

September 2004 No. 7

REVOLVE

INFLUENCING THE LIVES OF RURAL YOUNG PEOPLE

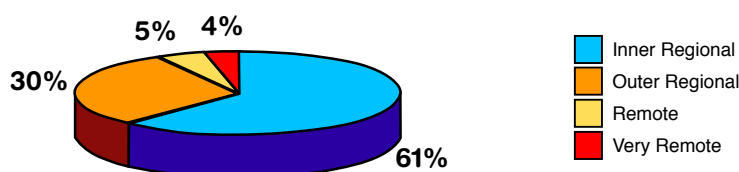
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Rural young people include those who are living in regional and remote areas of Australia. The experiences for young people living in rural Australia are quite different to those of urban young people. Whilst acknowledging the broad diversity of rural communities and young people within these communities, many issues are common across rural areas. These issues are compounded by the economic environment, educational and health disadvantages, and the lack of services, employment and training opportunities (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1999, p.20; Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert and Muspratt, 2004, pp.2-3). Research published recently describes the aspirations of young people in regional areas. It details the factors in rural life that impact on rural young people's aspirations and the strategies that may be applied to sustain and enhance these young people's aspirations. This issue of Revolve will discuss these findings and their relevance to YFC Australia and Christian Youth Workers.

THE FACTS

- There are 791,685 (approximately 30%) young people aged 15-24 living in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia (ABS, 2003a).
- Of these rural young people, most live in inner and outer regional areas (as based on the Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) (ABS, 2003a).

FIGURE 1 - percentage of rural young people 15-24 years in each area



- Young people raised in rural communities are under-represented in post-compulsory education and over represented in the most disadvantaged labour market group (Alloway et al, 2004, p.30).
- Secondary school attendance among 16 year olds range from 84% in urban areas to 41% in very remote areas (ABS, 2003b).
- Hospitalisation rates for pregnancy and childbirth are much higher in regional (9.36%) and remote areas (14.17%) compared to those living in major cities (6.46%) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003, p.358).
- Youth suicide rates are higher in rural (8.8 per 100,000) and remote areas (24.1 per 100,000) compared to metropolitan areas (6.4 per 100,000) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003, p.360).
- There are higher rates of physical inactivity during leisure time, higher rates of obesity, and higher rates of regular smoking, drinking at hazardous levels and using illicit substances among people living in remote areas compared to their urban counterparts (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003, p.355).
- For the majority of rural young people, the rural lifestyle offers a unique and strong sense of community connectedness and intergenerational relationships (Alston and Kent, 2001, p.8).
- Generally, young people in regional areas of Australia have high-level aspirations for their futures (Alloway et al, 2004, p.135).
- Around 70% of young people in regional or remote areas say they are pleased or mostly satisfied with their quality of their life (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003, p.357).

RURAL YOUNG PEOPLE'S ASPIRATIONS – A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The report discussed here by Alloway et al (2004) perceives young people's aspirations and expectations about the future in terms of success in education and employment, in order to avoid future hardship and disadvantage. However, as Christians, we believe that life is about eternal significance, not just this present life. It's about knowing Jesus and making Him known in this world. Young people's aspirations and expectations for the future can be significantly affected by a relationship with Jesus Christ. Aspirations derive from an understanding of self-worth, and an understanding of one's meaning and purpose in life. Christians know that it is Jesus who makes life worth living, who brings the only real meaning to life. This research by Alloway et al (2004) is nevertheless important for us to consider because it highlights to us as Christian youth workers strategies to enhance rural young people's aspirations, and therefore strategies to bring the love of Jesus and the meaning of life to rural young people.

Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Mat 9:37-38). Rural Australia is a plentiful harvest...but the workers are few. Rural communities always want more opportunities, resources and services for their young people. We have an amazing opportunity to serve these communities in a way where practical service brings long-lasting spiritual impact and blessing to individuals, towns and wider communities. Let's embrace this opportunity!

THE RURAL CONTEXT – OBSTACLES TO YOUNG PEOPLE'S ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Employment & Education

One of the major issues for rural young people is limited opportunities. Often this is due to socio-economic issues in rural communities. There are limited opportunities for employment and education. For instance, there are fewer jobs for young people in rural communities compared to urban areas (Alloway et al, 2004, p.46; Alston and Kent, 2001, p.51). This makes financial independence difficult for rural young people to attain, and places restrictions on what aspirations are possible to achieve (Alloway et al, 2004, p.46). Regarding education, schools in rural areas often have limited curriculum options due to the limited number of staff, students and resources to provide broader curriculum options. Furthermore, most rural communities don't have a post-secondary institution in or nearby, so education decisions for young people involve financial costs to cover transport and accommodation, not to mention university fees and equipment expenses (Looker & Dwyer, 1998, cited in Alloway et al, 2004, p.45). The costs incurred by families for young people's education and training also places pressure on young people to pursue less expensive options for their future (Alloway et al, 2004, pp.32, 195).

Recreation

The severe lack of recreation options for young people in rural areas is another major issue for rural communities. Things that occupy young people in urban area such as cinemas, major shopping centres and other sport and recreation facilities are scarce in rural Australia (and if young people in rural areas do have access to these, it often involves considerable travel). Leisure time in rural communities therefore "revolves around sport, pubs and BBQs" (Lance, 2004). For young women, especially those who aren't sports oriented, this means even fewer recreational opportunities. There is a growing amount of literature that shows how much recreation can benefit the development of young people (including their mental health and self-worth), as well as reduce alcohol and drug use and other risk activities (Patterson and Pegg, 1999, pp. 27-28). If young people feel "there is nothing to do", they may start to believe it regarding their future as well.

Discrimination – gender, race and sexuality

Limited opportunities for rural young people are confounded by discrimination and oppressive mindsets, particularly along the lines of gender, race and sexuality. Research has shown that violence against women is a greater problem in rural areas (Warner-Smith and Lee, 2001, p.33; Wyn, Stokes and Stafford, 1998, cited in Alloway et al, 2004, p.52), that women in rural areas are more at risk of being unemployed (Alloway et al, 2004, p.51) and that narrow conceptions of femininity and masculinity devalue and marginalise young women in rural communities unless that are in a relationship with a young man (Wyn et al, 1998, cited in Alloway et al, 2004, p.52). Research has also found links between the effects of homophobia in rural communities and the high incidence of rural male youth suicide (Wyn et al, 1998, cited in Alloway et al, 2004, p.53). Attitudes towards people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and Indigenous people also seriously affect the aspirations of young people belonging to these groups. A report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) found a common experience among Indigenous young people: that they receive subtle messages that “because you are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or South Sea Islander you won’t do well” (HREOC, 1999, p.12). When these messages are combined with restricted employment and education opportunities, inadequate housing and support, high arrest rates, poor health and substance abuse and lack of mentoring, young Indigenous people in rural areas must confront enormous obstacles, which would limit their expectations and aspirations for the future (Kenyon, Sercombe, Black and Lhuede, 2001, cited in Alloway et al, 2004, p.54). The greater extent of disadvantage among Indigenous Australians is evidence of racist and ethnocentric attitudes not only in rural communities, but throughout all Australian society, including those pervading welfare professionals and state and federal government policies.

(Although there is a significant number of Indigenous Australians in rural areas, details about working with Indigenous young people will follow in the next issue of Revolve).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YFC & CHRISTIAN YOUTH WORKERS?



It’s important for us to understand the context and the obstacles to young people’s aspirations and expectations. It’s having such an understanding that allows us to meet these young people where they are at, relate to them in a way that is real and meet their needs. From this discussion three main questions arise:

1. What services can we provide to rural young Australians?

Programs, services and resources are needed for rural young people. We have incredible opportunities to minister in these areas. Providing recreation opportunities is one avenue to do this. We can support and resource local churches to provide relevant events, activities and ‘places’ for young people to find belonging and acceptance. With appropriate networking and promotion across regional areas these events can draw young people from surrounding towns. These events don’t have to contain obvious Christian content, but can be avenues to build relationships with young people. Youth workers in rural areas have found this to be so important (Sharrock, 2004; Olsen, 2004, Lance, 2004; Paterson, 2004), particularly due to the lack of role models, mentors and services. Providing exposure to positive role models (particularly Christian leaders in the 18-25 age bracket) and mentors is also a huge draw card. These relationships can have significant and lasting impacts on their lives (Olsen, 2004; Sharrock, 2004). Providing these opportunities also encourages community participation, and skill development amongst young people, including leadership and peer support.

2. How can we make these accessible?

Financial and transport constraints for rural young people need to be considered. It's important to make the programs, activities and services we provide cheap or affordable, as well as physically accessible. This might require arranging transport options for young people (such as hiring a bus to pick up and drop home young people or arranging car pooling) and subsidising the costs of activities where possible.

3. How can we not perpetuate oppressive mindsets in rural areas?

This begins by examining and challenging our own prejudices and attitudes to “the other”. Learn about the experiences of young women, young Indigenous people, same sex attracted and CALD young people in rural communities. Build supportive relationships with these young people and listen to their stories and wisdom. Ask them how we can support and encourage them. Encourage these young people to pursue their aspirations despite the obstacles. Provide programs and activities that are relevant to, and accepting of, these young people, eg. activities that are gender neutral. Challenge the discriminatory comments and attitudes that you pick up in conversations with young people, workers and community members (and definitely don't convey them yourself), whilst promoting a positive view of the community.

Strategies to sustain and enhance rural young people's aspirations – bringing real meaning

The research into rural young people's aspirations and expectations for the future found several strategies to be helpful in sustaining and enhancing young people's aspirations. These range from the influence of parents, teachers and role models, to school, community, government and industry initiatives (Alloway et al, 2004).

Parents, teachers, friends and positive role models featured prominently as key influences on young people's aspirations for the future (Alloway et al, 2004, pp.138-152). In the words of a Year 11 student in rural NSW, “You talk to people you respect—people who seem to have made the right decision in their life...”. The advice and actions of respected people in encouraging young people to realise their potential and aspirations and achieve what is possible, without placing inadvertent pressure on them, was found to be significant in influencing the lives of rural young people (Alloway et al, 2004, p.141).

The research also found that networks between schools and other institutions and services was an important strategy to support student expectations and aspirations across rural areas (Alloway et al, 2004, p.227). Schools are often seeking to engage with facilities, services, programs and resources outside of their communities. The report describes schools as “resolute in encouraging self-determination amongst students by allowing them the opportunity to re-vision their futures, based on fuller understandings of the kinds of lives that were possible” (Alloway et al, 2004, p.227).

Community initiatives and the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) were also found to have strategic influence in rural young people's lives (Alloway et al, 2004, pp.235, 241). These strategies can reduce young people's isolation, contribute to “capacity building” amongst young people (which will increase their confidence in their ability to achieve their aspirations) and strengthen their connection to possibilities outside of their immediate community.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YFC & CHRISTIAN YOUTH WORKERS?



This research has described strategies relevant to YFC and other Christian youth programs seeking to serve and minister in rural communities. The importance of our involvement in these young people's lives is not only recognised by ourselves, but also by young people, parents, schools and communities in rural areas. This research reaffirms the importance of relationship, and all types of ministry in rural communities, such as the five arms of programs offered by YFC (schools-based, care (welfare-based), adventure-based, multimedia and events). All of these play a role in enhancing rural young people's aspirations, encouraging their potential, and giving them an opportunity to re-vision their lives and discover eternal meaning.

SUMMARY

The Bible says that God has plans to give all His people a hope and a future (Jer 29:11). In working with rural young people we are God's instruments in bringing a hope and a future to them and introducing them to Jesus Christ. We can do this by:

- Making our programs and ourselves available in rural communities.
- Building relationships.
- Encouraging a positive view of rural communities.
- Highlighting and building the strengths, capacities and resilience of rural young people.
- Encouraging the aspirations of rural young people and introducing them to new ideas, new opportunities and new possibilities.
- Reducing the isolation experienced by rural young people, particularly those who experience discrimination.
- Resource and networking with schools and churches in rural areas.
- Providing accessible recreation opportunities.

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REVOLVE

Revolve is a quarterly document that provides updates on the current trends and issues pertinent to young people in Australia. Revolve provides an interpretation as to what the research means for YFC and Christian youth workers, which incorporates recommendations about how we can do our ministry and mission better. Revolve is a means by which we can be attuned to the issues and needs of Australia's young people so as to better meet and respond to them.

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