

# The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people

Policy brief, October 2012

## Children and young people living in regional and remote areas

The Commissioner for Children and Young Western Australia (WA) undertook an Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (the Inquiry) after hearing consistently from communities across the State about concerns for the mental health of children and young people, from infants to young adults.

The Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia was tabled in Parliament in May 2011.

This policy brief focuses on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people living in regional and remote areas. These children and young people represent 28 per cent of all Western Australian children and young people.<sup>1</sup>

### What do children and young people say?

While mental health and wellbeing issues tend to be similar for children and young people regardless of geographical location, living in a rural or remote location has particular challenges. Many regional and remote communities have inadequate age-appropriate services and limited infrastructure such as transport and recreational facilities.

Children and young people who live in regional and remote communities said they would like more recreational facilities in their towns where they could socialise with other young people. They believed that being involved in sport and other activities would make a significant difference to their mental health and wellbeing.

*"Somewhere where they can sit back, play pool – instead of hanging 'round on the streets."* young person

*"[We need] more things for young people to do and to go to in the community and opportunities."* young person

Young people in the Wheatbelt raised concerns about confidentiality, lack of anonymity, and stigma as impediments to seeking help for mental health issues. Children and young people were concerned they would be seen accessing the service, or that their small home town meant they couldn't remain anonymous.

*"You don't like to see a mental health worker around town because you feel embarrassed."* young person

Access to services was also identified as a significant issue by children and young people in regional and remote areas.



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*"We need age-appropriate services. To provide safe places for kids to go so they are not bored and where support is available. In [my town] there is nowhere like this."* girl 15

*"Transport is an issue. There are hardly any buses. If we have to get somewhere we [have to] walk or ride our bikes."* male 19

## What were the Inquiry findings?

Key findings relating to children and young people living in regional and remote areas include:<sup>2</sup>

- For children and young people, mental health is profound in its importance – not only because it is the key to a rich enjoyment of childhood and adolescence, but also because it provides the foundation for a resilient and mentally healthy adulthood.
- Children and young people living in regional and remote parts of Western Australia face particular and unique challenges in terms of mental health, especially around accessing services.
- The overwhelming evidence was that there is lack of services and programs in regional and remote communities to address the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. In particular, there is an acute shortage of services and programs for children and young people who require early intervention and/or treatment services because they have a mental health illness.
- The limited extent of services assumes greater significance given that the level of need is in some cases greater in regional and remote areas. Significant numbers of Aboriginal children and young people in the more remote areas of the State are experiencing multiple disadvantages, including poor nutrition and inadequate housing, and complex issues including grief and loss, trauma, alcohol and substance abuse, violence and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.
- Professionals (including community child health nurses, school psychologists and mental health professionals) must travel significant distances to deliver a service in regional and remote areas and this has a negative impact on already limited service capability.
- A lack of access to mental health professionals means that it may not be possible to arrange referrals when mental health issues are identified. The considerable distances that then must be travelled in order to access appropriate services may also have a deleterious impact on children and young people.
- There are many benefits of having access to mental health information and support on the internet (and phone helplines) including that it is accessible, anonymous, engaging and informative. The benefits of information and communication technology (ICT) are especially true for young people in regional and remote areas where isolation and being unable to access services are significant barriers. However, it is acknowledged that not all children and young people have access to the internet and ICT is not a suitable replacement for face-to-face supports in their entirety.
- Children and young people's participation in extracurricular activities is linked to a range of positive outcomes and young people who participate in activities have a more positive sense of self. However, many children and young people in Western Australia – particularly in regional and remote areas – do not feel they have adequate access to sport and recreation opportunities.



Many of the Inquiry's recommendations are relevant to children and young people living in regional and remote areas, particularly those recommendations related to extending and adequately resourcing services. The following recommendations are of particular relevance:

**Recommendation 18:** The allocation of funding from the Royalties for Regions program be considered for the provision of mental health services for children and young people living in regional and remote communities.

**Recommendation 45:** Information and communication technology be an integral part of any comprehensive mental health plan for children and young people.

**Recommendation 46:** The Department of Sport and Recreation, the Department of Culture and the Arts and the Mental Health Commission work to increase arts, cultural, sport and recreation opportunities for children and young people – particularly in regional and remote areas.

**Recommendation 47:** The Mental Health Commission coordinate the establishment of co-located 'youth service centres' across the State.

**Recommendation 48:** Confidentiality, wherever possible, should be a critical consideration in the design and operation of services and programs, to encourage young people to seek help with issues concerning their mental health and wellbeing.

## What is being done?

A number of developments relevant to the mental health of children and young people living in regional and remote areas have occurred since the Inquiry.

- The Mental Health Commission has developed a 10-year strategic policy, *Mental Health 2020: Making it personal and everybody's business* which makes the needs of people living in rural and remote Western Australia a specific priority group. The Commission states that it is committed to "developing statewide mental health services and supports in ways that meet the diverse and unique needs and circumstances of rural and remote communities".<sup>3</sup> This policy also states that the engagement of vulnerable infants, children and their families during the formative early years is a high priority.<sup>4</sup>
- The Mental Health Commission's *Action Plan 2011-2012*, states that the Commission has allocated funding to the Department of Health, WA Country Health Service (WACHS) to respond to the needs of young people in rural and remote regions through community mental health services. This includes the appointment of program leaders who will develop specialised youth services to be delivered in a youth-friendly manner.<sup>5</sup>
- Since the release of the Inquiry report, the Federal government has rolled out the 'headspace' service across the country, which provides an online and telephone support and counselling service for 12 to 25 year-olds. This free and confidential service fills an important gap for all children and young people but particularly for those who live in regional and remote areas. The Federal government has also provided funding for a headspace centre to be located in Bunbury.<sup>6</sup>
- Partial funding from the Specialist Aboriginal Mental Health Service has been provided to WA Country Health Service and distributed to regional areas to be fully integrated into existing mental health services.<sup>7</sup>
- To encourage participation in sport and recreational activities, the State government has launched a 'KidSport scheme' where eligible children aged between five and 18 years



receive membership fee subsidies of up to \$200. This scheme has been taken up by a number of children and young people in regional areas.<sup>8</sup>

- The State government is also rolling out a statewide 'One Life' suicide prevention strategy with many regional and remote communities in the process of developing community action plans.<sup>9</sup>
- Youth Focus, an agency dedicated to preventing youth suicide and depression, has been funded to provide the 'Focus Plus' program which allows 12 to 25 year-olds who have a mental health care plan from their GP to receive bulk billed counselling and a range of other services. This service is currently provided in Perth and in the South-West region of Western Australia.<sup>10</sup>
- The Inquiry highlighted the need for parenting programs and supports to be available to assist families in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their children. The State government has funded the expansion of the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) with programs to be delivered in regional locations. The Department for Communities is also trialling an online program of Triple P.<sup>11</sup>

### What more needs to be done?

- There is a need for the development of a strategic and comprehensive mental health plan for all children and young people in WA that includes targeted mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention programs to address the mental health needs of children and young people living in regional and remote areas.
- This plan should include strategies to continue increasing sport and recreational activities, particularly as children and young people themselves consistently identify these as having a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing.
- There also must be a sustained and urgent focus on improving access to specialised mental health services and supports so that children and young people who need assistance can receive it easily and without too much disruption or displacement.
- There is a high need for improved strategies and increased services for the high number of Aboriginal children and young people who live in regional and remote areas (see policy brief: *Aboriginal children and young people*).

### Other relevant information

#### Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia

- The following publications are available on the Commissioner for Children and Young People's website at [www.ccyp.wa.gov.au](http://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au)
  - *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*
  - *Speaking out about mental health: The views of Western Australian children and young people*
  - *Wellbeing Monitoring Framework publications*

#### Mental Health Commission, Western Australia

- The Mental Health Commission's strategic policy *Mental Health 2020: Making it personal and everybody's business* and the *Action Plan 2011-2012* are available at [www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au](http://www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au)



## Telethon Institute for Child Health Research

- The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research is one of the largest and most successful medical research institutes in Australia. [www.childhealthresearch.org.au/](http://www.childhealthresearch.org.au/)

## eheadspace

- eheadspace provides online and telephone support and counselling for young people aged 12 to 25 years of age [www.eheadspace.org.au/](http://www.eheadspace.org.au/)

## Youth Focus

- Prevention of youth suicide and depression [youthfocus.com.au/](http://youthfocus.com.au/)

## The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists

- Prevention and Early Intervention of Mental Illness in Infants, Children and Adolescents: Planning strategies for Australia and New Zealand and The cost effectiveness of prevention and early intervention of mental illness in infants, children and adolescents is available at [www.ranzcp.org](http://www.ranzcp.org)

## Department of Sport and Recreation, Western Australia

- The Department of Sport and Recreation is the lead agency responsible for the implementation of government policy and initiatives in sport and recreation. A key role of the department is to contribute to the healthy lifestyle of Western Australians by increasing physical activity in the community through sport and recreation. <http://www.dsr.wa.gov.au/>

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<sup>1</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Profile of Children and Young People in Western Australia: Wellbeing Monitoring Framework*, 2011, p 7.

<sup>2</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia*, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Mental Health Commission, *Mental Health 2020: Making it personal and everybody's business*, Government of Western Australia, 2011, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Mental Health Commission, *Action Plan 2011–2012*, Government of Western Australia, 2012, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.headspace.org.au/about-headspace/media-centre/media-releases/headspace-welcomes-announcement-of-new-centres>

<sup>7</sup> Information provided to the Commissioner for Children and Young People from the WA Country Health Service, August 2012

<sup>8</sup> Ministerial Media Release, *KidSport kicks along in great southern*, Thursday 16 August 2012

<http://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/Results.aspx?ItemID=150823>

<sup>9</sup> Ministerial Media Release, *Suicide prevention strategy being rolled out across WA*, Saturday 10 September 2011,

<http://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx?ItemId=143941>

<sup>10</sup> <http://youthfocus.com.au/services-2/focus-plus/>



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<sup>11</sup> Report from Minister Helen Morton to the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia: Overview of progress*, April 2012.



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