

YOUNG PEOPLE AND USE OF PUBLIC OPEN SPACE

PURPOSE

To provide advice to Sport & Recreation Victoria on PRAV'S experience of the problems associated with young people's recreational use of public open space in Victoria as per the funding agreement between SRV and PRAV 2000.

This paper may assist in the development of a State Government response to the problems identified, and lead to the development of a strategy to assist Government and key stakeholders to work in partnership to deliver positive outcomes for young people at local and state level.

For the purposes of this paper, young people are defined as those in middle childhood (early adolescence, 12-17 years), not old enough to hold a driver's licence, who are attending school or training programs, or are early school leavers and/or unemployed.

BACKGROUND

PRAV believes that there is an inequitable distribution of public resources allocated to the recreation needs of young people throughout Victoria, (as opposed to the resources allocated to competitive sport) and in particular there is a growing need for unstructured play environments for older children and young people which will foster their creative, emotional as well as physical development within their local communities in particular. We acknowledge that there are significant resources for those young people committed to organized sport throughout Victoria, but there are many young people for whom competitive sport has little appeal, and the need for play and recreation opportunities for all young people, including those committed to sport, is increasing, given the changes underway in the community today.

Public open space for the purposes of this paper is best described as space which is accessible to the public, for general recreational purposes. Local parks are generally considered the major provider of public open space at a local level but there are other forms, such as streets, shopping centres which are also considered part of this discussion, particularly when considering the interests and desires of young people. It is not intended to comment on the role of parks managed by Parks Victoria, however we acknowledge that Parks Victoria data indicates that there is low usage by young people.

The Playgrounds & Recreation Association is committed to increasing the participation of young people in the use of public open space across Victoria and will work in partnership with all key stakeholders to achieve this outcome.

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED WITH YOUNG PEOPLE'S USE OF PUBLIC OPEN SPACE

Changes in the provision of new and established public open space over recent years

There has been an increasing tendency for public open space to be created in response to the pressure of powerful lobby groups at state and local government level. Public open space tends to provide for "passive interests" e.g. Royal Park within the City of Melbourne or "active interest" e.g. Albert Park within the City of Port Phillip and a variety of mixes of passive/active uses in local government and state parks across Victoria.

Young people's voices have not been heard in this environment and thus their needs have seldom been addressed. Where they have been listened to, Councils, in responding to requests for skate parks, basketball spaces and places to "hang out", have often found difficulty in responding positively given the pressure of the established constituency in not wanting any change to their immediate environments, in addition to the financial difficulties underpinning Local Government in Victoria over recent years.

The move to "bigger is better"

There has been a shift within both State and Local Governments to discard smaller neighbourhood public open space for the development of larger regional areas. This has certainly been evident in the provision of playgrounds and smaller shopping strips. Financial constraints have influenced this shift but there has also been a deliberate move towards the "bigger is better" model of provision of community recreation facilities which has lead to the disappearance of many local spaces used previously by young people. Whilst these smaller spaces may have been under-resourced and in many instances low standard, they were spaces which young people could identify with, and have some control and influence over, and which are no longer available. There is a need at the local level to have "smaller scale" space for young people. In considering planning for playgrounds for younger children we talk about there being a hierarchy of size and activity. The same principle should apply when considering appropriate spaces for older children and young people. Local open space should complement provision of parks managed by Parks Victoria. There is not a need for the "best skate park in Melbourne" to be in every municipality, but there is a need for local spaces where kids can learn the basics, learn from each other in relative safety, and with limited resources required, and create their own activities and fun.

There are significant transport issues today, given this shift to bigger facilities. Young people need to be able to get together in spaces that are accessible preferably via their own resources without having to be taken always by adults.

The development of privately owned shopping malls

"Shopping malls are today's town squares, the saying goes, but there is a fundamental difference: a town square is a community space where people meet, whereas a shopping mall is a private building where people spend money" (p18, Richard Guillatt, Good Weekend, November 22nd, 1997)

There has been a significant increase over recent years in the provision of large urban shopping centre developments across Victoria which have replaced public space for private space, a move that has been argued is in the economic interests of the tax payer. These developments have been strongly supported by state and local governments on the basis of perceived economic benefit, however the outcome for young people has been that they are no longer permitted to frequent these facilities without harassment and intimidation by police and security officers. In many instances these developments support private interests and not those of young people and local government is now constantly under pressure to rid privately managed spaces of young people. Developers should be required to work in partnership to provide for young people, and respond to their needs.

The introduction of 7 Day shop trading

For many years young people have used car parks attached to shopping centres across Victoria to ride skate boards, roller blade and generally hang out, particularly on Sundays, Saturday afternoons and evenings. With the introduction of 7 day, and in many cases 24 hour trading, these spaces have largely disappeared for use by young people

Economic and knowledge constraints on managers of public open space

Over the last decade there have been significant constraints on public sector managers of public open space. Maintenance costs have escalated and budgets have not increased and thus the lack of resources for new facilities and recreation opportunities for the community at large. Given this environment it has been difficult for Councils, often with the best intentions to resource new opportunities for young people. There seems to be a knowledge gap and/or lack of information about young people and their recreational needs at staff level in particular in many Councils. At community level, and therefore at Council level young people are more likely to be considered a "nuisance group" which causes difficulty in the political process.

The generation gap

"We must let children express themselves but I think it is overdone. In expressing themselves they are taking over. They are at the centre of the universe. Wherever you go, if there are any children present, they take over..."

This quote is from one of 1,193 people surveyed in 1997 by the Clemenger agency, which concluded that the greatest social division in Australia is the gulf between the young and the old. (p17, Richard Guillatt, Good Weekend, November 22nd, 1997)

There is a significant difference of opinion in the community about the legitimate recreational needs of young people. We believe that young people have a variety of recreational interests as do other groups within the community, however as a group they are largely dependent on the support of adults to realize their interests; they do not have the resources to travel far, and/or to organize activity around their own interests.

Adults have control of the use of private spaces, such as their own homes, whilst young people do not have control over any private space, and thus the need for the community to provide access to appropriate space for young people's recreational needs. Older people frequently express views as to how young people should spend their time, but unfortunately these views are often diametrically opposed to the views and interests of young people. There is a view of adults frequently expressed that young people should be organized, in structured activity of which adults approve. Observation and research suggests that there are many young people who will not follow this direction, and in fact, want to be able to determine themselves as to how they spend their recreation time.

Older people's anxieties about young people and community safety

The fact that young people, particularly boys, are perceived as a problem rather than an asset, is not new or novel to Australia. In the context of an ageing population increasingly fearful of technological change; economic inequality; unemployment; anxiety about immigrants and the pernicious influence of American culture; exacerbated by the media's presentation of tabloid scare stories which has encouraged politicians across the country to introduce draconian anti-juvenile legislation which could not have been imagined 20 years ago; there are pockets of significant fear amongst some parts of the community which is directed at young people generally.

Concerns about public safety is an issue and yet there is a significant difference between the public perception of concern for safety in communities and the evidence which does not support these perceptions.

The changed environment for youth today compared with their parent's generation.

Whilst there are many characteristics of life today (safety, time, technology, expectations etc) which we believe work against young people experiencing the freedom and space enjoyed by their parent's generation, there is a greater need than previously for those responsible for the development of children and young people to understand the importance of quality play experiences for all age groups, and the provision of appropriate opportunities which are accessible within local communities. Supervised unstructured play opportunities which operate in the inner Melbourne area are an ideal way to provide freedom and space for younger children, but there needs to be similar spaces for older children which meet their needs on a local basis.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION BY STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

There is a need for legitimate spaces for young people, just as other groups within the community have access to their own spaces. Whilst community interaction of all groups is desirable and essential, it needs to be recognized that there is a desire of all groups to have some control over their own spaces and young people share the same desire.

The document 'Public Spaces for Young People', 1998 by Rob White has provided the major source for this section of the paper.

"The issues pertaining to young people's use of public open space are diverse, complex and in many cases tied to particular local conditions, particular categories of young people and specific situational problems" (p11, Rob White)

Research considered indicates that in order to bring about a change in the numbers of young people who use public open space, and by association to develop a successful framework for successful youth crime prevention, a framework is necessary that will include the following elements:

- the adoption of a broad social development approach which incorporates measures designed to enhance the opportunities for young people, and which allow them to participate in the negotiations and decisions that affect them and others around them;
- the creation of a constellation of programs and activities to cater for the wide variety of interests, needs and situations, which are well targeted at specific problems;
- the importance of community ownership which takes into account local conditions and which allows the direct and active involvement of local young people and other members of the community;
- the necessity to adopt a holistic approach to youth issues which realizes the intersection of family, school, employment, recreation and other issues in creating "risk" situations.
- the importance of multi-agency involvement including the involvement of young people; so that a wide range of skills, knowledge and resources can be drawn upon in addressing complex problems;
- the necessity of research and auditing processes in order to determine levels and types of need, sources of conflict and potential avenues for action;
- the importance of evaluation of existing projects and programs, and the need for greater information about the effectiveness of different kinds of interventions, and
- the necessity of flexibility in approach, so that programs can be changed or modified as required, and through on-going evaluation, better targeting and better outcomes can be achieved.

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