

**Leavers at Margaret River: A Community Approach to  
Planning and Management**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In recent years an increasing number of school leavers have chosen Margaret River/Prevelly as the place to celebrate completion of secondary schooling. The region is a popular tourist destination. However, the facilities are not well suited to large numbers of young people seeking an intense celebratory experience over a short period of time. In order to cope with this annual influx of leavers the community decided that it needed to develop a management strategy that would both minimise the impact of the celebrations on the community and facilitate an enjoyable experience for the leavers. The community first undertook co-ordinated management of the leaver's celebrations in 2000 and followed this in 2001 with a more ambitious program that incorporated assistance from the School Drug Education Project (SDEP) and evaluation by the National Drug Research Institute (NDRI).

The 2001 program comprised the following activities

- Beach bonfire
- Chill Out Tent
- Evening sausage sizzle
- Continuous Police presence at events
- Adult patrols
- Increased security in the Caravan Park
- Photo competition
- Daytime beach activities

This list of activities does not tell the full story of how Margaret River managed leavers' week in 2001. The community took an accommodating, but very hands on approach. This was important in creating a positive social climate for the celebrations

## **METHODOLOGY**

A mixed method was employed because a considerable amount of information had to be gathered in short space of time about a complex community intervention. School leavers were interviewed regarding their expectations, as well as their actual behaviour in Prevelly, over the first few days of the leavers' week celebrations. Responses were gathered from 212 leavers staying in the Prevelly caravan park using a group survey technique. Twelve local stakeholders were interviewed individually using a standard protocol. The field researchers also systematically observed proceedings during the period of the celebrations.

## **RESULTS**

### **Leavers**

The leavers came to Prevelly for their end of school celebrations so as to be with friends and to relax. They wanted to leave the pressures of their lives behind and enjoy some stress free time. Most of the leaver's warnings came from parents and other family members and concerned personal safety and staying out of trouble. Not many of the leavers had received a police talk at their school. The leavers were warned by way of media stories that the police would have a strong presence in the area and that alcohol would be confiscated from minors at roadblocks. These roadblocks, as well as a police presence were concerns for the leavers. Staying together and looking after friends was the most popular strategy for avoiding problems. The overwhelming majority of leavers reported that they had consumed alcohol. A much smaller number reported using cannabis. Males generally started drinking earlier than females and many reported drinking more than planned. While drinking featured strongly as an activity, the leavers indicated that socialising rather than drinking was the best thing about their experiences in Prevelly. Violence was given as the most common negative experience, particularly for males. The leavers

felt that the celebrations would be improved with more entertainment and a number said they drank during the day because they were bored.

### **Stakeholders**

The local stakeholders were very forthcoming with the information they provided and there was remarkable consistency in their support for the community initiative. In terms of problems, the major theme in the stakeholders' responses was excessive drinking, although the celebrations were not seen as particularly problematic. All of the stakeholders interviewed were involved in some way in community support for the celebrations. The bonfire and sporting activities during the day were mentioned as activities that worked well in engaging the leavers. Leavers' behaviour was generally seen as good and interaction with the community volunteers was positive. The stakeholders considered that the community intervention made the celebrations safer and more manageable, although they also acknowledged that improvements could be made. Most recommended providing some form of music, but wanted to keep events low key for fear of attracting more leavers than the community could manage. The stakeholders were unanimous that the approach worked well and was needed. The leaver celebrations would continue to occur and the community would be better off if it managed the event on its own terms. Providing activities for the leavers created a climate of good will, which in itself reduced problems.

### **Field Observations**

Observations were made during community meetings and activity planning, when walking through the Prevelly caravan park, while surveying leavers, when driving around the community and at the bonfire. In the community planning meeting at the start of the celebrations there was concern about the local impact of the leavers' celebrations, but at the same time this did not translate into wanting to stop the leavers from enjoying themselves. The local police indicated that they would deal leniently with drinking by leavers. However, if the youths were behaving irresponsibly or were drawing attention to their alcohol consumption then they would intervene. The caravan park staff were an integral element in the community management strategy. Extra security staff had been employed and a tolerant approach would be taken to the

leavers staying in the park. However, nobody would be allowed into the park without a booking. The bonfire was an important strategy for drawing the leavers together, but was not advertised for fear of attracting too many people. This however meant that many leavers already in Prevelly did not attend on the first night. By the second night information about the event had been disseminated and about five hundred young people attended. Many of the leavers drank around the fire and all went well except for two minor incidents caused by irresponsible behaviour. A chill out tent was set up near the bonfire to deal with drunkenness and minor injuries, but for various reasons was not well used. The State Emergency Service also provided a sausage sizzle at the bonfire. Those who purchased food found it very convenient. However, most leavers did not know about the service and it was under utilised. The leavers spent the majority of their time in the caravan park. During the day groups tended to remain at their site and at night move around to socialise with their fellow leavers. Many seemed to be searching for somewhere to go and something to do. There seemed to be a pattern of leavers stopping in front of places that had light and music. The caravan park staff would then come along and break up the group, who would just collect again at the next place that had light and music. Access to the caravan park was well controlled and the leavers staying there felt safe. Access to alcohol was not as well managed. The liquor store adjoining the caravan park was very casual in asking for identification, which made it easy for underage leavers to obtain alcohol. At the beginning of Leavers' Week the police set up well publicised roadblocks on the main southbound road into Margaret River. This was done primarily to prevent underage leavers from bringing alcohol for later consumption. These roadblocks did deter many leavers from bringing alcohol. However in reality very few of the leavers actually reported going through a roadblock.

## **DISCUSSION**

Many of the school leavers decided on the Margaret River/Prevelly area for their end of school celebrations to avoid the difficulties associated with the more traditional leavers locations such as Rottneest and Dunsborough. Despite the fact that the great majority of leavers reported drinking during their celebrations, socialising and meeting new people was clearly the activity they liked the most. This is a consistent

pattern in leavers' celebrations and would seem to indicate that leavers see drinking as a part of the social process, rather than an end in itself (Young, Farrington & Midford, 2001). In turn this suggests that social activities that do not feature alcohol can be popular and may be a way to reduce consumption and harm in future years.

A large proportion of the leavers were concerned about initiatives such as roadblocks and sniffer dogs designed to curb underage drinking and drug use. Many of the leavers got around these restrictions by having a parent or an older friend in the car. Some leavers hid their alcohol and others were too scared to bring any at all. Some of the leavers indicated that they had intended to bring cannabis with them but chose not to for fear of being caught. However, the majority of the leavers expressed an aversion to drug use and their intention not to use was not influenced by the deterrent measures. Interestingly, virtually none of the leavers actually experienced a roadblock, which may reduce their deterrent value in future years. Despite the concerns about confiscation, most leavers purchased alcohol in Perth and brought it with them. The small number that purchased their alcohol upon arrival indicated that the Prevelly liquor store was very relaxed about checking ID. These factors taken together suggest that it was not hard for underage leavers to access alcohol. Some measures such as more stringent ID checks may reduce supply but this should not replace community strategies that address demand and harm.

School talks by police were not widely reported by the leavers. Warnings came predominantly from family members and tended to focus on harm reduction strategies such as staying together and looking after each other and not drinking and driving. Media stories seemed the main source for warnings about roadblocks and alcohol confiscation. In future years the media may be a useful means of delivering other information such as to behaviour expected of leavers, although police presentations in schools could also be usefully expanded.

There seemed to be few things to do during the day, which led to boredom and greater drinking. The evening events were well planned but poorly advertised, which led to poor patronage. In future years consideration should be given to improving access to events and facilities catering for leavers. Lighting in the caravan park and on routes to celebratory events such as the bonfire need to be looked at on safety grounds.

The data collected for this evaluation provides a detailed picture of what occurred during the course of leavers' celebrations in Margaret River/Prevelly. The leavers generally got what they wanted from the experience and at the same time local stakeholders felt they had maintained control of proceedings and minimised the impact on the community. In terms of the immediate and demonstrable benefits for the community and the leavers, the way the way proceedings were managed should be seen as a success. These findings however only tell one part of the story. The process of providing activities during the leaver celebrations involved an interaction between the community and the leavers. The community effort gave a message to the leavers that they were important. In turn this seemed to create a sense of obligation on their part to treat the community with respect. This creation of a relationship is at the core of how the Margaret River community managed their leavers' celebrations in 2001. In future years the community may choose to fine tune the activities provided during leavers week and the data in this report suggests a number of possibilities. However, what is important to emphasise from the report's findings is that decisions should always reflect the importance of building a relationship with the leavers.

The other benefit that emerged from this project was the capacity created within the community to manage such events. There was a strong sense from the stakeholders that the community had shown its ability to manage the leavers celebrations on its own terms, yet at the same time make the experience enjoyable for the young people who participated. The added bonus clearly recognised by this group was that the community was strengthened in the process.

The way the Margaret River community managed leavers' celebrations in 2001 stands as a model for other communities. Good planning, and community involvement in activities that build a relationship with the leavers seem to be the key to success. Communities faced with this annual influx of celebrating school leavers are never likely to develop the perfect program that eliminates all the problems, but engagement is likely to be the foundation of an effective strategy.

## INTRODUCTION

The Gold Coast in Queensland has long been a popular destination for school leavers seeking to celebrate completion of secondary schooling (Smith & Rosenthal, 1997; Zinkiewicz, Davey & Curd, 1999). Here large numbers of young people from Queensland, NSW and even Victoria gather for 'Schoolies Week', where they celebrate their changed status, socialise with peers and drink large quantities of alcohol. During the 1990s 'Schoolies' celebrations in Queensland extended to other holiday locations such as the Sunshine Coast and Bundaberg (Zinkiewicz, Davey & Curd, 1999). As the scale of celebrations increased so did the binge drinking and associated problems. Over this same period the phenomenon started to take hold in Western Australia and similar problems emerged. Initially Rottnest Island was the chosen destination for local school leavers, because of its proximity to Perth and the lack of a need to drive. However, in recent years greater numbers have put pressure on the island's limited accommodation. This has meant that leavers wanting the experience of a celebration away from home have had to venture further afield. Dunsborough attracted increasing numbers of leavers in the late 1990s and adverse consequences for the community seemed to escalate proportionately. Celebrations in Dunsborough gained a reputation for unruly behaviour and clashes with the local community and many leavers opted to hold their celebrations in Margaret River, which is a small distance further south.

This town and the surrounding district is a popular tourist destination, but the community had no experience of coping with the influx of several hundred teenagers, who wanted to compensate for the stress and focus of their final year in school by a few days of intense, uninhibited celebration. Most of the leavers stay in the Prevelly caravan park. This is about 10 kilometres from the town of Margaret River and provides reasonably priced accommodation near the beach. This location is away from the main townsite. However, there has not been a lot to do in the evenings and it is generally cold and windy. This meant the leavers had little to divert themselves from drinking and many looked to drive into town for entertainment, often after they had been drinking. The cold also meant that those who wanted to socialise around the

beach area built bonfires. These provided a gathering point, with warmth and light, but also caused burns to intoxicated leavers and brush fires in the sand dunes.

In 2000 local service agencies and businesses decided that both the community and the leavers would be better served if the celebrations were managed so as to minimise their impact on the local community, but still be enjoyable and memorable for the leavers. The local Safer WA Committee, which is a state supported community structure for responding to local crime problems, agreed to devise and implement a local strategy. They decided to provide entertainment and supervision for the leavers as a group at a beach area away from permanent accommodation. This initiative was deliberately not advertised so as not to attract leavers from surrounding communities. A large bonfire was organised for weekend evenings at the start of leavers' week and a pool of volunteers from local agencies provided a low-key adult presence.

This strategy was seen as a success by those involved, because it drew the leavers together, where they could be monitored, while at the same time facilitating mixing and socialising. A deliberate decision was made to tolerate drinking in the immediate area of the bonfire so that it could be monitored and kept in check. The adult presence was not seen as intrusive and interventions only occurred at the request of leavers or if safety became an issue. The one supervised bonfire also put a stop to the fires getting out of control in the dunes, because leavers did not light their own.

In this same year the School Drug Education Project (SDEP) had been heavily involved in co-ordinating a demonstration intervention during leavers' week on Rottnest Island (Young, Farrington & Midford, 2001). A lot had been learned from this involvement and the long-term plan was to use the understanding gained to assist other communities better manage their own celebrations. In the early part of 2001 SDEP held discussions with a number of communities as to how assistance could be provided to better manage local leavers' celebrations and at this time the Margaret River community invited involvement in their 2001 leavers' celebrations, including assistance with evaluating the local intervention.

Pederson et al (1988) noted that the local level has a number of advantages for intersectoral collaboration and there is increasing evidence that communities programs do have an impact on drug use and harm (Casswell, 1999). This has been

recognised at a policy level and strengthening community action on drug harm has been a priority of the most recent phase of Australia's national drug strategy (Phillips, 2000). The broadening of the school leavers' project to provide strategic assistance at the local level can be seen as a manifestation of this community emphasis.

### **THE 2001 LEAVERS' INTERVENTION**

A subcommittee of the Margaret River Safer WA Committee undertook the following activities for the 2001 leavers' celebrations.

- **The Beach Bonfire – This was provided on Friday and Saturday night, at the start of Leavers' Week**
- **The Chill Out Tent – This comprised a first aid and sobering up service for the leavers staffed by medical students**
- **Evening Sausage Sizzle – This comprised a food stall serving cheap convenient food in the area where the leavers were celebrating. Staffing was undertaken by local State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers**
- **Continuous Police Presence – Police provided a continuous presence in the vicinity of the bonfire**
- **Adult Patrols – Pairs of adults from all the local agencies involved in managing the celebrations provided local key monitoring of the area in the immediate vicinity of the bonfire.**
- **Caravan Park – The caravan park issued armbands to leavers with booked accommodation and employed extra security personnel to control entry and manage behaviour.**

The School Drug Education Project (SDEP) provided planning advice to the subcommittee on the basis of experience gained at Rottnest. It also provided assistance to the community during the peak period of the celebrations. This mainly involved the following activities.

- A photo competition emphasising activities not involving alcohol
- Daytime group beach activities
- Assistance with the adult patrols.

This list of activities does not tell the full story of how Margaret River managed leavers' week in 2001. The philosophy and approach adopted by the community were very important ingredients in the equation, because these defined the nature of the relationship between the leavers and the local community and created the social climate in which the celebrations occurred. The community once again took an accommodating, but very hands on approach on to the celebrations. There was no advertising for fear of attracting extra leavers and overtaxing local facilities, but those who were staying in the community were made to feel welcome. The low-key adult presence was an important manifestation of this approach. It created a relationship between the community and the leavers and permitted a more tolerant approach to drinking in the vicinity of the bonfire. The leavers' could drink socially, but the expectation of responsible behaviour and the informal controls inherent in public settings acted to limit their consumption. Additionally, because the drinking was visible it could be monitored and if difficulties arose these could be dealt with before getting out of hand.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study is part of a series of evaluations of leavers' week celebrations in a number of Western Australian locations. The broad research question being explored is how can these events be best managed so as to minimise harm for the celebrating leavers and the hosting community. In the case of Margaret River a unique opportunity was offered by the community to evaluate the 2001 celebration management strategies, which were developed and implemented locally, with minimal external assistance. This permitted a detailed look at not only what a community could achieve from its own resources, but also the processes involved in putting together such a local collaboration.

The research methodology was substantially based on previous studies conducted on Rottnest Island (Bogaards, Farrington & Midford, 2000; Young, Farrington & Midford, 2001). This previous research indicated the utility of a mixed method in circumstances where a considerable amount of information has to be gathered in short space of time about a complex community intervention.

In Margaret River responses were gathered from the school leaver population in the Prevelly caravan park and the major business and service stakeholders in the local community. The field researchers also spent four days mixing with leavers and community members during the period of the celebrations (22<sup>nd</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> November 2001) and systematically observed proceedings during this time. This approach draws on a number of evaluation methods and was termed 'triangulation' by Guba and Lincoln (1989) because the global understanding of what has occurred derives from several different investigation components. The use of several different sources of information also permits verification of accuracy and consistency of data.

## **SCHOOL LEAVER SURVEYS**

The school leavers were questioned regarding their expectations as well as their actual behaviour in Margaret River/Prevelly over the first few days of the leavers' week celebrations. Two hundred and twelve school leavers were interviewed using the

same 12 question survey instrument (see Appendix 1). This group was allocated the most amount of research time.

The field researchers approached groups of young people in the Prevelly caravan park during the day, generally at their tent sites or chalets. All but one group of the young people interviewed were in Margaret River/Prevelly to participate in the leavers' week celebrations. Groups were approached rather than individuals, because the young people seemed less intimidated and more open to answering the questions when they were with peers. The survey instrument was used to guide and prompt discussion rather than being administered word for word. Responses were recorded as accurately as possible. However, at times this was difficult, as a number of people would respond simultaneously. Generally one or two members of the group would dominate the initial responses, with other members agreeing and extending these answers with their own experiences. Occasionally a respondent would contradict his or her peers with a different opinion or unique experience. Hackey sacks, pens and Frisbees, with '100% control' branding, as well as RAC drink bottles were used as incentives for participating in the survey and there were very few refusals.

The leavers interviewed tended to come from the outer suburbs of Perth, with particular concentrations from the Wanneroo area and from Kalamunda and adjacent suburbs (see Figure 1). In a comparison with the home suburb of leavers who visited Rottneest in 2001 there was very little overlap, as this latter group tended to be drawn from the northern beaches and inner suburbs (Young, Farrington & Midford, 2001).

**Figure 1: Home suburb of leavers interviewed**

## **MAJOR STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS**

The major local stakeholders were interviewed individually about the leavers' celebrations two weeks after the event. In all 12 stakeholders were interviewed. Eleven of the interviewees were drawn from service agencies and community groups that participated in the planning and implementation of support activities. The sole business interviewee managed the Prevelly caravan park, where most of the leavers stayed during the period of the celebrations. The interview comprised eight core questions on leavers' behaviour and community responses, with elaboration of agency specific themes such as injury in the case of the health service interviewee. The final question was open ended to allow for additional comments. Each interview was held in an environment of the interviewee's choosing. Responses were recorded in point form with quotations to illustrate each topic. On average the interviews lasted between 30-40 minutes. The interview schedule is contained in Appendix 2.

## **PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

NDRI's two field researchers spent four days living in Margaret River/Prevelly during the leavers' period. Accordingly, the researchers not only gathered survey data, they systematically observed the activity associated with the leavers' celebrations. The researchers also had many opportunities to hold informal discussions with leavers, community volunteers and agency and business staff. Each evening observations from that day were recorded in a notebook. Data gathering was not a detached impersonal experience. The leavers began to recognise the researchers and other staff involved in the intervention. Young people often approached the researchers to ask for promotional gifts, to tell further stories they considered relevant or to invite the researchers to a party they had organised for the evening.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **SCHOOL LEAVER SURVEY**

Responses to each of the twelve questions were categorized by theme. The common themes were then arranged in a table, which identified the type of group (i.e. male, female, mixed) that raised each theme; and, the number of times the theme was identified. Only themes that were identified on at least five occasions have been tabulated. Individual quotes that were representative of respondents' comments on a particular theme have been included for illustrative purposes.

### **MAJOR STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS**

Responses to each of the eight questions were scrutinised for common themes. These were then summarised in terms of the extent to which they represented the opinions and experiences of the whole group or special interest sections within the group. Representative quotes were used to illustrate these themes.

### **PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

Over the four day field evaluation period two researchers observed activity during community meetings and activity planning, while walking through the Prevelly caravan park as surveyors, when driving around the community and at the bonfire as members of the crowd. Observational notes were taken by the field researchers on instances that illustrated the nature of school leaver celebrations in Prevelly. At the time, what was seen and heard in relation to school leavers was recorded without interpretation. Systematic ordering and interpretation of the data was undertaken subsequently. The field researchers were able relate their first hand findings to the responses provided by the school leavers and make comparison between the two. This was useful in terms of validity checking.

## LIMITATIONS

Most (58%) of the 212 leavers were interviewed in groups of mixed gender while the proportions of males and females interviewed in single sex groups were comparable (19.8% female, 22.2% male). The difference in the make-up of the groups is not considered to have substantially influenced the data as similar answers were attained from the three different groups concerning most questions.

The number of school leavers greatly exceeded the number of non-school leavers. There was a greater proportion of male non-school leavers to female non-school leavers (see Table 1). The males were commonly older than the school leavers. These non-school leavers were in Prevelly during the leavers' period for a number of reasons. Some were university students celebrating the end of their exams. Others were boyfriends of younger girls and some were travellers from other countries coincidentally in the region. Almost all of the non-leavers interviewed were aged 19 years or less. The responses received from this group were consistent with those given by the actual leavers.

**Table 1: Gender and leaver status**

<b>Gender and Status</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male non-leavers	21	9.9%
Male leavers	81	38.2%
Female non-leavers	3	1.4%
Female leavers	107	50.5%

Two interviewers conducted most surveys, with a few undertaken by the 'Leavers Live' team. As a consequence the interview style varied somewhat. The two main interviewers were male and female. Each researcher interviewed a comparable number of males and females. The male researcher interviewed 51.9% females and 47.1% males and the female researcher interviewed 48.9% females and 51.1% males.

It is difficult to ascertain whether the gender of the researcher affected the responses of the school leavers to certain questions, especially those relating to discussions about sexuality and alcohol and other drug consumption.



## **RESULTS**

The results are presented in three sub-sections. The first sub-section reports the findings from the interviews conducted with leavers. The second sub-section presents the results from the interviews conducted with key stakeholders and the third sub-section reports the field researchers' participant observations.

### **SCHOOL LEAVER SURVEY DATA**

Leavers were generally keen to express their opinions and were remarkably consistent in many of the issues they identified. Summary tables for each interview question have been presented in this section. It should be noted that N refers to the total number in the groups interviewed, but the figures in the columns indicated the number of responses. The discrepancy between the column total and the N total comes about because not everybody in a group expressed an opinion and themes mentioned less than five times have not been included. Representative quotes have been used to further illustrate the common themes.

**Table 2: What made you choose to come here for your celebrations?**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=47</b>	<b>n=123</b>	<b>n=212</b>
To be with friends	5	6	11	22
To relax	1	1	10	12
Tradition/ Reputation	6	1	4	11
To socialise with new people	3	5	2	10
Did not want to go to Rottnest	2	4	3	9
Did not want to go to Dunsborough	2	1	5	8
Less police expected in Prevelly	1	2	5	8
To get drunk		3	4	7
Easy to book	1	2	3	6
Like the location	2	1	3	6
To have fun		1	4	5

When asked why the leavers chose Prevelly for their end of school celebrations the greatest number indicated the desire to be with friends and to relax.

*It's the end of school, we want to have fun with our fellow leavers –Male*

*I love it here, it's very relaxed –Female*

In a number of cases previous leavers recommended Prevelly as a good place to celebrate leaving school. This linked with this year's leavers seeing it as a tradition to come to Prevelly.

*People from last year had good reports –Female*

*It's tradition –Male*

Many of the leavers expressed an aversion to Dunsborough and Rottnest, the more traditional locations for end of school celebrations.

*Dunsborough was too rough, too heavily policed and we didn't want the hassle of dickheads. -Male*

*You had to have an eighteen year old with you at Rottnest –Male*

The leavers placed some emphasis on their desire to enjoy themselves without the interference of police. They believed that Prevelly would be free from the heavy policing associated with other leaver's locations.

*Zero cops –Mixed group*

Some said they were coming to get drunk. Other minor themes were ease of booking, an appealing location and to have fun.

**Table 3: What were your expectations when you came here?**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=47</b>	<b>n=123</b>	<b>Comments</b> <b>n=212</b>
To meet new people and socialise	12	10	18	40
To drink	6	11	15	32
To relax	7	2	8	17
To have fun	5	4	6	15
To party	2	4	8	14
To have sex	2	4	7	13
To swim/ Go to the beach	1	2	4	7
To find lots of police/ Road blocks/ Alcohol confiscations	4	3		7
To pass out	1	3	1	5
Expected fights	3	1	1	5

The leavers expressed the desire to leave the pressures of their lives behind and enjoy some stress free time with their friends and fellow leavers.

*Drink, socialise, have fun, no stress, no parents –Female*

*Party, meet people, have fun, forget about school, get with chicks –Male*

Meeting new people and socialising was the most often mentioned expectation. Drinking was mentioned by a large number of the leavers, and here there was a male

bias. Other themes which featured recreation at their core included: to relax; to have fun; to party; to have sex and to swim/go to the beach.

There was a fear among the leavers that the police would prevent them from enjoying themselves and that fighting amongst fellow leavers and locals would be part of their experience.

*Cops would stop everything and there would be no fun –Female*

*Drunken aggressive guys wanting to fight –Male*

A small number of mainly male leavers mentioned that they had an expectation of passing out from their drinking.

**Table 4: Did anyone give you any warnings or advice before you came?**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total Comments</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=123</b>	<b>n=207</b>
No school police talk	4	5	8	17
Stay in groups/ look after one another	4		9	13
Drive safely/ Don't drink and drive	1	3	7	11
Consume alcohol sensibly	1	5	4	10
Media warnings	1	4	4	9
Had a school police talk	4	1	3	8
Be careful/ Stay safe/ Avoid behaviour which may cause regret	3	1	5	9
Watch your drinks to prevent spiking	5		1	6

Avoid trouble with the police

1

4

5

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Most of the leavers' warnings came from parents and other family members and concerned personal safety and staying out of trouble. Not many of the school leavers received a school police talk. In cases where talks were provided they seemed to focus on alcohol.

*Don't drink because we'll take it off you -Female*

*Drink in Moderation -Male*

Some leavers recalled general media warnings. In addition there had been some recent media coverage of drink spiking. This seemed to prompt warnings to females about the practice.

*Pour your own drinks, watch they don't get spiked -Female*

*Don't leave your drinks unattended -Female*

**Table 5: Were you worried about any problems you might have?**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total Comments</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=123</b>	<b>n=207</b>
Roadblocks/ Police	3	8	8	19
Theft	3	4	7	14
Rape/ Sexual harassment/ Being taken advantage of	7	2	1	10
Fights/ Violence/ Intoxicated people	2	4	5	9
Older Males/Predators	1		4	5
Getting too drunk/ Doing something stupid	2		3	5

The leavers were warned by way of media stories that the police would have a strong presence down south and that alcohol and drugs would be confiscated from minors at roadblocks. These roadblocks as well as the police presence was the major concern for leavers.

*Police confiscating alcohol, sniffer dogs and going to goal for getting drunk -Male*

*Cars being picked up in roadblocks -Female*

Theft was a concern for both sexes as many of them were staying in tents and had little to no security. This was magnified by the incidence of strangers entering campsites and chalets in search of a party.

*Theft from our tent of alcohol and other stuff -Male*

Females were worried about being taken advantage of when inebriated.

*Boys being too forward –Female*

*Date rape, sexual assault –Male*

Violence was more of a concern for males. Other minor themes were male predators and doing something stupid while drunk.

**Table 6: Do you have any strategies in mind to make sure you stay safe and avoid problems?**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Females n=42</b>	<b>Males n=42</b>	<b>Mixed n=123</b>	<b>Total n=207</b>
Stay in big groups/ don't stray/ help each other	9	3	26	38
Try to prevent theft	2	3	9	14
Avoid drunk people/ fights		7	2	9
Don't drink too much/ drink plenty of water	2		4	6
Not really worried/ no plans		5		5

Staying together and looking after your friends was overwhelmingly the most popular response to this question. However, this strategy was predominantly expressed by females.

*Look after each other –Female Stay in groups –Male*

Theft was an issue for both the male and female leavers and many mentioned the prevention strategies they were using.

*Hide alcohol –Male*

*Brought lock for tent -Mixed group*

Males were concerned with avoiding fights although a number said they were not worried about potential problems.

*Other people being dickheads and picking fights –Male*

*Not really worried –Male*

Moderate drinking was another prevention strategy reported by leavers

**Table 7: So what have you been up to?**

Themes	Females n=42	Males n=47	Mixed n=120	Total Comments n=209
Drinking	5	12	15	32
Went to the beach	3	9	9	21
Stayed in the caravan park	2	9	8	19
Didn't attend any activities	1	4	13	18
Played sport	1	8	6	11
Talked/ Socialised	2	3	9	14
Sitting around/ Relaxing	5	1	6	13
Shopping in Margaret River	1	7	4	12
Eating	3	2	6	11
Attended the bonfire	2	2	7	11
Plan to attend the bonfire		2	6	8
Didn't know about the activities/ No advertising	1	3	3	7

Drinking was the most frequent response when the leavers were asked this question. However, few of the leavers actually mentioned drinking as their sole intention.

*Smoking, drinking, eating, listening to music, meeting new people from other schools  
-Mixed group*

*Drinking, swimming, snorkeling, surfing, eating heaps, talking, sitting around,  
kicking around a footy, playing with Frisbees and hackey sacks, and throwing tennis  
balls -Mixed group*

Large numbers of leavers reported going to the beach and socialising in the caravan park.

*Went to the beach during the day and the caravan park at night –Male*

*Bumming around and partying, going to the beach -Female*

The bonfire was a popular activity, with many leavers having been or planning to go. A large number of leavers did not attend any activities and some indicated that they did not know about the activities

**Table 8: Did you drink or take drugs?**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total Comments</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=47</b>	<b>n=123</b>	<b>n=212</b>
Consumed alcohol	34	45	109	188
Expressed aversion to drug consumption	34	16	20	70
Consumed cannabis	1	9		10
Planning to consume cannabis		4	4	8

There was a dramatic difference between the number of leavers who consumed alcohol and those who consumed cannabis. Leavers were happy to tell the surveyors of their alcohol consumption but more reluctant to reveal that they were using drugs. Many females expressed an aversion to cannabis.

*Definitely no, not interested - Female*

*We were offered some, but refused -Female*

**Table 9: Did you drink more or less than you had planned?**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total Comments</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=47</b>	<b>n=123</b>	<b>n=212</b>
Drank less than planned	22	4	15	41
Drank as planned	15	11		26
Drank more than planned		12	6	18
Had no plan		5		5

The majority of female leavers drank less than they had planned, whereas the majority of male leavers drank more than they had planned. However, overall less alcohol was consumed by the leavers than intended.

*A lot less actually -Female*

*Heaps more -Male*

The males were also less likely to plan their alcohol consumption than the females.

*No plan -Male*

**Table 10: Where did you drink?**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total Comments</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=47</b>	<b>n=123</b>	<b>n=212</b>
Drank in the Caravan Park	12	25	29	66
Drank alcohol on the beach	4	6		10
Drank alcohol everywhere			8	8
Drank alcohol on walks	4		4	8
Drank alcohol at the bonfire		6		6

The leavers drank predominantly in the caravan park. However, some took their alcohol outside the park and drank in a number of locations. Surprisingly few drank at the bonfire.

**Table 11: When did you drink?**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total Comments</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=47</b>	<b>n=123</b>	<b>n=212</b>
Began drinking between 1pm and 5pm (inclusive)	13	12	20	45
Began drinking between 6am and 12pm (inclusive)	3	13	18	34
Began drinking after 6pm	1		4	5

Very few female leavers begin drinking in the morning. Most drinking commenced in the afternoon, with only a small number leaving their drinking until the evening.



**Table 12: Where did you get your alcohol?**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total Comments</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=47</b>	<b>n=123</b>	<b>n=212</b>
Brought alcohol from Perth	11	29	33	73
Parents supplied alcohol	26		17	43
Purchased alcohol locally	15	12	9	36
Alcohol purchased by older friend or sibling	24	5	6	35
Alcohol purchased themselves	2	7	17	26
Alcohol driven down by parent/ 18 year old	7	4		13

Most males brought their alcohol with them from Perth. More females bought alcohol locally, although females typically relied on others to purchase alcohol for them.

**Table 13: What would you say has been the best thing about your time here?**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total Comments</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=43</b>	<b>n=120</b>	<b>n=205</b>
Socialising/ Meeting new people	18	5	24	47
Freedom from school/ parents	2	1	17	20
Drinking	2	4	10	16
Relaxing	4	3	4	11
Atmosphere	2	3	1	6
Parties		3	2	5

The leavers indicated that the socialising was the best thing about their experiences in Prevelly.

*Being around your mates –Female*

*Meeting and being around other leavers - Male*

Many leavers also enjoyed the freedom of having finished exams and being away from home.

*'I can lie in bed all day without anyone telling me not to waste the day' –Female*

Drinking came third on the list and relaxing, the atmosphere of the celebrations and parties were also mentioned.

**Table 14: What would you say has been the worst thing about your time here?**

Themes	Females n=42	Males n=47	Mixed n=123	Total Comments n=212
Violence	2	6	10	18
Unwanted sexual advances	9	2	2	15
Accidents and Injury (excluding falling in the dark)	1	4	7	11
Antagonism from Local Youth	1	2	7	10
Weather	1	6	1	8
Nothing bad	4		2	6
Injuries because of no light	1	1	3	5
Cabin/ camp site invasion	2	1	2	5

Violence was given as the most common negative experience, particularly for males.

*Locals trying to start fights –Male*

*One of my mates got punched out –Female*

Sexual advances were a negative feature of the celebrations for female leavers

*A group of guys were sexually harassing us –Female*

*Some guys were groping us –Female*

Accidents and injury featured prominently, in large part because of poor lighting in the caravan park. The leavers were also unhappy with the way they were treated by the local youth. Apparently there was a back way into the caravan park which was unguarded and known to the locals. The locals entered the caravan park through this back way and harassed the leavers. They attempted to pick fights and one boy suffered a gash in his head from a local brandishing a broken bottle. The leavers also reported a feeling of hostility from the local youth when they were outside the caravan park.

*The locals were throwing stuff at our car –Mixed group*

*You fully get death looks from the locals –Female*

*A local smashed a bottle over his head -Male*

**Table 15: Did you visit the Chill Out Tent?**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total Comments</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=39</b>	<b>n=123</b>	<b>n=204</b>
No/ Didn't know about it	23	21	119	163
Heard about it but haven't been	10	4	3	17
Bad weather prevented going	5	4	1	10
Have a Chill out tent or first aid in the caravan park			5	5
Great idea	1	1	3	5

Most leavers did not know about the chill out tent. Some who did know about it commented that the concept was good. However, they also commented that the location was inconvenient, because it was away from the caravan park where a lot of the drinking and injuries occurred. There were a number of leavers who suggested that a first aid or a chill out tent could be usefully placed within the bounds of the caravan park.

*It's a good idea –Male*

*We need the chill out tent in the vicinity, people hurt themselves and they need help here, within Prevelly where the highest concentration of people are –Mixed group*

*We need first aid in the park –Female*

**Table 16: What do you think could be done to improve the experience?**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Total Comments</b>
	<b>n=42</b>	<b>n=47</b>	<b>n=123</b>	<b>n=212</b>
Music/ Bands/ DJs in the Caravan Park	3	4	10	17
More lighting in Caravan park	1	3	12	16
Extra activities/ Entertainment	5	5	4	14
Security and police were good/ Feel safe	1	4	6	11
More attention to cleanliness of caravan park facilities	2	2	6	10
Prevent fights		3	6	9
Allow more people to sleep in the tents and cabins	1	1	4	6
Better security	2		4	6
Allow guests into the Caravan park	1	1	4	6
Cheaper accommodation		3	2	5
Make the bonfire closer or provide a shuttle bus	1		4	5

The leavers felt there was a lack of entertainment and many were bored during the day.

*There's nothing to do except drink – Mixed group*

*There's nothing to do during the day except eat -Male*

Many would have been content with music in the caravan park.

*A concert in the caravan park –Female*

*A festival, bands or DJs, this would distract people so there would be less havoc  
–Mixed group*

The lack of lighting at night was a major concern for the leavers. Many injuries were a result of the dark.

*I keep tripping over the stairs in the dark –Female*

Throughout the survey many leavers expressed that they felt safe and secure within the bounds of the caravan park and were happy with the armbands given to leavers who had booked accommodation and the staff's tolerance.

*I think the park is very safe, I really like the idea of the armbands, they make me feel safe –Female*

*It seems pretty safe, it's safer than expected –Male*

*The wristbands are good –Mixed group*

The leavers who attended the bonfire reported enjoying it. However, few were happy to walk the distance between the caravan park and the river mouth.

*That's a good idea, the bonfire, I reckon, but it needs to be closer –Female*

The cleanliness of the caravan park was criticised by the leavers. The showers and toilets were apparently not cleaned of broken glass, used condoms and vomit often enough and the bins were not emptied when full.

*The bins are always full, there's nowhere to put our rubbish –Male*

*The toilets are not maintained very well, there's glass on the floor –Female*

*We need cleaner showers –Male*

### **STAKEHOLDERS' DATA**

The twelve local stakeholders interviewed were very forthcoming in the information they provided and there was a remarkable consistency in their support for the community initiative. Responses are summarised under the respective question headings.

#### **From your perspective what are the major problems associated with leavers' celebrations at Margaret River?**

The major theme in the stakeholders' responses was excessive drinking and consequent problems, which ranged from injury and vandalism to nuisance problems such as littering.

*Alcohol abuse – aggro – vandalism. Not caring for the community*

Some stakeholders considered the celebrations relatively problem free. Where problems did occur, they tended to relate to the large numbers of leavers using facilities designed for a small community

*The only problem was the can thrown in the fire. Most of the kids were fine*

*Minor problems....the infrastructure can only take so much*

Another theme was that where problems occurred they tended to involve older 'hangers on'

*A few older people got involved – sleazing on to the girls*

One stakeholder commented that the structure and supervision provided by the community seemed to reduce problems.

**Were you involved in the community intervention this year? How?**

Here responses varied considerably according to the role of the stakeholder interviewed. However, almost all were involved in the planning meetings, which decided how the celebrations should be managed.

*I went to the planning meetings. I organised the firewood for the bonfire*

Many provided an adult presence at activities over the main weekend of the celebrations and there was mention of the effort put into agency collaboration and co-ordination of activities.

*I was wandering around with a few other adults to see that things were ok*

*To see that there was agency collaboration*

The stakeholder responses to this question clearly indicate the pivotal role of the local Safer WA Committee in planning, co-ordinating and providing hands on supervision of the celebrations.

**Can you tell me about the activities that were provided for the leavers. Which ones worked best?**

The bonfire at night and the sporting activities during the day were consistently mentioned by the stakeholders.

*The community provided the bonfire*

*The Leavers Live team provided sporting activities during the day*

The Chill Out Tent and sausage sizzle were mentioned to a lesser extent and comment was made that there were inter agency safety patrols.

*The SES put on a sausage sizzle*

The bonfire was seen to work well because it drew the leavers together, although there was some concern expressed about safety. In one instance something thrown into the fire exploded and caused a minor injury.

*A lot of kids were sitting around and talking and making friends.*

The day and night time activities were seen as complementing each other well. These activities and the low key adult supervision indicated a good level of planning and inter agency collaboration.

**What are your impressions of this year's school leavers' behaviour? Was it better or worse than previous years? Can you give me some examples of what they did?**

Almost all the stakeholders said that the leavers' behaviour was good and better than in previous years.

*I was pleasantly surprised by their behaviour. They were respectful and appreciative of the activities provided*

One stakeholder considered that their behaviour was worse, because damage was more of a problem. Another commented that their behaviour was unpredictable because of inexperience with alcohol.

In terms of specific behaviour only a few examples were provided.

*Hooning around in cars, revving engines*

*Some mischief around the hospital. All fire hydrants were turned on*

One of the repeated themes was the positive nature of the interaction between the community volunteers and the leavers.

*They were polite, interested – would hold a conversation with the volunteers*

**Do you think the intervention made Leaver Celebrations safer for the leavers and for the community? How?**

The theme running through most of the responses was that intervention made the celebrations more manageable and reduced the impact on the local community.

*Yes, if they don't have a focal point they will just move around looking for a party.*

Providing a central area where the leavers could congregate was seen as important in terms of safety, as was provision of amenities and a level of supervision.

*They are going to drink – it's a good idea to put them in a safe area.*

*The activities made things more controlled*

The intervention involved considerable interaction between the leavers and the community, which was seen as valuable in creating a mutually respectful relationship.

*It was easier for the residents to approach the leavers and ask them to consider the community*

*The leavers seemed to appreciate the effort made by the local volunteers*

**What do you suggest would make school leaver celebrations better for students and the rest of the Margaret River community?**

Most stakeholders suggested that there should be some form of music entertainment, either in the form of bands or DJs.

*Definitely Music*

Some stakeholders were concerned that Margaret River would get a reputation for being an attractive destination for leavers.

*I think the secret is out now and there will be more leavers next year*

This was considered by some to justify a low key approach with minimal publicity about the activities provided by the community. Others suggested that there should be better information provided to the leavers about the facilities and activities provided

*The kids did not know about the food. Put it closer to where the kids are or publicise it better*

A consistent theme in many of the responses was to get suggestions from the leavers themselves so they felt they had a stake in how the celebrations were conducted.

*Encourage young people to feel they are responsible for their behaviour*

None of the stakeholders expressed dissatisfaction with the program of activities. Rather most suggestions were about improving existing activities such as extending the inter agency patrols, increasing lighting etc. This suggested that the stakeholders were generally happy with the core activities provided and were looking to fine tune what was generally seen as a good community intervention.

**Do you think it would be worthwhile to take a similar approach to the Leavers' period again? Why/Why not?**

The stakeholders were unanimous that the approach worked well, although some commented that a little fine-tuning may be required. There was general recognition among the stakeholders that the leaver celebrations would continue to occur and that the community would be better off if it managed the event on its own terms.

*We are going to keep getting them coming here in future years and we cope with them well using the present methods*

Keeping the leavers together was seen as important. This allowed better supervision of activities and provision of services. Centralising activities was also seen as attractive from the leavers' perspective, because it facilitated socialising and provided greater safety.

One of the repeatedly expressed concerns was that the community would become a victim of its own success and the infrastructure would be overloaded.

*Not publicising the activities was good because we did not want more people to come*

There seemed a consensus that the basic formula worked well and having the community plan and manage such a successful event engendered a sense of cohesion and competence. This was seen as good in terms of the sense of community created. Nobody suggested that the community should not take on management of the celebrations.

### **Is there anything else you would like to add?**

The strongest theme in the response to this question concerned how the local decision making and implementation process had benefited the community.

*It's important that people's voices are heard*

*From a community-building point of view it was good*

The provision of activities for the leavers was also seen as creating a climate of good will, which in itself reduced problems.

*The more relaxed atmosphere did seem to work. It wasn't abused*

There were some criticisms of the leavers' behaviour, mainly focussing on damage and general irresponsibility. Concern was also expressed about cannabis use. However, in the overall context these were seen as minor problems and not typical of the leavers' group as a whole.

Other comments mainly consisted of practical suggestions for improvement in future years. These ranged from better rubbish collection, to provision of music in the area where the leavers congregate.

### **DATA FROM PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS**

The two field researchers recorded observations each day during the leavers' period. Their observations were made during community meetings and activity planning, while walking through the Prevelly caravan park as surveyors, driving around the community and at the bonfire as members of the crowd.

Prior to commencing their data collection the researchers were invited to attend a community meeting where the stakeholders in the leavers operation discussed last minute plans and shared their thoughts with the external agencies involved in the intervention, such as the School Drug Education Project (SDEP).

The community of Margaret River was clearly concerned about the local impact of the leavers' celebrations, but at the same time did not begrudge the leavers enjoying themselves. One point that was conveyed adamantly was that this community was very different from neighbouring communities and would therefore handle the situation in its own way.

It was estimated that four to seven hundred school leavers would venture to Prevelly for their celebrations, but that the community was only capable of safely handling four hundred.

The local police indicated that they would deal leniently with drinking by leavers. They would not intervene if moderate consumption occurred in accepted areas for celebration and socialising, such as the beach bonfire. However, if the young people were behaving irresponsibly or were drawing attention to their alcohol consumption then they would be asked to tip their drink out rather than being issued a fine.

The caravan park staff were an integral element in the community management strategy and twelve security personnel were employed to patrol the park twenty-four hours a day. Leavers with booked accommodation were to be given a wristband, which allowed them entry into the park. All others would be turned away by the security personnel.

### **The Bonfire**

At the community meeting the researchers were informed that the bonfire had not been and would not be advertised. Apparently the community members did not want to attract leavers to Prevelly with news of organized activities. However, the leavers already in Prevelly were adversely affected by this secrecy, with few learning of Friday's fire until asked if they had attended by the researchers the next day. While talking to various leavers informally the researchers learned that many of the young people that had heard of the bonfire and ventured to the river mouth generally got lost and ended up at the wrong beach. This fact was due to the lack of signage and information. Other leavers on their way to the bonfire were told by those who were returning after journeying to the wrong beach that the event had been cancelled. Another factor was the weather. Many leavers did not leave the caravan park on the Friday night as it rained sporadically all evening.

The Saturday evening saw the bonfire enjoyed by many more leavers. The 'Leavers Live' team from the SDEP erected a sign at the turn off to the river mouth and the leavers were assured that the bonfire would not be cancelled. The police estimated five hundred people were in the crowd. Many were drinking and had carried their alcohol the two kilometres from the caravan park. In one incident a person threw something into the fire. This exploded and injured three bystanders. Two received minor burns; one on the neck and the other on the arm and the third suffered burns to the face and was taken to the hospital in an ambulance for treatment. The second incident involved a boy, who attempted to jump over the fire, but fell in, burning his legs.

The bonfire was well received. However, many of the leavers did not venture down to the river mouth, preferring to stay in the caravan park and listen to their car stereos. A

number of the leavers commented to the researchers informally about the need for entertainment other than the fire. The main complaint concerning the bonfire was the distance that had to be walked between the caravan park and the river mouth. Many of the leavers drove to avoid the walk. Of these, some were intoxicated and caused a hazard to those who walked. The leavers who chose to walk were generally intoxicated and walked in the middle of the ninety kilometres per hour road that had no streetlights.

### **The Chill Out Tent and Food Initiatives**

The chill out tent was located in the car park above the river mouth. This made it close to the bonfire, but over two kilometres from the caravan park. It was only functional during the two evenings that the bonfires were provided. The first night saw few people at the bonfire and so the medical students who were manning the tent left reasonably early due to lack of business. The second night saw more activity with the burns from the fire and a few overly intoxicated youths.

The main problem in terms of utilisation seemed to be that it was not recognizable as a chill out tent. When the researchers first arrived the chill out tent was located behind a barrier of caution tape with a police car parked in front. The car and the tape were removed when the appearance of exclusion was identified. The researchers observed the chill out tent for close to an hour on the Saturday night. The leavers appeared to be very happy with the medical students assistance and the patients got on very well with their carers. There were not many medical supplies at the student's disposal however, as a breakdown in communication led the State Emergency Service (SES) and the medical students both to believe that the other would provide them.

The SES set up a sausage sizzle for the leavers at the bonfire. This was located opposite the chill out tent. The leavers who purchased food from the SES were very happy with the service. However, the sausage sizzle was not widely known about. It faced away from the entrance to the car park and was difficult to see. The researchers overheard many of the leavers discussing their belief that the food was for the SES, police and other support staff. Better signage and advertising would almost certainly lead to greater patronage in future.

### **The Caravan Park**

The caravan park was the location where most leavers spent the majority of their time. During the day groups tended to remain at their site and at night move around to socialise with their fellow leavers. Leavers could be seen at the many surrounding beaches but not in large numbers. Drinking was a prevalent activity in all locations, unless early in the day. Surveying had to be done after the leavers had risen and eaten, about 10AM, and before 3PM, by which time the leavers had typically consumed too much alcohol to maintain focus. As the days progressed the leavers seemed to begin their drinking earlier and earlier. The males consistently began drinking before the females.

During the evening it was very dark in the caravan park, something that was disliked by the leavers and caused many injuries. Those who remained in the park seemed to be searching for somewhere to go and something to do. This caused the leavers to wander around the park aimlessly, occasionally pausing at the front of a busy chalet or to talk to a group of people. It appeared to the researchers that the leavers were stopping in front of places that had light and music. The caravan park staff would come along and break up the congregation of people, but the leavers would just move onto the next place that had light and music. This seemed to be how the night went on. The caravan park staff informed the researchers that the lights were not turned on because it caused the leavers to gather in one place.

A few leavers commented informally to the researchers that the liquor store adjoining the caravan park was very casual in asking for identification with alcohol purchases. One group said they were asked who the eighteen year old in the group was so he could pay for the alcohol and another group said that they were not asked for identification, despite all being seventeen. This made access to liquor very easy for the leavers

The caravan park was very strict with bookings and access. Only those who paid to enter and received an armband were permitted into the park. This made the leavers within the park feel very safe. Those without accommodation tended to sleep in their cars.

### **Police Roadblocks**

At the beginning of Leavers' Week the police set up well publicised roadblocks with sniffer dogs on the main southbound road that serviced Margaret River and other adjacent holiday communities. This was done primarily to prevent underage leavers from bringing alcohol for later consumption. These roadblocks frightened many leavers into not bringing alcohol and almost all leavers were deterred from bringing illicit substances. Those that brought alcohol tended to hide it and some leavers had parents or eighteen year olds drive them down so they could claim the alcohol as their own. In reality very few of the leavers actually reported going through a roadblock and the only confiscation the researchers heard of involved cannabis. This dissonance between expectation and reality may reduce the deterrent effect of this strategy in future years.



## DISCUSSION

Many of the school leavers decided on the Margaret River/Prevelly area for their end of school celebrations to avoid the difficulties associated with the more traditional leavers locations such as Rottnest and Dunsborough. Rottnest was considered difficult to book and the need for an eighteen year old in the house was a deterrent for many. Dunsborough had a reputation among the leavers for being dangerous and very heavily policed. The leavers anticipated that Prevelly would be policed leniently and found the venue easy to book.

The greatest expectation of the leavers was to meet new people and socialise while they were in Prevelly. While many also expected to drink, a considerable number of females indicated that they consumed less alcohol than planned. Conversely, males tended to report that they had drunk more than planned, albeit in smaller numbers. No systematic attempt was made to assess individual alcohol consumption, because of the group survey methodology

Despite the fact that the great majority of leavers reported drinking during their celebrations, socialising and meeting new people was clearly the activity they liked the most. This pattern featured in the evaluation of the Rottnest leavers' intervention in 2000 and would seem to indicate that drinking is seen by leavers generally as a part of the social process, rather than an end in itself (Young, Farrington & Midford, 2001). In turn this suggests that social activities that do not feature alcohol are likely to still be popular and may be a way to reduce consumption and harm in future years.

A large proportion of the leavers were concerned about roadblocks and sniffer dogs. The media had warned of roadblocks on the roads between Perth and the traditional southern celebration locations. Minors found with alcohol in their possession would have it confiscated. Sniffer dogs were reported to be part of these roadblocks, targeting illicit drugs. Many of the leavers avoided these restrictions by having a parent or an older friend in the car. Some leavers hid their alcohol and others were too scared to bring any at all. Some of the leavers indicated that they had intended to bring cannabis with them but chose not to for fear of its confiscation as well as fear of

being arrested or given a warning. However, the majority of the leavers expressed an aversion to illicit drug use and their intention not to use was not influenced by the deterrent measures. Interestingly virtually none of the leavers actually experienced a roadblock, which may reduce their deterrent value in future years.

Despite the concerns about roadblocks and confiscations, few of the leavers bought their alcohol in Prevelly or Margaret River. Most had purchased alcohol in Perth and brought it with them. The small number that purchased their alcohol upon arrival indicated that the Prevelly liquor store was very relaxed about checking ID. These factors taken together suggest that it was not hard for even underage leavers to access alcohol. Some measures, such as more stringent ID checks may reduce supply, but this should not divert effort from further development of the very promising community strategies that address demand and harm.

Warnings were issued to the leavers predominantly from family members. A number of schools were given police talks about the leavers week and shown a video taken in Dunsborough. The police warnings related mainly to alcohol possession and consumption, but the family warnings focused more on harm reduction strategies. The leavers were primarily instructed to stay together and look after each other, but also to drink responsibly and not to drink and drive. The media stories in the lead up to Leavers' Week were well recognised by the leavers and seemed the main source for warnings about roadblocks and alcohol confiscation, even if these were delivered second-hand by parents. In future years the media may be a useful means of delivering other information as to behavioural expectations from leavers and there is good scope for more police talks that focus on what a hosting community expects from visiting leavers. This research and previous Rottneest studies indicate that leavers choosing to celebrate in a particular location tend to come from a number of distinct catchments (Bogaards, Farrington & Midford, 2000; Young, Farrington & Midford, 2001). Accordingly, police and other service workers from host communities could target high schools in these catchments and effectively reach the leaver population most likely to visit their community.

Drinking responsibly and not drinking and driving were frequently mentioned warnings that have a basis in harm reduction. However, the main recommendation on

how to minimise problems was to stay in a group and take care of one another. This strategy then featured prominently in the responses given by leavers as to how they planned to stay safe, indicating that parental warnings were heeded by the leavers. This suggests that briefing parents on harm reduction strategies may be a useful approach in the future.

The leavers appeared to begin drinking earlier each day. This could have been due to boredom. There were few things to do during the day other than participate in the sporting activities run by the 'Leavers Live' team at the front of the caravan park and many of the residents at the back of the park were not even aware of these. The evening events were very poorly advertised, with many of the leavers completely unaware that events had been organised. The food initiatives in the river mouth car park were poorly signed and patronage suffered because of this. The bonfire was poorly attended on the Friday, because most leavers were not aware of it. By Saturday this had been rectified and attendance was good. However, more leavers would have attended if access had been easier. Some found the walk too far and others regarded it as unsafe because of poor lighting. Consideration should be given to some form of organised transport and better illumination: even getting leavers to carry torches would increase safety. The chill out tent was located at the river mouth with the food initiatives and the bonfire. Again, few leavers were aware of its existence and because most of the minor injuries and intoxication occurred in the caravan park it was not well sited in terms of access. In future years consideration should be given to providing a service in or near the caravan park.

The rules and regulations of the caravan park were well accepted by the leavers. The non-confrontational approach of the staff was praised and use of identifying armbands to control entry gave the leavers a greater sense of safety within the park's boundaries. However, the caravan park was criticised for its cleanliness and its lack of lighting. The bins were full a lot of the time and the toilets and showers were not cleaned for long periods. The lack of light in the park proved to be the cause of many injuries. A number of leavers fell off their chalet balconies in the dark, tripped on the stairs, or fell over unseen obstacles on the ground. The provision of better lighting and more regular cleaning would solve these problems.

The data collected for this evaluation of how the Margaret River community managed school leaver celebrations provides a detailed picture of community planning, program implementation, leavers' behaviour during the celebrations and problems that occurred. There were mistakes made and provision of some additional activities could improve the experience for the leavers. However, data from the three different sources used in this study consistently indicate that the leavers generally got what they wanted from the experience and at the same time local stakeholders felt they had maintained control of proceedings and minimised the impact on the community. Objective data on alcohol related harm has not been presented in this report because prevalence was low and comparison with previous years or other communities is meaningless due to differing practices. However the interview data from the stakeholders consistently indicates that this group knew what problems did occur, considered these to be minimal and felt that they had been effectively managed. In terms of the immediate and demonstrable benefits for the community and the leavers, the way the proceedings were managed should be seen as a success.

These immediate and clearly demonstrable benefits however only tell one part of the story. What takes a little more time to glean from the data presented in this report is the relationship and capacity building that occurred. These changes may however be more important in the long run. The process of providing activities during the leaver celebrations automatically involved an interaction between the community and the leavers. This meant that the leavers got a sense of what the community wanted from them and also what it was providing to make their stay more enjoyable. Conversely, the community members involved in providing the activities got a sense of who the leavers were as individuals and what they wanted from their stay in Margaret River/Prevelly. This seemed to form the basis for a mutually respectful relationship. An implicit message in this community effort is that the leavers are important enough to make their stay enjoyable. In turn this seemed to create a sense of reciprocal obligation to treat the community with respect. This creation of a relationship is at the core of how the Margaret River community managed their leavers' celebrations in 2001. In future years the community may choose to fine tune the activities provided during leavers week and the data in this report suggests a number of possibilities. However, making a series of prescriptive recommendations is not necessarily the best

way to help the decision making process. The community has to decide what best suits its circumstances and goals. What is important to emphasise from the report's findings is that decisions should always reflect the importance of building a relationship with the leavers.

The other less immediately discernible benefit that emerged from this project was the capacity created within the community to manage such events. The community stakeholders felt strongly that the intervention was directly beneficial both for the community and the leavers, but they also identified second order benefits of working together as a community and achieving something worthwhile. The stakeholders clearly considered that the community had managed the celebrations well and reflected on how the act of individual participation contributed to a greater sense of community capacity to manage local matters. The success of the celebrations seemed to give the stakeholders the confidence to further develop the leavers' intervention in future years. There was a strong sense that the community had shown its ability to manage the leavers celebrations on its own terms yet at the same time make the experience enjoyable for the young people who participated. The added bonus was that in the process of doing this the community itself was strengthened.

The way the Margaret River community managed its leavers celebrations in 2001 stands as a model of how local communities can take control of this annual occurrence rather than be overwhelmed by it. Good planning, and community involvement in activities that build a relationship with the leavers seem to be the key to success. Communities faced with this annual influx of celebrating school leavers are never likely to develop the perfect program that eliminates all the problems associated with hosting a large group of exuberant youth determined to have a memorable experience. However, engagement is likely to be the best foundation of an effective strategy.



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**APPENDIX 1. LEAVERS SURVEY SCHEDULE**



**Secondary School Students Questionnaire – Margaret River 2001**

<b>AGE</b>	<b>SEX</b> M/F	<b>POSTCODE</b>	<b>DAY</b> 1,2,3,4,5	<b>LEAVER?</b> Y/N

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Time:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

**1A) What made you choose to come here for your celebrations?**

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**1B) What were your expectations when you came here? What did you hope to do? What did you think might happen?**

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**2) Did anyone give you any warnings or advice before you came?**

PROMPT -----> What about your parents?

PROMPT ----->> Did you have a talk from police? What did you think of it?

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**3) Were you worried about any problems you might have?**

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**4) Do you have any strategies in mind to make sure you stay safe and avoid problems?**

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**5) So what have you been up to?**

PROMPT ----->Where have you been hanging out during the day and where at night?

PROMPT ----->> How about the organised activities? Which ones?

Why / Why not attending? Excellent, Good, OK, Bad? Advertising?

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**6) Did you drink or take drugs? What kind? How much?**

PROMPT ---> What time did you start?

PROMPT ---->> Where did you drink it or take it?

PROMPT ----->>> How did you get hold of it?

PROMPT ----->>>> Did you have more or less than you had planned? Why?

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**7) What would you say has been the best thing about your time here?**

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**8) What would you say has been the worst thing about your time here?**

**PROMPT -----> Has anything harmful happened to you or anyone you know?**

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**9) Did you visit the chill out tent? What for?**

**PROMPT -----> Were you happy with the help you received?**

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## **APPENDIX 2. STAKEHOLDERS INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**



**LEAVERS RESEARCH PROJECT – UNDERTAKEN BY THE NATIONAL  
DRUG RESEARCH INSTITUTE, CURTIN UNIVERSITY**

**MAJOR STAKEHOLDER'S INTERVIEW – CORE QUESTIONS –  
MARGARET RIVER DECEMBER 2001**

- 1. From you perspective what are the major problems associated with leavers' celebrations at Margaret River**

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- 2. Were you involved in the community intervention this year? How?**

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- 3. Can you tell me about the activities that were provided for leavers. Which ones worked best?**

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- 4. What are your impressions of this year's school leavers' behaviour? Was it better or worse than previous years? Can you give me some examples of what they did?**

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5. Do you think the intervention made Leaver Celebrations safer for the leavers and for the community? How?

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6. What do you suggest would make school leaver celebrations better for the students and the rest of the Margaret River community?

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