



The role of arts participation in regional well-being

This paper is a summary of key areas of interest from **Julia Anwar McHenry's** research thesis '**The Arts and Social Well-being in Rural Communities: A Qualitative and Quantitative Assessment in the Mid West Region of Western Australia**'. Anwar McHenry's thesis is the outcome of a research project on the role of the arts in the social well-being in the Mid West with a particular focus on the nature and impacts of the arts in rural communities.



Mural painted by local primary school children in Mount Magnet. Photo by Julia Anwar McHenry.

Anwar McHenry's research was supported by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and research partners, the Institute of Regional Development within The University of Western Australia, Country Arts WA, and the Department of Culture and the Arts (DCA).

The Mid West was considered an ideal location due to the diversity of settlement types, ranging in size and scale from large regional centres to small remote settlements, highlighting geographical variations that might impact on the arts and social well-being.

The area is an evolving region with diverse population and geography.

It consists of 18 local government areas (LGAs) covering an area of about 466,766 km², including offshore islands.

The grouping of these LGAs into four sub-regions: Geraldton, coastal, agricultural, and mining/pastoral, allows for ease of comparison when analysing Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data by Statistical Local Areas (SLA). The project investigated the contribution of arts participation to community well-being by fostering social connectivity, community cohesion, social inclusion, trust and reciprocity.

These outcomes are of major importance to governments, communities and businesses that traditionally use a variety of quantitative measurement criteria as the basis for policy and investment.

In addition, stronger arguments for the role of the arts in contributing to economic productivity can play a greater role in regional development discussions. This research creates a 'bridge' for the integration of quantitative and qualitative data on the more intrinsic aspects of arts and well-being in rural areas.



Drovers rest in Mingenew. Photo by Julia Anwar McHenry.

It is significant in effectively developing and identifying artistic values as indicators and outcomes that define well-being. These indicators can be further measured using the quantitative modelling techniques used outside of arts sector research.

In doing so, this research provides innovative theoretical tools to build a stronger case for more effective policy in the arts and regional development.

Julia Anwar McHenry's thesis paper is available to download from the DCA Research Hub.

Research Highlights

- Arts and culture and sport both increase engagement and contribute to increased social capital in different ways - arts and culture through 'bridging social capital' and sport through 'bonding social capital'.
- Rural residents travel greater distances to attend arts events, and are more committed patrons of the arts when presented with the opportunity to engage in them.
- Women play a strong role in maintaining arts and culture activities in the Mid West as volunteers. However, rural restructuring has contributed to decreasing volunteerism among women, many of whom have less time to commit to the community due to additional work responsibilities.
- Indigenous women benefit from regional arts and culture activities.
- Possible differences in the well-being of males and females across the sub-regions, may provide an indication of elements within those sub-regions that are perhaps more attractive or fulfilling for either gender.
- Generally, there were lower male participation rates for arts and culture activities in the Mid West.

Research Highlights

- Literature was identified both as an accessible art form available to remote populations and one of the few art forms males identified as an activity preference.
- The complex interaction of age, gender and length of residency differs between each SLA. This data, however, can now be recorded and used to build profiles of specific geographic areas for comparison with ABS and SLA statistics.
- Each sub-region has distinctly different trends for males and females according to their age and length of residence. For example, there is a higher proportion of 20 to 54 year olds in the mining/pastoral sub-region, a pattern especially prominent for males, and a greater proportion of people over 54 in the coastal sub-region.
- Coastal residents of both genders report the greatest level of well-being among sub-regions; while the social well-being for both genders is higher for agricultural residents - despite isolation or economic disparities within the same sub-region.
- With the greatest male to female ratio in Geraldton and mining/pastoral sub-regions, there were some contrasts between the gender profiles of long-term residents and fly-in fly-out (FIFO) which impact on arts activity participation, consumption and volunteerism.
- Recording arts and culture data is problematic as many activities are unfunded and occur spontaneously or infrequently. Some activities may utilise arts but their primary purpose is not recorded as arts or as an arts activity.



Airing of the Quilts in Northampton. Photo by Julia Anwar McHenry.