



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

All enquiries

Telephone: (08) 6213 2212
Email: chris.stronach@ccyp.wa.gov.au
Our reference: 16/3912

Dr Sarah Palmer
Principal Research Officer
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee
Level 1
11 Harvest Terrace
WEST PERTH WA 6005

Dear Dr Palmer

Inquiry into Building Resilience and Engagement for At-Risk Youth Through Sport and Culture

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry into building resilience in and engagement with at-risk youth.

As Commissioner for Children and Young People in Western Australia, my role is to advocate for the more than 585,000 Western Australian children and young people under the age of 18, including a specific responsibility for advocating for, promoting and monitoring their wellbeing.

Under the Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006 I am required to give priority to, and have special regard for, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

The benefits of activity to physical health and development are well known and extensively researched. The *Australian Health Survey 2011-12* notes that for children and young people, physical activity plays a key role in reducing the risk of obesity, cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, as well as a role in mental health and psycho-social wellbeing. It also stated that regular physical activity is associated with improved school performance, greater personal responsibility and group participation.¹ This survey reported that, in general, time spent in physical activity decreased as children got older, so that on average 15-17 year olds were engaging in around half the daily physical activity of 5-8 year olds.² This is important in

¹ Bauman A, Bellew B, Vita P, Brown W, Owen N 2002. *Getting Australia active: towards better practice for the promotion of physical activity*, National Public Health Partnership; cited in Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, *Australian Health Survey: Physical Activity 2011-12*, 5-17 year olds, [website] viewed 13 May 2016, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/462FBA87B642FCA4CA257BAC0015F3CE?op=endocument>

² Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, *Australian Health Survey: Physical Activity 2011-12*, 5-17 year olds, [website] viewed 13 May 2016,

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considering the impacts on rates of obesity or overweight among young people and adults. The Australian Health Survey found that, in 2011-12, around 29.5 per cent of 12 to 17 year old Western Australians were overweight or obese, compared to around 26 per cent of Australian 12 to 17 year old children and young people.³ Given the potential impacts on long-term health, it is important to support young people to engage in physical activity.

The best evidence on the role of sport and cultural activities for young people comes from young people themselves. I would urge the Committee to engage with young people directly to ensure they have a voice in this consultation, particularly as one of the main focus points of this inquiry is enabling engagement with young people. My office has undertaken multiple consultations with children and young people on matters which support and impact on their wellbeing and mental health. In all of these consultations, children and young people have told me that being engaged in sport⁴ and cultural⁵ activities is very important to their wellbeing, their connectedness to the community and their sense of social inclusion.

Children and young people who have been part of these consultations have also emphasised the breadth of activities which they are or would like to be involved in. While organised sport is often prominent for children and young people, there are many other activities, structured and unstructured, which children and young people enjoy and participate in. It is important to consider how access to activities other than organised sport might be facilitated for young people at risk.

In 2009 my office conducted a consultation that asked children and young people about the factors they considered important in their wellbeing. Eight key contributing areas were identified in responses, of which four – friends, fun and activity, acknowledgement, and freedom and independence – are particularly relevant to the relationship between resilience and sport and culture. Young people involved in sport and cultural activities are generally likely to be acknowledged for their achievements; young people can gain friends and strengthen existing friendships through sports participation; and young people can take some controlled risks through sporting or cultural activities.⁶

In a consultation on wellbeing with an emphasis on mental health, children and young people consistently referred to the roles of sports, hobbies and cultural activities in maintaining good mental health. One 15 year old girl said, '*I suggest more sporting grounds or youth centres where kids can make friends and get involved in fun activities, and even get counselling if they need it.*'⁷ Another young person interviewed in this consultation said, '*Try and get more youth*

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/462FBA87B642FCA4CA257BAC0015F3CE?op=endocument>

³ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.101.

⁴ For the purpose of this submission, 'sport' refers to team sports, individual sports, martial arts, gymnastics, and similar physical activities such as skateboarding, parkour, surfing and horse riding.

⁵ This submission acknowledges the Committee's definition of 'culture' which encompasses activities such as dance, music, theatre and visual arts, and also matters of a group identity such as traditional customs, practices and values.

⁶ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2010, *Speaking out about wellbeing: The views of Western Australian children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, pp.6-7.

⁷ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2011, *Speaking out about mental health: The views of Western Australian children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p.19.

*centres – football or baseball – one in every suburb – keep kids out of trouble.*⁸ The link between boredom and risk-taking behaviour was recognised and highlighted by these young people.

In my consultation with 1,200 Aboriginal children and young people in 2014, they had a strong focus on cultural activities and on sports as contributing to wellbeing and resilience, and the positive role it played in their lives.

In referring to cultural participation for Aboriginal young people, the Committee should note that this includes elements both of traditional Aboriginal customs, and of cultural activities such as art, music, and dance. For example, there are several programs particularly for Aboriginal young people which use hip-hop music and contemporary dance as a way of connecting with young people.

Young people reflected on the role of their traditional culture in forming and supporting their identity:

'Culture [is important] because I have a very spiritual connection with Aboriginal culture and it helps me as a person' 16 year old boy.

'My culture is who I am, it is a part of everything I do. It connects me to my family and makes me unique' 17 year old girl

'To me it means that I have something to live up to' 13 year old boy

'Learning about our ways that is important to know so I can be who I am. Tjukurrpa [Dreaming] and lore is my sign. I want my goondi [spirit] to be happy' 16 year old girl⁹

A strong sense of connection to culture assists in reinforcing a young person's identity and serves as a protective factor against risk.

A number of programs designed for young Aboriginal people at risk include elements of cultural practice and traditional teaching, including the Yiriman program in the Kimberley, the Nowanup Intervention Program near Albany, and the Wumbudin Kool-yee-rah 'Strong and Proud' after-school program in Albany. Yiriman and Nowanup are intended to address the needs of Aboriginal young people at risk of or who have entered the justice system.

Aboriginal children and young people who participated in the consultation also stated that sport and recreation activities were important to them, providing a sense of connection to friends and to the wider community, the opportunity to address boredom, and a capacity for personal achievement and recognition.

Similarly, in a 2015 consultation with children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, participants reflected on the role of sport in providing a sense of achievement, a way of making friends and participating in the community, and in supporting a positive outlook on life.¹⁰

⁸ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2011, *Speaking out about mental health: The views of Western Australian children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p.19.

⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2015, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Speak Out*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, pp.12, 14.

¹⁰ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2016, *Children and Young People from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds Speak Out*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p.14.

My office is in the process of finalising consultations with at-risk children and young people in the justice system and in out of home care. During these consultations, a majority of young people referred to various sporting and cultural activities as important in their lives.

Young people who spoke during these various consultations indicated there were particular barriers to participation in sport and other activities. These included access to transport (for training and games); the availability of sports or activities in their area, particularly for remote and regional young people; and the expense of participating, both in terms of enrolment fees and for equipment for various sports and activities.

The Kidsport program provides fee support to families to assist children and young people to engage in sport. The 2014-15 Annual Report of the Department of Sport and Recreation noted that of 46,145 children and young people assisted by this program, nearly two thirds (61.8 per cent) had not registered in a sporting club before, and that overall 32 per cent of children and young people helped were Aboriginal, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse or had disability.¹¹ This strongly suggests that the program materially assisted children and young people who would not otherwise have been able to join a sport, and such support is valuable for children and young people who are disadvantaged and therefore vulnerable to being at-risk.

In 2014 my office hosted Dr Michael Ungar as the Thinker in Residence, focussing on the topic of building resilience in children and young people. Dr Ungar presented extensively on the function of resilience as a protective factor for children and young people, and outlined nine common factors which predicted resilience, and helped to build resilience in children and young people.

1. Structure
2. Consequences
3. Parent-child connections
4. Lots and lots of strong relationships
5. A powerful identity
6. A sense of control
7. A sense of belonging/culture/spirituality/life purpose
8. Rights and responsibilities
9. Safety and support¹²

In reviewing this list the committee would note that participation in sport and cultural activities provides a strong parallel to these nine areas. In sport and cultural activities, a young person has structure (the rules of the game, or their cultural customs); consequences (rules are clear and sanctions are known and enforced); parent-child connections (support from family); strong relationships (with team members, fellow participants, coaches, officials); a powerful identity (as part of a team, a skilled person and a person with knowledge); sense of control (ability to take controlled risks in attempting skills); sense of belonging (as a team member, or as a knowledgeable person); rights and responsibilities; and safety and support.

Young people who are at-risk may lack the opportunities in their daily lives to engage and practice some of these elements. An ability to participate in sport and cultural activities allows an opportunity for young people to experience structures and consequences, and to develop

¹¹ Department of Sport and Recreation 2015, *Annual Report 2014-15*, Department of Sport and Recreation, p.44.

¹² Ungar M 2014, *Report of the 2014 Thinker in Residence – Resilience*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, pp.4, 21-24.

relationships, a sense of identity, belonging and control, and to exercise their rights and responsibilities.

Critically, while sport and cultural programs can support the development of the above-mentioned areas of improving resilience, they can only be effective where they are supported with effective programs addressing other needs of that young person, including family support, education and employment. If a young person returns constantly to an unchanged environment of dysfunction, lack of educational support and chaos, it is unlikely that any changes which could be affected by engagement in sport or cultural activities would have any lasting effect.

This raises a wider issue of effective service provision in the community. This is particularly relevant in regional areas, where services may not be well coordinated, and communities may be over-serviced in some areas but lack in others. In 2014 the Department of Aboriginal Affairs undertook a comprehensive review of expenditure on services in Roebourne and the Martu communities, as part of the Regional Services Reform program. This review found that although there were high levels of spending in the communities, the outcomes remained poor. This was in part the result of fragmented services and considerable duplication – for 247 young people in Roebourne there were 35 services, around half of which were sport-based. Although sport programs would have been relatively easily available for young people, it appears their effect was limited as provision was fragmented, and there was no coordination of support services to complement the impacts from the sporting programs.¹³ This is not isolated – during my visits to regional centres in WA I am continually told about the gaps in some services, duplication in others and a general failure of these service providers, particularly government, to engage with the community.

Recently I attended a round table hosted by Her Excellency Governor Kerry Sanderson, on improving educational and self-esteem outcomes for Aboriginal girls in WA. This forum highlighted the extraordinary range of programs targeted to Aboriginal girls, but also highlighted the lack of coordination, evaluation and linkages to other supports and services to achieve sustained outcomes that address the risk factors in these young people's lives.

Effective service provision requires that services be coordinated, to avoid duplication and ensure the services are available where they are needed; they are based on long-term outcomes; they are sustainably funded with realistic timelines and with some flexibility around delivery of services; and they are developed and delivered with community engagement and leadership. This final point is particularly important in reference to programs and services for Aboriginal people, which require cultural competence and effective engagement to be able to achieve results in the long term.

In 2013 the Government undertook a review of expenditure on youth programs and service for Aboriginal youth. This review found that there were numerous systemic issues in service provision in WA, including fragmentation of effort and funding; investment balance skewed towards statutory or crisis responses; a complex environment with numerous disconnected planning frameworks generated by multiple government departments; and poor or inappropriate engagement with lack of community and end user engagement.¹⁴ This review included recommendations to foster stronger partnerships and collaborative approaches; enable integrated and sustainable service delivery; and refocus investment on programs addressing the

¹³ Department of Aboriginal Affairs 2014, *Location-based factsheet*, Department of Aboriginal Affairs, accessed 13 May 2016, <http://www.daa.wa.gov.au/globalassets/pdf-files/remote-comms-reform/location-based-factsheet.pdf>

¹⁴ Department of the Premier and Cabinet 2014, *Aboriginal Youth Expenditure Review 2013*, Government of Western Australia, pp. 9-10.

complex needs of youth who are at-risk but do not fit into the traditional boundaries of agency responsibility.¹⁵

The State Government has continued this focus with the appointment of the Regional Services Reform Unit, which is currently examining how agencies can provide better services to Aboriginal people in WA, using these principles outlined above.

In summary, sport and cultural activities have the potential to play a strong role in building and supporting resilience and enabling engagement with children and young people, particularly those at risk, if those children and young people have effective and appropriate access to these activities.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present this submission to your Inquiry. I would be pleased to provide additional information if required, either as a written submission or in person. Copies of all CCYP publications referred to can be supplied on request, and are available through my website, www.ccyp.wa.gov.au. Please contact me should you wish further information.

Yours sincerely



COLIN PETTIT

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

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¹⁵ Department of the Premier and Cabinet 2014, *Aboriginal Youth Expenditure Review 2013*, Government of Western Australia, p. 13.