

WHOOPEE-DO CREW

Supporting Wellbeing in West End



Creative Change Project Report

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This report was prepared by Emma Heard.

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Background

The Creative Change Project

The Creative Change Project is a national Australian Research Council funded project exploring the role of community music in addressing social inequity across the country (creativechange.org.au). Based at the Creative Arts Research Institute, Griffith University, the Creative Change Project aims to build on the mounting international evidence base that documents the social, emotional, physiological, cognitive, cultural, and economic benefits that can come from participating in music, and how this might be harnessed by the social sector to support real impact in contexts of entrenched social inequity (Bartleet & Heard, 2023; Heard, Bartleet, & Woolcock, 2023).

The West End Case Study

Social inequity is a growing challenge facing communities across Australia and the globe. Kurilpa, in Meanjin (Brisbane) is no different, and is facing a unique set of social and economic circumstances that pose challenges for our community, including rapid gentrification, climate-related disasters (such as flooding and heat waves), tensions and pressures during the build-up to the hosting of the 2032 Olympic Games, and a growing cost of living crisis putting families and people at risk of and into homelessness (Cheshire, Walters, & ten Have, 2018; MacMahon, 2022; Mayher, 2022; Walters & McCrea, 2013; Walters & Smith, 2022).

Partnering with Micah Projects, and working closely with Community Plus+ West End Community House, the Creative Change Project is investigating the role of community-centred music making across the Kurilpa Peninsula and the impact it has for the West End community. As part of this case study, Research Fellow Dr Emma Heard has been collaborating with and learning from local musician Jenny 'Pineapple' Martinelli (the community mentor for the Creative Change Project's West End case study) and the Whoopee-Do Crew. This brief report has been prepared specifically for Community Plus+ and aims to document the impact that the Whoopee-Do Crew has on the people participating and also the wider community in West End.

A Framework for Understanding the Social Outcomes of Community Music

Drawing on a socio-ecological understanding, Bartleet (2023) outlines four dimensions of social outcomes of community music: individual, micro, meso and macro. See Figure 1. The individual level refers to personal transformations including aesthetic pleasure and creative expression, cultural connection and emotional wellbeing, identity affirmation and confidence, as well as personal safety and self-awareness. At the micro level, community music supports relational transformations including social connection and friendships, social integration, recognition and participation, and dialogic interactions. Beyond individual people, outcomes from community music also impact community transformations at the meso level through supporting collective identity and shared culture, sense of belonging and social capital (bonding, bridging and linking), and shared understandings. Finally, community music may also be influential at the macro level supporting structural transformations related to ideologies and discrimination, social, economic and political orders, human rights, and public policies and safety. In this report, we draw on this framework to understand the outcomes of the Whoopee-Do Crew for participants and the wider community.

Dimensions of Social Outcomes in Community Music

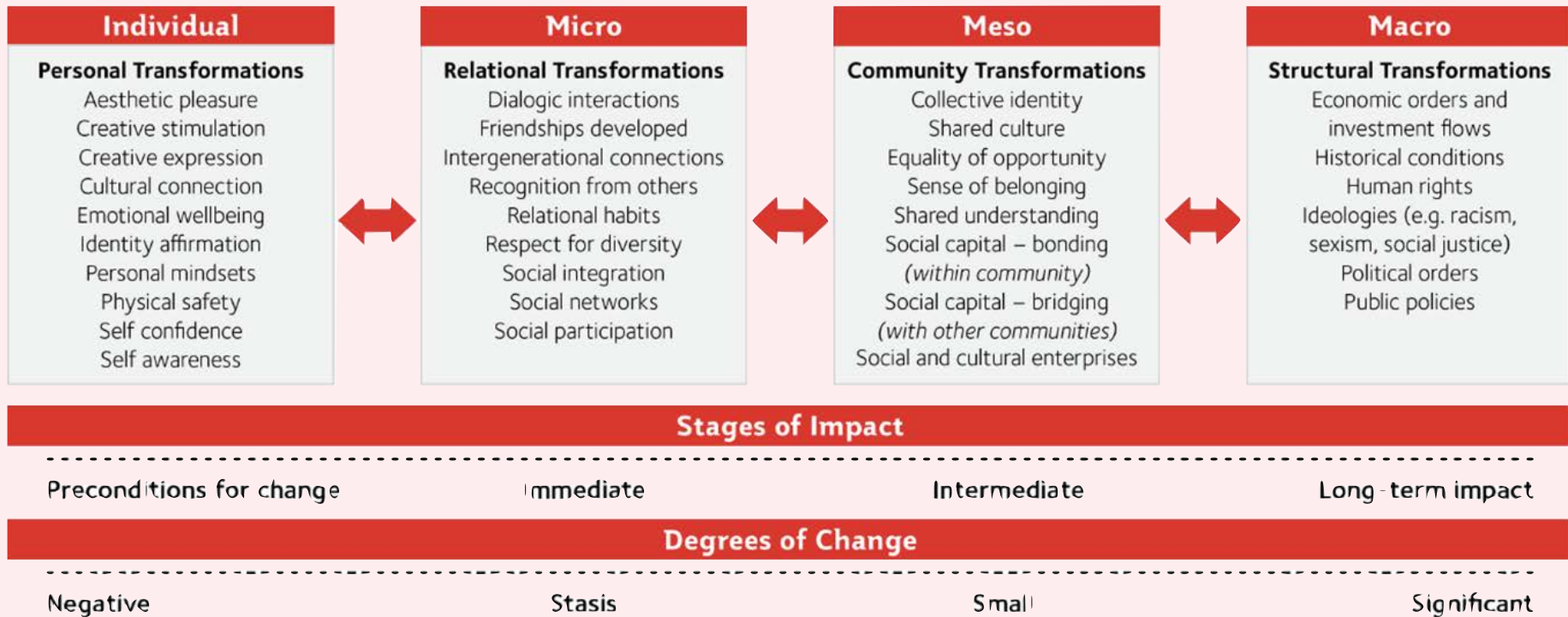


Figure 1. Dimensions of Social Outcomes in Community Music (Bartleet, 2023)

Methods

The Creative Change Project's West End case study included a wide range of community-engaged methods involving in-depth interviews, focus group, surveys, photo-voice and observation with more than 200 residents, community key informants, social sector representatives, community music facilitators, community music participants, local business owners, and elected representatives, for details see www.creativechange.org.au. This report focuses specifically on the Whoopee-Do Crew and the methods used to investigate the group's impact included:

- In-depth interviews with group facilitator and support organisation staff.
- Interviews, focus groups and informal conversations with members of the group.
- Observation by Creative Change Project Research Fellow over a 12-month period while participating in the group across 2023.
- Insights from the broader community gathered during the larger case study are also included where relevant.

The Creative Change Project received ethical clearance from the Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (2020/679) and the West End case study was designed and conducted in consultation with the West End community (including dialogue with Community Plus+ West End Community House, Micah Projects, West End Community Association). Jenny 'Pineapple' Martinelli is our community mentor whose insights and guidance have supported safety, rigour and authenticity across the West End case study.

Finding

Individual Transformations

The Whoopee-Do Crew is supporting a range of outcomes for individuals related to: wellbeing including joy, healing, physical health, a sense of purpose and a way to contribute; creative self-expression supporting wellbeing, recognition, and belonging; and confidence through mastery and skill development, which extends into people's lives beyond participation in the Whoopee-Do Crew.

Wellbeing

During any Whoopee-Do Crew session, the joy created among the group is palpable, with smiles, laughter, and light-hearted banter abound. For some people involved, this opportunity to participate in sometime joyful with others is rare and valued.

It just gets me out of the house for a couple of hours, gives me something to do, it's something I enjoy doing, muck[ing] around with music. (Participant W311)

Wednesdays are a good morning! (Participant W315)

For many people involved, including those with a disability, the Whoopee-Do Crew also supports physical wellbeing through physical movement (e.g. dancing and percussion) and vocalisation (e.g. singing).

People involved described Whoopee-Do Crew as a "safe space", a space for "healing" and "recovery", and a way to cope with challenging emotions. One person described the Whoopee-Do Crew as, "a safe place to grieve. It's a safe place to ... release certain energies [and] to be in [our] bodies".



Image 1. All smiles at the Whoopee-Do Crew (Photo by Emma Heard)

People involved described ways the Whoopee-Do Crew gave them a sense of purpose and a way to contribute, to “give back the community”, as well as creating pathways to new opportunities and experiences through the skills and relationships developed during the sessions. This included being encouraged and supported to learn new musical instruments, collaborating on new songs, and opportunities to perform. These wellbeing-related benefits were felt by everyone involved, including participants, facilitator/s, support workers, and myself as a researcher and participant.

I've never sung with a microphone before in my life. I've gone to university to learn to play music ... [but] there's a lot of things that I didn't learn at some places that are doing the educational things, that I've been able to learn them at the Whoopee-Do Crew. (Participant W315)

I've been with Whoopee-Do music crew for maybe eight years and I even just contributed a new song this morning and the band is so good that they can just pick up the chords, I can say give me a-e-e-d-a and they're on board. That's Whoopee-Do. They're brilliant. (Participant W316)



Image 2. Trying new things and learning new instruments (Image by Emma Heard)

Creative self-expression

From accounts of people involved, the Whoopee-Do Crew was created to give the community a voice - all members of the community, and importantly those who don't usually have a voice. The creative self-expression that is generated through collaborative song writing, storytelling and music-making is significant for many people involved and is a key mechanism through which other individual outcomes are realised. As the facilitator explains:

Through self-expression, that's when you find your voice and feel you're being listened to. You start to heal when you feel you belong. A lot of trauma and a lot of angst and mental health issues, [are related to] people not feeling they belong. ... So then you've got to create belonging. So we create belonging through community. (W007)



Image 3. Rare and meaningful moments of self-expression through song with others (Image by Emma Heard)

Performing their songs is a way for people involved in the Whoopee-Do Crew to share their identities, develop strong connections with one another, gain recognition from their community, and also educate the community about key issues affecting their lives (such as discrimination):

It's a peaceful way of education. It's a happy way of educating people. And not all Whoopee-Do Crew participants write down sad songs, there's happy songs. You got [participant's] song, it's a happy song. That song is a happy song. Them songs need to be applauded. (W115)

So the gift of Whoopee-Do music crew is the fact that it gives the voiceless and the underdogs a voice and a position to be heard and acknowledged in community. (W116)

Opportunities for creative self-expression are extended to everyone involved, people are encouraged to bring songs they have written, and the group embark on collaborative song writing together (including a recent collaborative project with Micah Projects and Griffith University which included three workshops and resulted in two new songs). For one person who has challenges with speech, the group (led by the facilitator) recently composed an instrumental piece which the group play while the person improvises spoken-word poetry over the top. Opportunities for creative self-expression are an essential element of the Whoopee-Do Crew. For the facilitator "it's [about] dignity, tools, you know, giving [people] the tools to find their own dignity, to find their own voice, find their own expression". Through a collaborative and non-hierarchical approach, the facilitator supports skill development and confidence to try new things. Since embarking on group song-writing, members of the group have written and brought new songs and poetry to the group and have demonstrated growing skills and enthusiasm for song writing together.

Confidence and empowerment

The Whoopee-Do Crew facilitates opportunities for people to experience mastery and develop confidence, which supports empowerment in their daily lives.

So [participant] was able to perform [his song] himself. And shine. And having those accolades, he just loved it. ... It gives him that boost, so that he goes in confidently into society. ... I think [performing] gives people the confidence, ... gives them more confidence to be in life, and to go round in life and be who they are. Because when they're accepted on stage, then it's like, well, 'you can accept me all the time then'. (W007)

Many people involved value the sense of achievement and recognition from their community that comes from opportunities to perform with the Whoopee-Do Crew.

Performing, you feel that you earn kudos for being here. Now this is a public space, so I get people coming up to me now and saying, 'Wow, you really rock on that [instrument]' and that is really important to me. (W310)

These multifaceted benefits for individual people are demonstrated by the visible commitment to the group, with people coming back week after week, and previous members returning and reconnecting.



Image 4. Confidence in performance (Image by Eduardo Espinoza)

Relational Transformations

Through engagement with the Whoopee-Do Crew, people from all walks of life, backgrounds and life situations develop strong bonds that lead to emotional and practical support. Authentic inclusion created by the facilitator is integral for developing and maintaining this connection.

Inclusion

The Whoopee-Do Crew is for everyone, people involved are from a wide range of backgrounds including professional and semi-professional musicians, people with disabilities, people

experiencing social isolation and loneliness, people wanting to learn an instrument, and people living with homelessness and other social and personal challenges. Everyone involved are lovers of music and everyone participates - being encouraged and supported to sing, play, dance, and at a minimum contributing a 'sound' at the beginning of the session.

This authentic inclusion is an integral aspect of the group as it facilitates participation based on mutual respect and enjoyment, something many participants don't get to experience often in daily life.

There's no inequality here. Most things [participant] goes to are for people with a disability, but the Whoopee-Do Crew is for everyone. (W622)

This sense of inclusion, supported by the group facilitator and extended by every person involved is demonstrated in this comment by a person new to the group, someone who was experiencing a range of physical, social, and emotional challenges, "I'd heard about this but was a bit shy to come along. I really appreciate how welcoming you all are, and I can feel the heart".



Image 5. Everyone has a role to play at the Whoopee-Do Crew (Image by Emma Heard)

Contribution

Contribution is an important aspect of inclusion at the Whoopee-Do Crew with everyone involved having opportunities to give something and feel they are valued and have a meaningful role in supporting the group. People who have challenges with speech sing including with the microphone, with nods of encouragement, words of thanks, and cheers extended to all who perform. Others play quietly in the background and their contributions are always acknowledged by the facilitator and other members of the group. For others, their contribution is related to setting up and packing down, dancing to music, teaching others, or fixing instruments - each of these roles is essential to ensure the group works and, for many people, these opportunities to contribute support a sense of purpose created through the Whoopee-Do Crew, which is an important part of their wellbeing. This is demonstrated by an offer from a person who joined the group for a few

weeks after passing by and hearing the music. This person noticed one of the instruments was broken, fixed it temporarily and said, "I can get you a new [instrument]. I might be homeless, but I can do that. I would love to do that for you guys".

Strong bonds and relationships

Having a regular, ongoing space of inclusion and participation plays an important role in the development of bonds between people involved.

Well, especially as I say, with people who have got, you know, limited socialisation, you know. I think it helps with a lot with bonding. Especially the socialisation bit because as they come here week by week, and they get to know different ways of doing things. And we sort of, you know, build, we bring [each other] out of [ourselves]. (W310)

Through music, people are able to share their stories with each other, stories of trauma and hardship, stories of love, stories of 'mundane' aspects of day-to-day life, stories of joy and stories of sorrow. And this creates a unique avenue for people to get to know each other with an intimacy seldom experienced in other contexts and relationships.

And people's songs and their stories, like some people who haven't been able to communicate, for whatever reason, there's been songs written about their story, Like [participant] has a song about going [to the beach], like people who you see every single day and you don't know these things, [or their] challenges, but when you hear their song, you know a little bit more about them. (W108)



Image 6. Inclusive spaces and strong bonds (Image by Emma Heard)

Being involved in the Whoopee-Do Crew creates strong bonds between people, including people from different walks of life who may not otherwise have an opportunity to interact. These bonds develop into last friendships through which people support each other emotionally and practically with life challenges and sharing in life's joys and celebrations.

For me, I've lived in West End since 1987. And I own my own house. ... I'm actually seeing another side of West End that I've never seen before. So, like it's been a bit of eye opener. And making friends with people, I wouldn't get a chance to meet just because we're not in the same circles. (W314)

I think it's just the camaraderie, the closeness, you know, I mean? With all of them. We are not just musicians, we're family. Someone will come in and say 'I'm off par today'. And they'll support each other. (W310)

I wasn't calling Uncle [participant] 'Uncle' back in those days [before joining the Whoopee-Do Crew], I only just knew him as a community person. (W315)

Whoopee-Do Crew creates a unique opportunity for support workers and the people they care for to connect and share a mutual interest, participating in something together as equals. Participating in music together is an important opportunity to develop rapport and mutual respect that is integral for working together. Further, through the Whoopee-Do Crew support workers have developed relationships with each other and are able to support each other.

There's the relationship between support worker and client as well. [Support workers who come have their] own story. So, you know, and I think for us, it's like, including the support workers too. (W007)

Community Transformations

Being in a public space, the Whoopee-Do Crew sessions are a unique opportunity for the broader community to connect and experience joy together. Activating spaces is key for safety. This has important implications for social cohesion and the development of shared identity.

Community connections

At any Whoopee-Do Crew session you'll see any number of passers-by stop for a listen and leave with a smile. This includes people shopping, commuting to work, taking children to school or other outings, council workers, people sleeping rough, local business owners and many others. The public display of 'who we are' plays a role in community identity and sense of place.

And I think it kind of makes West End more interesting when somebody just walks down the street and they come across a live band, like in the park. ... It becomes part of the social fabric or social identity of West End, [including for] people who happen to be visiting. I think it's an important part of that. (W310)

The benefits of these moment of connection are important for social cohesion - rare and unique opportunities for the wider community to see each other and learn about each other.

It is good for our community because [we all] understand a lot more about West End and people who live here. (W311)

For the facilitator, being in a public place and supporting an inclusive and open space is important for developing understandings about others and the struggles they might be going through, which can have positive implications for empathy and tolerance.

I think that takes away [judgement]. We see people, their behaviours in the streets, and there [can be] a fear around that, like even this morning [referring to a person yelling in the street near the group]. But, music sometimes, you know, people are doing that behaviour, but then they come into this space. And they just join in. And so the fear of those people starts to go, you start to find out why they have that behaviour. So it's also creating the community and uniting, and sort of, understanding people rather than the querying them. (W007)

Being a regular fixture in a public space further appears to also support connection for others in the community who may be experiencing social isolation, even if they are not actively participating in the Whoopee-Do Crew. For example, during one session, an elderly community member that didn't know anyone in the group came by with two bags of sandwiches to share. They told the group that in their culture you give food when someone is sick. This person's niece was in hospital, so she wanted to share this food with others. The sandwiches were received gratefully, and the community member stayed for a couple of songs and a chat creating a moment of social connection and happiness.

"All the connections and ties" developed through these moments are significant for the broader social fabric as they facilitate support in other contexts, laying foundations for connection and support among the wider community. One of the support staff explained that by stopping to listen to the Whoopee-Do Crew, people become familiar to each other and then offer practical help if they see the same people in need in other contexts.

Like it's that community stuff, by coming here. So when [participant] goes down the street, somebody who's seen Whoopee-Do, will be like, 'Oh, hey, [participant], I saw you. How are you?' Like, it's all of that stuff. The foundations have been laid out for us previously. ... That's the benefit to this community. (W108)

Place and safety

The Whoopee-Do Crew is purposively located in an important community space, with significance for our First Nations community and is also a space where the community has recognised the need for activation to support safety and wellbeing, see for example the installation of art-work and lighting by a community artist facilitated by Community Plus+ (Bowman, 2021). The Whoopee-Do Crew sessions transform this public park to into an open space that provides a regular time where the park is alcohol and other drug free, at the decision and enforcement of the community. Importantly, opening this space to the wider community can support the connection and cohesion as discussed above and encourage the people to view and use the space in different ways.

It activates the park in a positive way, which is awesome. ... Being in a public space, people will walk by and just, it just gets them thinking about this space in the right sort of way. (W109)

The Whoopee-Do Crew sessions also provide an opportunity for positive interactions between different members of the community as well as law enforcement, council workers and business owners. A local police officer regularly visits and engages with the group, getting to know them and other rough sleepers, and showing a different side to themselves through dancing and chatting. This informal relationship development appears to play a key role in being able to mediate and facilitate respectful and supportive interactions in other contexts.

People involved with the Whoopee-Do Crew have developed a sense of connection and belonging to the space, and work to care for the space including keeping it tidy and contributing to local government consultations about improvements. When a tree that shaded the regular practice area was unexpectedly removed, the group held a grieving ceremony and sang together about the importance of our natural environment and the impacts of climate change and over development in our community.

I think for a lot of people it keeps them grounded ... it's surprised me in the last 12 months a lot more people have started to understand what this park is all about. Before, I didn't think we'd be able to have a park at all. [We] were slowly destroying it ... but we've got this one back because of all the stuff together. (W315)



Image 7. A community celebration (Image by Katina Heard)

Valued by community

The Whoopee-Do Crew is valued by the community; smiles by passers-by are innumerable and this joy is a gift to the community. It is not unusual for people to return with instruments or just to listen after previously passing by. One morning, a bus driver who had come to use the public toilets was compelled to break into dance as the Whoopee-Do Crew played a song they knew and loved. The verbal and physical expressions of gratitude were clear. People involved in the Whoopee-Do Crew

in turn value the chance to give something to their community, strengthening their sense of belonging and purpose.

I've heard a lot of people, make [positive] comments. And to see people who are actually drawn in, they stop and sit and listen, and you think, 'Wow, I'm making an impact here'. It's always complimentary. There's no negatives when they talk about it. And it makes the band come together. (W314)

We do get the people from the street that walk past, but they stop in. You know, they pass by and listen to the music and all you can see is a big smile on their face and their body is moving to the beat. That tells us that we're doing something right. (W316)



Image 8. Giving back at Homeless Connect (Image by Emma Heard)

The Whoopee-Do Crew is valued by the wider community, which is demonstrated by invitations to perform at significant events locally and across Brisbane including the Kurilpa Derby, NAIDOC celebrations and Homeless Connect.

We don't actually go out looking for gigs. People hear it and just, you know. ... I think people like the concept of it. I think people like they can feel the energy of it. And they like that. And so people offer us to play. Sometimes paid, some isn't. It's often community stuff. (W107)

The Whoopee-Do Crew contribute to West End's identity and by being in a public space, telling community stories, the wider community also gain a sense of belonging and pride.

People know it's happening just by the fact that they are in West End, and it's like word of mouth or just being aware that it's happening and you might not even join in but knowing it's happening in your suburb or your community can be uplifting by itself, I think. Even if you don't come up, just by hearing it you think 'Oh that's happening and that's my community'. (W310)

Societal Transformations

The healing that happens through the Whoopee-Do Crew is also important for social transformation. This theory of change articulated by the facilitator explicates that through opportunities to heal, become visible, and be empowered, people who have and are experiencing trauma and oppression gain the capacity to contribute to community and broader society learns and benefits from these contributions.

Because we've got people healing, then you've got people contributing. And if people are contributing to a broader society, then that benefits everyone. ... I think it does affect the broader society because when you've got healing happening, that ripple happens. (W007)

The Whoopee-Do Crew is also valued by people involved as a means through which to demonstrate support for people experiencing hardship, educate broader society about discrimination and other issues, and also to learn about and from the local First Nations community.

So [Whoopee-Do Crew are] allowing me to sing educational songs that people don't think they are educational, but they are. It's just that we need to bring those songs up to today. Express those songs. Yes, I'm an activist, but I'm a peaceful sort of activist. ... Like I said, it's a peaceful way of education. It's a happy way of educating people. (W315)

For many, the Whoopee-Do Crew is their first and sometime only exposure to the First Nations language of the area (including the welcome and ending song which is sang in Yuggera/Jagera/Jagara with permission from Elders) and being in a culturally significant place facilitates meaningful interactions with and opportunities to learn from the First Nations Elders and community members of the area.



Image 9. Healing and contribution for transformation (Images by Eduardo Espinoza)

Discussion and Implications

Drawing on Bartleet (2023)'s framework for understanding the social impacts of community music, this report demonstrates some significant benefits of the Whoopee-Do Crew across individual, community and societal levels. This relatively small and largely unfunded community initiative is supporting wellbeing for a number of people in relation to physical and mental health, creative self-expression, and confidence and empowerment. These individual benefits create capacity and opportunity for contribution within the group and within the wider community. The relational bonds created during the sessions extend to lasting friendships that provide emotional and practical support for people involved.

The Whoopee-Do Crew plays an integral role in the social fabric of the West End area, through public expressions of shared identity, creating the foundations for social ties between different people from different backgrounds and social statuses, required for a functioning community, and through activating a key community space supporting street safety. In addition to being an opportunity for people involved to heal and embark on personal growth, the Whoopee-Do Crew is also a tool for educating others about issues facing the community and our society more broadly.

The Whoopee-Do Crew is a valued part of the West End community and functions largely through the support of Community Plus+ West End Community House. This report demonstrates the importance of this group, and potentially other arts-based, community-led initiatives not only for individual people involved but for wider society. The community building and development outcomes demonstrated in this report are essential for community wellbeing and are particularly salient in the current climate of growing inequity within the West End community. There are some key implications for Community Plus+ and other social sector and community development organisations from the outcomes of the report:

- Supporting community-led, arts-based initiatives can play an important role in achieving organisational purposes related to strengths-based approaches to individual and community wellbeing.
- Advocating for systematic integration of participatory, inclusive, community-led, arts practice in social sector programming and planning is necessary for harnessing the power of the arts to make real and lasting impact in contexts of inequity.
- Community music is an effective and supportive mode for building rapport and connection between support workers and clients, as well as for connecting people with social sector services.
- The Whoopee-Do Crew in particular is an integral part of the West End communities' shared identities, and to lose this group would have significant implications for social cohesion and community resilience and resourcefulness required to face the impending social and environmental challenges facing this community.
- Advocating for shared public space that can be activated by and with the community is necessary for social cohesion and safety.

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