



Exploring the Narratives Surrounding Young People in the Northern Territory

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Disclaimer:

Please note: The NT Youth Round Table is an independent advisory body. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and are not necessarily reflective of those of the Office of Youth Affairs or the Northern Territory Government.

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- Office of Youth Affairs; and
- Members of the 2017 Round Table.

Executive Summary

The objective of this community-based project was to identify the negative narratives that surround young people in the Northern Territory, specifically when it comes to youth crime and how it affects the community perception of young people. The “growing consensus that the Northern Territory is experiencing a spike in youth crime” has resulted in the strengthening of NT Police youth task forces, as well as an historic boost in funding to implement a range of youth diversionary programs (Canna, 2017). The widely-documented increasing level of youth crime that plagues the NT has led to a shift in community perspective that all young people are troublemakers. Such a shift only acts to exacerbate the intergenerational divide, with departments like the Office of the Children’s Commissioner launching campaigns specifically to combat these growing negative narratives.

As active young members of the community, we find that this portrayal of young people can have a negative effect in fostering a social environment whereby trust, respect, and cooperation and understanding between adults and young people is mutual.

Frankly, the results of the project were unsurprising to the group members, and supported the hypothesis that young people in the Northern Territory are subjected to a general negative perspective when it comes to youth crime. This was evident as the majority of members felt that youth crime in the Northern Territory was blown out of proportion, and that the current system of media reporting on youth crime unfairly portrayed most young people in the community. It was also found that the visible community perspective on youth crime as portrayed on forums like Facebook further strengthen this narrative, as people commenting were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the methods of dealing with youth crime and were quite open in their distaste for young people.

Introduction

Over the course of this year, we have participated in our quarterly Round Table meetings in Darwin and the discussion of youth crime and the effects that it has on other young people consistently came up in discussion. During the second Round Table meeting held in May, The Hon. Minister Wakefield addressed and discussed ways in which these negative narratives could be combatted. This discussion spawned our desire to further explore these narratives, their dominance in the community, and the influence that they have on other young people.

The following methodology was undertaken for the report:

1. Conduct research on Darwin’s major news sources and analysed their language, style, content and the reactions that they received from the community to be used for a focus group.
2. Engage with young people from around Darwin to explore the way that youth crime affects them. A meeting with City of Darwin’s Youth Advisory Committee was held.
3. Explore the influence that social media has on these narratives, and also analyse comment boards on articles related to youth crime in the Northern Territory.

Discussion

In recent times, public attitudes and opinions on young people and crime have evoked considerable discussion and social discourse. This predominantly negative coverage in our 24-hour news cycle has been aided by advancements in low cost technology. Most notably, the prevalence of news outlets using social media as well CCTV images from residential homes and businesses has further propelled this coverage beyond the traditional outlets of the NT News, 9 News, and ABC News Darwin.

In addition to news outlets, various Facebook groups, such as Darwin / Palmerston Crime Watch, Darwin Crime Rally/Protest, and the Darwin NT Buy, Sell, Swap & Wanted, are forums for the community to express their opinions and share reports of criminal activities to the broader public. The public commenting on news social media and also standalone groups further promotes a negative and sometimes inappropriate usage of language aimed at young people or particular groups of society. The presence and actions of standalone groups, such as the Alice Springs Volunteer Force (AVF) and the Concerned Residents Council (CRC) is the product of unsatisfied residents taking the rule of law and policing into their own hands (SBS, 2015). Indeed, the prominence and apparent popularity of vigilante groups in Alice Springs and the broader Territory serves as an example of how quickly things can escalate beyond a negative perception into the threat of violence.

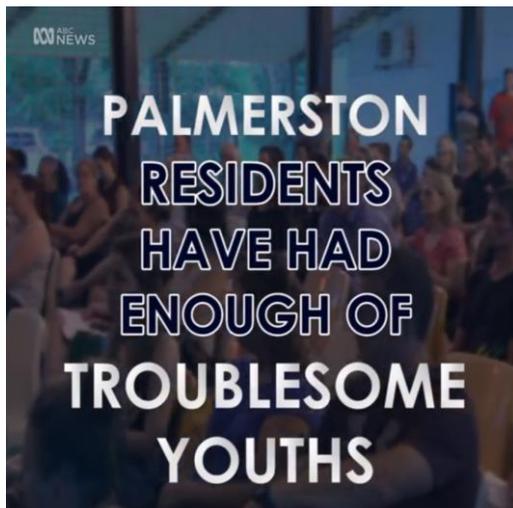
This change in perception and often polarising views of young people has been particularly evident since July 2016, when the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) Four Corners program aired an investigative report, pointedly titled 'Australia's Shame' which revealed the living conditions and poor treatment of youth juveniles under the care and protection of the Department of Correctional Services at the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre. Needless to say, it caused national uproar causing the Prime Minister to announce a Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory by the next morning. The findings of that report were recently handed down and can be found at <https://childdetentionnt.royalcommission.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>.

Members of this group investigated how the media is portraying young people by reviewing a number of news stories from different news outlets in the Territory, particularly in the last 12 months. The findings are listed below.

ABC News Facebook Page

In an age of social media dominance, public comment boards like those found on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube often provide a direct platform for community members to express their views, with those more popular views receiving more positive feedback ('likes'). On February 7 2017, ABC Darwin published a video on Facebook of a Palmerston community meeting titled "HAD ENOUGH: A police acknowledgement that crime in Darwin and Palmerston has spiked, and promises to reform the bail system, are made at a heated community meeting."

In this video, five of the five most 'liked' comments, which amassed a combined total of 73 'likes', each expressed a disapproval of current government and court attitude to youth crime. One member claimed that "Kids don't even try to cover there [sic] faces anymore because they know nothing will happen if or when they are caught." Another user claimed that we have "created a society of rights without responsibilities" due to the "academics leading their agendas" and treating "criminal youths like naughty boys." A comment which received a high 15 'likes' referred to the youth offenders as "little inbreds [sic] running around ... robbing innocent people whose taxes go towards feeding these sh*ts," while a comment with 10 'likes' suggested the Government "throw the turds in the middle of nowhere doing hard labour away from town."

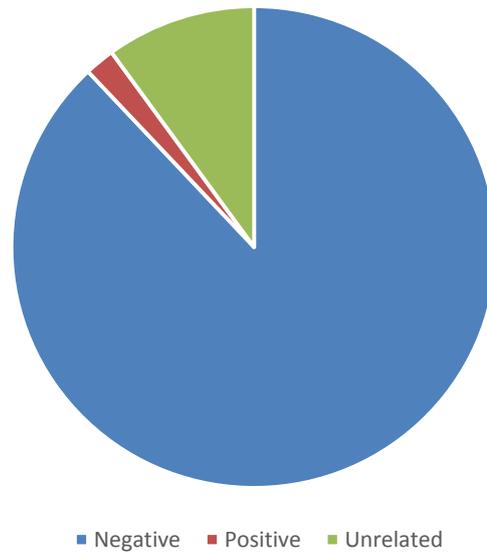


Credit: Photos courtesy of ABC News.

Of the top 50 comments on this ABC Darwin's Facebook video, 44 displayed a negative attitude towards the current methodology of dealing with youth crime, while 5 were unrelated and 1 was positive.

Given that social media platforms have already been linked with elevated levels of depression, anxiety and poor sleep, and given that 91% of 16-24 year olds use the internet for social networking, this constant reinforcement of negative narratives about young people on these platforms can only further exacerbate these growing mental health concerns and further strengthen the intergenerational divide (Young Health Movement, 2016).

Subject of Comments on ABC Darwin's Facebook Video



Nine News Darwin Facebook Page

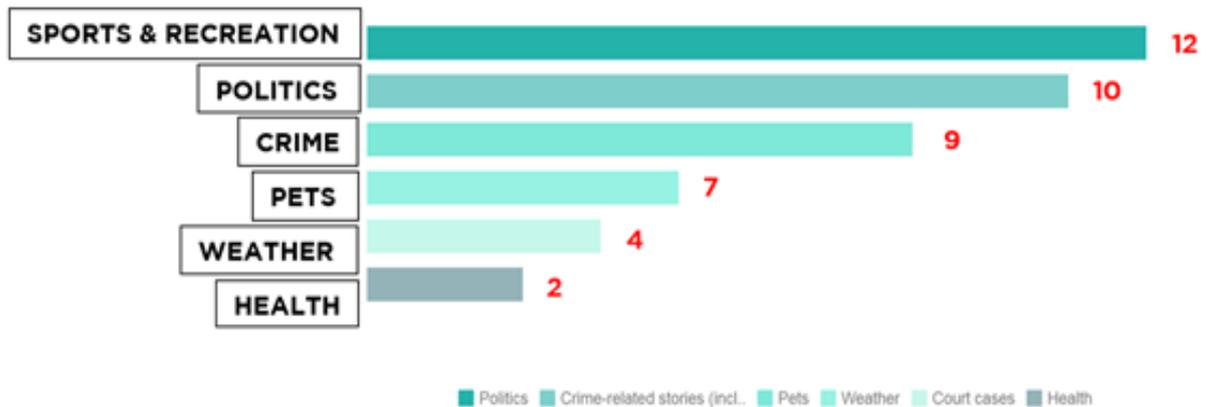
The group was also interested in what the top trending stories are on news sites like Nine News Darwin. Preliminary results from monitoring the Nine News Darwin Facebook page indicate crime-related stories attracted high volumes of online interaction and coverage.

Most evidently, in the month of August 2017, the group tracked a total of 9 crime-related posts or stories were published online; third behind the most popular interest of sports and recreational activities which received 12 posts or stories.

Given that media outlets want to encourage traction onto their social media profiles for marketing and promotional purposes a hypothesis could be made that they are using these stories as 'clickbait'. In an article published on Wired, Bryan Gardiner postulates that "editors write headlines in an effort to manipulate you—or at least grab your attention—and always have." Gardiner refers to the expertise of Jonah Berger of the University of Pennsylvania, who argues "[Sadness and angry clickbait] drives us, fires us up, and compels us to take action," whereas "Anger, anxiety, humour, excitement, inspiration, surprise—all of these are punchy emotions that clickbait headlines rely on." (Gardiner, 2015).

Nine News Darwin on Facebook

Top 6 stories reported for August 2017



These unbalanced media portrayals of young people are not unique to the Northern Territory, as Hertsmeire Young Researches found that “negative media stereotyping of young people exists and has done for a very long time,” in which media organisations capitalise on stories “with the least facts and details” to create “moral panics,” ultimately leading to “the public forming an unbalanced perception of the behaviour and attitudes of young people” (Jupp, et al., 2011). The Department of Health encourages people to be aware that “there is a difference between personal opinion and fact,” and that “our community can sometimes hold very narrow views about young people” (Department of Health, 2004).

Focus Group Session

To gather further evidence of how young people are affected by the negative stereotypes portrayed we conducted a one-hour long focus group session with the City of Darwin’s Youth Advisory Committee (YAC). This session focused on the narrative surrounding youth crime and young people in the Northern Territory. This wide-ranging discussion consisted of nine young Territorians aging from 12 to 25 years. We acknowledge the limitations to working with a small group, however due to time constraints

The focus group was delivered by:

- The session began with an exercise in which participants explored the cost of youth detention per child per jurisdiction. This provided an engaging activity at the start of the session which allowed the participants to think deeply about the effects and prevalence of youth crime in each state and territory,

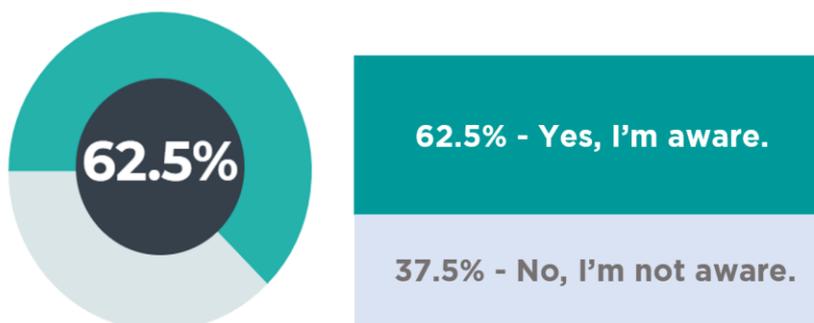
- The YAC Members then participated in a spectrum debate in which a statement was put to the participants about youth crime in the Northern Territory. They moved along the spectrum to indicate their agreement or lack thereof (from strongly disagree to strongly agree).
- Finally, formal questions were presented to the members to create a conversation exploring youth crime, who is responsible for managing crime and the media portrayal of young people in the NT.

The prepared materials for the focus group can be found in Appendix 1.

When asked if government should play a greater or lesser role in youth crime, a member of the focus group said the government should play a lesser role because we have become too dependent and have delegated our responsibilities to the government. However, other members of the focus group disagreed and claimed the government should play a greater role for a number of reasons. That is: the government has access to services that are directly associated with the community, this means they can directly target the areas of vulnerability causing youth crime and attack them at the source, rather than after the crime has been committed.

Considering the recent domestic and international media attention to the ABC's Four Corners report on the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre, we wanted to better understand how this reporting and coverage was being received by young people in our local community. We asked participants if they were familiar with this facility, and their response is shown in the below graph:

How many of you are aware of the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre?



One participant of the focus group believed that the issue of youth crime in the Northern Territory had been “blown out of proportion,” believing that the “media are the issue in how they portray young people.” Another member expressed concern with the freedom in how these issues are reported by the media and the

consequences that can have on giving all young people a bad name -- being “painted with the same brush.”

When asked what came to mind when they thought of youth crime, two members promptly responded “low socio-economic status” and “risk factors.” When asked to elaborate on the latter, the member explained how a combination of factors like “boredom and peer pressure” can push vulnerable children to commit these crimes. They argued it could be battled with more programs like Midnight Basketball, a free program provided to young Territorians in the local Darwin community on Saturday nights. The program aims to use sport to encourage young children, who would otherwise be roaming the streets, to come along and play in a safe and supervised environment where they also undertake workshops relating to safe and healthy living.

In an off-hand remark, as one member was explaining how, as YAC members, they were doing good for the community and it was not necessarily being heard about, another member asked if “that was going to make the media any money, though?” While a few members laughed, it was a subtle tap at what would later be discussed in more length in the group – the incentives of media to publish stories which will reach the farthest and so generate the most profit.

This further reinforces Deborah Dunham of *The Huffington Post* in-depth analysis of the stereotypes surrounding young people and concluded that “we’re not doing teenagers – the future leaders of our world – any favors by continuing to perpetuate this negative stereotype.” Matt Wells at the *Guardian* similarly found in his investigation that “the media habitually portrays young people in an overwhelmingly negative light” (Dunham, 2014) (Wells, 2004)

At this point, the Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services (NTPFES) ‘name and shame’ system, in which they would regularly upload the names and pictures of underage children on the Facebook page was discussed.



PHOTO: The NT Police Facebook post showed the children's faces and names, which the ABC has blurred. (Facebook: NT Police)

The Northern Territory is the only jurisdiction in the country which allows the ‘naming and shaming’ of juvenile offenders. Under the *Youth Justice Act 2005*, a young offender’s name and picture can be published publicly unless a Local Court Judge suppresses its publication. The group understands this is now being reviewed by the NT Government.

The NT Police uploaded a picture, name and details of the child to Facebook, which was then shared by

Nine News Darwin. Both posts provoked a number of comments calling on the child to be “shot, used for target practice or fried on electric fences” (McQuire, 2015). Members expressed concern that this led to the reinforcement of the idea that youths are troublemakers and “little sh*ts.” This practice was found by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner to be breaching human rights. (Vanovac, 2017).

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed throughout this project further strengthened our view that there is a general, negatively-skewed perception of young people in the Northern Territory which is fuelled by social media. This was demonstrated through the exploration of community forums like Facebook, the focus group conducted with the Youth Advisory Committee, and online research.

It is our belief that these negative narratives can lead to a wider intergenerational divide, as youth are marginalised as being ‘troublemakers and lost causes’. It can also lead to unnecessary hypervigilance, which can result in subconscious stereotyping and prejudice and threats of violence. The reinforcement of the negative narrative of young people incubated the idea that the community must always be vigilant of their own youth.

We are just a group of young Territorians trying to better the community for other young Territorians. As active members of various youth groups we come in contact with amazing young people that are contributing to society and we want to combat the overarching negative narratives to ensure there can be a better future for our young people. We want all young people to have a chance, where they are no longer marginalised or identified as troublemakers and lost causes without the chance to prove themselves.

Recommendations

As members of the NT Youth Round Table as well as active volunteers in various groups across the NT, we strongly feel that the public perception of young people is being skewed negatively.

It is our belief that if we shift the narrative away from young people as troublemakers and provide more airtime to those that are doing good, more young people will aspire to achieve those feats. We believe it would create a more inclusive and welcoming Northern Territory if other members of the community could see young people as potential future leaders instead of potential future troublemakers.

The report recommends the following actions:

- Greater focus on positive achievements by young people such as the proactive campaign “See Us. Hear Us. Know Us.” This campaign run by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner aims to highlight the achievements of young people in the Northern Territory to give balance to the uneven scales of opinion which currently favour crime and negative stories.
- Promote greater responsibility to media outlets to be more responsible by having more balance in their news stories online and through traditional news methods. If we could counter all the negative news stories with positive stories of young people doing well the community perception could shift.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Focus Group questions and materials

Questions

Introduce why you are doing this (as a part of your Round Table project). You need to ensure that it is a safe and supportive environment otherwise people will not respond. Ensure people that their responses will be confidential and that they will not be identified throughout the report.

1. Do you think youth crime is a problem in today's society? Why / Why Not
2. When you think about youth crime, what are some of the first things that come to your mind?
3. What crimes do you think young people are more likely to be involved in?
4. Have you, or someone you know that has taken part in any youth crimes? (i.e. vandalism, destruction of private/public property, stealing, shoplifting, trespassing, etc.)
5. *What are some reasons that you think leads young people to commit crimes? (if discussion is muted, suggest: home life, parental neglect, peer influence, etc.)
6. Follow up question to Q4 - Why do you think this is the case?
7. What is the Territory Government's role on this important issue?
8. Should the NT Government play a greater or lesser role?
9. *Do you think The Government response by providing more activities during after hours and throughout school holidays will reduce the likelihood of youth crime?*
10. What role do you think charities, non-for-profit organisations and non-governmental agencies (NGOs) should play in addressing youth crime?
11. Do you think local authorities are doing enough to prevent young people from committing crimes? If not, please explain why?
12. Do you remember when you first found out about Don Dale? Was it recent?

13. Follow up question to Q7: Do you view Don Dale positively or negative? If so, please explain why?
14. Do you think the Federal Government should step in and intervene to address this problem? Cite the precedent established in the Federal Government's National Emergency Response (commonly referred to as the 'Intervention') in 2004 when the federal government responded to *The Little Children are Sacred Report* and enacted a wide-ranging, but controversial set of measures aimed at addressing the 'disproportionate levels of violence in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, as well as the endemic disadvantage suffered in terms of health, housing, employment and justice.'