

Scouting: creating resilient youth and communities

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Scouting builds resilience for life. This is confirmed by empirical data now to hand which show the positive role the Scouting Movement plays in building the resilience of young people to cope and thrive during challenging times. Scouts Australia has embraced resilience as a concept and strives to develop resilience in its many thousands of youth members, equipping them to become better citizens and make positive contributions to society. Scouting, too, is contributing in other ways to enhance the resilience of local communities in times of disaster.

Key words: Australia; communities; community service; diversity; resilience; the Scout movement; Scouts; youth.

This paper will be about Scouting, youth and community resilience. Scouting is a values-based, volunteer, outdoors-focused Movement with over 54 million members worldwide. The purpose of Scouting is to develop young people from five to 25 years of age to be better citizens of their local communities and to help build a better world. Through an age-specific programme, we develop the leadership skills, the self-confidence and the resilience of our young people. We learn by doing. Our founder, Lord Robert Baden-Powell, a highly-decorated military leader, was himself a visionary and a world leader. To our delight, the World Scouting Movement has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 with the outcome to be revealed in October. Scouts appear to be the only organisation in the world working on all 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals promulgated by the United Nations. Scouting enjoys a presence in 216 countries and territories around the world – that is all countries of the world except five which are predominantly communist.



Figure 1: The Chief Scout, 1929: Lieutenant-General The Right Honourable Lord Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, 1st Baron Baden-Powell of Gilwell, OM, GCMG, GCVO, KBE, KStJ
[Source: Reynolds (1943), plate opposite p. 112]

Scouts Australia

At Scouts Australia, we are incredibly proud of our 113-year history and currently have around 72,000 members. We are the largest youth development organisation, both Australia-wide and in each state and territory. Across New South Wales (NSW), we have some 18,000 members, comprising 15,000 youth and 3000 volunteer leaders. We have a state-wide footprint with close to half of our 418 Scout groups in regional New South Wales.

Another feature is our diversity. Nearly 40 per cent of our members are female. Muslim Scouts is one of our fastest growing formations. In metropolitan New South Wales, we have Vietnamese Scouts and Jewish Scouts amongst others. We have programmes for children with additional needs. In regional and remote areas, we have the largest number of Lone Scouts in Australia. We also have a Scout programme for the sons and daughters of serving Australian Defence Force members.

As a volunteer-based organisation, we contribute over 1.5 million volunteer hours annually to the New South Wales economy, which is valued at about \$65.5 million. Over our 113-year history, we have empowered more than one million young Australians to help create a better world. This led the Australian Government in 2008, our centenary year, to declare 2008 as the Year of the Scout; with a one-dollar circulating coin minted in our honour.

The Impact of Scouting on Australian Youth and their Resilience

Our founder, Lord Baden-Powell said: “The Scouting Method affords an opportunity for initiative, self-control, self-reliance and self-direction” (Reynolds 1943). Of course, these characteristics of Scouting underpin personal resilience. He also coined the motto “Be prepared”. A Scout is never taken by surprise; they know exactly what to do when anything unexpected happens. Through Scouting, we want to give our young

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people the courage, the positivity, and the resilience to keep going, through good times and bad.

While this has been our goal, we were never sure until recently what actual impact we were having on young people. In 2019, Scouts Australia partnered with the organisation Resilient Youth Australia² and the University of South Australia, to seek independent measurement and validation of the impact that the Scouting programme is having on our youth. As part of the methodology, over 1000 Scouts aged between 8 and 18 years across Australia were surveyed. Their answers to the survey were compared with answers given by some 50,000 youth in the same age cohorts in 2019 who together comprised the Australian norm dataset.

The survey involved youth answering 75 multiple-choice questions against the components of resilience as specified by Resilient Youth Australia, which defines resilience as “the ability to draw upon the strengths within yourself and around you to flexibly respond to life while remaining true to yourself and creating relationships with others”. The 75 questions covered a range of areas including the participant’s strengths, life satisfaction, hopefulness, coping style, mental health and protective behaviours. The results were statistically analysed and validated. They were made publicly available as a 15-page report titled *The Scouting effect: measuring Scouting’s impact on the resilience of young people in Australia* (Wicking et al., 2020). The detailed survey results can be accessed at the Scouts Australia website³, where there is also a two-minute video by our Chief Commissioner of Australia, Phil Harrison, together with infographics summarising the key outcomes⁴.



Figure 2: The front cover of the report *The Scouting effect: measuring Scouting’s impact on the resilience of young people in Australia* [Source: Wicking et al. (2020)]

²Resilient Youth Australia is an organisation committed to measurably improving the resilience of young people. It employs a measurement methodology developed in conjunction with the University of South Australia. <http://resilientyouth.org>

³https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5850e095414fb5946daf8f2c/t/602db6a850e22859939472bc/1613608682937/ResilienceSurvey4PageBrochure_NoBleed.pdf

⁴<https://scouts.com.au/blog/2020/05/29/the-scouting-effect-scouting-builds-resilience-for-life/>

The outcomes were very reassuring for us. They confirmed officially that Scouting builds resilience for life. We now have empirical evidence of the positive role Scouting plays in building the resilience of young people to help them cope and, indeed, thrive during even the most challenging times.

The specific results of the independent resilience survey found that young people involved in Scouts have an overall better life satisfaction than their non-Scouting peers. Also, the longer our youth members stay in Scouts, the more resilient they are likely to become; from being able to find ways to solve a problem to being more likely to forgive themselves if they make a mistake. Scouts demonstrate a far wider range of resilient behaviours than young Australians of the same age. Scouts are 12 per cent more likely to feel good about themselves, 13 per cent more likely to trust others, 15 per cent more likely to feel they have made a positive contribution to their community, 8 per cent more likely to forgive themselves if they make a mistake, and 12 per cent less likely to report feeling tired or having little energy. Scouts also have a healthier mental state than non-Scouts by 13 per cent, which is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also report they have a healthy body 12 per cent more than non-Scouts.

At a time when everyone needs some extra positivity in their lives, we are proud of the significant contributions Scouting is making across New South Wales and Australia, both in metropolitan and, importantly, in regional New South Wales. It is those regional areas that had to endure the effects of the pandemic, droughts, floods and bushfires.

The report draws out the contribution that Scouting is making to equip a new generation of youth with the essential skills they need to bounce back from challenges and face the world with confidence. These findings are ground-breaking and are exciting for Scouts Australia as they reaffirm the essential service that Scouting has delivered, and continues to deliver, to our local communities, viz. the Scouting spirit of resilience.

Scouting During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As a result of the public health orders in New South Wales due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were not able to hold our regular Scout meetings nor were we able to hold our regular outdoor activities, including adventurous activities, our camps and our major events. Our Movement, however, quickly developed online Scouting, “Scouting@home”, where the Scouting programme was delivered over the internet, and activities were conducted in the home and in the backyard, all in compliance with the public health order restrictions. One particularly memorable experience was the number of our young people who observed ANZAC Day from the end of their driveway. Interestingly, it was our youth and our young leaders who led the charge in developing the “Scouting@home”

programme. They taught their older adult leaders how it could best be done.

I acknowledge we lost members through COVID-19, largely from families who felt that they joined Scouting to do outdoor adventure and that online Scouting was not delivering what they wanted. That is entirely understandable. Scouts NSW, however, has now regained in absolute numbers all those members lost during the early days of the pandemic.

As a result of the pandemic, many more families are looking for a values-based and outdoors-focused organisation for their sons and daughters to join. That has led to many more families who have had no previous association with Scouting now turning to the Scout Movement. Our task is to deliver those expectations at a time when COVID-19 is still restricting what we can do, when we can do it, and how it can be done.

Scouting's Footprint in the Community

It is important that community groups, such as Scouts, work in partnership with the state government and its emergency services to further improve the overall resilience of our local communities. Scouts NSW has a state-wide footprint through its Scout halls, campsites and activity centres. These can be, and have been, used by the State Emergency Service together with the Rural Fire Service at times of a disaster, including in the 2019-2020 bushfires and also in the 2021 floods.

In Murrumbateman, nestled between Yass and Canberra, our Scout Group is building a hall that also will be a training centre for the local Rural Fire Service. We are now working with the Resilience NSW Commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons, as well as the Australian Red Cross to reassess our Scout halls and campgrounds as safe havens and as places of retreat during a disaster. This is about building future disaster resilience in local communities with Scouts being part of the solution.

Scouts NSW is also active in assisting local communities to cope with and to recover from natural disasters. A number of our Rovers [Scouts aged between 18 and 25 years], as well as our leaders, also volunteer with the State Emergency Service and the Rural Fire Service. In the recent bushfires, our youth members were among the first to prepare meals for the firefighters and the many hundreds of evacuated families. We welcomed the Country Women's Association into our kitchens. We delivered thousands of face masks both as the bushfire clean-up began and during the early days of the pandemic. We distributed hundreds of quilts donated to us from all around Australia for families who lost their homes to the bushfires. One of our many community projects involved building shelters and making hundreds of pouches for injured wildlife to assist them to recover. This is about service to community.

The foregoing are just a few more examples of how Scouting is working in a different way to build resilience in our local communities. We want Scouting to not only build resilience in young people, but also to be part of local communities and assist them to build their resilience.

Conclusion

Scouts NSW is proud to be building resilience among our youth, and this is confirmed by the empirical data now to hand. We also are proud to be contributing in other ways to enhance the resilience of local communities at times of disaster. On behalf of Scouts Australia (NSW Branch) I am grateful for the opportunity to share the Scouting story with you.

The Author: Neville Tomkins, OAM, BA (Hons), Dip Mgt, FAIM, GAICD, JP, became Chief Commissioner of the New South Wales Branch of Scouts Australia on 1 August 2016, after completing 36 years in the Commonwealth Public Service, including 25 years in the Senior Executive Service. Previously, he served as Chief Commissioner of Scouts for the Australian Capital Territory for nine years. He also led the rebuilding of Camp Cottermouth following its near destruction by fire in 2003. Later, as International Commissioner for Scouts Australia for six years, he and his team led a reform programme which saw thousands more youth participating in international Scouting activities. He continues to serve in multiple Scouts Australia appointments, including that of National Co-ordinator for Redress. He has served on the National Executive of Scouts Australia, and as a National Councillor for the past 19 years.

Neville was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 2010 for service to the community, particularly through leadership roles in the Scouting Movement. In January 2016, he was awarded the Surgeon-General John White Medal for service to health. He has received various international Scouting awards, including the Silver Sakura Award for his promotion of understanding and co-operation between the Scout Association of Japan and Scouts Australia. In 2018, he received the highest Australian Scouting award, the Silver Kangaroo, for eminent achievement and meritorious service to the Association. Neville is also a lifetime blood donor with the Australian Red Cross and an Ambassador for the St Vincent de Paul Society. [Photo of Commissioner Tomkins: Scouts Australia]

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