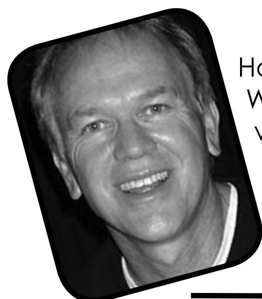
Going bush: youth work in rural settings

Howard Sercombe



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This article is a reflection on my experience as a youth worker in the Western Australian Goldfields towns of Laverton (population 450, 1,000km NE of Perth) and Kalgoorlie (population 30,000, 600km ENE of Perth). While there are things that make youth work in these settings difficult, there is also a richness and holism in youth work practice outside the city. The existence of a real community where people (including decision-makers) actually know each other makes long-term change for young people a real possibility. Living in the community in which you work, and where all your clients know where you live, also raises some interesting issues of accountability, ethics and practice.

For the past four years, I have been working as a youth worker in rural/remote Western Australia, first, as a youth development officer with the Shire of Laverton, about half way between Perth and Alice Springs, and then as a manager of a suite of youth services in Kalgoorlie, a bit closer to Perth. In both places, youth services were either non-existent or under-developed, and both projects involved getting services up from scratch. This article pulls together some reflections on what makes youth work in these settings different.

The situation for rural young people compared with their urban counterparts is often more different and yet more similar than people might imagine. Generally, the principles of youth work practice should be as applicable to working with rural young people as they are to young people in any other setting. However, there are some features of rural youth work that make it both easier and harder to meet the needs of the young people we serve.

It is probably true to say that for the entire history of youth work, the focus has been on young people in urban situations. Urban life, it has generally been thought, is particularly corrupting of young people, and special interventions are necessary in order to protect them from long-term damage. Youth work has been one of those interventions.

Rural life, on the other hand, is more "natural", and in the mythologies that have, since Rousseau, permeated our understanding of what development means, young people are seen to have a better chance of not being corrupted by the vices and vicissitudes of urban living and of turning out okay. For many social commentators, rural life presented a kind of ideal community, in which everyone knew each other and looked out for each other, people never locked their doors and there was always a welcoming smile in the street. The lack of anonymity may have also meant that some behaviours, such as illegal drug use or promiscuous sex, were more inhibited, and that people lived better lives as a result. Sons and daughters may have found easier pathways to employment than their

city cousins in their parents' trade or on the farm.

There is some truth in this picture. I'm not saying that it is idyllic: there aren't living situations anywhere that are idyllic. But rural towns and villages are real communities, rather than "imagined" ones (Anderson 1983); they are constituted by real relationships in which people know each other and talk to each other. Living in a city, I knew only two of my neighbours, even though I had been living in the same house for 10 years. Within a week of moving to Laverton, I knew everyone in the street, had been invited out three or four times, and had met most of the local government councillors, the Shire President and Chief Executive Officer and all the shopkeepers in town.

That density of social connection produces a high level of what social planners have been calling social capital. Social capital, derived from a range of sources, notably Pierre Bourdieu's book The Forms of Capital (1986) and Urie Bronfenbrenner's work on social ecology (eg. in The ecology of human development (1979), is a function of the number, variety and quality of social relationships that people have in their lives. The amount of social capital that a person has is a major factor in their resilience, their capacity to bounce back when hard times come. It is also a major factor in the health of a community, in the capacity of a community to deal with its own problems, and to use outside assistance in a productive and sustainable way without becoming dependent on it.

It is precisely the lack of these kinds of connections that makes urban or suburban youth work difficult. We talk about working with the community in city-based work, but often the community is more imagined than real. People who live in a particular suburb may know no-one else in the suburb. They may never have met their member of parliament, and probably don't know who he or she is. Shops are likely to be owned by multinationals. Local community workers probably live somewhere else, and drive into work every day from their "nicer" suburb some distance away. Their kids don't go to school there, they don't shop there, they aren't out on the street.

In rural communities, depending on some other factors like size and proximity to cities, people do often actually know each other. If the town or village is small enough, people actually know everybody. If you see someone in the street more than once and you don't know who they are, you ask them. Laverton was like that, quite literally.

So in many rural situations, "community" is a present reality, rather than an abstraction. It makes community development approaches to youth work not only possible, but almost inevitable. And it creates a kind of wider accountability for a youth worker. You become accountable not only to the young people you work with and to your direct management, but to the local police sergeant, the chairperson of the ratepayers association, the secretary of the parent association at the school: any of whom will be quite happy to nail you at the pub or at a community meeting called for some other purpose to talk about what you are doing with this young person or that. Maintaining your obligation to the young people as your primary clients, and to confidentiality, in this situation can take some persistence.

Rural areas have their problems too, and some of the advantages of isolation have faded in the face of the transport and communications revolutions. Problematic drug use is now prevalent outside cities in many parts of the world. Television and other media extend their reach, for good or ill, into rural lounge rooms as they do urban ones. Reported crime may be less common, but hidden crimes such as the sexual abuse of children have not been rare in country areas (Neame & Heenan 2004). Unplanned pregnancies seem no less likely, and young women who do become pregnant may have fewer choices about the decision they make about their babies (AIHW 2003). Youth suicide is more frequent in rural areas – sometimes several times more so (Revolve 2004). Consumption of legal drugs, particularly alcohol and tobacco, by rural young people can be significantly higher than among their urban counterparts (ibid).

High levels of unemployment, though unevenly distributed, have been a problem for the last several years in many areas, especially given the urban drift and corresponding rural decline that is now endemic across the world. Many rural towns are shrinking as businesses close down and shops are no longer able to compete with the supermarket in the next big town, or they are becoming redundant because of improved communications, transport and information technology. When families leave towns in search of work, banks and government services close because the population is no longer there to support them, and the town enters into a downward spiral (Kenyon et al. 2001).

In such a situation, young people can find that their horizons are shrinking along with their town. It can be hard to see a future other than the one already narrowly prescribed, and young people can feel trapped and claustrophobic. Indeed, staying in the village can be

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synonymous with failure: people who are successful "get out of this place", and the only people who stay are people who haven't made the grade and who have no other choice.

The picture of rural bliss, in which young people grow up in a healthy environment making their own fun and enjoying the support of a caring community in which they have lived all their lives, may have a measure of truth for many young people, at least in comparison with their city cousins. However, it may not be as positive for some, and it isn't the whole story. It is often when the environment is not ideal that rural communities pull together the resources to employ a youth worker, or that central or provincial governments make rural youth work funding programs available.

Challenges in rural youth work: overcoming economies of scale

"Economies of scale" is an economic term which holds that it is cheaper (per person) to deliver a service to a lot of people than it is to a few. Often, smaller rural towns and villages don't have the youth population to justify a full-time youth worker or the taxpayer/ratepayer population base to finance it. Youth work may be restricted to the work of volunteers, part-time staff or staff who have a range of responsibilities besides their role in supporting young people. These scenarios tend to produce services with a high turnover of staff, and in which workers may lack training in youth work practice or indeed any relevant training at all.

This situation presents a major challenge for the delivery of a professional youth work service to rural young people. Often, what counts as "viable" youth provision relates to the total potential market for a service. Decision-makers won't support the establishment of a service unless there are 1,000–2,000 young people in an area, even if the youth service can only really work with 30 or 40. It is not a particular young person's fault that they may be one of only three people who face a particular problem in a year. It doesn't make it less of an issue than if it hits 300 – at least for those three.

So youth workers, recognising the barriers of economies of scale, need to find flexible, creative and economically sustainable ways of delivering services to young people in these situations.

Referral

Another issue facing rural and remote youth workers is the scarcity of specialised services. The community may have managed to pull together the resources to employ a youth worker, but the youth worker may well be all there is. City workers are more likely to be accustomed to being able to refer a young person to a youth accommodation service (or give them a choice of several), a drug rehabilitation or counselling service, a youth health or legal service, an alternative education centre, several sporting clubs, as well as other activity-based organisations, such as church youth groups, theatre groups, art classes and so on.

Youth workers in the city are therefore generally in a position to be able to be precise about what their job is and what it isn't. Issues that fall outside this mandate are referred on to someone else, and the youth worker's responsibility progressively diminishes. In the country, you may not have that luxury. Young people may well come to you after suffering an assault, trying to deal with their parents breaking up, needing help with a difficult police officer in town or wanting you to organise a disco. It would be nice to refer them to someone more expert, but you are probably it.

In this context, it is important to use the resources that are there. There may not be youth-specific services, such as a youth health service, but community nurses are often highly skilled and great to work with. The local representative of the public housing authority may not be used to accommodating young people, but with a bit of help they can usually make the distance. You might have to work a bit harder to make sure that a referral is effective, for example, by supported referral, in which you are actually in the room with the young person when they talk to a professional or government representative. It may be your job to translate – to help the officer understand what a young person is saying and vice versa.

Increasingly, the internet creates a range of possibilities for overcoming

the (dis)economies of scale in the provision of services to young people in remote locations. If your client needs a lawyer, it is much easier now to find and engage one, even if they are based in the capital city. Also, youth workers can use email and the Web to provide the information and advice that a young person needs. If a young person needs a good psychologist or counsellor, telephone or internet counselling is becoming more readily available. With the increasing penetration of broadband technology, real-time face-to-face conversation over the web is an expanding opportunity.

These developments mean that the brokerage roles of rural youth workers become more important. You need to have the skills to develop the contacts, and form effective referral protocols with them.

Target group

(Dis)economies of scale may also mean that you may not have much choice about your constituency. There might be only 40 teenagers, total, in town. You might want to work with 14- to 18-year-olds, but 10- to 13-year-olds are the ones who come along. Then because the 10- to 13-year-olds are there, the 14- to 18-year-olds stay away.

Age variations may not be the only dynamic you have to deal with, either. Just because there is a relatively small market, doesn't mean that they all have the same tastes. Half the group might be into country and western, the other half might be into hip hop. And just because it is a small group doesn't mean that they all get on with each other. Rival groups of young people in conflict with each other is not just a city thing. You can easily find that what started out already as a small constituency is further fragmented by these kinds of variables, making service delivery complicated and controversial.

Professional challenges

Maintaining a private life: Managing your moral reputation

As any decent philosopher will tell you, being a professional is not just a matter of doing a good job for the eight hours a day that you are at work. Being a professional is about pursuing a kind of virtue in your life, both on and off the job (Koehn 1994). In a small town, your virtues or lack of them can be rather visible. If you get blind drunk and make inappropriate sexual moves on the community nurse and then throw up in the corner or fall asleep snoring with your head on the table, the next day, the whole town will know about it – including the young people. If you get a visit from by the police for driving badly or possessing illegal drugs or playing music loudly until four in the morning, the town will know about it. If you are slow to pay your bills or repay your debts, the town will know about it. If someone sleeps over at your house, the town will probably know about that too. If you go to the doctor, they will know, and it probably won't be that hard to find out why and even the results of any tests you might have had.

Small towns can be surprisingly forgiving. And they can be very judgmental. You can't afford to be naïve about this. The thing is, if you are going to work in this town, if the good citizens are going to release their sons and daughters into your care, you need to be able to maintain your moral reputation. As a youth worker, the town needs to know that they can trust you with their children's moral development. And it can make the communication of messages about safe drug use difficult if you are regularly seen to be a bit over the limit around town.

This might sound unfair, but when you look at it closely, a lot of what we do or claim to do is to help young people develop their virtues. If ours are a bit sullied, we can't blame people for objecting. So if letting off some steam is important to you (as it is to most of us), plan to get out of town on a regular basis, and do your letting off in the city.

Managing a private life: setting appropriate boundaries

Because everyone will know where you live, it is important to set limits on your availability for work. None of us minds being called out for something serious, but when young people are knocking on your door at eight o'clock on a Sunday morning and asking you to open the youth centre because they are bored, some limits need to be put in place. You will also need to make decisions about whether you will invite young people in when they knock on your door, or whether your house is off limits for your clients. It might be appropriate to have a planning meeting for the youth group at your place, or even to have a dinner party for young people, but you need to be clear.

Especially, it needs to be you who makes those decisions. If you aren't assertive, you will find clients around your house all day and half the night, and you will be burnt out in a very short space of time. If in doubt, err on the side of conservatism. You can always relax a rule, but it is much harder to tighten one.

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Winning the space to do what you do

Youth work as a practice has undergone a lot of development over the past 20 years, although some things continue to be done pretty much as they always have been – at least on the surface. We have argued in this paper for the importance of clarity: about you knowing what you are doing and why. This, and the effective communication of your aims, are especially important in rural areas. Because they have less exposure, community members' knowledge of youth work may be limited to their own experience when they were young, such as uniformed youth organisations, and sport and recreation. They often have not had any exposure to developments in contemporary youth work practice, like developmental youth work (e.g. Pittman 1991; Pittman & Cahill 1991; Pittman & Wright 1991) or, if they have, they may see it as "too academic".

Concepts of effective youth work practice may be restricted to "giving them something to do" or "getting them off the streets" or "keeping them out of trouble". A structured program with lots of young people running around sports grounds or involved in organised activities is much more visible than the quieter and sometimes longer-term intervention associated with getting groups of young people together to work out what they want to do with their time and energy.

This is one of the reasons why youth workers in rural settings need to spend time keeping the community informed, and educating the community about their role and the positive outcomes that flow from the work they are doing. Promotion and publicity are often neglected areas in youth work practice, but they become even more critical in small towns and communities. People have to know what you are doing. Use local newspapers, local government newsletters, presentations to service organisations, such as Rotary, and local interagency meetings. Remember, however, that the point is about what young people are achieving, rather than what a fantastic person and local hero you are.

A model for entering a rural community

The standard practices for community development in the city are true for rural communities as well. Key qualities are humility and openness: these people know their community way better than you ever will. Your job is not to come from on high with the answers to everything but to listen and facilitate the mobilisation of their knowledge.

Research

Do your research before you get there. Statistical, historical and other information will be available to you before you arrive in town. Find out the key industries, the population profile, the numbers of students at the school, the socio-economic profile of the town and the general history. Many small communities have a historical society and usually, some enthusiast will have written about how the town came to be. Gather what statistical information you can from the national statistics authority (in Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics).

Perhaps your position has had previous workers in it. See what you can do to track them down, to get their perspective on the town, how it works, how young people are seen within the town and what the needs are. How was the position created in the first place? What needs were the community trying to meet?

Do more research when you get there. Go through the files. Read the needs analyses; in my experience, usually a couple of youth needs surveys have been done before a position is created for a youth worker.

Make a map

Map the community service agencies in town. Find out what they do, who works there, what their interest is with young people, what they think the needs are and how they think they might be met. If you can, have these kinds of conversations over coffee and find out what kind of ally they might be in your work. Don't present yourself as someone with the answers.

Map other significant institutions: local government, churches, schools, government department offices, police.

Map the social geography of young people in the town. Where do they go to hang out? Who goes there? Where does everyone else go? What institutions currently connect with young people? What is the school doing, and how do young people respond to it? How about the church? How about service organisations, or volunteer

organisations, or uniformed youth organisations, or sporting groups? Who drinks at what pub?

Get around

Get around to as many people as you can. Get invited to meetings, to do a short introduction to yourself and your project and the way you want to work in the community. Meet as many young people as you can, in as many different contexts as you can. Try and get a sense of who is likely to come on board with your project, who has energy and the right kind of spirit to move things along.

Organise

Pull together a youth reference group and a community reference group. If these exist, pull them together and see how open they are to inviting new people.

Start the planning process

Identify the major issues of concern to each group. Remember that productive community work is not about solving problems, it is about creating possibilities. Create possibilities and the problems generally get left behind. Stay positive: your project is about what people would like to happen in the town.

Identify the resources you need, and where resistance is likely to come from.

Begin action

As much as possible, work with young people and the community to get things done.

Collaboration and community development

Core institutions take on a much greater significance in rural communities than in the city. The school is not just a place you send your kids to be educated. The school is a major resource; for example, they may have the only public address system, data projector or hall of any size in town. Teachers at the school are also members of the wider community and may well have to live next door to the parents of kids in their class, and their kids may be in your youth group.

The same is true of the police. The local station may know not only the young people you work with, but also their older siblings, parents and often grandparents. Local police officers will coach junior sport or volunteer for the community dance on Saturday night, the volunteer fire brigade or the ambulance, or serve on the parent–teacher council at the school. Churches and local government authorities may well take on similar interlocking roles. Again, the degree to which this is true will vary with the size of the town, but it will be true to some extent for towns with populations up to about 30,000 and perhaps more.

So for rural areas, community is a reality you have to work with. Community development, a desirable option elsewhere, becomes bread and butter in rural contexts. Engaging the community represents a field of opportunity in the country that is difficult to replicate in city-based youth practice, and is potentially either (or both) your greatest resource and your greatest obstacle.

The ideal situation for youth work practice is where the young person is understood within their social context, and the range of interventions that youth work employs are applied not only to the individual young person, but also to their family, their peer group and to social institutions such as schools, churches and law enforcement agencies with which they are involved. In this way, young people are enabled not only to act and change within their social environment, but to change with their social environment. Youth work in rural areas can begin potentially to approximate this ideal.

Rural communities are, generally, a long way away from the centres of power where decisions are made. Paradoxically, that can often mean that it is easier to get things done. Local officials often have a much higher degree of autonomy than their counterparts in the city, and are much less bound by red tape. In one instance, for example, we were hiring the school bus to take a group of Aboriginal young people to Alice Springs, 1,600km away across the Great Victoria Desert, for an Aboriginal music festival. I didn't have a bus licence, but one of the other workers had one, so we were OK. It occurred to me, however, a couple of days before we were due to leave, that it might be wise to have a back-up driver available. The next day, I went in for the written test, borrowed the town fire engine for a bit of practice driving a truck (the licence is the same), did a few laps of the town and went in for my practical test the same afternoon in the same fire engine. In the city, that would have taken me six weeks and several professional lessons.

Working in rural communities can therefore be a really good way of coming to understand the ways that societies work. After a short time, you will be able to identify the major centres of power in the community, who needs to be convinced before something can happen, who the figureheads are and who the power really sits with. You will be able to work out the way that political systems work, including the various levels of government (local, state or

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provincial, and national), how the dominant political parties do their business, and the interrelationships between the business community, the politicians and the bureaucracy. You will be able to see the way that lobby groups operate, though many of the deals will be done behind closed doors, and it might take quite a while and some judicious questioning to find out how that works. Small communities can be quite corrupt in the way that rules and regulations are administered, contracts are awarded and benefits and penalties applied.

Generally, rural communities care a lot about their young people, and the comment above about it being easy to get things done applies as much to getting things done for young people as it does for anything else. The problem is generally that the community doesn't really know what to do. Given a clear idea of what needs to happen, or what they need to do to find out, you will often find that it isn't difficult to get the local member of parliament, the mayor or shire president, the school principal, the officer in charge of police, regional heads of government departments, the head of the chamber of commerce and various other "influentials" around the table to talk about what needs to be done for young people you work with. These brokers may in their turn have direct access to decision-makers, such as government ministers or business people, and if ideas are sold well, you can find that things can come together quite quickly.

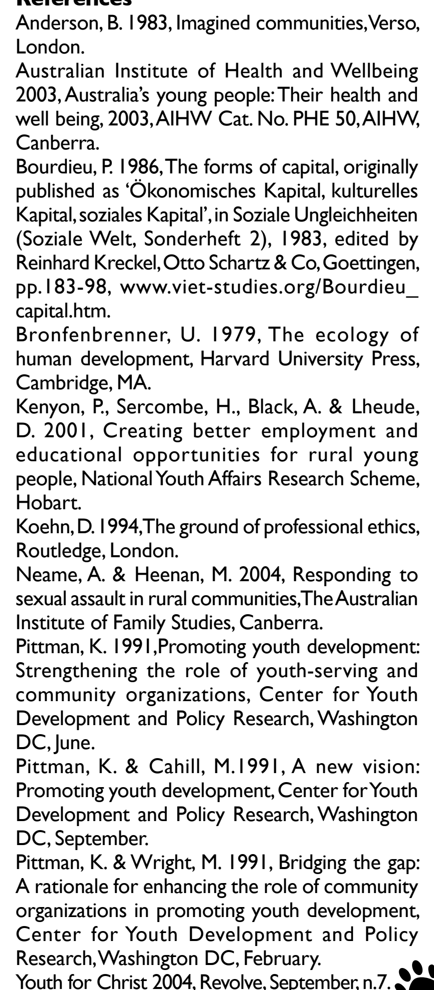
Conclusion

Working with young people in rural settings has lots of attractions. In a smaller community, you can really see the effect of your work. Developing a collaborative relationship with the school, police, medical staff, local government and others with an interest in young people can produce a lively and transformative network of relationships that make a difference in the lives of young people in the town.

From a personal point of view, the challenge of being the only person available to connect with young people in the town can teach you a lot about your own practice. What works and what doesn't becomes immediately and sometimes painfully obvious, so reflective practice tends to be forced upon you. Having to cover a much wider field of play means that you may be given responsibilities and develop skills in a year or two that might take you a decade in the city.

Often, too, working in rural areas means that you aren't just working with "problem" young people. You will often know every teenager in town, and working with a "normal" population of young people can raise a range of possibilities for developmental practice that might be harder to realise on the streets of a big city.

These joys and pleasures, however, are balanced by a much wider field of accountability, in terms of who you are accountable to, when you are accountable, and for what kinds of activity. This may be a discipline that is productive in your life, but some workers find it claustrophobic and constraining. It is something that needs to be taken seriously. Rural work can also be isolating, and it is crucial to maintain strong professional networks both with other professionals within your community and with other youth workers elsewhere. Thankfully, in the age of the internet and email, this is easier to do.



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