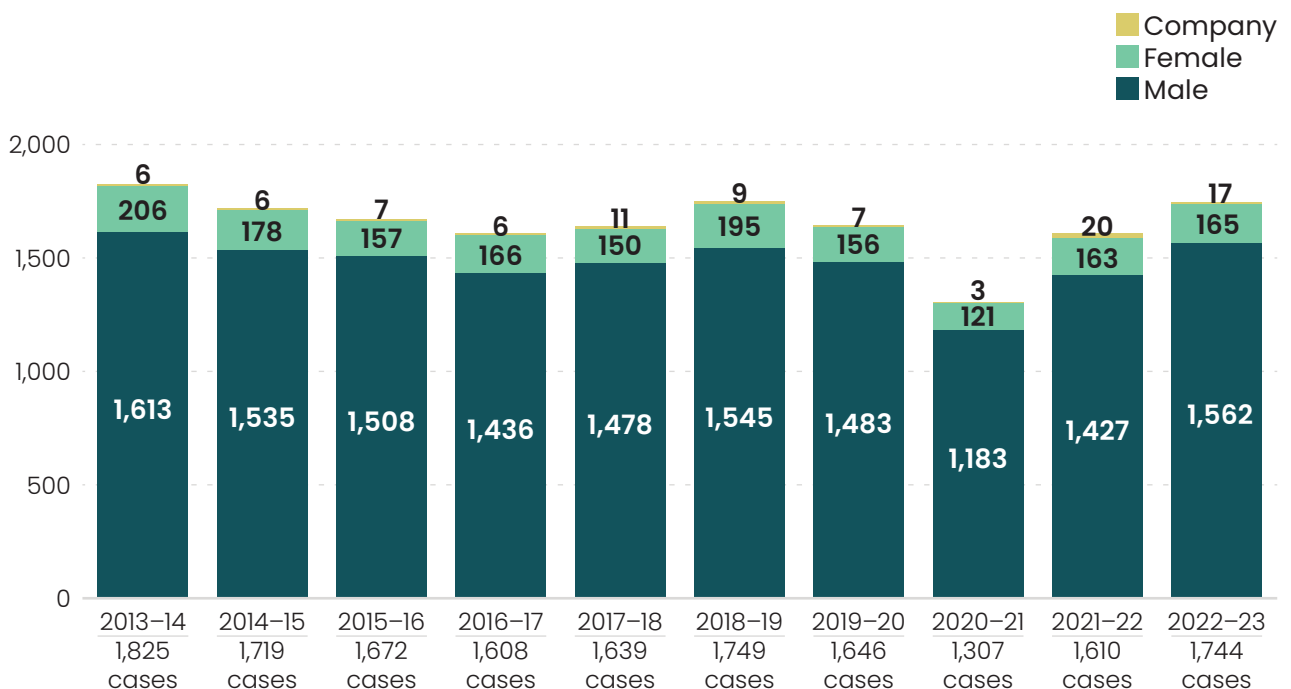
14 For an explanation of box plots, see 'Reading the data' below.

15 Life imprisonment was imposed in 22 cases, all of which involved a principal offence of murder.

## County Court

In the 10 years to June 2023, there were 16,600 cases sentenced in the County Court. The gender of the offender (or whether the offender was a company) could be determined for 16,519 cases (Figure 7). Of those, the offender was male in 14,770 cases (89.0%), the offender was female in 1,657 cases (10.0%), and the offender was a company in 92 cases (0.6%).

**Figure 7: Number of cases sentenced in the County Court, by financial year and whether the offender was male, female or a company (16,519 cases)<sup>16</sup>**



Sexual assault offences were the most common principal offence type in the County Court (19.2% of cases), followed by illicit drug offences (17.1%) and assault and injury offences (14.4%) (Figure 8, page 8). Of the 3,185 sexual assault cases, the most common offence was sexual penetration of a child aged 12 to under 16 years (561 cases).<sup>17</sup>

**Sexual penetration of a child aged 12 to under 16 years was the most common sexual assault offence in the County Court (561 cases)**

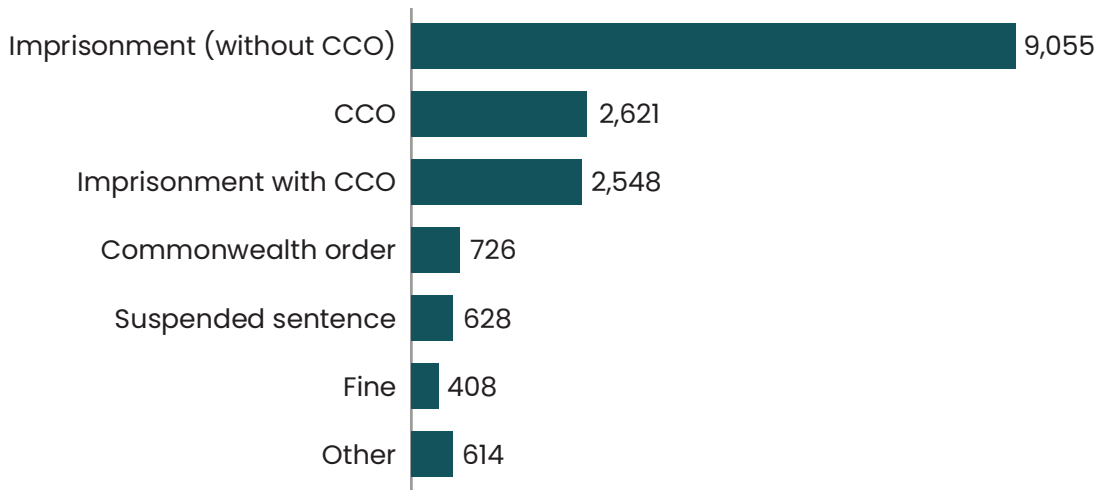
<sup>16</sup> Figure 7 excludes 81 cases where the gender or company status of the offender was unknown: 3 cases in 2015-16, 2 cases in 2017-18, 20 cases in 2018-19, 7 cases in 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22, and 35 cases in 2022-23.

<sup>17</sup> In this report, the offence of sexual penetration of a child aged 12 to under 16 years includes the offence of sexual penetration of a child aged between 10 and 16 (*Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) s 49(b), repealed), sexual penetration of a child aged between 12 and 16 (*Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) s 49(b)) and sexual penetration of a child aged between 12 and 16 under care, supervision or authority (*Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) s 45(2)(c), repealed).



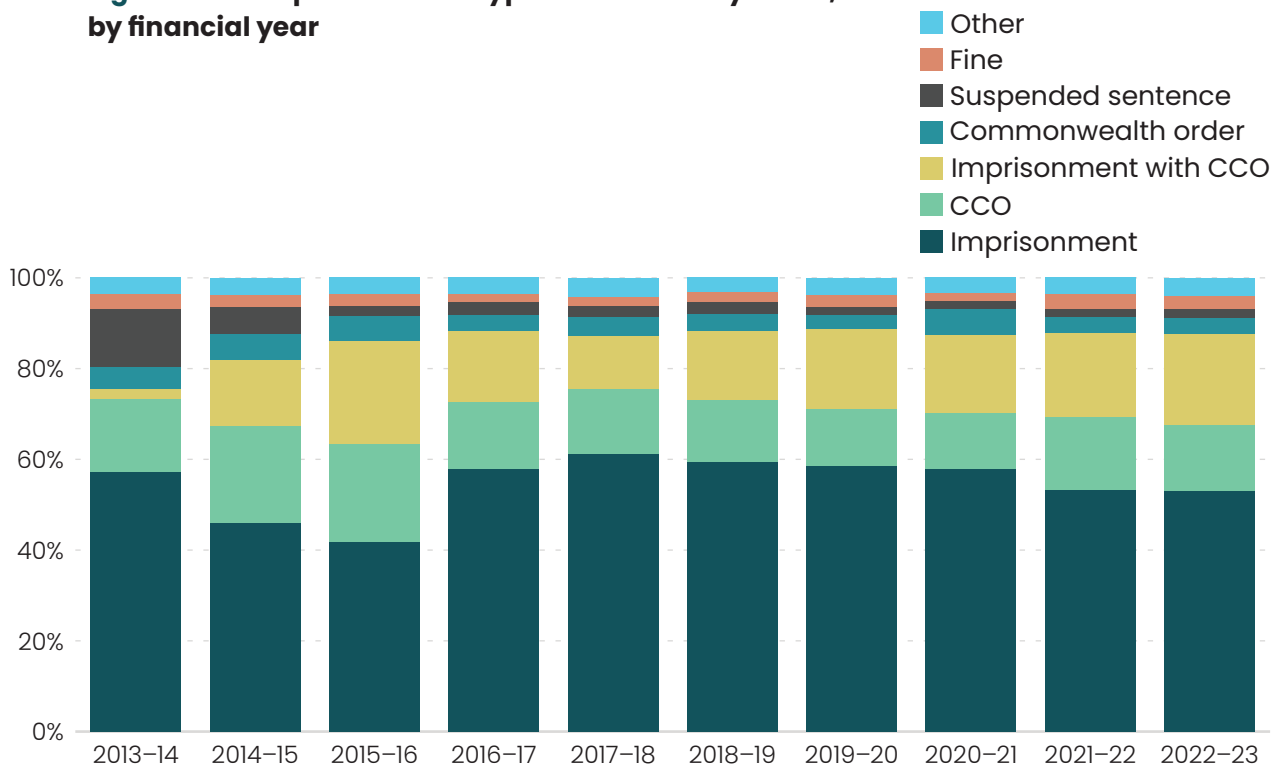
Imprisonment (without a CCO) was the most common principal sentence in the County Court (54.5% of cases) (Figure 10). The remaining principal sentences were CCOs (15.8% of cases), combined orders of imprisonment with a CCO (15.3%), Commonwealth orders (4.4%), suspended sentences (3.8%), fines (2.5%) and other sentence types (3.7%).<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 10: Principal sentence types in the County Court (16,600 cases)**



The proportion of cases receiving imprisonment without a CCO ranged from 41.9% (in 2015–16) to 61.2% (in 2017–18) (Figure 11).

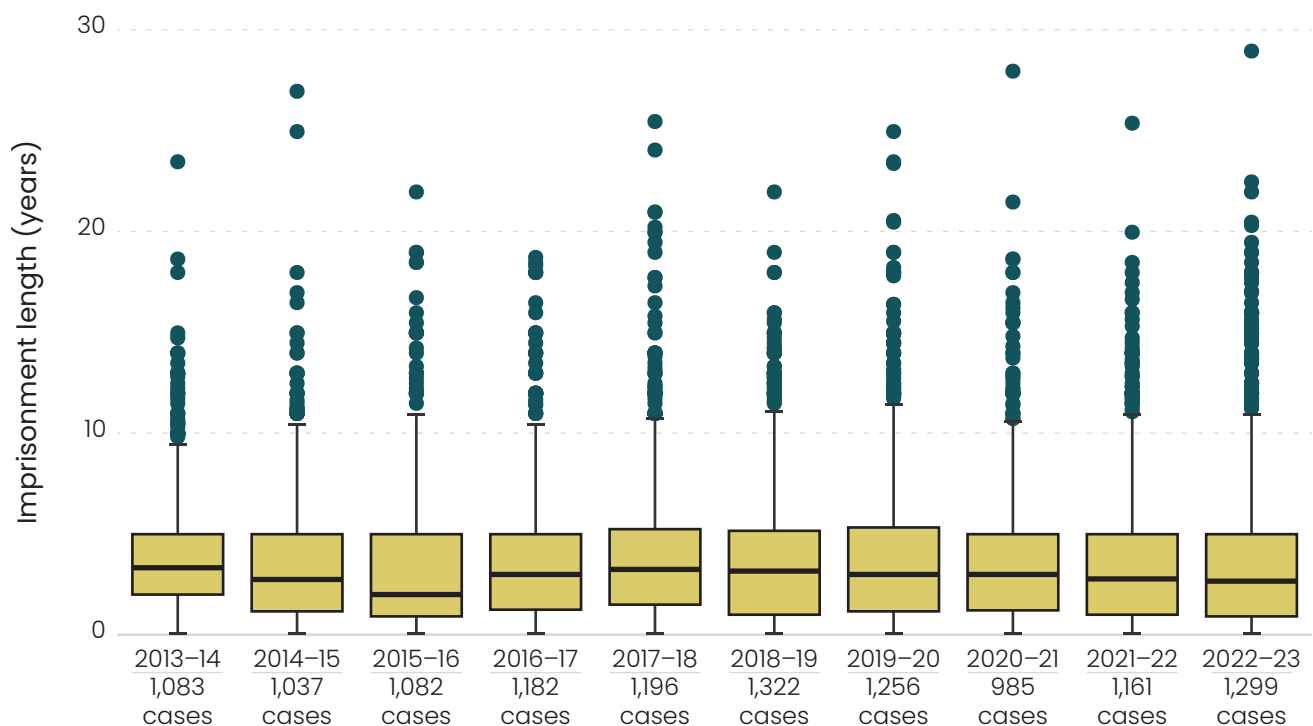
**Figure 11: Principal sentence types in the County Court, by financial year**



<sup>18</sup> The 614 *other* sentence types were 298 youth justice centre orders, 215 adjourned undertakings, 45 drug and alcohol treatment orders, 32 unconditional release orders, 14 discharges and dismissals, 4 residential treatment orders, 2 probation orders, 2 good behaviour bonds, 1 youth attendance order and 1 hospital security order.

Imprisonment (with and without a CCO) was imposed in 11,603 cases in the County Court during the 10-year period. Figure 12 uses box plots to represent the range of imprisonment lengths for the total effective sentence in those cases, including the minimum, median and maximum imprisonment lengths imposed.<sup>19</sup> Imprisonment lengths ranged from 1 day to 29 years<sup>20</sup> (Figure 12). The median length was 3 years, and the average length was 3 years and 8 months. Imprisonment lengths were less than or equal to 5 years in 75.9% of cases (8,806 cases of the 11,603 that received imprisonment).

**Figure 12: Box plots of imprisonment lengths in the County Court, by financial year (11,603 cases)**



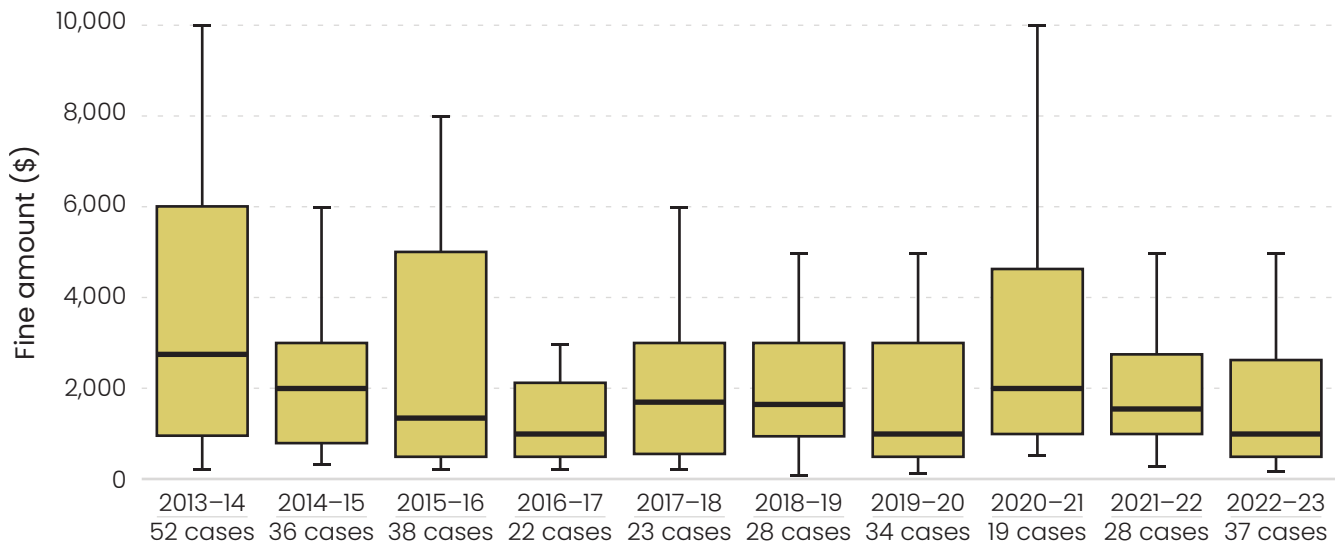
19 For an explanation of box plots, see 'Reading the data' below.

20 A sentence of 29 years' imprisonment was imposed in *DPP v Hu* [2023] VCC 739 for rape and a number of other offences. The second longest sentence of 28 years' imprisonment was imposed in *DPP v Henderson (a pseudonym)* [2021] VCC 17 for various child sex offences.

A fine was the principal sentence in 408 cases in the County Court during the 10-year period. In 317 of those cases, the offender was an individual, and in 91 cases, the offender was a company. Fine amounts for individuals and companies are considered separately because maximum penalties for companies are typically 5 times greater than maximum penalties for individuals.<sup>21</sup>

The fines imposed on individuals ranged from \$50 to \$180,000.<sup>22</sup> The median fine for individuals was \$2,000, and the average fine was \$6,823. The median fine for individuals ranged from \$1,000 (in 2016–17 and 2022–23) to \$2,750 (in 2013–14) (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Box plots of fine amounts for individuals in the County Court, by financial year (317 cases)**



The fines imposed on companies ranged from \$8,000 to \$2,980,000.<sup>23</sup> The median fine was \$300,000, and the average fine was \$371,308.<sup>24</sup>

21 *Sentencing Act 1991* (Vic) s 113D(1).

22 A fine of \$180,000 was imposed on one offender in *DPP v Fergusson* [2017] VCC 1276 (the offender was sentenced for a workplace health and safety offence that had resulted in a workplace fatality).

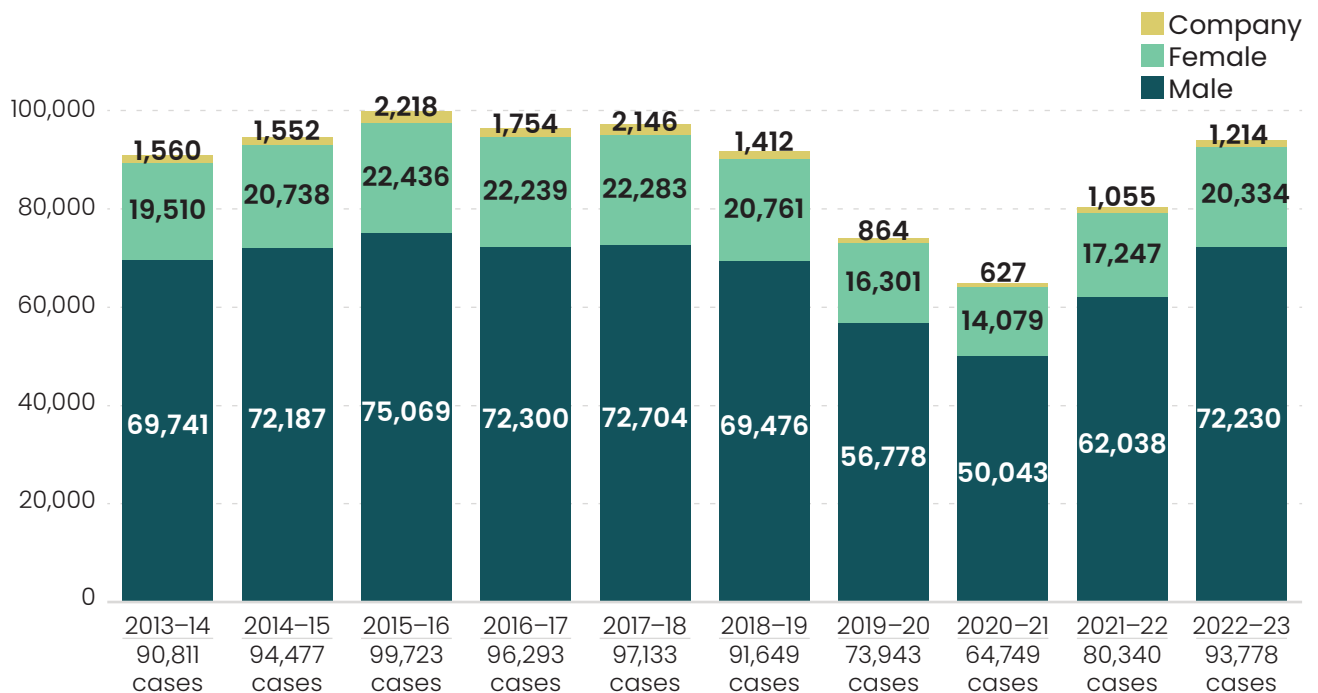
23 In *DPP v Bradbury Industrial Services Pty Ltd* [2023] VCC 1029, a company received a combination of fines for offences contrary to the *Dangerous Goods Act 1985* (Vic), the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (Vic) and the *Environmental Protection Act 1970* (Vic), totalling \$2,980,000. The second highest fine that a company received was \$1,710,000, which was imposed in *The Queen v Avanteos Investments Ltd* [2022] VCC 869 for offences contrary to the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth).

24 Box plots were not provided for companies as there was not a sufficient number of fines each year to identify a meaningful trend.

# Magistrates' Court

In the 10 years to 30 June 2023, there were 882,896 cases sentenced in the Magistrates' Court (Figure 14). Of those 882,896 cases, the offender was male in 672,566 cases (76.2%), female in 195,928 cases (22.2%) and a company in 14,402 cases (1.6%).

**Figure 14: Number of cases sentenced in the Magistrates' Court, by financial year and whether the offender was male, female or a company (882,896 cases)**



Traffic and vehicle offences were the most common principal offence type sentenced in the Magistrates' Court (41.6% of cases) (Figure 15, page 13).

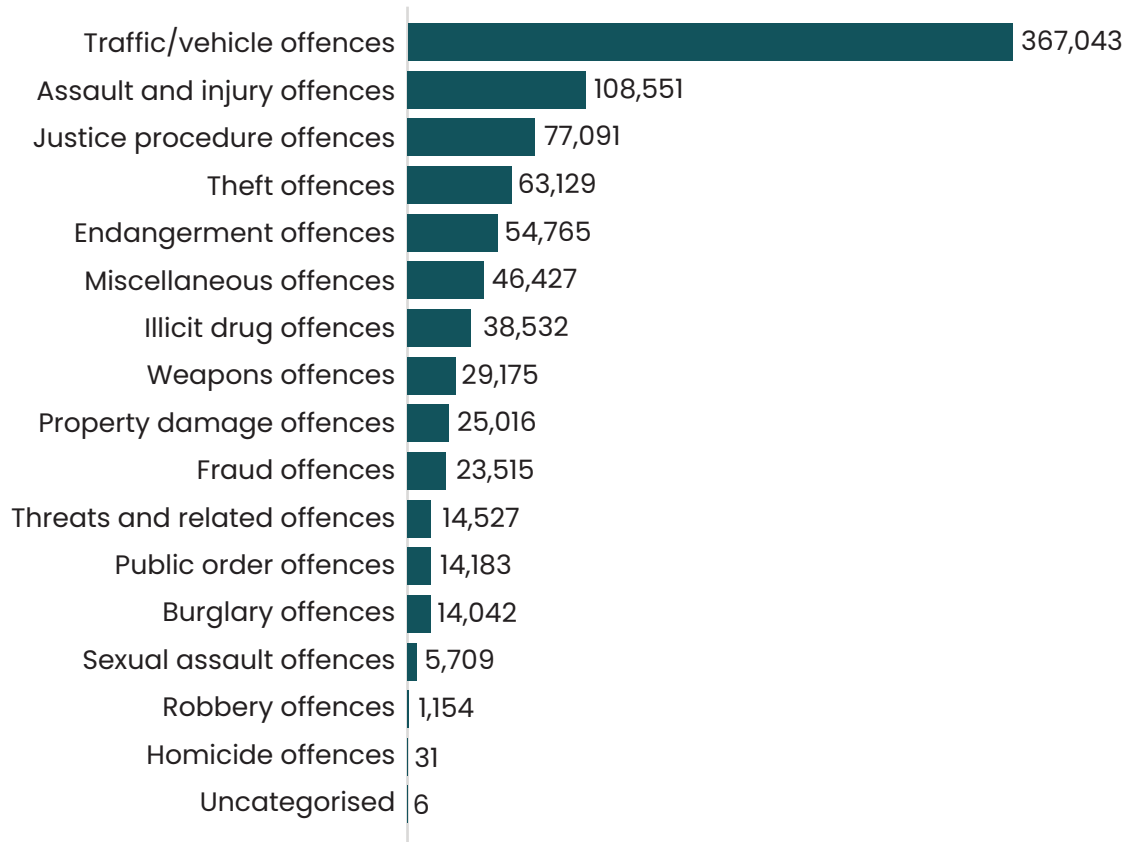
Of the 367,043 traffic and vehicle cases, the most common offence was driving while suspended (67,560 cases).<sup>25</sup>

Traffic and vehicle offences were the most common principal offence type each year, ranging from 38.4% of cases (in 2019-20) to 45.4% of cases (in 2015-16) (Figure 16, page 13). Assault and injury offences were the second most common principal offence type (between 11.3% and 14.0% of cases each year).

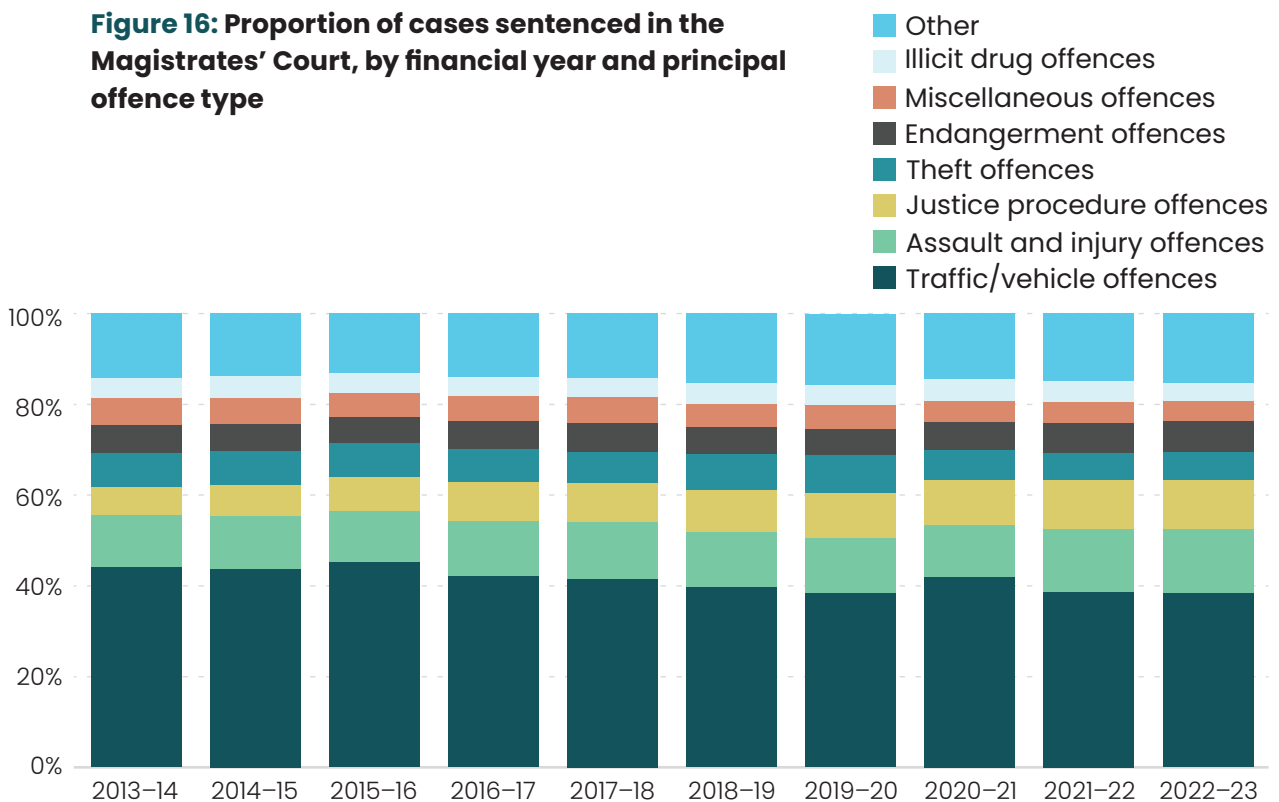
**Driving while suspended was the most common traffic and vehicle offence in the Magistrates' Court (67,560 cases)**

<sup>25</sup> Road Safety Act 1986 (Vic) s 30. The maximum penalty for driving while suspended is 240 penalty units or 2 years' imprisonment.

**Figure 15: Number of cases sentenced in the Magistrates’ Court, by principal offence type (882,896 cases)<sup>26</sup>**



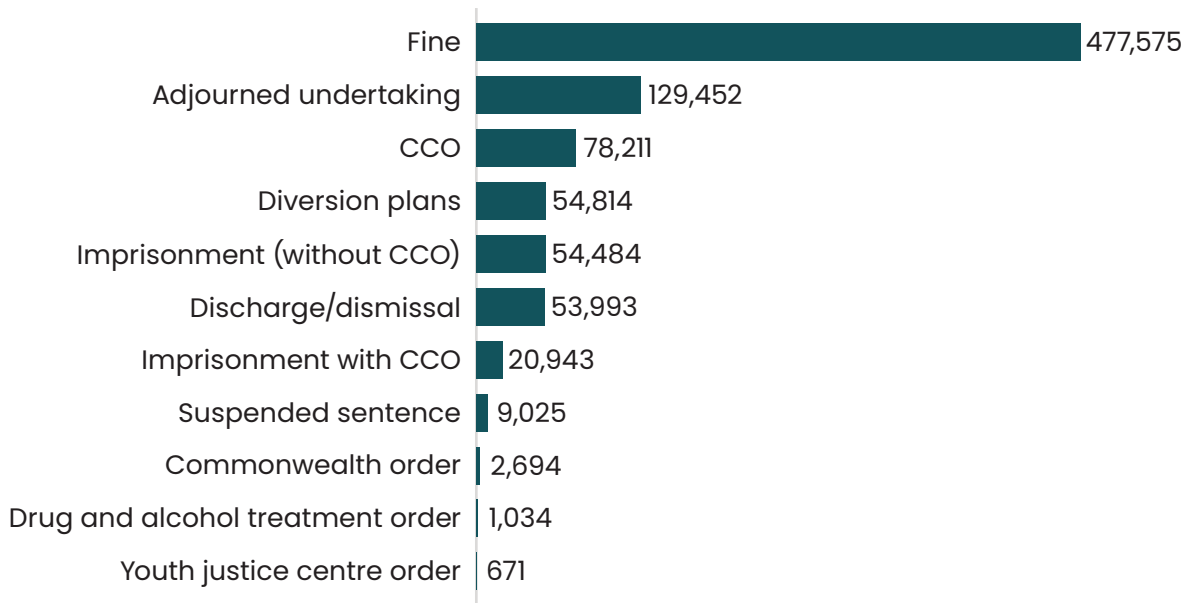
**Figure 16: Proportion of cases sentenced in the Magistrates’ Court, by financial year and principal offence type**



<sup>26</sup> The 31 homicide offences sentenced in the Magistrates’ Court were dog attack causing death (24 cases), incite suicide (3 cases), dangerous driving causing death (3 cases) and aid and abet suicide (1 case). It was not possible to determine the principal offence type for 6 Magistrates’ Court cases during the 10-year period.

A fine was the most common principal sentence type in the Magistrates’ Court (54.1% of cases) (Figure 17). The remaining principal sentence types were adjourned undertakings (14.7% of cases), CCOs (8.9%), diversion plans (6.2%), imprisonment without a CCO (6.2%), discharges and dismissals (6.1%), combined orders of imprisonment with a CCO (2.4%), suspended sentences (1.0%), Commonwealth orders (0.3%), drug and alcohol treatment orders (0.1%) and youth justice centre orders (0.1%).

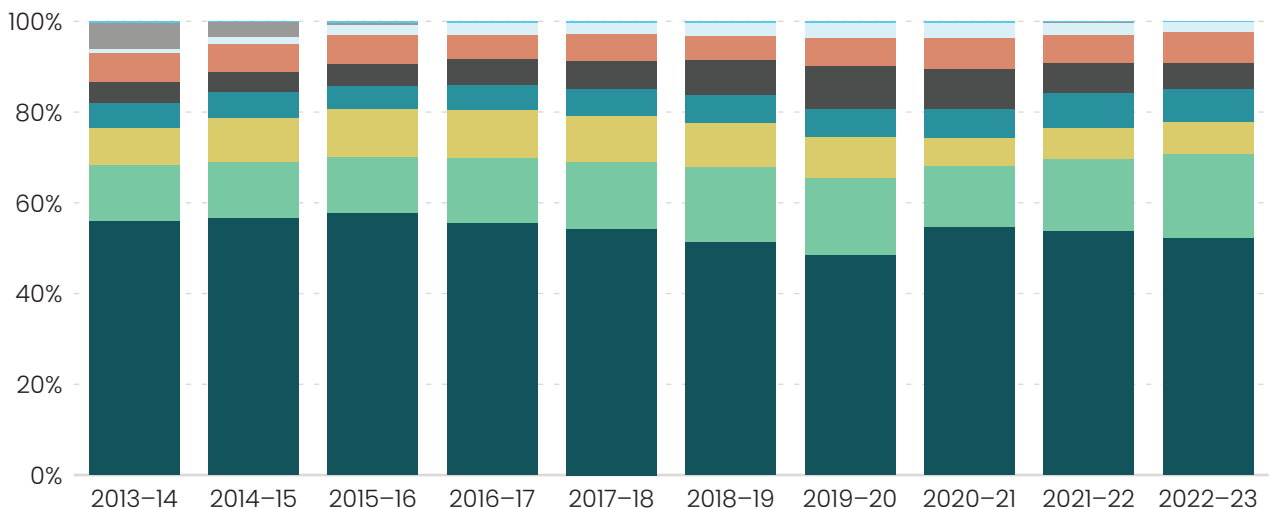
**Figure 17: Principal sentence types in the Magistrates’ Court (882,896 cases)**



The proportion of cases receiving a fine ranged from 48.4% (in 2019–20) to 57.6% (in 2015–16) (Figure 18).

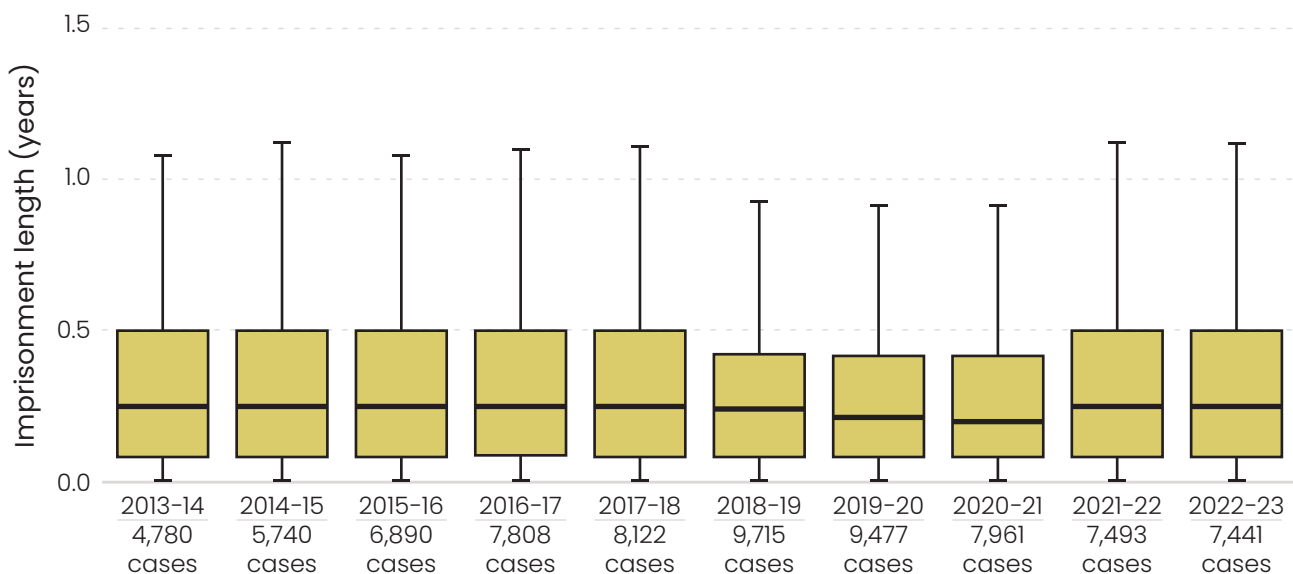
**Figure 18: Principal sentence types in the Magistrates’ Court, by financial year**

- Other
- Suspended sentence
- Imprisonment with CCO
- Discharge/dismissal
- Imprisonment
- Diversion plan
- CCO
- Adjourned undertaking
- Fine



Imprisonment (with and without a CCO) was the principal sentence in 75,427 cases in the Magistrates' Court during the 10-year period. Figure 19 uses box plots to represent the range of imprisonment lengths for the total effective sentence in those cases, including the minimum, median and maximum imprisonment lengths imposed.<sup>27</sup> Imprisonment lengths ranged from 1 day to 5 years.<sup>28</sup> The median length was 3 months, and the average length was 4.5 months. The median length was 3 months in all years except 2019–20 and 2020–21, when it was 2.4 and 2.6 months respectively.

**Figure 19: Box plots of imprisonment lengths in the Magistrates' Court, by financial year (75,427 cases)<sup>29</sup>**



A fine was the principal sentence in 477,575 cases in the Magistrates' Court during the 10-year period. These fines were imposed on 465,116 individuals and 12,459 companies.<sup>30</sup> Maximum penalties for companies are typically 5 times greater than the maximum penalties for individuals.<sup>31</sup> In the Magistrates' Court, the jurisdictional limit for fines also varies by whether the offender is an individual or a company: fines can be up to 500 penalty units for an individual (\$98,795 in 2024–25) and 2,500 penalty units for a company (\$493,975 in 2024–25).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For an explanation of box plots, see 'Reading the data' below.

<sup>28</sup> The jurisdictional limit in the Magistrates' Court is 5 years' imprisonment: *Sentencing Act 1991* (Vic) s 113B. A sentence of 5 years' imprisonment was imposed in 1 case in the Magistrates' Court.

<sup>29</sup> Statistical outliers have been removed from this graph to improve readability.

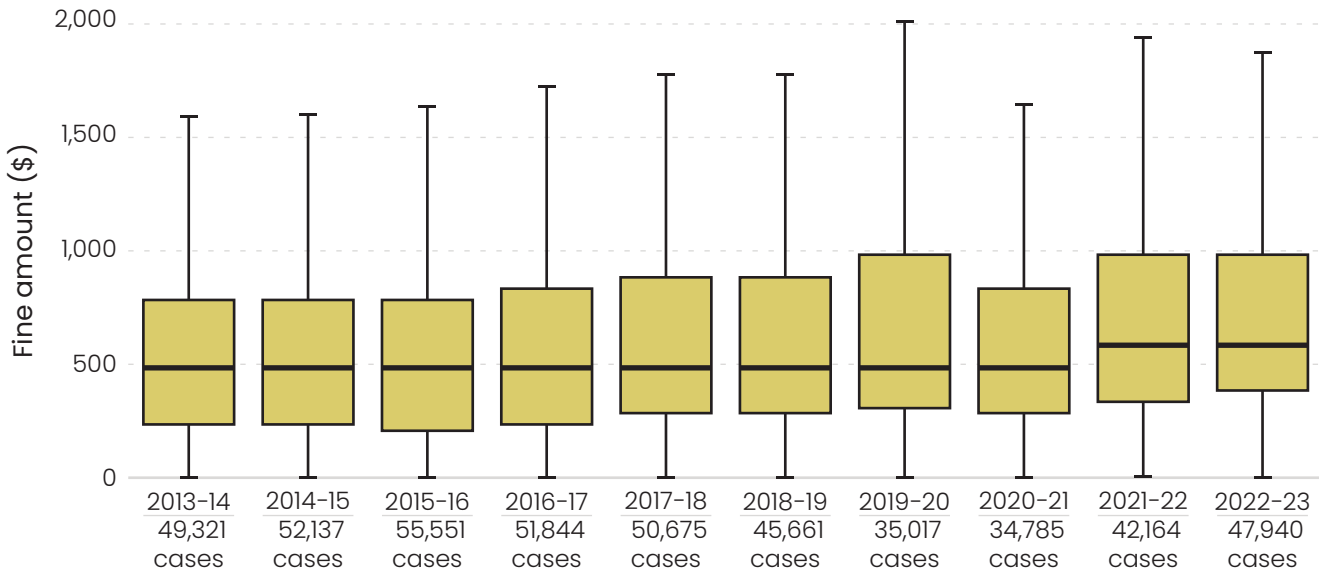
<sup>30</sup> In reporting on the values of these fines, we excluded 1 fine imposed on a company and 21 fines imposed on individuals because we were unable to verify the fine amounts.

<sup>31</sup> *Sentencing Act 1991* (Vic) s 113D(1).

<sup>32</sup> *Sentencing Act 1991* (Vic) ss 112A, 113D(1A).

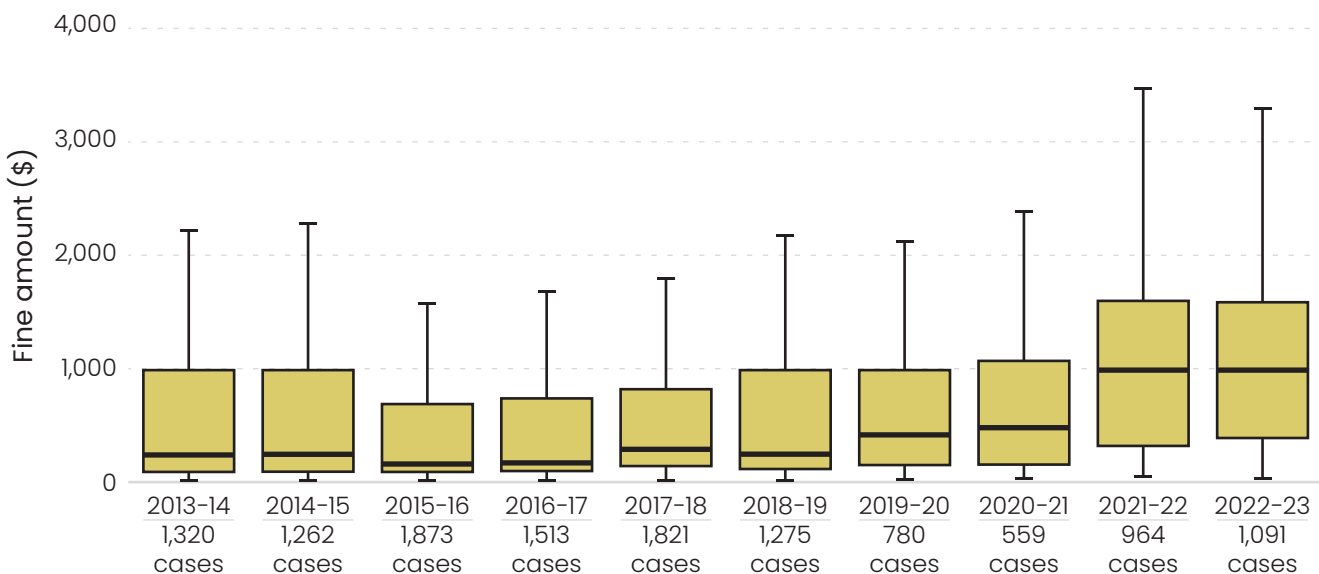
The fines imposed on individuals ranged from \$7.80 to \$255,000. The median fine was \$500, and the average fine was \$731.80. The median fine for individuals was \$500 each year except in 2021–22 and 2022–23, when the median fine was \$600 (Figure 20).

**Figure 20: Box plots of fine amounts for individuals in the Magistrates’ Court, by financial year (465,095 cases)**



The fines imposed on companies ranged from \$10 to \$850,000. The median fine for companies was \$500, and the average fine was \$3,852. The median fine for companies ranged from \$200 (in 2015–16) to \$1,000 (in 2021–22 and 2022–23) (Figure 21).

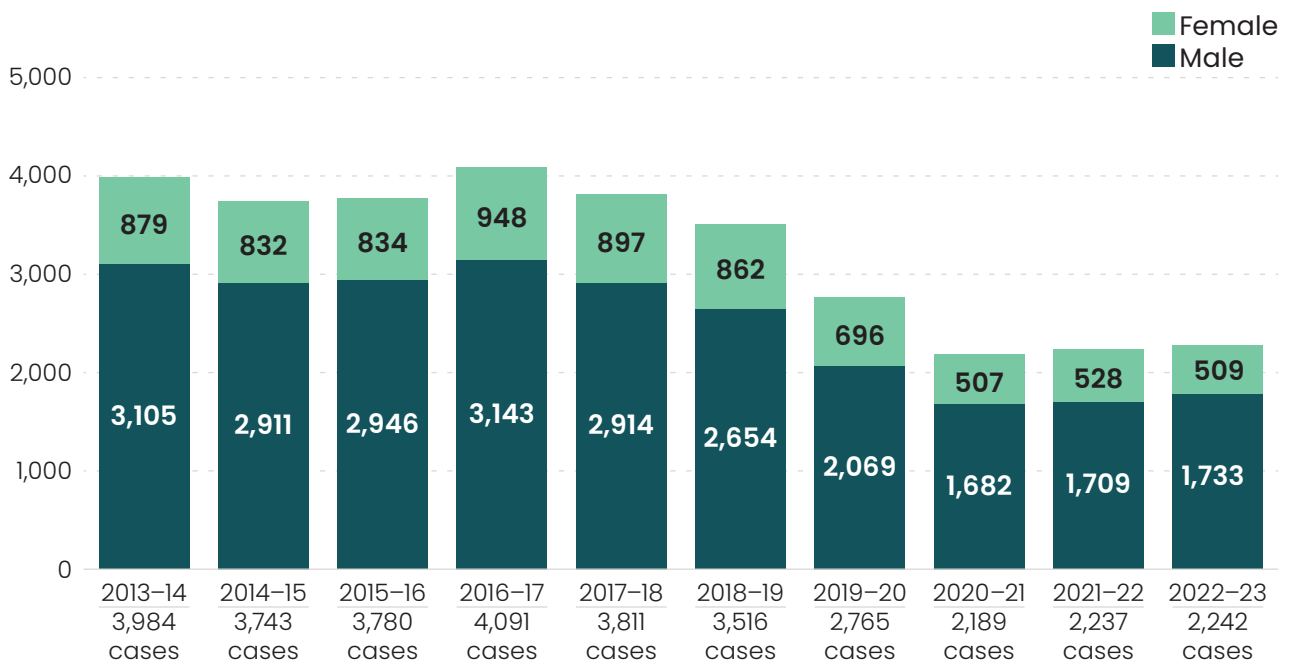
**Figure 21: Box plots of fine amounts for companies in the Magistrates’ Court, by financial year (12,458 cases)**



## Children's Court

In the 10 years to June 2023, there were 32,358 cases sentenced in the Children's Court (Figure 22). In 24,866 of those cases (76.8%), the children and young people were male, and in 7,492 cases (23.2%), the children and young people were female.

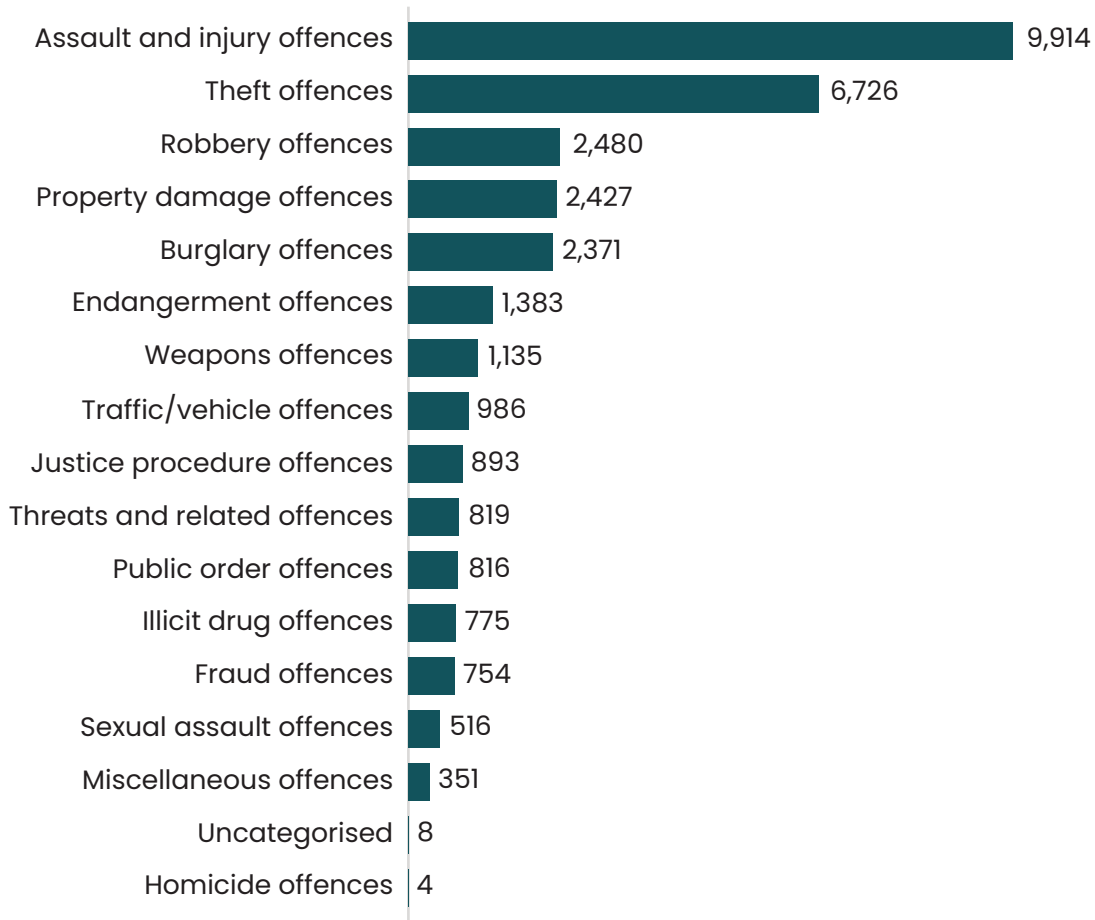
**Figure 22: Number of cases sentenced in the Children's Court (32,358 cases)**



Assault and injury offences were the most common principal offence types in the Children's Court (30.6% of cases), followed by theft offences (20.8%) (Figure 23, page 18). Of the 9,914 assault and injury cases, the most common offence was unlawful assault (3,739 cases).

**Unlawful assault was the most common assault and injury offence in the Children's Court (3,739 cases)**

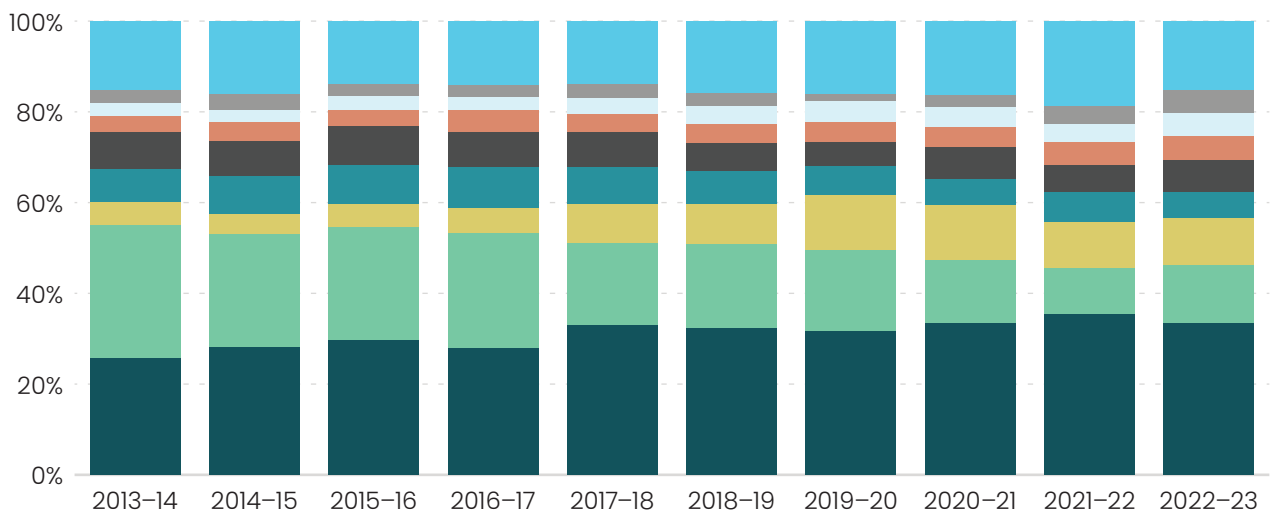
**Figure 23: Number of cases sentenced in the Children’s Court, by principal offence type (32,358 cases)**



Assault and injury offences were the most common offence type each year, ranging from 25.8% of cases (in 2013–14) to 35.5% (in 2021–22) (Figure 24).

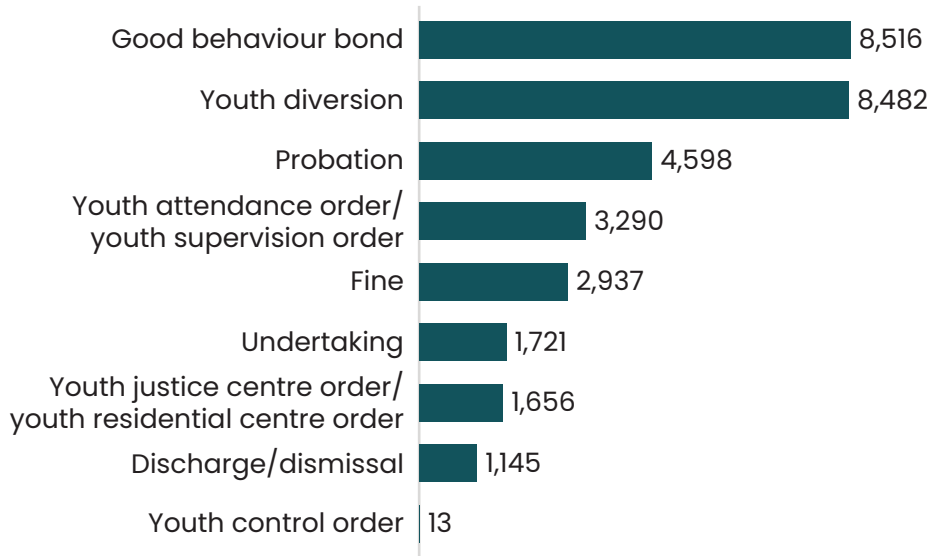
**Figure 24: Proportion of cases sentenced in the Children’s Court, by financial year and principal offence type**

- Other
- Traffic/vehicle offences
- Weapons offences
- Endangerment offences
- Burglary offences
- Property damage offences
- Robbery offences
- Theft offences
- Assault and injury offences



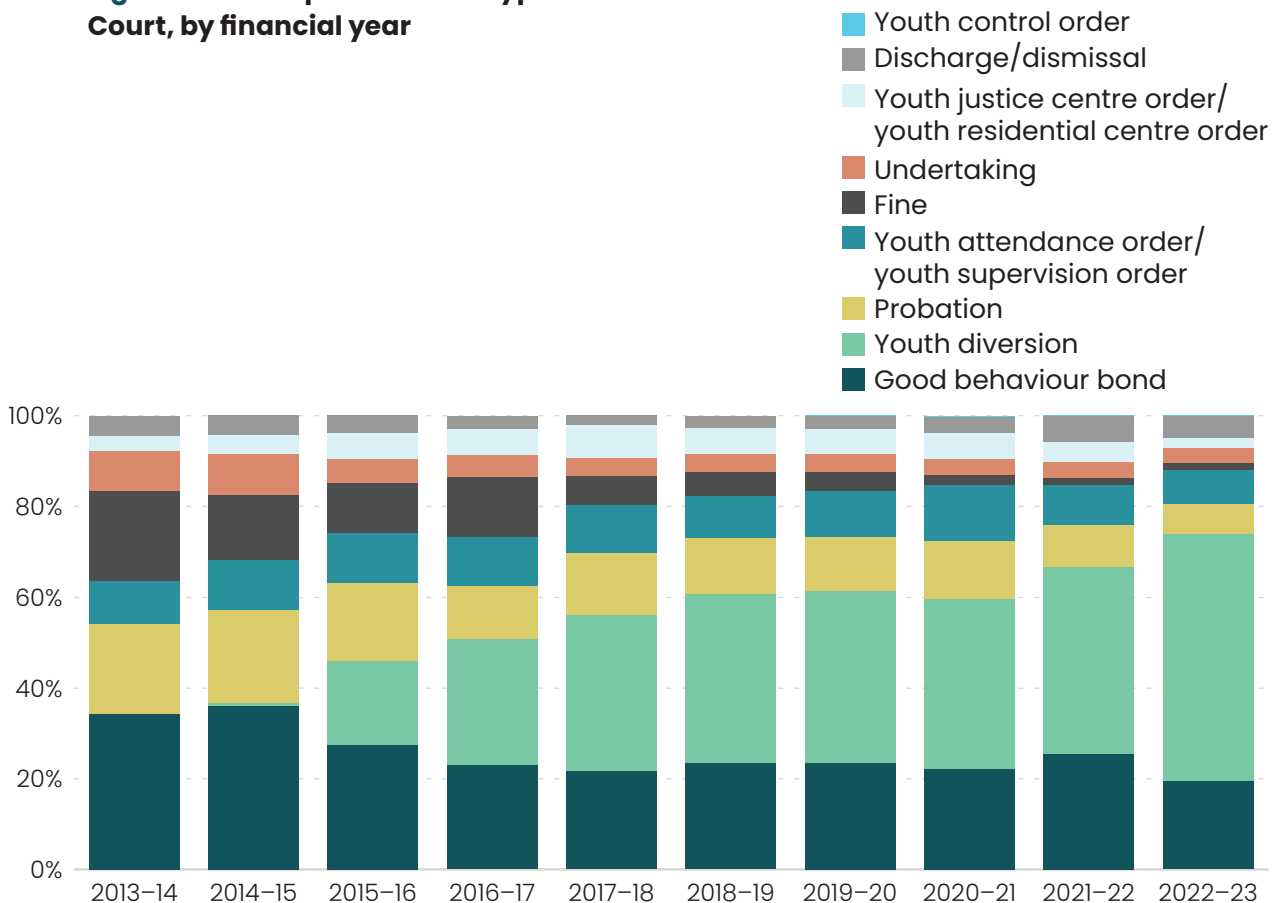
A good behaviour bond was the most common principal sentence in the Children’s Court (8,516 cases or 26.3%) (Figure 25).

**Figure 25: Principal sentence types in the Children’s Court (32,358 cases)**



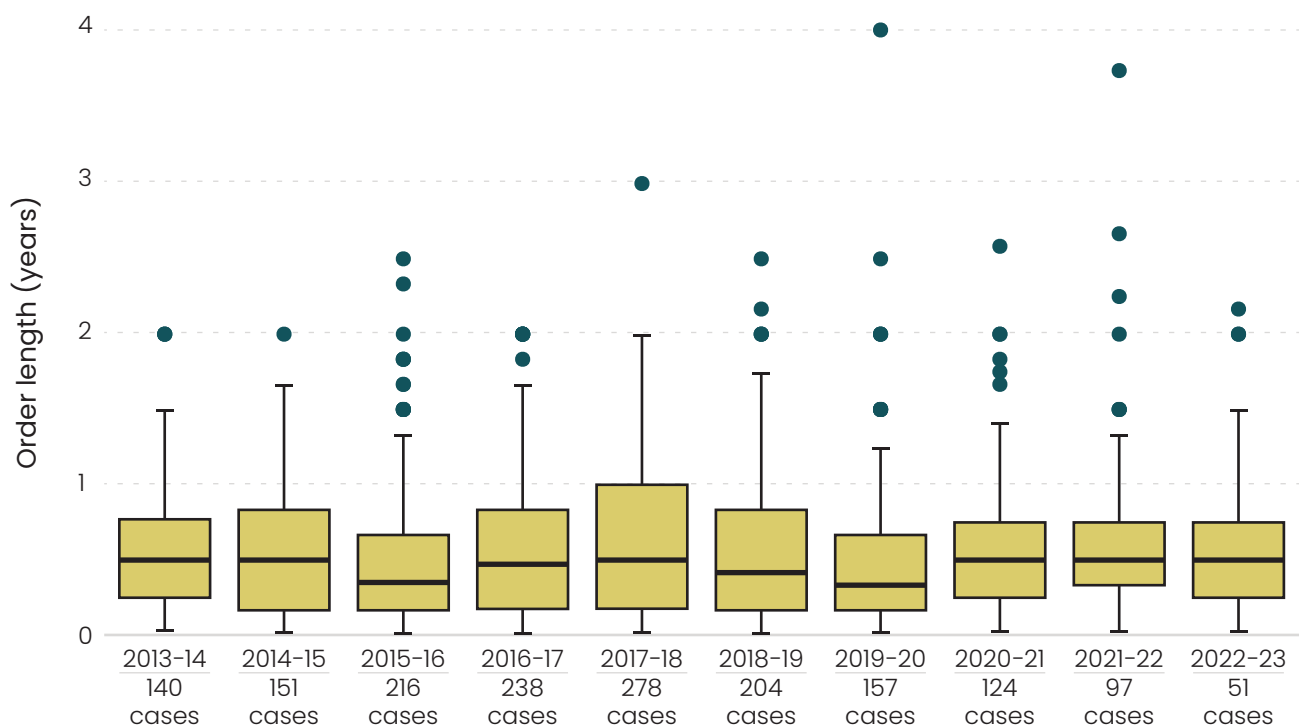
Good behaviour bonds were also the most common sentence each year from 2013–14 to 2015–16. Since then, however, youth diversion has been the most common principal sentence in the Children’s Court and accounted for 1,215 (54.2%) of the 2,242 cases sentenced in 2022–23 (Figure 26).

**Figure 26: Principal sentence types in the Children’s Court, by financial year**



A youth justice centre order or youth residential centre order was imposed in 1,656 cases in the Children’s Court during the 10-year period. Figure 27 uses box plots to represent the range of youth justice centre order and youth residential centre order lengths in those cases, including the minimum, median and maximum lengths imposed.<sup>33</sup> Order lengths ranged from 1 day to 4 years.<sup>34</sup> The median length was 6 months, and the average length was 6 months and 3 weeks. The median length ranged from 4 months (in 2019–20) to 6 months (in 2013–14, 2014–15, 2017–18 and 2020–21 to 2022–23).

**Figure 27: Box plots of youth justice centre order and youth residential centre order lengths in the Children’s Court, by financial year (1,656 cases)**

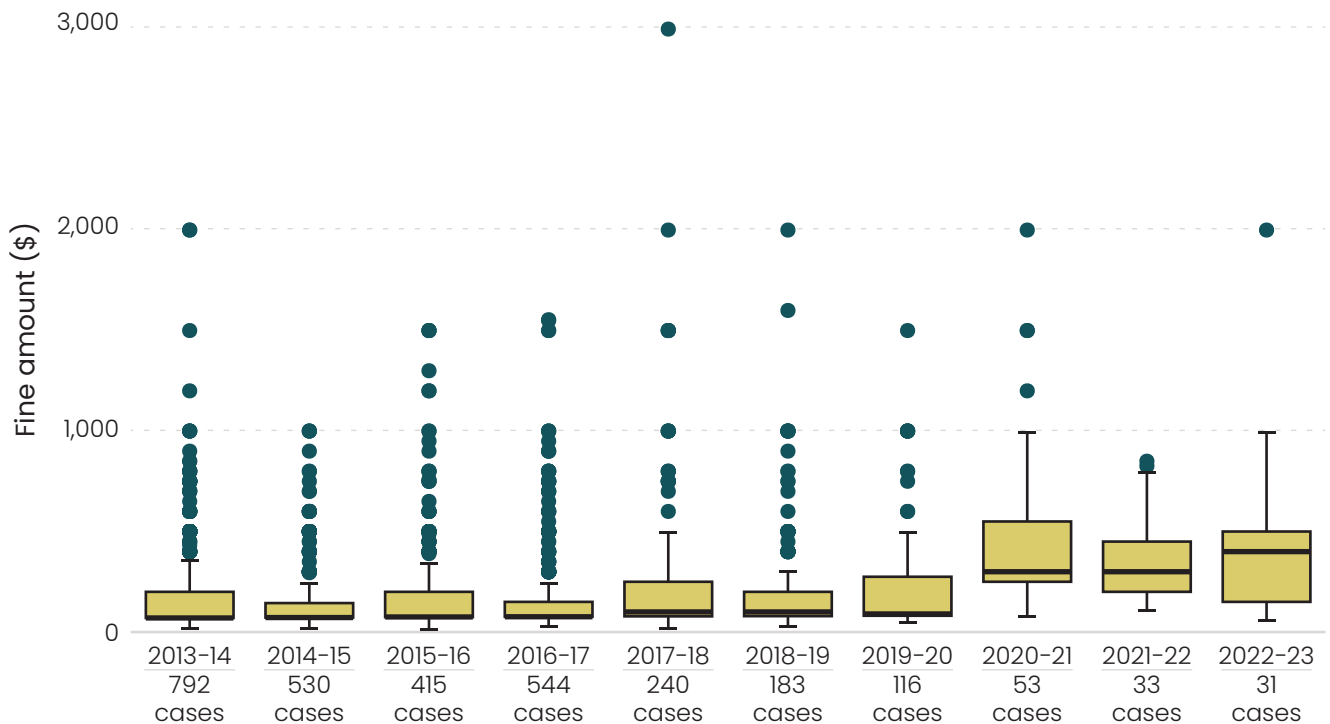


33 For an explanation of box plots, see ‘Reading the data’ below.

34 The maximum period of a youth justice centre order is 4 years: *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic) s 413(3)(b). A 4-year youth justice centre order was imposed in just 1 case in the Children’s Court.

A fine was the principal sentence in 2,937 cases in the Children’s Court during the 10-year period.<sup>35</sup> The maximum fine that can be imposed in the Children’s Court is 5 penalty units per offence (or the maximum fine that an adult can receive for the same offence if that amount is less than 5 penalty units).<sup>36</sup> Fine amounts ranged from \$5 to \$3,000.<sup>37</sup> The median fine was \$79, and the average fine was \$194 (Figure 28).

**Figure 28: Box plots of fine amounts in the Children’s Court, by financial year (2,704 cases)**



35 There were 233 cases where the fine amount could not be determined.

36 *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic) s 373(a).

37 One child or young person was sentenced to an aggregate fine of \$3,000 for 7 offences.

# Reading the data

## Counting rules

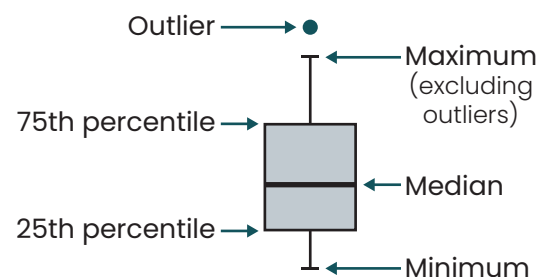
This report presents data on the number of cases sentenced in the Victorian courts. For case data, the counting rule for principal proven offences counts just one charge per case: the offence that received the most severe sentence within a case (or the most serious offence according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' National Offence Index if multiple offences received an equally severe sentence). This counting rule is useful for understanding the number of people sentenced and for understanding how their most serious offence is usually sentenced. Our SACStat database includes the prevalence of different offences at a charge level (i.e. SACStat includes all principal and non-principal offences).

This report excludes custodial or non-custodial supervision orders for people who have been found not guilty because of mental impairment or found guilty at a special hearing, and it excludes unconditional release orders under the *Crimes (Mental Impairment and Unfitness to Be Tried) Act 1997 (Vic)*.

Although not classified as a 'sentence', diversion plans have been included in this report due to the critical role they play as an outcome for people who become involved in the criminal justice system.

## Box plots

A box plot (also known as a box-and-whisker plot) shows key points in the distribution of a series of numbers, including:



- the median, represented by the horizontal line within each box. Half of all values in that distribution are above the median, and half are below
- the 25th percentile, represented by the bottom line of the box. This is the value that 25% of the values in the distribution fall below
- the 75th percentile, represented by the top line of the box. This is the value that 75% of the values in the distribution fall below.

Apart from some values, which are statistical outliers,<sup>38</sup> the full range of the data (from the smallest to the largest value) is represented by the tips of the vertical lines ('whiskers') extending from the box.

## Fine amounts

In this report, fine data is presented in dollar amounts. Maximum fines for offences are, however, set by reference to a particular number of penalty units. Penalty units in Victoria are indexed annually by the Victorian Treasurer, increasing from \$100 in 2003–04 to \$197.59 in 2024–25.<sup>39</sup>

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38 Outliers are based on a standard measure: a value beyond the 75th percentile by more than 1.5 times the interquartile range (for moderate outliers) or 3 times the interquartile range (extreme outliers). See John Tukey, *Exploratory Data Analysis* (1977) 43–44.

39 Sentencing Advisory Council, 'Fine' ([sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au](https://sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au), 2024).

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