

Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities

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1. Introduction

This submission provides comments to the Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities based on recent research projects undertaken by the author. The research projects concern issues and problems young people face with regarding to access to transport in rural and regional areas. The research projects are appended to this submission and include:

- Currie G Gammie F Waingold C Paterson D and Vandersar D (2005) ‘Rural and Regional Young People and Transport – Improving Access to Transport for Young People in Rural and Regional Australia’. Youth Affairs Research Program ISBN 0 9752498 5 1 Jan 2005
- ‘Tasmanian Youth Transport Strategy’ Published by the Department of Youth Affairs Tasmania.

This submission is structured in response to the terms of reference of the inquiry as follows:

2. Influencing Factors
3. Developing Strategies
4. Conclusions

2. Influencing Factors

Terms of reference 1 and 2 of the inquiry concern the identification of factors influencing young people in rural communities as follows:

1. Identifying and examining the factors that influence young people in deciding to remain in or leave the rural communities in which they reside;
2. Identifying and examining the factors that influence young people in deciding whether or not to return to the rural communities in which they have previously resided following the completion of study, travel or other fixed or short term activities in other places

Research has highlighted lack of transport as a significant barrier to the well being of young people in rural and regional communities. The national survey of transport for young people (Currie et al, 2005) found lack of transport to be a pervasive issue in rural Australia and that it significantly restricted access to education, employment and social opportunities for young people. Almost all transport by young people in rural Australia involves getting a lift from friends and relatives. This was considered to be a significant barrier to personal mobility since as one respondent put it:

“dependency on friends and family for transport is fraught with difficulties re: negotiation, availability, abuse of favours and other people having to bear our transport costs” (Wodonga, Victoria)

The lack of available public transport to provide personal mobility was the key problem identified in the survey. Distances were too far to walk and cycling was either unsafe or too far.

Limitations on access to education, employment and social opportunities were considered the main problems caused by lack of access to transport by the young people in the survey. Secondary impacts such as anti-social behaviour and leaving towns because of lack of opportunities were also noted by respondents. This is one comment from a respondent:

“Young people are unable to go into 'town' due to being at school during the week, which results in lack of socialisation, such as going to the movies with friends. Also young people are not able to get certain items they may want or need, such as clothes or presents for friends. Also lack of transport makes it hard to access your own bank. Lack of transport on the weekends results in young people becoming incredibly bored, and therefore partaking in activities that they would probably not do otherwise, such as roaming the streets and drinking at a very young age” (Shuttleworth, Victoria)

Another Victorian submission to the study showed how lack of an independent means of transport can affect young mothers :

“Jenny is a young single mother living 5 kilometres out of a small regional town. She chose to live in the former share farmer's cottage because the accommodation is cheap and suits her tight budget. The local Maternal and Child Health Nurse suggested Jenny may enjoy a new parent's support group. In order to attend this group, she walks 5km's into town, pushing her child's stroller as there is no other means of transport available to her” (Wangaratta, Victoria)

Taxis were considered too expensive by most young people in the survey.

The study also identified structural weaknesses in the rural Australian economy which exacerbates rural car dependence. A cycle of rural car dependence (Figure 1) was noted where low density and dispersed communities resulted in poor cost effectiveness of public transport. This reduced transport services which in term reduces the viability of rural businesses including retailing. This can lead to centralisation/rationalisation of work/retail and recreational services which leads to an increase in travel distances to services thus increasing the need for travel. This makes public transport less viable and so on.

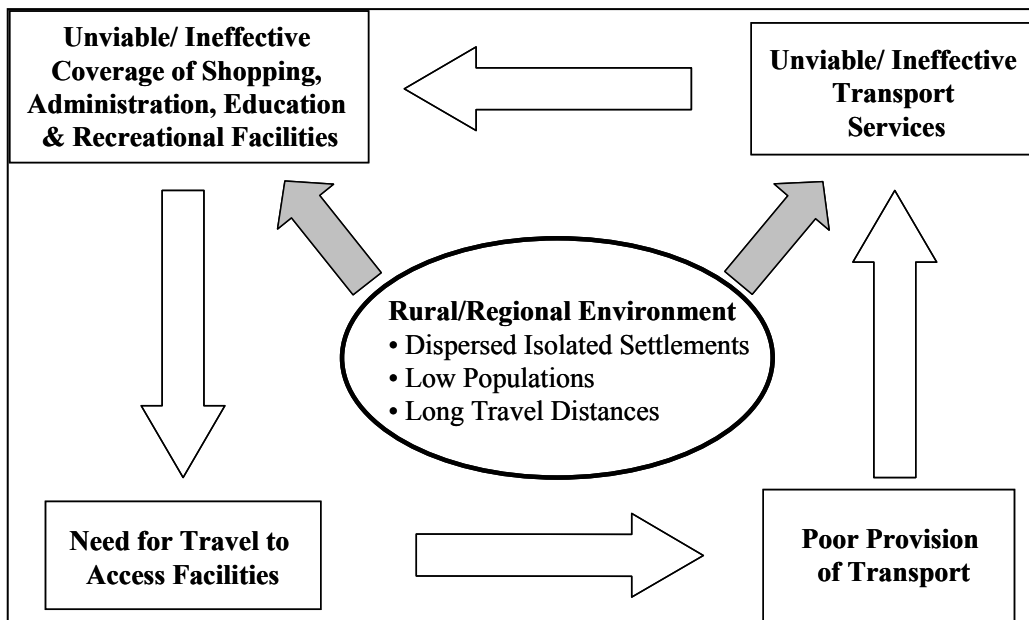


Figure 1 The Vicious Cycle of Rural Car Dependence

Source: Tasmanian Youth Transport Strategy (2003)

Overall links between lack of transport and lack of opportunities for young people in rural communities were apparent. It is easy to see links between these issues to declining retention rates of young people in rural communities.

3. Developing Strategies

Terms of reference 3 of the inquiry is:

3. developing strategies and recommendations on steps that might be taken to increase the number of young people who decide to remain in or return to rural towns and communities.

The research projects appended to this submission suggest a number of cost-effective options to address the transport needs identified. Providing greater access to services is likely to improve the attractiveness of rural communities to young people since it will increase the opportunities for educational, employment and social activities.

The main options identified were:

- expanding and improving public transport services available in rural communities including making better use of rural school buses for this purpose
- expanding community transport services including better coordination of services
- encouraging ride sharing schemes to make better use of available cars (with due consideration of security and safety concerns associated with this)
- encouraging ‘outreach’ services, where mobile services are brought to regional communities on say a weekly basis

Several ‘best practice’ transport projects were identified in each of the studies. The Victorian governments current ‘Transport Connections’ program follows much the type of model identified for the better sharing and deployment of community transport services in rural communities. Expansion of this scheme would improve the attractiveness of rural communities to young people. This type of scheme is often called community bus brokerage. This was identified as the most popular option to address transport issues of young people in the Tasmanian study. Subsidies to reduce the cost of transport e.g. taxis were a popular option amongst young people.

4. Conclusions

Much evidence has been collected in the these research projects to suggest that lack of transport limits opportunities for young people to participate in education, employment and social life. It is easy to draw links to these issues and low retention rates for young people in rural areas. A number of options have been identified to improve transport access for young people. These should be pursued as a means of improving the attractiveness of rural communities to young people.