

2004

School leaver celebrations in Western Australia: A three-year intervention study

Richard Midford
Edith Cowan University

Nicole Young

Fiona Farrington

Troy Bogaards

This article was originally published as: Midford, R., Young, N., Farrington, F. & Bogaards, T. (2004) School leaver celebrations in Western Australia: A three-year intervention study. *International Journal of Health Promotion and Education*, 42(4), 100-108.

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks/5608>

School leaver celebrations in Western Australia: A three-year intervention study

By Richard Midford, Nicole Young, Fiona Farrington and Troy Bogaards, National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

Key words: young people, alcohol, drugs, prevention, community development.

Abstract

A project involving community management of school leaver celebrations in Western Australia was evaluated over three years. In the first year formative evaluation was undertaken. The findings were then used to draw up a comprehensive intervention programme designed to reduce harm for the leavers and the host community. In the second year the externally co-ordinated and well-resourced intervention was evaluated in terms of impact. In the third year the intervention was on a smaller scale and co-ordinated by an agency within the local community. The evaluation emphasised sustainability. A similar mixed methodology, comprising surveys of school leavers, interviews with community stakeholders and participant observation was used in all three years. The findings indicate that strategic support can produce sustainable benefits by enhancing community capacity. Activities that brought leavers together in social situations were well received and worked directly to reduce risk. In addition, the act of providing for the leavers built a relationship with the community, which acted indirectly to reduce risk. This sense of relationship seems to be the key to well-run leaver celebrations.

Introduction

Around the world there are a number of high-profile events that attract young people during their transition into adulthood. There are strong rite of passage associations with these events, which typically involve increased alcohol and other drug use and associated high-risk behaviour. In America there is the annual 'Spring Break' ritual, which involves large gatherings of college students at well-known seaside tourist destinations (Smeaton *et al* 1998, Josaim *et al* 1998). When Josaim *et al* (1998) surveyed participants they found that 91 per cent of the males and 78 per cent of the females reported at least one episode of binge drinking in the previous day. A study of young British holidaymakers visiting

Ibiza, Spain, showed a similar pattern of increased risky drug use (Bellis *et al* 2000). Use of ecstasy five or more days a week went from 2.9 per cent prevalence when in the UK to 42.6 per cent when in Ibiza. The same frequency of alcohol use increased in prevalence from 24.8 to 87.4 per cent.

In Australia the most notable rite of passage celebration occurs at the end of high school. This is variously known as 'Schoolies Week' or 'Leavers' Week'. It is a social phenomenon that looms large in the public consciousness because it involves a volatile mix of young people, high risk alcohol and other drug use and intense media scrutiny. The event first came to prominence in Queensland where during the 1990s increasing numbers of local and interstate school leavers converged on well-known holiday spots, such as the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast, in the week following final exams (Ballard *et al* 1998, Smith & Rosenthal 1997, Zinkiewicz *et al* 1999). The numbers of leavers and their behaviour put considerable strain on these communities. Zinkiewicz *et al* (1999) interviewed school leavers at a number of popular Queensland locations and found that in the previous 24 hours most had got drunk. Use of cannabis and ecstasy was also high and a large percentage had experienced some form of interpersonal conflict or physical harm that was related to alcohol use.

Western Australia does not have the population or concentration of tourist facilities to experience school leaver celebrations on the same scale as Queensland. However, celebrations involving smaller numbers occur in late November/early December, and are spread over a number of seaside holiday locations. One of the most popular destinations is Rottnest Island, off the coast of Perth. Each year several thousand young people gather here to unwind after the pressure of their final exams, socialise with old school friends, make new friends and mark their passage into independence and adulthood (Bogaards *et al* 2000). For most leavers these celebrations involve the consumption of large quantities of alcohol, with all the risks identified in the Queensland studies (Ballard *et al* 1998, Smith & Rosenthal 1997, Zinkiewicz *et al* 1999). In addition, there is the problem of underage drinking, because

most school leavers in Western Australia are still 17 years of age.

In 1999 the Western Australian School Drug Education Project (SDEP) initiated a project aimed at reducing harm and supporting host communities in their management of leavers' celebrations. Rottnest Island was the logical setting for developing and testing intervention strategies for a number of reasons:

- It had a history of attracting large numbers of leavers.
- The Rottnest Island Authority (RIA), which has responsibility for managing the island, was keen to collaborate.
- The leavers were all accommodated in a central area containing most of the tourist facilities, which made access for data gathering convenient.

The Intervention

The Rottnest Island intervention was evaluated over three successive leaver celebrations from 1999 to 2001. In the first year there was no intervention beyond that normally undertaken by the service agencies and businesses on the island. The time was used to conduct an extensive formative evaluation. A number of recommendations were made from this study on ways of reducing harm for both the celebrating leavers and the Rottnest Island community. These recommendations then formed the basis of a comprehensive intervention co-ordinated by SDEP on Rottnest in 2000 and known as 'Leavers Live'. The effectiveness of this intervention was evaluated. In 2001 the Rottnest Island Authority (RIA) assumed the major co-ordinating role. The scale of the intervention was somewhat reduced from that of the previous year because of fewer resources, but effort was concentrated on those activities considered most effective in reducing harm. An evaluation was again undertaken, with an emphasis on examining how the intervention was sustained under community management.

Major components of the externally co-ordinated 2000 'Leavers Live' intervention

- Police talks to school leavers prior to leavers' week
- Provision of information to the parents of leavers via school newsletters
- Information sent out by the RIA to all leavers holding bookings
- \$1000 deposit required to book accommodation
- Chill Out tent – staffed by volunteers
- Rottnest Island rangers visit and brief all leavers in accommodation
- Extensive daytime activities programme comprising beach sports and competitions
- Discounted \$5 Recovery Breakfasts at the island tearooms

- Bands and DJs at the Rottnest Hotel – afternoon and evening
- Free water provided at the Rottnest Hotel
- De-licensing of a section of the Rottnest Hotel to form an underage dance area
- Coloured wrist bands for over 18s entering the Rottnest Hotel
- Increased security staff at the Rottnest Hotel
- Stopping of alcohol home deliveries
- Extended trading hours for many Rottnest food outlets
- Late night convenience food near leavers' accommodation
- Police and rangers' Welcome Sausage Sizzle with food donated by local businesses

Major components of the 2001 programme co-ordinated locally by the RIA

Activities continued from previous years:

- Police talks to school leavers prior to leavers' week
- Provision of information to the parents of leavers via school newsletters
- Information sent out by the RIA to all leavers holding bookings
- \$1000 deposit required to book accommodation
- Discounted \$7 Recovery Breakfasts at the island tearooms
- Chill Out tent – staffed by volunteers
- Rottnest Island rangers visit and brief all leavers in accommodation
- Stopping of alcohol home deliveries
- Late night convenience food near leavers' accommodation
- Extended trading hours for many Rottnest food outlets
- Increased security staff at the Rottnest Hotel
- Free water provided at the Rottnest Hotel

New activities:

- Afternoon music programme of live bands and DJs held in a central open area
- Schoolies Island Chaplains (SIC) visited leavers in their accommodation
- Nursing Post open 24 hours a day
- Arm bands issued by the RIA to identify school leavers with accommodation
- Extra security staff at the bottleshop to ensure no-one under 18 obtained alcohol
- Rottnest police and rangers provided information talks to disembarking leavers as to what was expected of them during their stay.
- Rottnest police searched bags belonging to young people under 18 years of age if they believed they were carrying alcohol

Methodology

The overall purpose of this three-year evaluation was to examine how a harm prevention initiative

targeting school leaver celebrations could be developed, implemented and institutionalised in a community that regularly hosts such events. Three methods of gathering data were employed: surveys of school leavers; structured interviews with key stakeholders from local businesses and service agencies; and participant observation of celebratory activity. Young field researchers were used to gather data because leavers were less guarded with peers. The same approach, using essentially the same instruments, was employed in all three years to allow meaningful comparisons over time. This mixed methodology approach is termed 'triangulation' because information on salient issues is gathered from several sources (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, Guba & Lincoln 1989). It has a number of advantages in naturalistic settings because it provides a global perspective while offering a check on the accuracy and consistency of the data gathered by each of the evaluation methods.

School leaver survey

School leavers were asked about their expectations and experiences during the leavers' celebrations. The field researchers approached groups of young people during the day in a number of central areas – usually where food and drink were being sold. During this period there are very few other visitors to the island and all of the young people interviewed were on the island to participate in the leavers' celebrations. Groups were approached rather than individuals as the young people were more open to answering the questions when with friends. The survey instrument was used to guide and prompt discussion rather than being administered verbatim. Generally a response would be given by one or two members of the group, with others agreeing and building on that response from their own experiences. Occasionally a respondent would add a contradictory or substantially varied opinion. All individual verbal responses were counted. Small items promoting responsible alcohol use were used as incentives for participating in the survey and the refusal rate in all years was near zero.

Table 1 presents the number of leavers surveyed in each year. The number of leavers on the island at

any one time is limited by accommodation. In all three years the leaver population was approximately 2000. Samples represented approximately 12.5 per cent of the celebrating population in 1999 and 2000 and approximately 5.5 per cent in 2001.

Key stakeholders interviews

The persons occupying the following key positions on the island were interviewed in each year of the study:

- Manager of the Tearooms
- Manager of the General Store
- OIC, Rottnest Police Station
- Manager of the Nursing Post
- Events Manager, Rottnest Island Authority

The same structured format was used in all cases and the questions sought information on: the problems caused by the celebrations; what was done by the community; whether this improved the situation; what other improvements could be made; and whether similar initiatives should be undertaken in the future.

Participant observation

Each year the field researchers lived on Rottnest Island during the leavers' celebration period. Accordingly, the researchers not only gathered survey data but also systematically observed activity associated with the celebrations. However, this was not a detached, impersonal experience. The researchers became well known to leavers, who would often initiate contact and provide unsolicited information. Each morning observations from the previous day were recorded as a brief narrative.

Analysis

School leaver survey

Responses to each question were categorised by theme. The common themes were then arranged in a table that identified the number of times each theme was raised in each year of the study. Themes that were identified on at least five occasions in any one year were considered representative and have been reported. Individual quotes have been presented where they illustrate a representative theme.

Key stakeholders interviews

Responses to each question were scrutinised for common themes. These were then summarised in terms of the extent to which they represented the opinions and experiences of the whole group or special-interest sections within the group. Representative quotes have been used to illustrate these themes.

TABLE 1: Number of young people surveyed

	Females	Males	Total surveyed	Percentage of leaver population
1999	47.8%*	52.2%*	250	12.5%
2000	47.2%	52.8%	250	12.5%
2001	49%	51%	112	5.5%

*Estimates based on balanced gender composition of mixed interview groups

Participant observation

In the first instance what was seen and heard during the celebration period was recorded without interpretation. Subsequently, thematic ordering and interpretation of the data was undertaken. Comparisons were then made with survey and key stakeholder data to determine the extent to which report matched actual practice. This was found to be useful in terms of validity checking and increasing confidence in the study's findings.

Study Limitations

Every attempt was made to use the same methodology in all three years. However, a number of variations occurred due to changing circumstances and experience. The changes need to be borne in mind when making comparisons.

The 2001 component of the study was conducted on a smaller scale because of resource limitations and the availability of previous research to guide investigation. In 2001 only 112 young people were interviewed as compared with 250 in each of the previous years. This limitation is offset somewhat by a corresponding change in the survey instrument. In 1999 and 2000 four slightly different questionnaires were administered to cover the full range of leavers' experiences from expectation to reflection. The consequence of this approach was that different respondents answered different questions depending on the stage of the celebrations. Accordingly, only a proportion of all respondents interviewed ever answered particular questions. In 2001 only one survey instrument was used and consequently all 112 respondents answered every question. This means that sample sizes for the questions reported in this paper are not appreciably different across years.

There was a notable rise in the number of male past leavers interviewed in 2000 and 2001. In 2000 they comprised 54 per cent of the males interviewed. This is likely due to the celebrations increasingly being seen as an opportunity to meet large numbers of young women. Importantly, however, the responses made by past leavers were substantially similar to those made by leavers.

Results

School leaver survey

The school leavers were generally keen to express their opinions and were consistent in the issues they identified as important from their perspective. Responses to each question have been presented in a summary table. Each table presents the number of times a theme was mentioned in 1999, 2000 and 2001. They provide a quick reference point for comparison over the years. It should be noted that 'n' indicates

the total number of persons in the groups interviewed. The figures in the columns indicate the number of responses recorded for a given theme. The discrepancy between these two figures comes about because one individual may have expressed an opinion on several themes or not everybody in a group expressed an opinion. It should be noted that once a widely held opinion was expressed the rest of the group tended to indicate support with non-verbal gestures, so the strength of opinion is generally under-reported. Quotes have been used to illustrate common themes.

Expectations of the Rottnest experience

Expectations were generally similar in all years (see Table 2). Three expectations were commonly mentioned: have fun; party/socialise with friends; and drinking:

Have a good time – celebrate because we finished exams
(female)

Get absolutely maggot (male)

In the two earlier years this question was asked of young people before they arrived on the island and so represented their hopes for what lay ahead. In 2001 all of the respondents were already on the island and most had experienced at least one night of celebrating by the time their opinion was sought. This variation in approach explains the two new themes that emerged: citing expectations of violence, and expressing overall disappointment or surprise with their experience:

Street fights (male)

We expected it to be ok but they broke our tents and stole our bags (male)

TABLE 2: Expectations of the Rottnest experience

Themes	Number of comments		
	1999 n=106	2000 n=50	2001 n=112
Have fun / good time	40	10	16
Relaxing / unwinding	36	9	8
Partying / socialising with friends	35	3	26
Drinking	33	9	21
Sex / meeting opposite sex	30	6	13
Swimming / beach / sun	20	2	5
Meeting new people	10	3	12
Disappointed / shocked			14
Aggression / violence / vandalism			5

Alcohol and drug use

The data presented in Table 3 indicate that alcohol was widely consumed in all three years:

A block – I drank a whole block. I'm known as the iron lung (male)

Just prior to the 2001 leavers' celebrations

Western Australia introduced legislation to give police the power to confiscate any substance from a juvenile if they considered it would be used as an intoxicant. The Rottneest police used this power to search the bags of underage leavers as they disembarked on the island and confiscate any alcohol found. Despite this, the overall number reporting that they had obtained their alcohol from the mainland actually increased in 2001. However, more than twice as many respondents also reported buying alcohol on the island in 2001 than in previous years when no systematic confiscation of alcohol was undertaken:

Bought it on the mainland and we had an 18 year old with us on the ferry (male)

Got it from the bottle-o here, someone else bought it (male)

In 2001 many more respondents reported that their parents had supplied the alcohol than in previous years and in some instances also stayed on the island:

Our parents get it – they are in the house with us (female)

There was a substantial increase in the reported use of illicit drugs from 1999 to 2000. A further, smaller increase was observed in 2001:

Alcohol, cigarettes and ecstasy (female)

Drink and a bit of weed (male)

Cannabis use was most commonly reported.

In all years some young people expressed an active aversion to drugs and/or a desire to drink in moderation:

Drink a little bit – you don't have to get out of your head (male)

Heaps of drugs, all the boys – it's gross (female)

TABLE 3: Alcohol and drug use

Themes	Number of comments		
	1999 n=80	2000 n=128	2001 n=112
Consumed alcohol	74	81	102
Brought alcohol from mainland	13	15	23
Expressed aversion to drug consumption	10	10	12
Did not drink to excess	7	4	6
Bought take-away alcohol at Rottneest	6	9	19
Consumed cannabis	5	12	15
Consumed illicit drugs (excluding cannabis)	4	13	17
Parents supplied alcohol	1	2	8

Best part of leavers' celebrations

In all three years, socialising was the highlight of the young people's experience on Rottneest (see Table 4):

Socialising with friends and knowing there is no more school (female)

Meeting a lot of new people (male)

Drinking was not commonly recounted as a

highlight. However, it did appear:

Drinking in the sun with the esky (male)

A new theme about feeling free from constraints and able to relax emerged in 2001 for the first time:

The fact that we didn't have to wake up at a certain time – the freedom (male)

TABLE 4: Best part of leavers' celebrations

Themes	Number of comments		
	1999 n=80	2000 n=78	2001 n=112
Mingling / dancing / meeting friends	22	23	32
Drinking	8	2	5
Atmosphere	7	5	10
Having sex	5	3	1
Freedom / no parents / relaxing			14

Worst part of leavers' celebrations

Responses, summarised in Table 5, indicate that violence and tension were commonly considered the worst aspect of the celebrations in all three years, although there was a slight drop in 2001:

People getting hell rowdy – really violent (male)

Sexual harassment has steadily decreased over the three years of this study:

Guys saying annoying things as we walk past (female)

However, during the most recent leavers' celebrations there was a substantial increase in the number of people who reported feeling physically sick due to excessive consumption of alcohol and other drugs:

The mornings – the hangovers (female)

The personal injury reported was generally minor in nature:

Drunk and fell off a toilet and cut my finger (female)

Notably, boredom resurfaced as a theme in 2001. This featured in 1999, but did not appear in 2000 when organised activities were at their peak.

TABLE 5: Worst part of leavers' celebrations

Themes	Number of comments		
	1999 n=105	2000 n=118	2001 n=112
Violence / tension / vandalism / home invasion	27	35	21
Sexual harassment	18	12	3
Physically sick / hangovers	10	8	22
Bored / waiting for something to happen	8		5
Lack of sleep	7	6	3
Nothing bad	7	5	5
Injuries	7	11	7
Stopped by police / security	4	9	8
Seeing others sick	3	4	6
Things stolen	1	2	7

Harm reduction strategies

The data in *Table 6* indicates that the most common strategy to stay safe was to stay in large groups:

Stick together at night time (male)

The second most common strategy was to drink moderately and reduce hangovers:

Limit alcohol – don't put yourself in a situation where you get in trouble (female)

Reporting that there was nothing to be concerned about arose as a theme for the first time in 2001:

White male 18-year-old – I think I am fine, nothing to worry about (male)

Themes	Number of comments		
	1999 n=146	2000 n=132	2001 n=112
Stay in big groups / help each other	36	26	25
Drink in moderation / drink plenty of water	17	8	14
Screen predator guys / avoid weird older guys	9	1	3
Try to prevent gear / alcohol being stolen	7	3	2
Wear sunscreen / stay out of the sun	5	2	1
Carry / use condoms, pill	9	4	1
Hang around the house when drinking a lot	6	1	
Not worried			7

Opinion of intervention activities

This question was not asked in 1999 because of the formative nature of the research conducted in that year (*Table 7*). In 2000 the music initiative was sited in a specially de-licensed area of the hotel. Many of the respondents did not like being segregated and identified as underage:

I went to the pub and watched a band from the licensed area. It was quite good actually. I think it was a good idea. I'm not sure about the underage part though – being segregated you felt a bit stupid – they called it a crèche (female)

In 2001 there was widespread appreciation of the music initiative, which was sited on a grassed area away from the hotel. Criticisms mainly related to music style rather than the idea itself:

Yeah, during the day hanging out at the shops for lunch, watched a band. It's good to have as a background (male)

Not my type of music (male)

Reasons for non-attendance in 2001 were a lack of motivation and inability to drink:

You can't be bothered, just want to be with your friends (female)

No, because you want to drink in the house (female)

Despite a more extensive advertising campaign and a more central venue in 2001, some young people

still said they did not know about the activities programme:

Didn't know, didn't go (male)

The Chill Out tent was mentioned favourably a number of times in 2000, but seemed to be taken more for granted in 2001, even though it was well utilised:

I think the people there are really nice. They are volunteers.

They should have it every year (female)

The food initiatives were very well received in 2000:

The food being available was good cos otherwise everyone was drinking on an empty stomach (female)

However, increased prices and decreased choices in 2001 meant that leavers did not identify this as a special service and offered no comments.

Theme	Number of comments	
	2000 n=118	2001 n=112
Didn't like music initiative	16	11
Liked music initiative	15	32
Didn't know about activities	8	8
Appreciated Chill Out tent / First Aid	5	1
Appreciated food initiatives	5	
Didn't attend any activities	4	9

Key stakeholders interviews

Stakeholders were interviewed on the basis of their position. Accordingly, staff turnover meant that few of the same people were interviewed over successive years. This impacted on the ability of stakeholders to provide comparisons with previous years. The responses of the stakeholders are summarised under the respective question headings.

From your perspective, what are the major problems associated with leaver celebrations on Rottneest?

The responses from the service authority representatives were knowledgeable and comprehensive over all three years and included comments on damage and vandalism, alcohol and drug misuse resulting in injury or arrest, sexual assault and crime. By comparison the business managers tended to be more circumscribed in their awareness of the leavers' behaviour, citing litter, graffiti and cruelty to wildlife as the major problems from their perspective. Their responses were similar in 2000 and 2001, but less tolerant and more critical of the leavers' behaviour in 1999.

Can you tell me about the activities provided for leavers? Which ones worked best?

The three service authority representatives comprehensively listed the range of initiatives undertaken

on Rottneest, including the music initiative, Chill Out tent, St John's Ambulance, free water at the hotel, the jetty briefings by police and rangers, and the food van. The food van was the only strategy that was regarded negatively. In intervention years 2000 and 2001 the proprietor experienced harassment and theft. In addition, one stakeholder reported that the location was used as an informal gathering area where drug dealing took place. The music was a qualified success in both years, with poor attendance in 2001 disappointing a number of the stakeholders. The business managers were aware of the range of leavers' initiatives that had been undertaken. However, they tended to comment on those strategies where they had direct involvement. For instance, comment was made that the Recovery Breakfast initiative was not viable because of poor financial return.

Do you think any of the measures taken by the Rottneest community made leaver celebrations safer for the leavers and/or the community itself?

In 2000 the respondents were somewhat disappointed that all their effort had not produced better results and felt there was room for improvement. However, in 2001 all five respondents answered yes to this question. They felt that containing the leavers in one area, giving talks on the jetty, providing the Chill Out tent and food van and increasing the security presence all contributed to increased safety. Each respondent clearly considered that the initiatives were complementary and that the programme as a whole was a well-integrated package that prevented problems at a number of levels:

Keeping them in one area where they are more easily contained keeps them away from residents and other holidaymakers, while the increased police, security and ranger presence was very good and keeps everyone safe.

What do you suggest would make school leaver celebrations better for the students and the rest of the Rottneest community?

In 2001 each respondent had specific ideas for further improvement of the initiatives already in place, although no single theme emerged. Other responses were more general and reflected an attitude of acceptance and tolerance, which marked a change from responses in 1999 when there was considerable scepticism:

It is a tradition for students and they want to go and make their own fun.

Rottneest is limited in resources and logistics and requires a balancing of the needs of regular holidaymakers as well as the school leavers.

Do you think it would be worthwhile to take a similar approach to the leavers' period again? Why/Why not?

All five of the respondents answered that they would take a similar approach, which built on the

experience gained in previous years. All five stakeholders indicated a willingness to continue their involvement:

We can only get better – working very cohesively as a team.

Participant observation

The hotel

The trial in 2000 of providing live entertainment and de-licensing part of the hotel was not repeated in 2001, which meant it was no longer the focus of the celebrations. It seemed that the lack of entertainment and strict security measures at the hotel, coupled with the high probability of receiving fines for street drinking, kept leavers in their accommodation in far greater numbers than the year before.

Health and social services

In both 2000 and 2001 the friendly attitude of the Chill Out tent volunteers made it a favourite gathering spot for leavers. Many simply came to get a glass of cordial and talk to the staff. However, there were always a number of intoxicated young people being cared for when the field researcher visited. In 2001 records kept by the staff indicated that care was provided to 90 intoxicated young people. The St John's Ambulance stand was also well utilised. In 2001 the Nursing Post was open 24 hours a day and had a security guard. This meant better access, better control and more efficient provision of treatment.

Police and security services

The attitude of the police in 2001 was very different to that of previous years. A change in the officer in charge was accompanied by a change in approach. The leavers' Welcome Sausage Sizzle, provided by police in 2000, was not repeated, and in 2001 the leavers' first encounter with the police was on the jetty, when they were given a warning talk and had their bags searched and alcohol confiscated if underage. In 2001 uniformed and plain-clothes police and security guards were continually present in the service and accommodation areas used by leavers, whereas in 2000 few security personnel were seen.

Music initiative

In 2000 music had been provided at the hotel, where a special de-licensed area was made available for the leavers. This segregation worked against socialising and encouraged underage drinkers to attempt entry into the licensed area. In 2001 live music was provided during the afternoon on a central grassed area. There were usually only small numbers of

young people sitting around in the immediate vicinity. However, there was always a steady stream of leavers walking by, and the central shopping area, where the bands could be seen and heard, was usually full of young people.

Leavers' behaviour

In 1999 the field researcher observed a considerable amount of violence and harassment in the evenings, which seemed to be fuelled by boredom and intoxication. This was not the case in subsequent years when only minor scuffles were observed. In 2001 instances of aggression were quickly controlled by police and/or security. In both 2000 and 2001 the accommodation area at night was typically full of young people dancing and mingling in large groups. During the day the leavers typically sunbathed on the beaches and played ball games in front of their accommodation. Groups of young people were also seen enjoying leisurely lunches at the island cafes, and the tour bus service was well patronised.

Discussion

In all three years of this evaluation the leavers' expectations have remained fairly similar: to have fun; to relax and unwind after a hectic exam period; and to celebrate the milestone of school graduation with friends. These expectations are similar to those expressed at the other end of school celebrations in Australia (Ballard *et al* 1998). Drinking was an integral part of the celebrations, with most leavers planning to drink heavily. In 2001 more leavers brought alcohol with them from the mainland despite the threat of confiscation, and many more leavers reported that their parents had supplied their alcohol, despite an education campaign for parents on this issue.

Self-reported illicit drug use increased over the course of the study. This finding may reflect an increased willingness to report use rather than actual increased use, as behaviour associated with drug use did not change noticeably from year to year. However, many more respondents in 2001 reported that they obtained their drugs on Rottnest and that use was not planned in advance. This suggests that greater attention to drug dealing during the celebrations is likely to yield good prevention dividends.

In 1999 and 2000 regulation of the leavers' celebrations had emphasised constructive engagement and early warnings when behaviour was getting out of control. As part of this approach the police put on a Sausage Sizzle for the leavers in 2000, which meant that first contact was positive. In 2001 there was greater policing of underage possession of alcohol and street drinking. This was seen as a 'crackdown' by leavers, and their safety

concerns swung dramatically away from physical and alcohol related harms towards fear of getting themselves into trouble. However, this did not translate into efforts to reduce illegal activity; rather there seemed to be an emphasis on avoiding detection. In addition there was a new theme in 2001 of leavers saying that they were not concerned enough to develop any harm reduction strategies at all. Often this was expressed with a note of bravado. It could be inferred that these young people felt disempowered by this additional external control, when in previous years they had taken more responsibility for themselves. The down side of a stricter approach by authorities may be a less thoughtful approach to harm avoidance by the leavers. The data, however, also allows for another interpretation. In 2001 the best part of many leavers' experience was recounted as 'freedom'. This was often expressed as freedom from the cares of school and being away from parents. The appearance of this new theme seems to contradict any suggestion that the hard-line policing detracted in a major way from the overall experience of release sought from the leaver celebrations.

In 2001 there was a substantial increase in the number of young people reporting that their negative experiences included feeling physically sick. There could be a number of reasons for this, but one contributing factor may have been less availability of cheap, convenient food, particularly at night. The cost of take-away food from the food van was substantially higher in 2001; the Recovery Breakfast offered by the tearooms also increased in price; and subsidised Sausage Sizzles were not provided in 2001.

In 2000 the research indicated that leavers were not bored during their time on Rottnest, which suggested that the intervention activities were engaging. In 2001 the theme of boredom returned. In the first year of the study, boredom seemed to contribute to some of the antisocial violence and vandalism on the island, and it was thought that by providing a broad range of activities in 2000, damage and harm could be reduced. Although boredom appeared once again as a theme there was no accompanying increase in damage or vandalism. Nonetheless the reappearance of this issue may be an early warning of future problems.

Live music was the major entertainment initiative in 2001, although many leavers indicated that they had not sat and listened to the bands. This initiative should, however, be seen as a success, partly because it contributed to the celebratory atmosphere and partly because it created a sense among leavers that the community had considered their needs. This was exemplified by comments such as:

They have tried to make it good for us (female)

Community effort seems important in motivating the leavers to behave well in return.

The Chill Out tent was a standout success in both

years, and numbers sobered up in 2001 indicate the direct prevention value of this service. In addition this service was a very tangible demonstration of the community providing for the leavers and acted to build links between the two groups. In this regard the 5000 cold drinks and 400 conversations on alcohol and drugs were also important.

Over the three years of this evaluation research, planning and collaboration between the service authorities and businesses on the island in preparation for leavers' week has become more institutionalised, while at the same time the initiatives undertaken have evolved in response to changing needs and resource support. It is important to emphasise that by 2001 the leavers' programme had been completely taken over by the Rottneest community. This shows how strategic support for a limited period can produce long-term benefits by enhancing community capacity. It also shows how a motivated community can quickly take on board new approaches. Local expertise was well demonstrated in the 2001 programme. The previous year's initiatives were neither blindly followed nor abandoned. Rather, there was a process of refinement. Importantly, the development of the 2001 programme took place through a series of structured meetings between all the local stakeholding organisations. This fostered greater local ownership and further assisted in tailoring the programme to the needs of the community and the leavers.

The leavers seem to be engaged by activities that allow them to meet and socialise with fellow leavers and give a sense of occasion. When social activities are not provided, boredom, drinking and the need to make something happen increase. This is a volatile mix. The community did not get everything right with its celebration programmes in 2000 and 2001, but providing options for the leavers seemed to reduce risk. The act of providing for the leavers was also a powerful factor in building a relationship between them and the Rottneest community. The implicit message was that the community cared enough about the leavers to try and make their stay on the island enjoyable. In turn there was a sense of reciprocal obligation to treat the community with respect.

Creating a sense of relationship seems to be the key to a well-managed leavers' celebration. This is probably the most important lesson learned from the evaluation, and something that would be critical to replicate in other interventions in other communities dealing with the same issue. Leavers are going to continue to come to Rottneest and other holiday destinations to celebrate the completion of high school. There is no perfect programme that will eliminate all the problems associated with hosting a large group of exuberant youth. However, there is good evidence that engagement is the best foundation for reducing harm.

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the Western Australian School Drug Education Project and facilitated by the generous co-operation of the Rottneest Island community.

References

- Ballard R, Curd D, Roche A (1998). The meaning, madness and magic of schoolies festival. Paper presented at the APSAD National Conference, Sydney, NSW, 9–11 November 1998.
- Bellis MA, Hale G, Bennett A, Chaudry M, Kilfoyle M (2000). Ibiza uncovered: changes in substance use and sexual behaviour amongst young people visiting an international night-life resort. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, **11**, 235–244.
- Bogaards T, Midford R, Farrington F (2000). *School leavers celebrations on Rottneest Island: Formative evaluation report*. Perth: National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University of Technology.
- Denzin NK, Lincoln YS (1998). Entering the field of qualitative research. In N K Denzin, Y S Lincoln (eds), *Strategies for Qualitative Inquiry (Vol. 2)*, pp1–34. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Guba EG, Lincoln YS (1989). *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Josaim BM, Hobson JS, Dietrich UC, Smeaton GL (1998). An analysis of the sexual, alcohol and drug-related behavioural patterns of students on spring break. *Tourism Management*, **19**, 501–513.
- Smeaton GL, Josaim BM, Dietrich UC (1998). College students' binge drinking at a beach-front destination during spring break. *Journal of American College Health*, **46**, 247–254.
- Smith AMA, Rosenthal D (1997). Sex, alcohol and drugs? Young people's experience of Schoolies Week. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, **21**, 175–180.
- Zinkiewicz L, Davey J, Curd D (1999). Sin beyond Surfers? Young people's risky behaviour during Schoolies Week in three Queensland regions. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, **18**, 279–285.

Address for correspondence

Richard Midford
National Drug Research Institute
Curtin University
GPO Box U1987
Perth
WA 6845
Australia
Email: R.Midford@curtin.edu.au ◆