

Using the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to strengthen children and young people's wellbeing

Policy brief – May 2015

Regional and Remote Areas: the impact on the wellbeing of WA children and young people

A snapshot

- In 2012 around 27 per cent (27.1%) of all children and young people lived in regional and remote areas of WA. Around 60 per cent (61.6%) of Aboriginal children and young people 0 to 19 years live in regional and remote areas.
- In a number of important areas, the wellbeing of children and young people living in regional and remote areas is behind their counterparts in the metropolitan area.
- Generally speaking, children and young people in remote and regional areas do not have the same access to facilities and services as those in the metropolitan area.

What is the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework?

The Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia developed the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to monitor and report on the wellbeing of Western Australia's children and young people.

The Framework comprises two reports, the second editions of which were tabled in the Western Australian Parliament on 14 July 2014:

- *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People* provides a picture of how children and young people in WA are faring according to 40 key measures of wellbeing.
- *Building Blocks* lists and describes best practice and promising programs from around Australia which have been shown to be effective in improving the wellbeing of children and young people.

This policy brief explores key information from the two Wellbeing Monitoring Framework reports related to children and young people in regional and remote areas.



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

Why this issue is important

While most children and young people in regional and remote areas are doing well they generally have **less access to services** than their counterparts in the metropolitan area. There are also **differences in children's developmental outcomes** across geographic areas, with children in the metropolitan area achieving better physical development and learning outcomes than children in other areas.^{1 2}

Conversely, children in regional and remote areas are more likely to **prefer active pastimes** and spend more time outside than their metropolitan counterparts.³

Most children and young people (72.9%) live in the metropolitan area. Regional areas⁴ account for around 17 per cent (17.1%) of the population and remote areas⁵ 10 per cent (10%). For Aboriginal children and young people, around 60 per cent (61.6%) live outside the metropolitan area.⁶

What we know already

Not all measures in the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework are differentiated by region or regional status. In some cases this is a result of the data collection – use of alcohol in pregnancy, for example, did not reference the location at which the mother lived. For other measures, such as deaths due to injury or disease, the numbers are small and have been omitted to respect the privacy of young people.

Participation in sport and cultural activities – sport and cultural activities provide children opportunities for with physical, emotional, intellectual and social development. Children and young people aged five to 14 years in regional and remote areas attended at least one cultural event or venue⁷ at a slightly higher rate (75.6%) than children and young people in the metropolitan area (73.9%).⁸ The proportion participating in organised sport was similar overall for regional and remote (63.9%) and metropolitan (63.5%) areas, although girls in regional and remote areas participated in sport at a higher rate (58.5%) than those in the metropolitan area (52.8%).⁹

Smoking –Smoking in pregnancy is associated with low birth weight, growth retardation in the foetus and increased risks of prematurity. There is also evidence of association with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).^{10 11} The **effects of maternal smoking can persist throughout a child's life.**

Women in regional WA are more likely to smoke during pregnancy than their metropolitan counterparts. For example in 2011, 12.7 per cent of non-Aboriginal women in the Mid-West and 15.5 per cent of non-Aboriginal women in the Goldfields smoked during pregnancy compared with 7.5 per cent of women in North metropolitan Perth. The State average for non-Aboriginal women smoking during pregnancy in 2011 was 10.2 per cent.¹²



Aboriginal women are significantly more likely to smoke during pregnancy than non-Aboriginal women regardless of the geographic location of their residence.¹³

Infant mortality – the infant mortality rate (the rate of survival of children in their first year of life) is used internationally as a key indicator of a country's overall infant health status.¹⁴ In WA overall, the number of infant deaths is relatively low and has shown a downwards trend in recent years.

Compared to metropolitan Perth, there is an **increased risk of perinatal and post-neonatal deaths** in every regional area of WA, with the exception of South West region perinatal deaths.¹⁵

Child health checks – Children in regional and remote areas receive their first child health checks at a similar rate to children in the metropolitan area. For the later checks, up to three years of age, children in regional and remote areas attend at a higher rate than metropolitan children. In 2013, approximately 97 per cent of children in regional and remote areas received their school entry health check.¹⁶

Children developmentally vulnerable on entering school – the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)¹⁷ can be used to describe aspects of children's early development and to provide some indication of the influence of socio-economic and community factors on that early development.¹⁸

According to the AEDC, children in regional and remote areas of WA are **more likely to be developmentally vulnerable** the year they start school than their metropolitan counterparts. In 2012, 39.2 per cent of children in very remote areas of WA were considered developmentally vulnerable compared with 24.7 per cent of children in the metropolitan area.¹⁹

Overcrowded households – the effects of living in an overcrowded household can be far-reaching. Children in particular appear to be significantly affected by **living in overcrowded households** with increased irritability, tension and aggression, lower levels of interaction with other children and poorer educational attainment and mental adjustment.²⁰

Children living in public housing in remote areas of WA are more likely to be living in overcrowded conditions than children in public housing in metropolitan WA. This data is only reported for Aboriginal households. In WA in 2012–13, 13.2 per cent of Aboriginal households in public housing in very remote areas were considered overcrowded.²¹

Teenage pregnancy – parenthood during the teenage years²² is closely linked to less favourable health, educational and economic outcomes for both the mother and baby.²³

Teenage fertility rates²⁴ are **higher in regional and remote areas** of WA than in the



metropolitan area. In 2012²⁵ regional and remote areas had a rate of 35.2 babies per 1,000 teenagers. This figure comprised the Wheatbelt rate of 28.4 compared to the Outback²⁶ rate of 52.0. The metropolitan rate for the same year was 14.9.²⁷

Programs that have been evaluated as effective in this area

The Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia's *Building Blocks* edition one and two reports showcase 126 programs that have been shown to be effective at improving the wellbeing of children and young people or that demonstrate promise in this regard. Common themes of effective programs include meaningful community engagement, local design, reciprocity and strong and engaged leadership.

Seven programs in *Building Blocks* were specifically cited as being presented in regional and remote areas. Other programs listed in *Building Blocks* may also be applicable in regional and remote areas:

- **Best Beginnings** – Edition 1, page 16. This program is a home visiting service that targets vulnerable families with infants aged 0 to two years. Best Beginnings involves regular home visits by trained staff who provide support, advice, information, community connections and practical help to parents.
- **Wyndham Early Learning Activity Centre (WELA)** – Edition 1, page 35. This service aims to provide early learning activities that encourage the promotion of children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development as well as providing a source of support for their parents and carers.
- **Best Start** – Edition 1, page 24. This is a flexible, family-friendly program that includes playgroups, nutrition and health education, early language and numeracy skills. It also offers pre-primary integration programs targeted at Aboriginal families with children aged up to five years.
- **Talking Realities - Young Parenting Peer-Education Program** – Edition 1, page 91. A health promotion strategy for young parents and youth at risk of early pregnancy, which utilises a peer-education model to expand the scope of existing school-based sexual health programs.
- **Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) Advice Program** – Edition 1, page 38. This program assists families who face difficulty in maintaining tenancies or home ownership due to personal or financial circumstances.
- **Regional Youth Justice Strategy (RYJS)** – Edition 1, page 93. A community-oriented service that includes a range of programs to support young people at risk of entering the justice system, as well as those already in the system. The RYJS operates in the Mid-West, Gascoyne, Goldfields, East Kimberley, West Kimberley and Pilbara.
- **Reconnect** – Edition 1, page 41. A community-based early intervention



program for young people aged 12 to 18 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and their families. Reconnect operates nationwide including East Perth, Midland, Mirrabooka, Wembley, Albany, Bunbury, Broome and Mandurah.

Policy implications

The need to provide children and young people living in regional and remote areas with **equitable access to services** is clearly demonstrated by the statistics, which show that for many measures children and young people in remote and regional locations are disadvantaged compared to those in the metropolitan area.

It is impractical to suggest that all services in regional and remote areas should be provided in exactly the same way as in metropolitan areas or in large regional centres. Nevertheless, there is clearly a greater need for programs and services to support better outcomes than is currently provided.

Service providers need to consider how best to deliver services in regional and remote areas based on the requirements in each area. This may include strategies to retain and develop the professional and para-professional workforces in regional and remote areas to enable effective and sustainable delivery of services and programs.

Some services, such as infant health, are best provided on a **face-to-face basis**. Others such as education services are limited by population density and so young people may have to continue to travel away from home to access the full range of possibilities.

In some areas there is a clear opportunity for service providers to consider innovative methods of service provision in regional and remote areas, which may include use of **internet or other technology-based solutions**. This may be particularly applicable to counselling and mental wellbeing services, some health consultancy and employment support.

¹ Baxter J, Gray M and Hayes A 2011, *Families in regional, rural and remote Australia*, Australian Institute of Family Studies [website], Factsheets 2011, <<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/factsheets/2011/fs201103.pdf>>

² 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.177.

³ Baxter J, Gray M and Hayes A 2011, *Families in regional, rural and remote Australia*, Australian Institute of Family Studies [website], Factsheets 2011, <<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/factsheets/2011/fs201103.pdf>>

⁴ Including Mandurah, Bunbury and the Wheatbelt.

⁵ Including Esperance, Goldfields, Mid West, Gascoyne, Pilbara and Kimberley.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011*,

⁷ Defined in the collection as visiting public libraries, visiting museums or art galleries, or attending performing arts events.

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012, *Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities, Australia 2012*, Table 6, cat. no. 4901.0 [website] viewed 1 May 2015, http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/subscriber.nsf/log?openagent&49010do024_201204.xls&4901.0&Data%20Cubes&9858105680E947D8CA257B0C000C305D&0&Apr%202012&11.02.2013&Latest

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012, *Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities, Australia 2012*, Table 8, cat. no. 4901.0 [website] viewed 1 May 2015, http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/subscriber.nsf/log?openagent&49010do024_201204.xls&4901.0&Data%20Cubes&9858105680E947D8CA257B0C000C305D&0&Apr%202012&11.02.2013&Latest

¹⁰ Laws PJ et al 2010, *Australia's mothers and babies 2008*, Perinatal statistics series no. 24, Cat no. PER 50, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p.67

¹¹ Perinatal and Infant Mortality Committee 2010, *The 13th Report of the Perinatal and Infant Mortality Committee of Western Australia for Deaths in the Triennium 2005-07*, Department of Health, Western Australia, p.46.

¹² 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.50.

¹³ Data supplied by Maternal and Child Health Unit, Department of Health WA (unpublished)

¹⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Society at a Glance 2009: Social Indicators, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, p. 106.

¹⁵ Perinatal and Infant Mortality Committee 2010, *The 13th Report of the Perinatal and Infant Mortality Committee of Western Australia for Deaths in the Triennium 2005–07*, Department of Health, Western Australia, p.47

¹⁶ 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, pp.70–71.

¹⁷ Previously the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI).

¹⁸ Australian Government 2013, *A Snapshot of Early Childhood Development in Australia 2012 – AEDI National Report*, Australian Government, p.8

¹⁹ 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.175.

²⁰ Standing Conference on Public Health United Kingdom, cited in Page A 2002, 'Poor Housing and Mental Health in the United Kingdom: Changing the Focus for Intervention', *Journal of Environmental Health Research*, Volume 1, Issue 1, Chartered Institute of Environmental Health [website], viewed 21 November 2011, <http://www.cieh.org/JEHR/housing_mental_health.html>

²¹ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2011, *Report on Government Services*, Commonwealth of Australia, Table 16A.14 and 16A.28

²² In keeping with the terminology used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other states, in assessing this measure 'teen' and 'teenage' are used to indicate persons 19 years and under. Where this measure is highlighting births to mothers 17 years and under, that is specifically stated.

²³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009, *A picture of Australia's children*, Cat. no. PHE 112, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p.64

²⁴ The teenage fertility rate, as defined by the ABS, is the number of births during the calendar year to women aged 15 to 19 years, per 1,000 female estimated resident population aged 15 to 19 years at 30 June of the same year. Births to women aged less than 15 years are included.

²⁵ Note that rates for the sub-regions of WA are the average rate for the reference year and the two preceding years.

²⁶ Kimberley, Pilbara, Mid West, Gascoyne, Goldfields and Esperance.

²⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, *Births, Australia, 2012*.