

Data is fighting crime and saving this town

Renewal Bourke has found that big data does not have to be evil.

Jessica Sier

Bourke in rural NSW has long had a serious youth crime problem.

For 10 years, the town had watched helplessly as more and more kids were expelled from school, thrown in jail, and ended up with few options to get their lives back on track.

But thanks to new access to government data that offers granular insight into everything from youth reoffending to school attendance to family violence, the outback town has begun to combat some of its deep-rooted problems.

"Kids being taken away and families being broken again and again has been our Achilles heel for years," Alistair Ferguson, leader of the Bourke Tribal Council and founder of Maranguka, an indigenous self-governance organisation, told *AFR Weekend*.

"But we've managed to use concrete data from what's actually happening in our community to build some programs and policies that are working. We are actually seeing a drop in the number of kids getting caught up in the criminal justice system and the ability to see what's going on is very powerful."

Bourke's youth crime and family violence problem is not unique in Australia. All over the country, small communities and townships struggle to build cases for more resources to combat social problems that stem from drug abuse, violence, lack of schooling and intergenerational trauma.

Kristi Mansfield, founder of Seer, the data platform that underpins Bourke's data transformation, said access to government data is a profound way communities can take matters into their own hands.

"Everyone wants to change their own community but they're sick of just talking about it," Ms Mansfield said, adding anecdotal evidence does not help to build funding cases or measuring the success of an initiative.

"Data is concrete, it tells its own story and once people get the hang of it, they can use it in really practical ways."

Ms Mansfield, who founded Seer in 2019, has spent the last several years coaxing data flows out of government departments and sourcing publicly available data, while building a platform that presents that information clearly.



"There's a huge risk in the growing data divide between those organisations that have resources and people to use data for decision-making," Ms Mansfield says.

"Our aim is really to give people who aren't technical and who don't have confidence working with data, more efficiency in their decision-making. These are the people with the real power to change the system in local communities."

After the Bourke Tribal Council and Maranguka approached Seer to help, they together developed a platform that now absorbs data coming from 15 different sources.

These sources include NSW Health, the Justice Department, the Department of Social Services, as well as organisations like the local area police, high schools and primary schools and local not-for-profit organisations.

"We had been trying for years to get this kind of information to help our decision-making, but we were met with a great deal of reluctance and difficulties," Mr Ferguson said.

"We grew an extra skin during that exercise, and had to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of everyone which was critical."

But once the data was flowing in, it did not take long for the council to dis-

to conduct their suspension at school so they were not influenced by violence in the home.

Another trend the Bourke Council saw clearly was that school attendance rates and engagement programs actively deflect offending.

Armed with this clear, unequivocal evidence, the working groups buckled down to review attendance rates and began connecting with schools, police and community leaders to gather resources to boost the number of in-school programs.

We can actually see the needle moving... we are establishing circuit-breakers.

Alistair Ferguson, Bourke Tribal Council

Over a short period, Bourke saw a jump in the number of supervised school holiday programs and is discussing the rollout of a reward system for school attendance.

"We can actually see the needle moving," Mr Ferguson said. "And while we're still fixing the plane mid-flight, and we're a long way from getting it completely sorted, we're talking intergenerational trauma at work here, we are establishing circuit-breakers that make a difference."

While data analysis is already up and running throughout corporate Australia, the use of government data is also gaining traction in local social policy.

Last year, the Data Availability and Transparency Bill was proposed, and while it is still awaiting passage, it seeks to create a broader scheme of controlled access to public sector data.

Under the legislation, data will be shared for the purposes of government services delivery, informing government policy and programs, and research and development.

Seer has already rolled its platforms across townships including Shepparton in Victoria to combat social isolation and poor school attendance, Mt Druitt in NSW to re-assess early school development problems, Burnie in Tasmania to combat intergenerational unemployment, and many more.

Mr Ferguson said the leadership, aspiration and drive already exists in communities.

"Add that to government data and smart technology and you've got a really profound way to get that community spirit pouring into a useful direction," he said.

Bourke Tribal Council leader Alistair Ferguson says the access to data has helped the town combat youth violence. Left: Kristi Mansfield the CEO of Seer, helped pull all the information together. PHOTO: JAMES BRICKWOOD

cover the extent of its youth crime problems and begin immediately identifying patterns. The first was that most of the crime happened between 6pm and 6am, when school was out and the services had knocked off for the day.

"Communities like Bourke have become accustomed to services just doing whatever they please without any scrutiny or input from the community," Mr Ferguson said.

"But we've changed the dynamics of that by having this information at our disposal. The community itself has come together in a really good way."

After the council appealed for 24-hour service assistance, they also saw through the data that violent behaviour in schools was picking up in line with family violence reoffending.

Working groups began meeting quarterly and ultimately decided that suspended teenagers were often sent straight back home into a difficult environment, before fleeing out into the streets.

As such, another Bourke-wide decision was to require suspended children