

The West Australian

Opinion

OPINION

Antonio Giometti: Why locking kids up in Banksia Hill makes us all less safe

Antonio Giometti The West Australian
Fri, 18 November 2022 2:00AM



The return to community of a child who has been in Banksia Hill is related to an increase in crime. Credit: Danella Bevis/The West Australian

It is no secret that regional WA Police have the most stretched resources in the State, geographically isolated from wider support services that urban areas have readily available access to, but they do their very best to keep our communities safe.

While the Fitzroy Valley has one of the lowest overall crime rates in the region, we are not without problems.

Alcohol and substance addiction, family violence and sexual abuse, and mental health are issues that young people in our community experience and navigate through every day, so it is of no surprise that youth-related crime presents a significant problem for us.

WA has the highest rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth detention at 212.8 per 10,000 young people, and youth from our communities contribute to that number. It takes a village to raise a child, and in the Valley, we are already working proactively together with local police and other agencies to keep youth engaged and busy and connected with their communities to meet their needs as best we can.

A recent youth initiative of Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation delivered in partnership with the Department of Justice as part of the Kimberley Juvenile Justice Strategy shows the positive impact that working together with youth on-country and with the community can have. The Youth Connexion initiative is a service that focusses on assisting young people who are street-present with mentor support, immediate health and wellbeing assistance, transport and food, while building relationships with youth and their families.

Working in close partnership with the police, and other local social service providers, the service is provided by locals with existing networks and relationships within the community.

The initiative illustrates the importance of linking these services together with broader family supports to address root causes and improve the social well-being for these families, in essence, providing support for our people by our people.

While it's not the silver bullet, since the roll-out of this service, Fitzroy Police have reported a significant drop in street-present youth numbers and the effect on a drop in related crime.

Youth are more engaged and involved with our community, and attendance numbers at school and planned youth activities are continuing to increase. While the proof is in the pudding, there are some gaps that as a community we need to fill.

Although there is a noticeable decline in youth-related crime, there are still factors that can impact this. Football games and funerals can see a surge in crime, but the one most noticeable is the return of a young person from Banksia Hill and their experiences they bring with them.

Returning home after being separated from their community and family for a lengthy period, together with the trauma experienced from being detained, and a real lack of post-release support services in the region is a recipe for disaster, for everyone.

Add mental health issues, FASD, substance addiction, and PTSD that were not addressed or adequately supported while inside, I can almost guarantee that this will result in a trip back to Banksia Hill to start the cycle again.

And it's not just the youth that suffer, our whole community does. Trying to re-establish relationships with extended family and wider community becomes near impossible.

Residential facilities developed in partnership with our communities and located in our region would help to break this cycle, and to keep youth on-country and connected to their communities. If they're doing their crime on-country, it makes sense for them to do their time there too. Allow their families to be part of their rehabilitation and involved with the justice process, and resource existing services to help us fill the gaps; help us to continue to help our young people.

We know how to support our young people and communities; we know their needs and how to meet them best. It is the right of every Aboriginal child to be immersed in their culture. It is about connections and relationships, and when we facilitate and support this, it is the greatest source of resilience for Aboriginal children, young people, and their communities.

Antonio Giometti is chief executive officer of Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation.

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Antonio Giometti: Flood rebuild an opportunity for desperately needed facilities

Antonio Giometti The West Australian

Tue, 10 January 2023 2:00AM [Comments](#) [+](#)



 A supplied image obtained on Saturday, January 7, 2023, of floodwaters across the Great Northern Hwy at Fitzroy Crossing, Bunuba country, in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. A remote Western Australian town surrounded by a 100-year flood has become a refuge for hundreds of people evacuated from outlying communities. (AAP Image/Supplied by Andrea Myers) NO ARCHIVING, EDITORIAL USE ONLY Credit: ANDREA MYERS/PR IMAGE

While we are thankful to see financial relief and support for our flood ravaged region from both State and Federal governments, the devil is in the detail, and we need to ensure that our mobs and their needs are central to these recovery efforts.

The effects and impacts of the flooding show many similarities to Eastern States' experiences, but there are also several significant differences. Most of our mobs don't have insurance or have savings to draw from. Many have large immediate and extended families that they are financially responsible for. And with more than 40 Aboriginal communities — most of them remote — each one has been impacted differently and will have varying rebuild requirements. A one size fits all rebuild approach will simply not work for us.

During this devastation it became obvious that we have a community and a response to be proud of. In the immediate days of flooding, we worked alongside other local businesses to purchase, co-ordinate and distribute food and fuel. Locals used their tinnies to evacuate and relocate families and check on other mobs; locals made their way down to the depot and café to cook food for our volunteers and emergency workers and organise food packs to be delivered to communities. We did this around the clock and continued to even after government back up arrived. We're exhausted and frustrated at the lack of communication from DFES, and the time it took for extra assistance to arrive, but we're still doing it.

But now the bigger challenge emerges. The rebuild and recovery and how this will be coordinated and planned and carried out.

The State and Federal governments have committed disaster recovery assistance to people in the shires of Derby-West Kimberley, Broome, Wyndham-East Kimberley and Halls Creek, through the jointly funded Commonwealth-State Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. Eligible costs include assistance measures for individuals and families, businesses, primary producers, non-profit organisations and local and State governments. Under these arrangements, State governments determine what assistance measures will be activated, and the areas in which they will be made available. We are hoping that these measures will have the communities' needs and requirements front of mind.

The rebuild must be community driven to ensure it is fit for purpose from a community and cultural perspective — not a white fellow perspective — therefore recovery funding for the Fitzroy Valley needs to be directed to Aboriginal corporations to manage and undertake what our people will require to rebuild their homes and communities. We will work with the shire to ensure planning regulations and laws are met, but the design and focus needs to be community driven and culturally responsive to each of our communities' and their mobs' needs. It's an opportunity to consider facilities and infrastructure that they desperately need but always tend to be overlooked in favour of straight out of the box options. Facilities appropriate for our elderly and vulnerable. Much needed facilities for our youth.

The shire's decision only a few months ago to permanently close the Fitzroy Visitor and Information Center hasn't exactly indicated to our communities that their needs and requirements are important. On the ground local organisations and businesses are what our communities need to help with planning for rebuilding and recovery, not someone in an office 400km away.

This engagement and co-ordination with local communities needs to happen immediately, and not as consultation for the sake of after decisions have already been made. This is something that we see constantly when significant decisions and projects involving the wellbeing of Aboriginal people are made.

The expected changes in climate, more frequent extreme weather events and the lack of good planning and infrastructure in the region is certainty that flooding will occur again unless we plan for and invest in better infrastructure and response systems. We need to get it right this time, if we don't, we might not be as fortunate.

Antonio Giometti is CEO of Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation.

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Editorials Opinion

OPINION

Editorial: Time to prepare for the next disaster

The West Australian

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It will be weeks before the true cost of the floods which have devastated the State's north can be known. Credit: Geoff Davis/Geoff Davis



It will be weeks before the true cost of the floods which have devastated the State's north can be known.

With 100 homes destroyed in Fitzroy Crossing alone and crucial road infrastructure washed away, the clean-up bill will be massive.

But as Prime Minister Anthony Albanese noted when he toured the ravaged region on Monday, it's miraculous the toll wasn't greater.

"What is extraordinary is that there isn't a greater human cost," Mr Albanese said.

"You can rebuild roads, you can rebuild houses, you can't of course rebuild lives.

"I think it is quite extraordinary that there has not been a more extreme human outcome as well."

As the floodwaters recede, Kimberley residents are calling out for help to prepare their home for the next inevitable disaster.

Writing in today's The West Australian, Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation chief executive Antonio Giometti said the rebuild effort was an opportunity to shore up the region's defences against future extreme weather events and build culturally appropriate facilities.

"The expected changes in climate, more frequent extreme weather events and the lack of good planning and infrastructure in the region is certainty that flooding will occur again unless we plan for and invest in better infrastructure and response systems. We need to get it right this time, if we don't, we might not be as fortunate," he said.

Getting it right, he said, will mean involving local Aboriginal groups in the response efforts. He warned against a "one-size-fits-all" approach imported from the Eastern States or WA's south, inappropriate for the unique needs of the Kimberley.

Derby shire president Geoff Haerewa said it was imperative the Fitzroy River bridge be rebuilt to withstand future extreme weather events and fit-for-purpose evacuation centres be provided.

We know the clean-up will be arduous and slow.

Premier Mark McGowan foreshadowed significant difficulties to come for the rebuild effort including the sizeable challenge of housing tradies in one of the most remote parts of the country.

Unfortunately, we know these extreme weather events are becoming more frequent. Kalbarri and Northampton still bear the scars of the devastation brought by Tropical Cyclone Seroja in 2021.

That's why our State and Federal governments need to sharpen their response for when more natural disasters inevitably occur.

Fortunately, help is on the way for affected Kimberley residents, including financial assistance such as temporary living allowances, and grants of up to \$10,000 for housing repair and to replace household items. Support for farmers is anticipated once the extent of stock losses is known.

There's also the Lord Mayor's Distress Relief Fund, which has already raised \$3.5 million in donations committed by the State Government and the fund's board. Donations can be made online or by cheque.

The West Australian

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OPINION

Antonio Giometti: Government is shirking its responsibility to vulnerable families

Antonio Giometti The West Australian

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Antonio Giometti is CEO of Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation. Credit: Supplied/Supplied



It's disappointing that recently retired Labor MP Alannah MacTiernan's final parting shot was aimed at regional Aboriginal parents telling them to simply just control their kids, because as a former regional development minister she should be very aware of the unique issues that face remote communities and aboriginal families.

It's hard to deny that the significant portion of responsibility lies with the parents. It's fine and well to point the finger at parents and tell them to do better, but let's talk about the Government's responsibility to help and support them to parent well.

Let's talk about the Government's responsibility to provide the same level of access to services for regional people as they do in urban areas.

Let's talk about the recent research from WACOSS that showed the social services sector is suffering inadequate indexation which is affecting its ability to deliver much needed services to vulnerable communities like ours.

Let's talk about the fact nearly half of respondents in the sustainable funding survey reported that they have reduced their operations in order to stay open, or that all government contract service areas reported inadequate funding.

You cannot starve social service providers of funding, crippling their ability to deliver support and services, and then clutch your pearls in horror when the desired outcomes are not achieved.

The impacts of the flooding exacerbated many problems in our communities such as family violence, resulting in an increase in demand for support from our local women's resource centre.

As first respondents Marra Worra Worra ensured that they received immediate financial aid to support them so that they could keep women and children safe during this critical time of need. This shouldn't have been our responsibility, and their funding should have been sufficient to provide for situations such as this.

The impact of inadequately funded services on families when parents aren't getting the support and services that they need to help them parent is blindingly obvious in communities like ours.

Many of the parents in our communities face a suite of challenges including intergenerational trauma, family violence, alcohol and substance abuse, and without support services to address and resolve these, parenting falls to the wayside and the kids are left to their own devices which often leads to antisocial behaviour and crime.

As families return to country and a dry town after a month of living in places where the drinking restrictions are more relaxed and away from support networks, we are anticipating a host of new challenges with this. Our regional health services are preparing for an increase in demand for drug and alcohol services and mental health support, and we are hoping that there is sufficient funding for them to do this.

Social services are vital for communities like ours, where we work together closely to provide wraparound services and fill the gaps where we can. We work closely with the police to try to reduce youth related crime. We operate a night patrol service every night, a valuable initiative with the Department of Justice. This involves taking the kids home to reduce the number of street-present youth. But a lot of the time, home isn't safe, or is the reason they are out roaming the streets.

The alternative to Banksia Hill is a welcome initiative that has been a long time coming, but instead of polishing the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, Government needs to adequately fund the services that help communities and families to build fences at the top.

Antonio Giometti is CEO of Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation.