

RESEARCH SUMMARY

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Evaluation of The Bush Telegraph Across the Eyre Peninsula: An Intentional Capacity Building Program to Build Wellbeing-and-Trauma Responsive Regional Communities¹

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Background: Disproportionate Negative Impact of Mental Illness on Regional Communities

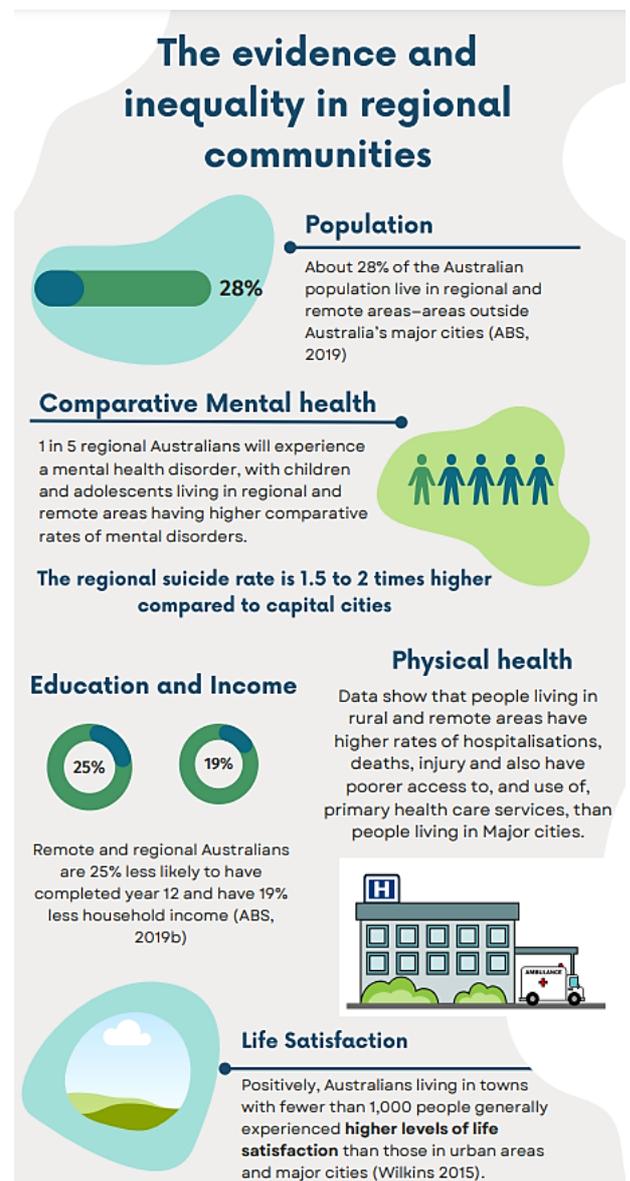
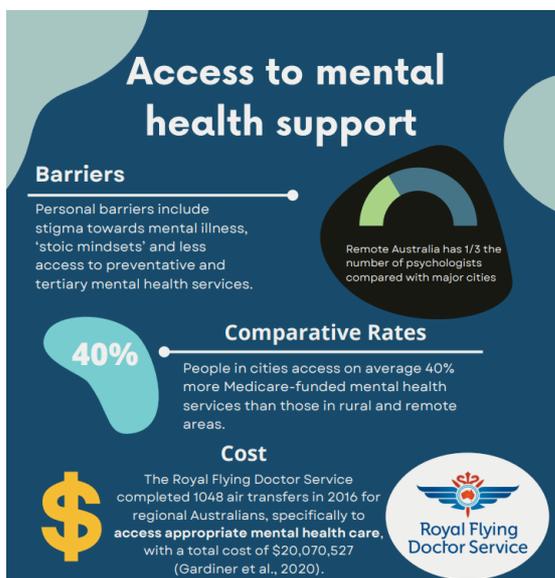
Within regional and remote areas, there are a range of barriers that impact on the delivery of both preventative and tertiary mental health support.

Australians who live in rural and remote locations have **worse health and whole-of-life outcomes** compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

These negative outcomes are magnified in the most vulnerable community members. Inequities in health and wellbeing arise out of the disparities within regional communities.

Of note, **experience of trauma** is associated with future negative whole-of-life outcomes. Trauma can be understood as life events that significantly overwhelm people's coping ability, and are associated with intense negative feelings (often a loss of safety, trust, control and shame).

For Aboriginal people this includes **transgenerational impact of trauma** that can be traced back to colonisation and the displacement of people from their traditional lands, the separation of children from their families, and policies and services that conflict with Indigenous values and culture.



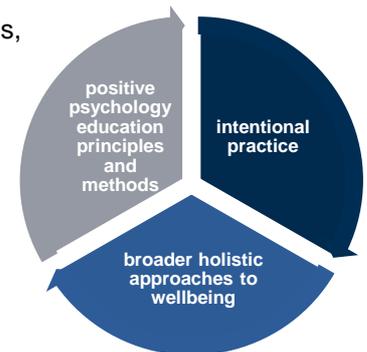
1. Summary of: Gruber, M. (2021). The Most Significant Changes of The Bush Telegraph program on the Eyre Peninsula and reflections for future implementation. Submitted to fulfill the requirements of Masters in Applied Positive Psychology. Central Queensland University.

Taking an Individualised Whole-Of-Community Approach (Wellbeing-and-Trauma Responsive Communities)

There is increasing acknowledgement that wellbeing and health promotion activities need to consider the unique cultural, historical and socioeconomic contexts of the individual community. This is particularly so for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Working Together, 2014).

Unfortunately, many preventative and tertiary wellbeing and social-emotional programs are imposed on regional and remote communities, and may not add value to the community because they:

- Bring an **over-reliance on individualistic factors** (e.g., knowledge, skills, mindsets) in understanding wellbeing outcomes, and may disregard broader community or contextual factors (e.g., local culture, trauma)
- Become **another ‘layer’** and **do not dovetail** into the strengths, wisdom and current initiatives of the local community.



Concepts integrated in ‘wellbeing-and-trauma responsive communities’

What is needed are integrated **whole-of-community responses** to individual and collective wellbeing that are embedded and owned within the local region, in a manner that honors the unique needs, context and knowledge systems of individual community.

The concept of ‘wellbeing-and-trauma responsive communities’ (LBI, 2021) is purported to do this. It moves away from a reductionist approach to wellbeing and mental health, but instead values complexity, multi-disciplinary approaches, and the role of systems and communities to understand and promote optimal human functioning.

The Bush Telegraph: A Systemic Approach to Building Wellbeing-and-Trauma Responsive Regional Communities

‘The Bush Telegraph’ is a LBI Foundation program designed to build wellbeing-and-trauma responsive local communities (or connected thriving communities). As reflected in its name, The Bush Telegraph is focused on **empowering local community members**, who are embedded in the “**bush**” to “**telegraph**” the science of wellbeing and resilience in a manner that draws upon the voices, wisdom and strengths of the local community, and supports its translation into existing knowledge systems.



A pilot version of The Bush Telegraph was delivered in collaboration with Centacare Catholic Country (CCCSA) across the **Eyre Peninsula** (South Australia), with a focus on the Ceduna, Whyalla and Port Lincoln communities between November 2020 and June 2021, as funded by the South Australian Government, under the Statewide Wellbeing Strategy, led by Wellbeing SA. The Bush Telegraph is founded upon the following key features:

Local Community Champions	IMPACT trained, coached and accredited community members have access to ongoing coaching and resources to empower their communities. These were CCCSA staff members.
Wellbeing Projects	Community Champions work side-by-side ‘with’ communities to deliver projects that translate the science of wellbeing to local needs and context, drawing upon the IMPACT Program.



The project culminated in the delivery of **14 Wellbeing Projects**, supported by 17 local community champions, across the Eyre Peninsula (engaging over **600 people**).

Study Aims

The purpose of this study was to evaluate The Bush Telegraph, bringing focus to the following points:

- What were the experiences of the Community Champions who were the program leaders in the implementation of The Bush Telegraph?
- From their perspectives, what are the most significant changes in the communities who participated in the program?
- What are key areas for future program development and improvement?

Study Methodology

The study employed the **Most Significant Change evaluation methodology**, as detailed by Davies and Dart (2005). This represents a qualitative or “**participatory**” **evaluation** process.

The researcher assessed written accounts of Community Champions of the most significant change perceived ($n = 13$). They then conducted focus groups ($n = 6$) to further investigate the initial themes identified and gain deeper understanding of the impacts.

Analysis of data, using inductive thematic analysis and recognised protocols (Davies and Dart, 2005), was undertaken focusing on Community Champions experiences of the most significant changes following program implementation.

Results

The study found the following key outcomes.

Experiences of Community Champions

The study identified the following key themes in terms of how Community Champions experienced The Bush Telegraph. Community Champions reported that the program had led to the following:

Shared Intent and Language	• A shared language, founded upon intentionality and growth, had supported stronger inter-team collaboration.
Scientific Strategies	• Practical strategies to support and enable strong service delivery and practice outcomes.
Confidence	• Increased confidence to support others with content related to wellbeing and resilience.
Organisational Collaboration	• Language of intentionality, growth and key IMPACT content has fostered inter-program collaboration.
Community Connections	• Strengthening of inter-agency and community connections, and the initiation of new interagency collaborations and connections.

Community Champions also reported key organisational and contextual stressors that impacted on their experience of The Bush Telegraph.

Most Significant Community Impact

The study identified the following key themes in terms of how Community Champions viewed the most significant impact of The Bush Telegraph within the community.

Resources	• New forms of resources on the science of wellbeing, growth and trauma being disseminated throughout the community.
Accessible Language	• Scientific strategies were able to be adapted into locally accessible language that connected to local communities.
Sustainable Projects	• Sustainability of key content into support processes and community owned wellbeing projects.

Future Program Implementation Recommendations

The study identified the following areas of future program development and implementation:

- Strengthening program clarity and expectations for Community Champions.
- Increasing timeframe from 'learning' IMPACT content to 'coaching' content.
- Managing competing workload pressures.
- Strengthening face-to-face and wrap-around coaching support.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to identify Community Champion perspectives of the most significant changes that have occurred following the implementation of The Bush Telegraph across the Eyre Peninsula.

Meaningful growth outcomes

The study found that The Bush Telegraph delivered sustainable outcomes for both Community Champions and local communities, in a manner that was **aligned to the stated goals** of the program (building wellbeing responsive communities).

Foundation and catalyst for future growth

There is evidence that the program has provided a **foundation for the future** delivery of local wellbeing programs and initiatives in a manner founded upon the science of wellbeing, trauma and growth. In other words, the program can have a **'catalytic effect'** to support the sustainable 'telegraphing' of the science of wellbeing, and to promote local community collaboration and shared wellbeing solutions.

Program refinement for sustainability

While the program delivered meaningful outcomes, the study identified a range of factors that impacted on the delivery. The study offered a range of suggestions to support the future sustainable implementation of The Bush Telegraph, including to foster alignment and sustainable implementation with the partner agency.

Implications for policy and practice

This research **supports the importance of community-owned wellbeing programming**. It demonstrates the role and importance of moving away from reductionist approaches to wellbeing and mental health, and the potential role for the integration of (1) positive psychology, (2) intentional practice and (3) and broader holistic approaches to wellbeing.

The study has highlighted the importance of promoting mental health and wellbeing outcomes through collaborative approaches that are founded upon shared language, evidence and methods.

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