

Wunan Foundation's Response to Recent Articles Published in the West Australian Relating to Alcohol Abuse in the Northwest

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The recent articles by the West Australian newspaper on the Genocide of the Aboriginal people in the Northwest of Western Australia by alcohol addiction is sadly true and it is having a catastrophic impact on the lives of many families, their children, the community at large and the local economy.

The problems caused by the misuse of alcohol and having no role and purpose in life including a job for many Aboriginal families has been developing for a long time and what you see is the tip of a social disaster iceberg which has been unfolding for over 50 years.

There are many reasons to this tragedy the core of which was the breakdown of the family unit due to the introduction of welfare, alcohol, and mass unemployment with the introduction of the basic wage in the pastoral industry in the 1960's.

The problem these factors have caused is now endemic and inter-generational and has unleashed a cascade of catastrophic social consequences, including rampant crime, child abuse, family violence, neglect, chronic health afflictions, homelessness, and one of the world's most alarming suicide rates.

When you consider the issue of juveniles and crime, the same factors are present in every case. Broken families, limited education, neglected children, inter-generational welfare dependency, high alcohol consumption, poor health, overcrowded housing, poor living conditions and a breakdown of traditional norms and values.

Many of the youth from these families who are involved in crime don't have a safe place to live, do not have anyone they can look up to for guidance, do not feel loved and do not have any aspirations for the future or a better life. And the sad part is that they are born into a family whose parents experienced the same lifestyle when they were children.

We must change our thinking and our strategy to resolve this problem and the recent announcement by the WA government in an article in the West Australian newspaper on a plan for Broome is the type of thinking required. The article also mentions that 800 children were removed from the streets of Broome by the Police for antisocial behaviour, and this highlights the extent of the problem we face.

In Kununurra the police are also removing children from the streets late at night and some of these kids are 7 - 8 years old. The real tragedy however is that when the children are taken home often there is no responsible adult there to care for them.

There is no silver bullet to turnaround decades of well-intentioned but bad policy decisions which created this state of affairs in the first place, but rather a series of trade-offs which we must make if we want to create a better future than what is happening now.

These trade-offs will need to be considered in areas such as alcohol control, the payment of welfare and jobs, child protection, the safety of the community and businesses and the introduction of real consequences for those who do not comply with the rules including juveniles and their families.

One of the biggest trade-offs we must make is how do we determine a plan for the future which will be politically acceptable and financially achievable? This issue has waylaid many good intentions in the past but if we can come up with a plan to do this, we will at least have the basis for re-creating who we are and what sort of society we want to live in.

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