

Australian Climate

There is growing evidence that participation in community activities is associated with less psychological distress¹ and good mental health,² higher levels of self-reported personal wellbeing^{3 4} and neighbourhood wellbeing.⁵

When young people experience a 'combination of problems, such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime and family breakdown', these problems can prevent social inclusion and can be reinforced through generations.⁶

Social exclusion during adolescence is known to impose significant and ongoing economic and social costs for individuals and our broader society.

Significant factors include:

- Disengagement with education;⁷ of students leaving school in Year 10 or below in 2008, 57% were not fully engaged with work or education by May the following year.⁸
- Youth unemployment; stands at 17.0% in 2010 (15-19 year olds not fully engaged in work or study). This is over three times higher than the unemployment rate across the whole of the population.^{9 10}
- Poor health; particularly mental ill health and obesity; 1 in 4 (26.4%) young people aged between 16 and 24 are living with a diagnosable mental disorder in any 12 month period¹¹ and nearly 30% of young people (13-17 years) are either overweight or obese.¹²
- Criminal activity;¹³ in 2008, young people (those aged 18–24 years) accounted for 20% of the total prison population.

Social inclusion is making sure all citizens participate in the economic and civic life of our country but a recent UNICEF¹⁴ report shows Australia lags behind in looking after its most vulnerable.¹⁵

Throughout adolescence and young adulthood, young people experience a critical period of social and emotional development in their transition from dependence on school and family towards greater independence.¹⁶

Community disorganisation and low neighbourhood attachment are key risk factors with the corresponding protective factor being strengthened communities.¹⁷ In disadvantaged and socially isolated communities, it is very difficult to eliminate the myriad of risk factors surrounding vulnerable youth on a daily basis. These risk factors include drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, welfare dependency and a lack of good role models. However, by successfully engaging local business people, schools, youth workers, sporting groups and others in the community, these risk factors can be addressed.

Early Intervention

Evidence shows that early intervention programs contribute to the promotion of strong communities and positive social outcomes for young people.^{18 19} Strategies are most effective during 'transition' points in people's lives, such as early childhood and adolescence.

Activities for young people across our cities and in particular in regional and rural Australia are generally adhoc, lack resourcing and are not well sustained or embedded into the community. This is for a variety of reasons including resource allocation, education and employment attainment and opportunities which impact on young people's ability to engage in their community. The impact of this on young people who disengage from mainstream education, have a family history of violence and/or abuse and lack the resources/skills to change potential predetermined pathways is severe. Connecting young people to their communities early and enabling their active participation in community life is key to reducing vulnerability.

Gauntlett²⁰ reviewed a wide range of preventative and early intervention programs and concluded that early intervention programs not only contribute to strong communities, but do so in a way that enables communities to continue to deal with issues through their own resilience and capacities. In respect of young people, they conclude that 'there is overwhelming evidence that for many community-based programs directed at the early prevention of social disadvantage, the social benefits received are way in excess of any costs to run the program'.

Local approach to early intervention

A local, approach to problems of social exclusion is one of the most effective methods for dealing with social and economic disadvantage. This approach provides the opportunity to target disadvantaged youth in a focused way by addressing the multitude of local concerns such as access to transport, clubs, services and events.²¹

Most young people identify strongly with their local communities and their peers. Therefore responses for vulnerable young people need to be available locally and be coordinated and tailored to both individual and group interventions.²²

Family Coherence

A young person's quality of life is underpinned by economic security, safety, shelter, connection to community, and having positive personal relationships.²³ Families and communities contribute significantly to these determinants and make an important contribution to young people's wellbeing. In fact family functioning is an important predictor of academic and behavioural outcomes.^{24 25}

Most young people rely on a combination of personal resilience, safe and supportive families, a good network of friends and strong ties to schools or recreational, cultural or faith-based activities to protect them from the problems and risks that present as a normal part of the transition to adulthood.

However, for a minority of young people this may not provide enough protection. Through a combination of individual, family and community circumstances and barriers to participation, these young people face markedly higher risks of doing poorly and not reaching their full potential.

Coercive parenting styles characterised by hostility, putdowns, or holding power over them via punitive or psychologically controlling, poorer family cohesion, family conflict, and poor family functioning are associated with increased risks of detachment from families, poorer health outcomes,²⁶ disruptive behaviour and depressive illness. Young people living in low-income families or with parents who have a disability or mental illness can experience poor family functioning.

Increasing Social Connections

Increasing social supports through participation in sporting clubs or active recreation activities has also

been shown to have positive social effects. These include better development of life skills, and increase in academic achievement.²⁷ Linking young people and their families with community facilities and networks builds active cohesive communities. The earlier inclusive opportunities are provided for young people, the greater the impact on positive psychological development.

Sport is a powerful social inclusion tool that allows participation and development of negotiation skills, crucial for young people to develop to go on to lead healthy, productive lives.

Sport can assist young people with appropriate language development, including inappropriate use of swearing, using verbal skills to negotiate as opposed to physical interactions and language etiquette when interacting with adults. It also provides a positive point of contact with the wider community, including positive peer associations and supports a sense of purpose for young people.

There are several ways in which increasing social connections may have positive effects on young people. People within a social network may play a role in health promotion and positively influence the health related behaviours of others. In addition, a broad social network may increase a person's resources and knowledge, allowing them to gain access to quality health services. Social support may also have positive psychological or emotional effects, helping young people to better cope with stress and illness.

Studies looking specifically at the link between social support and adolescent health have found a relationship between a young person's level of social support and a number of health risk factors, including physical inactivity, depression, and tobacco smoking.^{28 29}

Potential Impacts of Midnight Basketball

Midnight Basketball is an early intervention program that builds valuable social interactions in the community.

Midnight Basketball engages the local community to simultaneously reduce risk factors, as well as build protective or resiliency factors for disadvantaged young people. Midnight Basketball builds the community capacity to reduce such risk factors and counterbalance these by building an individual's protective and resilience factors.

Participation in Midnight Basketball provides the opportunity for disadvantaged youth to address the following:

- Witness a whole community response that engages a broad cross section of the community who care and value its young people.
- Decreases anti social behaviour risk through role modelling of positive acceptable behaviour.
- Opens up new possibilities for relationships to be fostered and supported between adults and disadvantaged young people.
- Provides an expanded community network that increases opportunity for attitudinal change and potential re-engagement in education and employment.
- Provide adults with insight into young people's capabilities and often untapped skills and qualities despite many personal challenges.
- Promotes local social cohesion and trust and decreases the possibility of social conflict.
- Provides the opportunity to experience the positive benefits of teamwork, structure and in turn experience a positive context for the creation of trust and confidence.

¹ Ellaway A & Macintyre S 2007, 'Is social participation associated with cardiovascular disease risk factors?', *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 64, pp. 1384–1391.

² Priest N, Waters E, McLean P & Webster K 2008, *Evidence of the links between social participation and mental wellbeing outcomes*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation & McCaughey Centre: VicHealth Centre for the Promotion of Mental Health and Community Wellbeing, School of Population Health, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

³ Morrow-Howell N, Hinterlong J, Rozario PA & Tang F 2003, 'Effects of volunteering on the well-being of older adults', *The Journals of Gerontology Series B, Psychological sciences and social sciences*, vol. 58, no. 3, pp. 137–145.

⁴ Mellor D, Hayashi Y, Stokes M, Firth L, Lake L, Staples M, Chamber S & Cummins R 2009, 'Volunteering and its relationship with personal and neighbourhood wellbeing', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 144–159.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Cabinet Office 2010, *Social Exclusion Taskforce: Context for social exclusion work*, UK Cabinet Office, accessed 1 December 2009, www.co-test.co.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/context.aspx

⁷ (1999) *The Cost to Australia of Early School Leaving*. Sydney: Dusseldorf Skills Forum: National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (now NATSEM) University of Canberra.

⁸ The Foundation for Young Australians (2010) *How Young People are Faring 2010 At a Glance*.

Available: <http://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/HYPAF-2010-Report.pdf>.

⁹ Mission Australia. *Youth Employment Strategy – Preventing a Lost Generation* March 2010.

¹⁰ Unemployment rate for persons aged 15-64 years in 2010 to 5.2% according to Australian Bureau Statistics (2010a) *Labour Force Australia*, May 2010, Cat No.6202.0 Canberra ABS

¹¹ *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (2007)*. Australian Bureau of Statistics (cat. no. 4327.0)

¹² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010) *Australia's Health 2010 The twelfth biennial health report of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare*. Australian Government Canberra.

¹³ Rollings (2008) 'Counting the costs of crime in Australia: a 2005 Update' Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. Research and Public Policy Series No. 91 p.47. management), Aust. Institute of Criminology

¹⁴ UNICEF Report 2010 http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/media_7517.html

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) 2004, [Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Young People in Australia: Discussion Paper: Principles and Strategies](#), DoHA, Canberra.

¹⁷ Gauntlett, Erin, Hugman, Richard, Kenyon, Peter and Logan, Pauline (2000) 'A meta-analysis of the impact of community-based prevention and early intervention action'. Department of Family and Community Services Policy Research Paper No. 11.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Manning, Matthew, Homel, Ross and Smith, Christine (2006) 'Economic Evaluation of a Community Based Early Intervention Program Implemented in a Disadvantaged Urban Area of Queensland'.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ <http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/Initiatives/Pages/disadvantage.aspx>

²² Ibid

²³ Wyn J (2009) *Youth health and welfare: the cultural politics of education and wellbeing*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.

²⁴ Zubrick S, Silburn S, Gatton A, Burton P, Dalby R, J Carlton et al. 1995. Western Australian child health survey: developing health and wellbeing in the nineties. ABS Cat. no. 4303.5. Perth: ABS & Institute for Child Health Research.

²⁵ Sawyer M, Arney F, Baghurst P, Clark JJ, Graetz BW, Kosky RJ et al. 2000. Mental health of young people in Australia: child and adolescent component of the national survey of mental health and well-being. Canberra: Department of Health and Aged Care.

²⁶ Wise S 2003. Family structure, child outcome and environmental mediators: an overview of the Development in Diverse Families study. Research paper no. 30. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

²⁷ Wyn J (2009) *Youth health and welfare: the cultural politics of education and wellbeing*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.

²⁸ Beets M, Vogel R, Forlaw L, Pitetti K & Ca B 2006. Social support and youth physical activity: the role of provider and type. *American Journal of Health Behavior* 30(3):278–89.

²⁹ Vilhjalmsson R 1994. Effects of social support on self-assessed health in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 23(4):437–52.