Creative Change Project

How Music Strengthens the Social Fabric of Urban Communities Facing Rapid Gentrification and Rising Social Inequity

Insights From the Creative Change Project's Case Study in West End (Kurilpa) with Micah Projects, Queensland, Australia

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY | CREATIVE ARTS RESEARCH INSTITUTE
GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY | QUEENSLAND CONSERVATORIUM
Australian Government
Australian Research Council
MICAH PROJECTS
Breaking Social Isolation
Building Community

The information contained in this report may be copied or reproduced for study, research, information, or educational purposes, subject to inclusions of an acknowledgement (suggested citation follows).

ISBN: 978-1-7641573-0-8

Suggested citation

Heard, E., & Bartleet, B.-L. (2025). *How music strengthens the social fabric of urban communities facing rapid gentrification and rising social inequity: Insights from the Creative Change Project's case study in West End (Kurilpa) with Micah Projects, West End, Australia* [ARC report]. Creative Arts Research Institute, Griffith University.

Acknowledgements

This research is part of the Creative Change Project and has been funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Future Fellowship (FT200100495) at the Creative Arts Research Institute and Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University. The team includes ARC Future Fellow Professor Brydie-Leigh Bartleet; Research Fellows Dr Emma Heard and Dr Mathew Klotz; PhD candidates Pearly Black, Joel Spence, and Chi Lui Flora Wong; and Communications Officer Dr Matt Hsu. This case study was led by Emma Heard with support from Brydie-Leigh Bartleet. This report was prepared by Emma Heard and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet with feedback and editing support from Mathew Klotz. This report has been reviewed by the project's external evaluator Professor Geoffrey Woolcock.

We would like to thank all of the participants involved in this study and to acknowledge our community partners Micah Projects and Community Plus+ West End Community House for their collaboration and contribution. In particular, thank you to our community mentor Jenny 'Pineapple' Martinelli, the team from Micah Projects—Karyn Walsh, Katie McGuire, Sam Eyles, Robyne le Broque and Deborah Balke—and the team from Community Plus+ West End Community House, including Kylie Deen, for their guidance and input.

We acknowledge the Yugarabul, Yuggera, Jagera, and Turrbal Peoples, who are the traditional custodians of the lands on which we have housed this project at Griffith University. We pay respect to the Elders, past and present, and extend that respect to traditional custodians of the lands where we have worked across the country, including the Bidjara, Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Gunaikurnai, Kunja, Ngarluma, Wadawurrung, Wurundjeri, and Yindjibarndi Peoples. We also pay our respects to our First Nations team members, Advisory Group members, Elders and Cultural Advisors, partners, and project participants.

CULTURAL CARE WARNING: First Nations readers are advised that this report may contain images of people who have passed away.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the ARC nor the project's partners.

Front cover image

Coming together around music. Image by Katina Heard.

For additional information on the Creative Change Project

Contact Project Leader Professor Brydie-Leigh Bartleet: b.bartleet@griffith.edu.au or visit our website: creativechange.org.au

About this report

This report has been prepared for a general readership of musicians, community members, sector leaders, government departments, funders, and colleagues from diverse industries and disciplines, along with those with a general interest in harnessing the power of music to support social change in their communities.

The Creative Change Project has a wider suite of resources and outputs, all publicly available, including peer-reviewed academic articles, book chapters, conference presentations, videos, and creative outputs. These can be found on the Creative Change Project's resources page:

Other case study reports from the Creative Change Project

Report design by Ben Chew in Liveworm Studio
Queensland College of Art and Design, Griffith University.

How Music Strengthens the Social Fabric of Urban Communities Facing Rapid Gentrification and Rising Social Inequity

Insights From the Creative Change Project's Case Study in West End (Kurilpa) with Micah Projects, Queensland, Australia

Executive Summary

Community music initiatives can play a transformative role in fostering individual and collective wellbeing and strengthening the social fabric of communities experiencing rapid gentrification and rising social inequity. Insights featured in this report come from an in-depth community music study in the urban area of West End (Kurilpa), Queensland, as one of the Creative Change Project's four major case studies. Together, these case studies provide a comprehensive investigation into the role that community music plays in creating greater social equity in Australian communities, particularly in contexts of entrenched disadvantage. West End was chosen for its long history of community-engaged arts, coupled with socio-economic disadvantage and recent, rapid gentrification, which has seen inequity in the area grow.

This case study used a qualitive ethnographic approach designed and conducted in close collaboration with community partner organisation Micah Projects, community mentor Jenny 'Pineapple' Martinelli, and Community Plus+ West End Community House. Data were generated through engagement with 233 residents, musicians, community music participants, community representatives and leaders, and business owners via formal and informal interviews and focus groups, surveys, observation, and photovoice.

Key insights from this case study centre on five interrelated areas, ranging from the individual to the interpersonal, community, and societal levels.

1. Individual and collective wellbeing

Active engagement in creating music with others contributes to the ability of participants to maintain a healthy and well life. In addition to musical skill development, community music initiatives in West End are low-pressure, inclusive, accessible, and safe opportunities to learn new skills. This skill development has important implications for a person's confidence and sense of self, which supports positive identity formation, affirmation, and wellbeing.

2. Social connection

Community music in West End facilitates interpersonal connections that provide practical and emotional support through both strong bonding relationships and intermittent relations with a diverse range of community members.

3. Social cohesion

The social connection fostered by community music enables understanding and community cohesion—rare and unique opportunities for people to see each other and learn about each other. Community music in West End facilitates dialogue about who we are, what our shared values are, and what we want for our community in the future.

4. Reclaiming public space

Community music in West End activates public space in ways that support safety and generate trade for local businesses while bringing people in the community together. Music in public spaces, including repurposing roads for gathering and celebration, is important for collective identity and a means to think differently about what kind of community and society we want to live in.

5. Advocacy and activism

In West End, community music is an important conduit for dialogue about issues of local importance, including overdevelopment, flood recovery and resilience, and community green space. Community music in West End is also a means of collaboration to generate awareness and raise funds for social services, local businesses and social enterprises, community spaces, and charities. Community music plays an important role in activism, contributing to and generating participation in social movements of local and national importance.

Implications

This report highlights the important role that community music plays not only in the lives of individuals who participate directly in community music activities but likewise for the social fabric of the community as a whole. Insights from this case study demonstrate how music can work at individual, community, and societal levels in ways that both mitigate the consequences of social inequity for individuals (e.g. through promoting wellbeing among people who are marginalised) and possibly challenge the unequal power dynamics that lie at the heart of social inequity (e.g. through advocacy and activism). These insights suggest that efforts should be made to support the musical ecology in West End and, in particular, increase cross-sectoral collaborations between artists and social sector organisations in order to enhance the positive impact that community music can have in addressing rising social inequity.

Visualising Our Creative Change Insights: Our Imagining Instrument

The Creative Change Project has sought to describe the relationship between music and social equity in ways that reflect music's creative, generative, adaptive, and iterative nature. We have created an 'imagining instrument' to help us show the dynamic and relational way music simultaneously works at individual and collective levels to create greater social equity. In each of our case studies, the surfaces of this 'imagining instrument' feature slightly different concepts, reflecting what emerged as significant in these place-based contexts and what was considered salient by our team members and their community collaborators. In all cases, the *relational* nature of this shape echoes the interconnected way that community music operates, whereby individual processes and outcomes are always connected to the collective and vice versa. The *continuous* nature of this shape reflects the temporal way music functions—blurring boundaries between past, present, and future. When making music, we are attuned to the present experience, but we also keep the sonic memories of the past in the loop and can imagine future potentialities at the same time.

This shape also reminds us of the knock-on effect when internal or external disruptions have an adverse effect on the community music experience. Moreover, we find this shape evokes a certain wonder and curiosity that embodies the creative spirit of community music and speaks to its potential to advance social equity efforts in highly distinct ways. As you read the insights of our suite of research reports, we encourage you to keep this 'imagining instrument' in mind and consider how the reported outcomes interact with one another in dynamic ways such that they are not isolated outcomes on a linear trajectory but rather reflective of a dynamic and relational process that is constantly unfolding.

Community music in West End creates opportunities for wellbeing at an individual and a collective level through social connection and cohesion. Reclaiming public spaces with inclusive music brings people together in dialogue around who they are, who they want to be collectively, and how they want to shape the places in which they live and belong. This supports social equity.

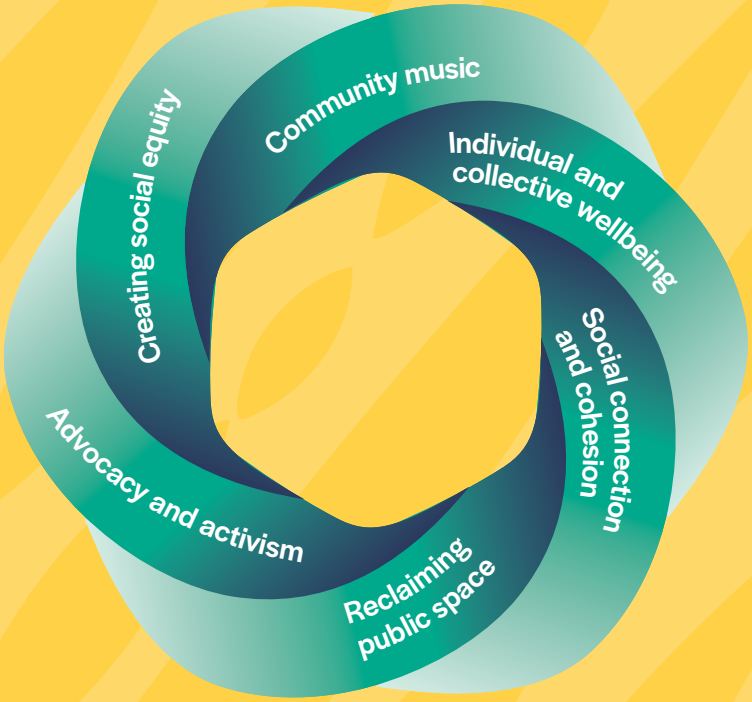


Figure 1: Insights from this case study

Introduction

Creative Change Project

The Creative Change Project is an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship that has explored the role of community music in addressing social inequity across the country (www.creativechange.org.au). Based at the Creative Arts Research Institute and Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, the Creative Change Project has aimed 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 to support real impact in contexts of entrenched social inequity (Bartleet & Heard, 2024; Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Heard et al., 2023).

Community music can be broadly defined as participatory music-making by, for, and/or with a community. At its heart, community music involves the creation of inclusive, locally embedded, and community-led opportunities for engagement in music. Rather than being characterised by a particular style, genre, medium, or aesthetic, community music is distinctively reflective of its cultural context and shaped by its participants and local setting. Given its focus on community agency, musical practices within this field customarily work to uphold values of inclusion, access, equity, justice, and self-determination (Bartleet, 2023).

For the Creative Change Project, social equity is about ensuring every person has the opportunities and resources to reach their fullest potential and live a fulfilled life. Inequity can be understood as differences in the resources, opportunities, rewards, and rights a person has based on their position within society, which lead to disparities in health and wellbeing that are unjust and avoidable. Structural systems of power (i.e. the way our society is organised and operates) cause certain groups to thrive at the expense of others. Social inequity has multiple and intersecting causes and symptoms such that to achieve equity, we must work across individual, community, and systemic levels.

This report features insights from one of four Creative Change Project case studies. This case study partnered with Micah Projects and worked closely with Community Plus+ West End Community House to investigate the role of community music-making across the Kurilpa Peninsula and the impact it has for the West End community. In contrast to investigating the impact of established, large-scale community music programs, which is the focus of other Creative Change Project case studies, the West End case study took 'place' as the starting point to explore the role of community music in addressing social inequity. West End was chosen for its history of socio-economic disadvantage and recent, rapid gentrification, which has seen inequity in the area grow (Walters & McCrea, 2014). It was also chosen for its close proximity to the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, which is home to the Creative Change Project's Lab. While it has been important to undertake research across the country in a mix of urban, regional, and remote locations, we also felt it was important for a range of ethical and scholarly reasons to study this topic in our Conservatorium's own backyard.

West End: A Brief Introduction

West End (part of the Kurilpa Peninsula,[1] which also encompasses Highgate Hill and South Brisbane) is one of the most densely populated areas in Queensland, with 7,300 people per square kilometre (Australian Bureau of Statistic [ABS], 2021a). The population of this 1.9 km^2 area has significantly increased over the past two decades and is now three times what it was 20 years ago (4,680 in 2001 and 14,953 in 2021). In the last decade alone, the population has almost doubled (the comparative population growth across greater Meanjin/Brisbane was approximately 20%), from 9,474 in 2016 to 14,953 in 2021 (ABS, 2021b). This growth was designed by local and state governments, including via the South Brisbane Riverside Neighbourhood Plan, which aimed to increase the population to 25,000 (Walters & McCrea, 2014). Of the population, 19% are in the lowest income bracket quartile, and 34.5% are in the highest quartile (Evershed, 2019).

Figure 2: Map of West End. Sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2021b)

West End is one of the oldest suburbs of Meanjin (Brisbane), taken from the Turrbal and Jagera/Yuggera Peoples during the (ongoing) colonial invasion of Australia. After serving as a site for farmland and agriculture, the area became home to labourers and dockworkers and a place of industry, with a gas works,

1 The Creative Change Project makes every effort to recognise First Nations place names in their resources.

Figures 3 and 4: Images from 2011 and 2022 floods and community recovery. Images by Emma Heard

a concrete factory, a boot factory, and soft drink and ice cream factories being developed in the late 1800s through early 1900s (Connor, 2011; Walters & McCrea, 2014). The remnants of this industrial history are increasingly used by developers to exploit the sense of place and the local culture and history (Rius Ulldemolins, 2014).

West End is a culturally significant area for First Nations Peoples, including: the Turrbal and Jagera/ Yuggera Nations. A local park called Musgrave Park is a historical meeting place and contemporary site of protest, celebration (holding one of the most attended NAIDOC celebrations in Australia), political movements (e.g. tent embassies), and community gathering (Blair, 2023). Boundary Street, West End's independent retail strip, marked the racist segregation perimeter where First Nations People were excluded from after 4 pm and on Sundays throughout the 1800s (Aird, 2001; Kerkhove, 2015).

West End has a culturally diverse history, with Greek and (later) Vietnamese migration from the mid-1900s influencing the culture of the area (Walters & McCrea, 2014). However, this demographic has changed. While it was estimated that in the 1980s up to 75% of the residents in West End were Greek, this figure had dropped to 5.2% by 2011, and Greek represented a very small portion of people in the area (Godwell, 2014).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, West End underwent bottom-up or second-wave gentrification. Families, artists, and middle-class workers moved to the area for affordable housing and access to jobs, with the hosting of the World Expo in 1988 transforming the adjacent area in South Brisbane and instigating the steady increase in housing prices (Molnar & Walters, 2021; Walters & McCrea, 2014). These early gentrifiers contributed to West End's strong community and place identity through their flexible uses of space and resources, an active and inclusive public realm and third spaces that allowed strangers to be together, and the fact that 'each historical influx of residents retained a particular stake in the neighbourhood' (Gall, 2009, p. 359; Walters, 2019; see also Walters & McCrea, 2014).

Over the past decade, the area has experienced rapid third-stage or top-down, developer-led gentrification. Many high-rise, high-density apartments have been built across the old industrial zone, housing prices have significantly increased, and city planning did not include adequate public services and amenities (Walters & McCrea, 2014; Walters & Smith, 2022). This has contributed to growing inequity, and many low-income residents have been displaced via relocation (Burt, 2023). In addition to rapid growth and accompanying gentrification, West End experienced two major flood events in 2011 and 2022 that have disproportionately affected vulnerable and lower-income people, along with those living in large-scale developments built on the floodplain with inadequate flood resistance and mitigation planning (Cheshire et al., 2018; Mayher, 2022; Ulubasoglu, 2020).

Changes in the socio-economic status of the area are visible in the shifting nature of retail in West End, which is changing the community identity (Molnar & Walters, 2021). Further, Brisbane City will host the 2032 Olympic Games. Being in close proximity to the city centre and to major facilities, such as the Gabba sporting stadium, West End is set to host a number of events, along with the Olympic Games International Broadcasting Centre. While there is exciting potential for the Olympic Games legacy to deliver increased greenspace, community infrastructure, prosperity, and opportunities for local business, there are also growing concerns about the social and economic impacts of hosting the Olympic Games for people living in local communities, particularly lower-income people (Bowman, 2021a).

Figure 5: Tents in Musgrave Park demonstrating growing homelessness. Image by Emma Heard

Figure 6: Line of people accessing weekly free food by Community Friends. Image by Emma Heard

Figure 7: The old and the new of retail in West End. Vietnamese grocer (recently closed) next to a luxury car dealership. Image by Emma Heard

Figures 8 and 9: Examples of arts and social justice in West End. Images by Emma Heard

Despite these challenges, West End has a strong place-based identity and is home to an engaged, diverse, and resilient community that welcomes people from all walks of life. This community engagement is demonstrated by the active West End Community Association and other local community-based groups (e.g. Resilient Kurilpa, Community Plus+ West End Community House, Community Friends, and Feeding 4101) that support local people, organise events, and advocate for key issues in the area. West End also remains a hub of social service provision and employment. Homelessness and low income remain visible across West End (Burt, 2023). A weekly distribution of free meals and groceries sees long lines, with community volunteers, many of whom are there to receive food, assisting with the distribution (Yeomans, 2022).

West End has a long and deep history of drawing on community arts to advance social justice (Aird, 2001; Bowman, 2021b; Capelin, 1995; Granville, 2021). This tradition is visible and felt in the streets of West End today, including in politically inspired street art, musical instruments in public spaces, and active café and bar scenes that support local musicians and artists and contribute to community events (Connor, 2011). The tensions experienced by residents related to the rapidly changing suburb and their strong sense of belonging to the community can be felt in the music of many local musicians (e.g. 'The Gutter's Back' by the Sunday Bests and 'All the People Cheer Me Up' by the Whoopee-Do Crew).

The Rialto Theatre was built in 1924 as a cinema and was used for decades as a live performance venue and radio studio before a significant storm and a fire in the 1990s caused extensive damage; however, the original façade still remains, and the building now houses hospitality outlets (Connor, 2011). Now, West End and surrounding areas are home to several of Queensland's major cultural institutions, including the Queensland Performing Arts Centre; the Queensland Conservatorium and Queensland College of Art and Design, Griffith University; the Gallery of Modern Art; Queensland Theatre; Metro Arts; Queensland Ballet; and Triple A Murri Country Radio.

Figure 10: Rialto Theatre building in 2023.
Image by Emma Heard

Figures 11, 12 and 13: Examples of musical instruments in public spaces in West End. Images by Emma Heard

This rich cultural history and the social and economic challenges the community is currently facing made West End an interesting site for investigating the role that community music might play in supporting and building social equity.

Case Study Aims

This case study aimed to investigate the role that community music plays in West End, specifically exploring outcomes for, and experiences of, people engaged in these community music practices. Drawing on perceptions and experiences of people in the area, the case study aimed to explore how community music may support social equity and how cross-sectoral collaborations with the prominent social services sector in this community could enhance these efforts.

The Research Fellow (Emma) leading this case study has been a local resident of West End since the early 1990s, having moved to the area as a child. During that time, she has established relationships with many people and community organisations across the suburb. Arts and music were a strong part of Emma's childhood, and although she has never actively pursued or engaged in creating music, it has nevertheless remained in her life, working to cement her sense of belonging with West End. Emma is a qualitative social and health researcher curious about the potential for the arts to support transformative change towards more equitable societies. Given she is currently raising two children in West End, Emma has a personal stake in understanding West End and working to preserve the acceptance, inclusion, and belonging that this place provides to so many people.

Figure 14: *Unity Starts in West End* by Lisa-Marie Vecchio, Artforce Brisbane. Image by Emma Heard

Figure 15: Micah Projects and Griffith University team members (left to right): Sam Eyles, Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, Robyne Le Brocque, Emma Heard

The Project Leader (Brydie) has spent a significant amount of time in West End because of its close proximity to the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, where she has worked for the past 20 years. Alongside Emma, Brydie has worked with the partners on this project and new initiatives to explore the role community music can play in enhancing the social fabric of West End. This work builds on Brydie's extensive portfolio of projects exploring how communal music-making can open up pathways for greater social justice, equity, inclusion, and wellbeing, especially in communities where entrenched social disadvantage, displacement, and division exist.

Partner Organisation Profile

Micah Projects grew out of a young mother's support service and was established as Micah Projects in 1995. Over the past more than 25 years, Micah Projects has grown into a well-established and trusted organisation assisting the communities of West End and greater Brisbane through services related to homelessness, domestic and family violence, youth support, and disability, among other things. Micah Projects is a strong advocate, contributing to a range of State inquires, and is embedded deeply in the community, including through partnerships on many projects with local community groups. Information about Micah Projects' history and current work can be found on their website: www.micahprojects.org.au

Micah Projects played a key role in contributing to the design of the case study methods and supporting the Creative Change team in ensuring outcomes were relevant and useful for the social sector and the community.

Research Design

This case study used a qualitive, ethnographic approach. In line with the Creative Change Project's ethos of valuing the collective creativity, expertise, wisdom, and dynamism inherent in communities, this case study was designed and conducted in close collaboration with community partner organisation Micah Projects, community mentor Jenny 'Pineapple' Martinelli—an established First Nations musician, community worker, and long-term resident of West End—and Community Plus+ West End Community House. A range of largely qualitative and participatory methods were used, including in-depth interviews, focus groups, informal conversations, ethnographic observation, online surveys, and photovoice (see Table 1 for details). A total of 233 people contributed to data generation for this case study (see Table 2 for participant demographics). The Creative Change Project received ethical clearance through Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref No: 2020/679).

Table 1

Summary of Methods

Method	Participant Type	Aim	Number of Participants/ Initiatives
In-depth interviews	Community music facilitators and organisers	To understand the aim and outcomes of current community music initiatives from practitioner perspectives.	11
Brief interviews and focus groups	Community music participants	To understand the aim and outcomes of current community music initiatives from participant perspectives.	23
Online surveys	Community music participants	To understand the aim and outcomes of current community music initiatives from participant perspectives.	100
In-depth interviews	Key community informants	To gain contextual knowledge about West End, including how music is activated (currently and historically) in relation to community development, politics, social support, and health.	18
In-depth interviews	Local music-related business owners	To gain contextual knowledge about West End and understand the role of music in local businesses and community development.	4
Online survey	Residents	To investigate residents' perceptions about the role of music in West End in relation to broad participation in music and how music might (or might not) shape the community and contribute to social and health equity.	70
Photovoice	Residents	To gain a deeper understanding about the role music plays in people's lives and the broader community in West End.	11 (of these, 4 were also online survey participants)
Observation and engagement at community music initiatives	Conducted by EH across 2023	To investigate the role of music in the lives of people in West End and to observe outcomes of music participation for diverse groups of people.	5 initiatives
Total			**233 participants** **5 initiatives**

Table 2

Participant Demographics

N = 233

Gender	%
Woman	54.43
Man	29.54
Gender-diverse[1]	2.95
Not reported	13.08

Cultural Background	%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	3.38
CALD[2]	3.79
Cultural background reported[3]	74.26
Not reported	18.57

Sexuality	%
Heterosexual	43.88
Queer[4]	22.36
Not reported	33.76

Housing	%
Owner-occupier	44.72
Renting	24.47
Share-house	10.13
Other	3.38
Not reported	17.30

Age	%
Under 18	0.42
19–29	10.55
30–39	19.41
40–49	13.50
50–59	15.19
60–69	18.99
70+	7.17
Not reported	14.77

Disability	%
Yes	11.81
No	68.78
Prefer not to say	2.53
Not reported	16.88

Employment[5]	%
Full-time	36.10
Part-time	15.77
Casual	9.54
Unemployed	1.66
Caring	1.66
Volunteering	2.90
Studying	0.83
Retired	12.03
Pension	1.24
Not reported	18.27

1. We use the term 'gender-diverse' to indicate myriad genders that sit outside the heteronormative colonial gender binary, recognising that the term remains imperfect. Responses included ambiguous (n = 1), nah (n = 1), N/A lol (n = 1), and nonbinary (n = 2).
2. Culturally and linguistically diverse.
3. Participants were asked to identify their cultural heritage according to how they interpret this term. We do not indicate whether participants were born in Australia. Responses included Celtic and Prussian (n = 1); Australian (n = 40); German, Irish, and English (n = 1); Scottish (n = 1); Italian (n = 4); Portuguese, Irish, Chinese, French, and Russian (n = 1); Turkish (n = 1); European (n = 17); Thai (n = 1); English (n = 25); English and Scottish (n = 1); vanilla (n = 1); Jewish (n = 1); English and German (n = 1); Finnish (n = 1); Trinidadian, English, and Canadian (n = 1); Norwegian and Czech (n = 1); Burmese (n = 1); ESL (n = 1); Filipino (n = 1); Asian (n = 1); Spanish (n = 1); Swiss (n = 1); Irish (n = 5); Italian and Irish (n = 1); English and Irish (n = 5); Chinese (n = 2); white (n = 5); Irish, Scottish, and English (n = 7); South American (n = 1); Greek (n = 1); Irish and Scottish (n = 2); Irish, Scottish, and German (n = 1); Irish and Serbian (n = 1); Polish (n = 1); Croatian (n = 1); dragged up in a slum (n = 1); Dutch (n = 2); English and New Zealander (n = 1); Indian (n = 1); Canadian (n = 1); New Zealander (n = 1); and Gubbawogorigianee, or white, Italian, and Aboriginal (n = 1).
4. As with 'gender-diverse', we employ the word 'queer' as an umbrella term describing sexualities that range from gay to pansexual to asexual and beyond. In doing so, we do not wish to elide the important differences between the ongoing histories, experiences, and struggles of each sexuality. Nor do we mean 'queer' to be interchangeable with the more expansive LGBTQIA+ acronym. Responses included lesbian (n = 5), bisexual (n = 11), gay (n = 3), queer (n = 6), same-sex (n = 2), ambiguous/ non-existent (n = 1), lesbian/bi/gay/queer (n = 1), bi-curio (n = 1), pansexual (n = 5), fluid (n = 1), asexual (n = 3), adventurous (n = 1), musical touch (n = 1), queer/bisexual (n = 1), and queer/lesbian (n = 1).
5. Some participants listed multiple forms of employment in their responses. In such cases, the participant's first type of employment is included in the statistics for employment. Examples of multiple forms of employment included part-time and studying/training (n = 2); retired and caring (n = 1); retired and volunteering (n = 3); casual, volunteering, and caring (n = 1); casual and volunteering (n = 2); retired, volunteering, and caring (n = 3); casual and studying/training (n = 1); and part-time and volunteering (n = 1).

Figure 16: Music Appreciation Program group photo

As part of the West End case study, two new community music programs were piloted with our partner organisations. The first of these programs, the Music Appreciation Program, involved a group of participants from Micah Projects who were experiencing or at risk of loneliness attending a live music event together once a month across a six-month period.

The second program, Song Writing for Social Connection (SWSC), consisted of three songwriting workshops held fortnightly and conducted with people attached to Micah Projects and Community Plus+ West End Community House. The workshops were each three hours in length and held in an open, public space in which an inclusive community bands meet weekly. The sessions were facilitated by Jenny 'Pineapple' Martinelli—the regular facilitator of the Whoopee-Do Crew, which is the community band associated with Community Plus+ West End Community House. These workshops culminated in the collaborative development of two new songs written by and for the local community.

Figure 17: Song Writing for Social Connection workshop group. Image by Emma Heard

Figure 18: Song Writing for Social Connection collaborative lyrics and chord development. Image by Emma Heard

Figure 19: West End Case Study team (left to right): Katie McGuire (Micah Projects), Jenny 'Pineapple' Martinelli (Community mentor), Sam Eyles (Micah Project), Brydie-Leigh Bartleet (Griffith University), and Emma Heard (Griffith University), with Kylie Deen (Community Plus+ West End Community House) and Joel Spence (Griffith University) on screen

Figure 20: Street Arts community performance on Boundary Street, West End. Image provided by Steve Capelin

All members of the team—including the Creative Change Project team, community mentor, and team members from Micah Projects and Community Plus+ West End Community House—provided insights from their diverse personal and disciplinary backgrounds during data analysis. These backgrounds included community music, social work, education, performing and creative arts, art therapy, community development, and social service provision. Participants also had opportunities to provide input when preliminary findings were shared at two established community music sessions, one supported by Community Plus+ West End Community House and one supported by Micah Projects. At these sessions, key themes with images and quotes were shared on large posters with groups of 5–15 people (some of whom had participated in interviews and/or focus groups), with space to provide thoughts and reflections on the posters.

As an extension of the West End case study, the Research Fellow designed a stand-alone project that was undertaken by a student enrolled in a Master of Human Services through Griffith University's School of Health Science and Social Work. This project aimed to extend our understanding about the long-term wellbeing implications of participating in community arts. Working with the founders of Street Arts, which was a community arts organisation that operated in West End throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the project involved in-depth interviews with 13 people to capture their perspectives about how participating in Street Arts affected their wellbeing, then and now, and their life trajectories. Detailed outcomes are reported separately and corroborate many of the benefits of community music identified across the West End case study, particularly in relation to individual wellbeing.

Figure 21: Creative Change Project data sharing. Image by Emma Heard

Key Insights

> **‘Music communities and groups are like roots that hold soil together to prevent erosion. They hold community together, give “nutrients” to the wider community, and tell stories that give a sense of layered, complex, multifarious identities, joined together in some way.’**
>
> **(West End resident survey)**

Insights from this case study illuminate the important role that community music plays in individual and collective wellbeing in West End through promoting social connection and social cohesion among people across the suburb. Community music is also a way for residents to develop a shared identity and to reclaim public space in equitable and anti-capitalist ways while enhancing street safety and supporting local businesses. Finally, community music in West End provides a platform for residents to have their voices heard and a public-facing mechanism for advocacy and activism. Each of these five themes highlights different ways that community music might work to build social equity within a community.

Individual and Collective Wellbeing

The World Health Organization recognises that wellbeing ‘encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose. Focusing on wellbeing supports the tracking of the equitable distribution of resources, overall thriving and sustainability’ (World Health Organization, 2021, p. 10). Active engagement in creating music with others contributes to the ability of participants to maintain a healthy and well life. For some, this is about healing through music or using music for coping. For others, engaging in music is an important part of broader life skill development, allowing them to establish important social connections and maintain a healthy routine. One community music participant stated,

> **I don’t smoke. I don’t drink. I don’t drink coffee. I used to, and I find that I prefer to have the music pick me up and take me where it’s gonna go. I don’t want the crutches. … I want the music to be strong enough to carry me. … You don’t have to rely on being stoned or drunk. (W301, community music participant)**

Another community music participant said,

> **It’s giving you something to do, something to look forward to. When you are by yourself, you haven’t got no one. Without the music, I wouldn’t care what I do for the day, but because I do know that there’s gonna be a music [I get up]. It makes me feel very involved in the community. … It also makes me focus as well. I became more organised. (W308, community music participant)**

Musical skill development is an important outcome for many people involved in community music in West End. For some residents, community music provides economic benefits through busking and paid opportunities to perform. At the same time, a number of community music facilitators who make a living from playing music value the opportunity to participate in music with their community in non-transactional ways. One community music facilitator explained,

> **I’m also a working musician—that’s how I earn my wage. So, I do plenty with music that is totally transactional. And … I don’t think that’s of no benefit. … But taking transaction out of the equation [by facilitating a free community music group in a public park], it just becomes … purely about music and relationships. I think that’s important. (W002, community music facilitator)**

In general, community music initiatives are low-pressure, inclusive, accessible, and safe opportunities to learn new skills. This has important implications for a person’s confidence and sense of self, which supports positive identity formation and affirmation (Bartleet, 2023; Bartleet & Heard, 2024; Heard et al., 2023). This appears to be true for people actively creating music and also those engaging as audience members. A community music facilitator remarked,

> **We're giving people a voice. … I'm attempting to allow people to pick it up themselves and direct themselves. … And having those accolades … it gives [people] that boost, so that [they] go confidently into society. And I suppose that's what it's about too—like, trying things you wouldn't normally do. (W401, community music facilitator)**

Similarly, a West End resident said,

> **[Through attending live music] I think we all learn to make peace with ourselves. And watching someone like [this performer] talking about this quirky, diverse, messy person that she is … I think that's helpful for all of us. It's that thing of showing herself—like, people showing themselves, and their vulnerability, and their realness. And that has an impact. … I think we also take something from that, like a sense of learning to love ourselves a bit more by watching someone else loving themselves a bit more, which is helpful. (W402, resident)**

Community music in West End appears to be an important part of maintaining cultural connection and creative self-expression for many people. As one participant stated, 'It's cultural. It's sit around the campfire.' A First Nations Elder reflected upon this:

> **It was nice to be included in [creating that musical performance] because those women are really important—as mums, as women, being through the turmoil in their lives and stuff like that and maintaining a family and maintaining who we are as Aboriginal women, Aboriginal people. (W119, First Nations Elder)**

For participants of this case study, the confidence and empowerment developed through community music participation are an integral part of creating broader social change. Both the owner of a music venue and the facilitator of an established community music program described how the safe spaces created during music programs and performances allow people with marginalised identities not only to express themselves in that moment but also to walk confidently into the community as themselves in ways that demand acceptance and respect. This has the potential to create change at the societal level (Bartleet, 2023; Heard & Bartleet, 2025b). As one key informant explained,

> **We have some pretty full-on metal shows in [this venue] and most of the audience is gender neutral. … The more empowered the young become, the more empowered they are with their stance on, like, 'This is who we are—either like it or fuck off.' And [society] don't have a choice but to change. [The acceptance of gender diversity and gender equality is happening] and I think the reason why is, like, these kids could be so empowered. It's basically coming back to live music and art. They're allowed to go to these places and feel comfortable within themselves and feel normal and then be able to walk out on the street and, like, go, 'Yeah, this is who I am.' So, yeah, it's pretty important. (W202, key informant)**

Figure 22: *Trial of Humans,* creative self-expression through music. Image by Katina Heard

Figure 23: Forbes Street Gigs—sharing and creating culture through music. Image by Katina Heard

'I think it gives people confidence when they're performing, 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." So, it's about having that belonging and having that acceptance from the wider community.'

(W007, community music facilitator)

Figure 24: Community musician Duane Doyle playing with the Whoopee-Do Crew. Image by Eduardo Espinoza

Figure 25: Researcher Emma Heard playing with the Whoopee-Do Crew. Image by Eduardo Espinoza

Figure 26: Community musician and facilitator Jenny 'Pineapple' Martinelli playing with the Whoopee-Do Crew. Image by Eduardo Espinoza

Figure 27: Community musician Judy playing with the Whoopee-Do Crew. Image by Eduardo Espinoza

Figure 28: Community musician Trevor playing with the Whoopee-Do Crew. Image by Eduardo Espinoza

Figure 29: Laura Street Festival—sharing music in the backyard. Image by Katina Heard

Participation in community music further supports and creates opportunities for people to contribute to the community and be valued. This has benefits for the individual, the community, and society more broadly. A key informant said, '[Community music] builds people's own personal capacity to do other things and participate publicly … so that you're not on the edge' (W111, key informant). And a community music facilitator further explained, 'Because we've got people healing [through community music], then you've got people contributing. And if people are contributing to a broader society, then that benefits everyone' (W007, community music facilitator).

Finally, community music in West End promotes community-generated messages about what it means to live a good life inclusive of all. This includes community musicians changing well-known music, such as folk songs and hymns, to shift sexist or racist narratives and to promote healthy and respectful behaviours. For example, at an initiative that sees people gather to sing sea shanties at local venues each month, facilitators work to shift problematic narratives within well-known folk songs, seeking audience input in generating new lyrics that represent values of inclusion and safety. These lyrics have become a mainstay of the facilitators' national performances and have been taken up by other musicians and community music facilitators internationally. One community music facilitator explained this process:

> **So, 'The Drunken Sailor'—we 'Put him in an Uber and get him home safely', 'Tuck him into bed and put him in touch with relevant support groups', and 'Keep him safe from sexual predators'. … We sing it literally every show [and] it gets a really good response every time. And it kind of sets the scene for the night. … [And] the repetitive nature … that repeats and repeats, and so [everyone] gets the message more and more. They hear it, they have a giggle, and then they join in. (W010, community music facilitator)**

Although some community music initiatives do reach people living with disadvantage, many people face social, economic, and health challenges to participation, meaning that the positive wellbeing outcomes may not be reaching those who would benefit most, as one community music participant explained of a particular group:

> **It's a very good time, and I think that everyone could feel accepted [in this group]. But then … when you look at the people coming, a lot are of the highest socio-economic level. I've got a feeling … it's probably harder to get less well-educated people in groups like this. … We're privileged to be able to. Like, we have the resources to get here and to be able to take the time. It's kind of very sad. … It's difficult, but I definitely think it can help. (W313, community music participant)**

These findings highlight how community music is operating in West End in ways that support personal, community, and societal transformations towards social equity. Developing stronger coalitions and collaborations between diverse sectors, including the arts and social sectors and governments, could allow for the harnessing of the creative strengths and resources that exist within this community to support positive individual and collective wellbeing (Heard & Bartleet, 2025b).

Social Connection

Social connection has significant health and wellbeing benefits, with loneliness and social isolation increasingly recognised as a global public health concern (Barreto et al., 2024; Holt-Lunstad, 2022). In West End, community music creates environments that foster connections integral for the wellbeing of individuals and the community more broadly, providing practical and emotional support. At times, this is about the development of strong bonding relationships, but more intermittent connections also lead to practical support. This is exemplified in a reflection from a resident who opens their street-facing garage to local bands each month for between 10 and 100 people to gather on the street, listen to music, dance, and share food:

> **The upstream effects—the effects that come with establishing relationships with people—[are] looking after someone's house when they're away, helping someone out when they're in trouble. They got COVID, and they need coffee. … I would do that for someone who I knew through this event because it's being equitable and understanding that different people have different needs. And if you can help, help when you can. (W005, community music facilitator)**

'All that connection and ties' (Key informant, W108) developed through these moments are significant for broader social fabric because they facilitate support in other contexts, laying foundations for connection and assistance among the wider community. As one key informant explained, by stopping to listen to an established, inclusive community band, people develop familiarity with each other and then offer practical help if they see each other in need in other contexts:

> **Like, it's that community stuff by coming here. So when [Participant X] goes down the street, somebody who's seen [The Community Band] will be like, 'Oh, hey [I know 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, key informant)**

Connections fostered through community music in West End facilitate empathy and tolerance by bringing diverse people together around a shared experience. Community music is a 'social lubricant' (W103, key community informant) for many people in West End, allowing them to develop an understanding about other people and their lives. This was articulated by a key informant who runs a music studio on Boundary Street. They highlighted how the concentration of the arts in West End facilitates broad social connections that allow different types of people to interact and a desire to contribute to a sense of belonging to place:

> **Like interrelations, just meeting people. There's so many people who aren't even artists. They are like butchers, and folks who come up here, and, like, people who just got out of jail. It's, like, so … a large range, and we just get to connect. Yeah. And that, you know, that wouldn't happen if it wasn't for the concentration of art here. Yeah. And I also think it's bred a desire to really expand on our, my past music and poetry. Yeah. What can I actually do? How can I tell the story? (W116, key informant)**

With literature highlighting how loneliness and social isolation are important social justice issues that have significant implications for health and social equity (Barreto et al., 2024), these findings provide important insights about how community music can support more equitable places through building social connection.

Yet there remains a challenge in capturing the impact of community music on wellbeing and social connection, as described by an elected representative of the local area.

> **'A KPI that might not be accounted for is that this person felt really empowered, felt really good in their day, they found a new hobby, and because of that, they felt less social isolation. Because they felt less social isolation, it reduced the strain on our health system.**
>
> **It reduced the need for mental health support. … Because it reduced that mental health strain, there is a return on investment. … [But it's difficult] to put a dollar figure on it. It is a part of a greater puzzle [and] it's hard to trace.'**
>
> **(W107, key informant)**

Figure 30: Faith-based singing group. Image by Rose Lane

Figure 31: Friends bonding through community music. Image by Harry Pierce

Figure 32: Connecting with neighbours through music. Image by Peter Milne

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is particularly important in contexts of gentrification because it fosters common beliefs and shared values (Bernstein & Isaac, 2023). For many people in West End, the social connection fostered by community music enables understanding and community cohesion. As one participant stated, 'Being able to share in collective experiences hopefully lead[s] to people broadening their perspectives on various topics' (W543, resident). In reflecting on why they volunteered to facilitate a parents and carers singalong in a public park, a community music facilitator highlighted the importance of developing a shared culture with others, including those different from you, and how this enables supportive environments:

> **But on a musical level, that kind of development of culture is expressed and shared, and that helps people, right? … I mean, on a macro level, the more of these little knitted communities that you have, the more supportive a place is, right? And I think especially for people with children and babies, those sorts of incidental, supportive people around you who know you—like, sometimes it's as simple as that. (W002, community music facilitator)**

The benefits of moments of connection are important for social cohesion—rare and unique opportunities for the wider community to see each other and learn from each other. As one participant stated, 'It is good for our community because [we all] understand a lot more about West End [Kurilpa], and people who live here' (W311, community music participant). This sense of togetherness in West End that community music supports helps the community to face local challenges, including gentrification, (over)development, and the cost of living and housing crises. As a key informant explained,

> **Bringing people together across different classes, particularly in highly gentrified areas like West End or New Farm builds relationships that then create safety and a broader understanding of our neighbours. And that supports equity, which can include a sharing of resources, but also relationally. (W104, key informant)**

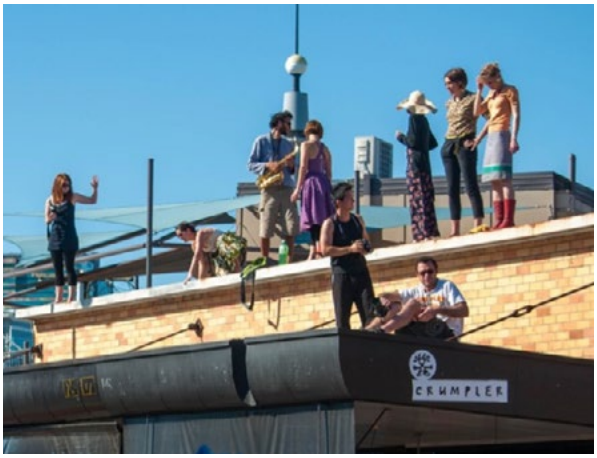
Community music in West End facilitates dialogue about who people are, what their shared values are, and what they want for their community now and in the future. This happens through storytelling and public displays of collective values. As a community music resident remarked, 'It [community music] aligns with my values and tells stories I feel good about, ones that we don't hear as much of anymore' (W326, community music participant).

Figure 33: Laura Street Festival—singing with others for a purpose. Image by Narelle Thomas

Figure 34: Kurilpa Derby—community connection through music. Image by Peter Walters

'[Community music in West End] weaves together the different stories of its residents, gives a sense of united identity. … [It] gives the community frequent events and happenings to come together in public to enjoy (rather than individual households doing individual things). When combined with things like arts, derbies, events, etc., it contributes to a sense of togetherness.'

(W569, resident)



Figures 35 and 36: Kurilpa Derby—participating in music as public celebrations of identity. Images by Peter Walters

Figure 37: Kurilpa Derby—celebrating who we are at the Kurilpa Derby. Image by Narelle Thomas

‘Deepening our emerging cultural identity by telling our stories in song. … Art heals people. Music is a way to gather and untangles us from stereotypes needing to be broken down. … It makes us feel a sense of pride of who we are and how great our neighbourhood is. It helps us promote our values and what we love about living here.’

(W501, resident)

For people in West End, these public displays of who they are through music play a role in community identity and sense of place, as one community music participant elaborated:

> **And I think it kind of makes West End [Kurilpa] 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, community music participant)**

Community music in West End creates a space for demonstrating these collective values and political ideas to people in decision-making positions. West End is an inner-city area experiencing rapid gentrification, and this has seen people with power—including politicians at all levels of government and large-scale business owners and developers—move into the area. A previous elected official spoke about how visible music on the streets in West End is an opportunity to reach people with policy and political decision-making power:

> **Increasingly, in West End, there are a lot of powerful people. … I’ve been heavily shaped by the values and the musical ecosystem of West End. And that informs my approach to politics and the policy changes I advocate at the citywide level. And I’d say the same is probably true for a lot of people who’ve represented the area. (W117, key community informant)**

Notably, the influence of music on political and social change is not necessarily positive, and people in West End recognise that music can be used to cement the status quo and harmful ideologies in various contexts.

Reclaiming Public Space

Community music in West End activates public space in ways that support safety and generate trade for local businesses while bringing people in the community together. As explained by a local business owner,

> **It's a way to look at street safety. … [By] activating the space with music and heaps of different community members, bad behaviour stops because there's all these other community members. It becomes kind of self-policing. And then all the small businesses thrive under that as well. So … if we continually foster community [through music], we all benefit. (W203, key community informant)**

Activating community spaces is not only about safety and a thriving local economy. Community music facilitators and participants, elected officials, community group representatives, and residents all highlighted ways community music in West End works to reshape and reclaim public space. Many discussed how important such a reclamation is for creating an environment that fosters both collective identity and different ideas about community and society writ large.

A small number of responses to the resident survey reflected the challenges of and division within the West End community, noting discomfort with the noise from music in public spaces.

Reclaiming public space for the demonstration of shared beliefs, values, and identities can play an important role in social cohesion, and the insights of this case study suggest that activating public spaces through inclusive and creative community-led activities is particularly important for communities such as West End, which are experiencing challenges related to rapid gentrification, (over)development, and increasing cost of living (Bernstein & Isaac, 2023).

Figure 38: Playing music on the street with neighbours. Image by Peter Walters

Figure 39: Busker in West End. Photo by Joel Spence

Figure 40: Kurilpa Derby—reclaiming the streets from cars and commerce. Image by Rose Lane

'The visible and ubiquitous presence of different forms of music-making shapes the suburb's identity of itself and is really important in reminding people that there's more to life than commerce and work. … If you're living in a community where every day you're essentially watching a live music performance—whether you're, like, walking past [a café], and you glance in and see a band there, or there's a busker, or someone playing piano in the park, or even you hear music drifting down from someone's house because some musos are having a rehearsal—that broadens the possibilities that you can imagine for your future, or your community, or, like, what kind of society you want to live in.'

(W117, key community informant)

Advocacy and Activism

Community music participation equips people with the skills to contribute to equity-related change within their community and society more broadly (Bartleet & Heard, 2024). This can be through illuminating and critiquing unjust ideologies and status quos and expressing concerns about social, cultural, and political systems in accessible ways. As one faith-based leader stated, 'It actually helps conscientise people' (W106, key community informant). A key informant wondered,

> **And what is it about music itself? It is an interesting thing because I think it does enable you to engage in a different way from when you just talk about things. And I don't think it even has to be protest songs or anything like that. I actually think people get moved, and it offers an opportunity for reflection as well. (W110, key community informant)**

In West End, community music is an important conduit for bringing people together to speak out about issues of community importance, including overdevelopment, flood recovery and resilience, and community green space. For example, an informal group of residents has successfully advocated for restrictions on development and organised capacity-building for body corporate organisations, tenants, and homeowners to be flood resilient. This group uses music to draw attention to local issues and build relationships, as described by one of the group's representatives:

> **If you're going to have a group like ours just continue and function … People [need to] feel like they can talk things out with each other. So, these kinds of [music] events … create a space where people can talk to each other, reinforce their connections with each other, support each other if needed, and have some fun, relax, meet new people. … Both for the group itself, but also for what I call that next circle of people … [People] that won't turn up to monthly meetings, but they will turn up to [music events]. And occasionally, somebody says, 'I'll be more involved. What can I do?' So, it's a soft organising, if you like. (W110, key community informant)**

Community music in West End also provides opportunities to generate awareness and raise funds for social services, local businesses and social enterprises, community spaces, and charities. The way music can facilitate the coming together of a community to support social action was described by a number of residents.

For many people in West End, community music initiatives are opportunities to discuss important societal issues and work to create a culture of speaking up and speaking out about injustices they are witnessing or experiencing:

> **Because there's that sort of expression of how you would like the world to be a better place or the things that we want to have changed. And it's important to stand up and be heard and not let things go by because it's when people don't say anything about racism or don't say anything about prejudice that things keep going. … [Music helps] people feel stronger in their commitment to those issues. That certainly rings true for me. (W403, resident)**

> **I think if you listen to musicians talk about music and the potential impact of their music, most of them would say that music can't change the world. But maybe it can change us in some way that enables and encourages us to work for change in the world. … [I]t's not helpful to overstate the impact but not understate it either. … [I]t's about songs that encourage people to find a reason to live, that reinforce values of care and kindness and compassion. So, those things, I think, can nurture people in community—that give them a culture then to take risks, speak up, stand up, speak up. And then there's some songs that are specifically there that help people have a language or actually stand up and speak out, that actually do challenge directly those systems [of oppression]. But it's the people engaging in that struggle that make the difference. The songs are kind of augmented or encouraging or nurturing. (W106, key informant)**

> **'Music binds a community. It binds all ages. It's fun. … It synchronises heartbeats. It synchronises ways of thinking. And, I think, in a world where we will probably have to rely on joining together to fight or help deal with increasing global warming [and other challenges]. And, I think, maybe it's important for us to rediscover that [connection].'**
>
> **(W410, resident)**

Figure 41: Coming together around music. Image by Katina Heard

Moreover, community music in West End plays an important role in broader activism, contributing to and generating participation in social movements. There are many examples of musicians integrating political messages into song lyrics, and this is important for stimulating dialogue within the broader community, as described by a key informant:

> **People are often narrating their lived experiences through music. So, even in the song lyrics of, like, the rock band, or the folk band, or the hip-hop band that's playing at a nighttime music venue, they're talking about this stuff. And so, there are political conversations happening through musical lyrics or musical forms that all those audience members are engaging with on some level. (W117, key community informant)**

People in West End understand community music, then, as a way to strengthen the power and reach of political messages. Indeed, when describing how people often become disengaged with speeches at protests and community meetings, a local journalist stated, 'Just sing it!' (W101, key community informant). Relatedly, coalitions between community musicians and community organisers can strengthen a movement. This was exemplified by the facilitator of a community marching band, who highlighted how community musicians can make protests more meaningful for those participating and function as mouthpieces for disseminating the message:

> **I like to think that we improve the quality [of a protest] and support the standing of the people that we protest alongside by providing something that's nice to listen to and that lightens the mood. So, I like to think that, in that sense, we're helping achieve whatever political goals they are going for by playing music. (W011, community music facilitator)**

First Nations participants in this case study discussed how, in contexts of ongoing colonisation, community music is critical for healing, storytelling, and dialogue in terms of the past and ways forward. A First Nations musician who recently opened a music studio in West End on Boundary Street—a historically significant street that marked a racist exclusionary zone—described how providing a space for their community to create music was (a) about reclaiming place and (b) about allowing First Nations artists and community members to have control of their narrative and educate others in safe and empowering ways:

> **We've had this obligation almost to talk ... about our experiences [in relation to oppression and colonisation] and, like, fill people in with the gaps [in their historical and contemporary knowledge]. And that's the stuff that landed me in hospital. ... The overextending, the exhaustion, feeling the need to constantly come up with new ways to talk about these things. ... When you look at what has needed to be changed... it's a lot to do with space. ... Government took our land and took our ceremony spaces. [They] have built churches on top of these ceremony spaces. And so, there's a role in society to**

> **speak on those things. And there's a role in society to make sure those stories never die. … So, I was just in a position where I was able to make something happen [by opening a music studio]. And that's been the biggest change for me and my friends and family. We've got a space now [to express ourselves and share our stories]. (W116, key community informant)**

Similarly, a local journalist explained how community music festivals organised by the First Nations community are important for the wellbeing of that community while also having important activist outcomes:

> **If you go to Brisbane Blacks Live, you might talk to some of those performers, and they might say that, really, it's about their own community. Essentially, they're singing for their own community, which is important for their community. But there is also that sense that they're telling us [non-Indigenous people] … that they are part of the community. And that they are here. And we are engaging in that. (W101, key community informant)**

Additionally, community music initiatives in West End are a way to experience and practise different ways of being, challenging current political orders and prevailing ideologies. 'Just to be involved in a little project together. It doesn't cost you money. It's taking nothing. It's anti-capitalist in that way, purposefully' (W002, community music facilitator).

Few residents and community music participants considered the potential policy implications of community music practice, but several key community informants—including journalists, elected officials, and representatives of community organisations—described how they saw music as setting the foundation for and influencing dialogue about major national policies. As a key informant explained,

> **Music, like a lot of art forms, can be a space to discuss ideas or explore concepts before it's acceptable to really have those debates in other public policy contexts. And, you know, whatever the issue is, guaranteed that people will be singing and writing songs about it 30 years before there's any government legislation about it. (W117, key community informant)**

Capturing the impact of community music on policy and broader social change is not simple or clear-cut. This was acknowledged by many participants—including elected officials, community music facilitators, and representatives of community organisations—who discussed ways they perceive community music contributing to change while noting it is a complex process in which music will never be solely responsible for change but might play a very significant role alongside other factors.

Figure 42: Advocacy through music. Image by Peter Young

Implications

Insights from the West End case study support and extend Australian and international literature exploring the ways community music contributes to equitable societies (Bartleet, 2023; Bartleet & Heard, 2024; Heard et al., 2023). This report highlights that community music in West End works to improve the immediate wellbeing and life trajectories for many people in the suburb through benefits related to wellbeing and social connection, identity formation and affirmation, and confidence and empowerment. While community music initiatives reach people across different socio-economic and sociocultural divides, people experiencing marginalisation and disadvantage face additional barriers to engaging with community music. These are the people who may benefit most. West End has a strong social and community development sector, and it will be important that these organisations receive adequate support to integrate community music (and other arts-based practices) more systematically into their service delivery. Additionally, building cross-sectoral coalitions can increase the reach and effectiveness of such programs. This is evident in the pilot programs that the Creative Change Project co-designed and implemented with both Micah Projects and Community Plus+ West End Community House as part of this case study (Heard et al., 2024).

Recent research demonstrates the harmful health and wellbeing implications of gentrification for long-term and marginalised residents (Anguelovski et al., 2020; Cole et al., 2021). Supporting the established grassroots community music activities already happening across West End has the potential to mitigate some of these harms. These outcomes, and their implications for health and social equity, are explored in detail in a publication focused specifically on community music as health promotion (Heard & Bartleet, 2025a).

Consistent with emerging literature exploring how community music can support social equity–focused change (Bartleet & Heard, 2024), this case study demonstrates that community music in West End is an avenue for bringing diverse people together to develop empathy and understanding about people different from oneself and to be challenged to think critically about the socio-political structures that work to cement inequity across the community.

Finally, community music in West End is a catalyst for social and political change. Community organisations bring people together through music to raise awareness of and funds for local issues, community musicians bolster activist efforts, and residents use music to create dialogue about local and national political concerns. Importantly, just the existence of community music itself in West End has the potential to create equity-related change: it is a public display of the (often divided) community's values, and it promotes a different way of being together and living a good life.

Community music in West End does more than create opportunities for improving individual wellbeing. This case study demonstrates that community music plays an important role in developing the social fabric of West End, bringing people together in dialogue around who they want to be collectively and how they want to shape the place in which they live and belong. Building a collective identity, including through street activations, formal and informal jams, and storytelling through song, is an essential element of social cohesion, and in contexts of gentrification, such cohesion can be particularly important in addressing social and cultural displacement (Bernstein & Isaac, 2023; Davis et al., 2023).

Figure 43: Community musicians playing for the Community Friends free food gathering. Image by Emma Heard

Figure 44: ***Unity Starts in West End*** by Lisa-Marie Vecchio, Artforce Brisbane. Image by Emma Heard

Figure 45: Kurilpa Derby street DJ. Image by Eduardo Espinoza

Recommendations

Recommendations for Practice

1. *Adopt best practices in community music*

- To achieve social equity goals, community music practitioners should employ non-hierarchical facilitation, ensuring participants feel equal, valued, and respected in all aspects of music-making.
- Programs should facilitate authentic inclusion and accessibility by actively reducing barriers (financial, cultural, physical, psychological), ensuring music-making spaces are welcoming and reflective of diverse community identities.
- Programs should remain flexible and responsive, allowing for ongoing input and adjustments from community members to ensure relevance and adaptability.
- Programs should adopt principles of co-design by involving participants in planning, execution, and evaluation, ensuring their lived experiences directly shape programs, thus building empowerment and ownership.

2. *Strengthen cross-sectoral collaborations*

- Sector leaders should encourage ongoing, sustainable partnerships between arts-based organisations and social service providers, leveraging each sector's expertise, resources, and networks.
- Organisations should establish formal frameworks or agreements to enable collaborative funding applications that support the financial sustainability of joint community music initiatives.
- Program leaders should engage local government, businesses, health services, and education institutions as active collaborators in community music initiatives to maximise reach and impact.

3. *Systematic integration of community music into service delivery*

- Community and social service providers should formally integrate community music into their programming strategies as part of holistic service delivery, recognising music as a means for social connection, cohesion, advocacy, and improved wellbeing.
- Service providers and practitioners should conduct regular capacity-building and training for staff in community music facilitation, increasing organisational understanding of music's social benefits.
- Sector leaders should consider using community music strategically within health promotion, mental health services, community development, and advocacy to enhance service delivery and social equity outcomes.

Recommendations for Policy

1. *Enhance accessibility and use of public spaces*

- Local governments should develop clear, supportive policies that facilitate community-led music initiatives by ensuring public parks, streets, and communal areas are accessible for collaborative music-making events.
- All levels of government should reduce bureaucratic barriers, simplify permit processes, and minimise fees associated with the use of public spaces for music-related activities.
- All levels of government should ensure urban planning processes actively include community music considerations, recognising its role in enhancing safety, wellbeing, local economies, and community identity.

2. *Support and incentivise small business participation*

- Local government should create policy incentives such as grants or subsidies for small businesses that regularly host or facilitate community music activities, particularly those that are accessible from street level, thereby activating spaces and enriching local culture.
- Local economic policies should explicitly recognise community music's role in supporting local trade and economic resilience, particularly in rapidly gentrifying urban areas.

3. *Sector-wide policies encouraging music integration*

- Social, health, educational, and governmental sectors should implement policies supporting the regular use of community music in services and internal practices to stimulate creativity, innovation, and social responsiveness.
- Policy frameworks should encourage collaborations across arts, health, and community sectors to systematically integrate music into broader strategic objectives, such as social cohesion, mental health promotion, and community resilience planning.
- Policy frameworks should advocate for the use of arts-based strategies, including music, in public health initiatives targeting social isolation, mental health, and wellbeing.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. *Continued exploration of community music and equity*

- The Creative Change Project has provided a solid foundation for exploring the role community music can play in creating greater social equity in Australian communities. Further interdisciplinary research could examine how community music interacts with other determinants of social equity, such as housing, economic policy, urban planning, public health, and cultural development.

2. *Place-based focus on research*

- While the health benefits of engaging in music are increasingly evidenced, there is little research exploring broader potential implications for building more equitable places. More attention should be given to exploring the role that community music can play in place-based approaches and in addressing the social, cultural, and political determinants of health and wellbeing.

3. *Complex outcomes and mechanisms of change*

- The processes through which community music can affect individual and community change are complex, and outcomes are closely intertwined with a wide range of factors. Interdisciplinary and action-oriented research that brings together community development, arts, and sociology has the potential to illuminate the how of community music in shaping individual and collective wellbeing.

4. *Long-term and systemic impact studies*

- There is great potential for longitudinal studies that measure sustained impacts of community music participation on individual wellbeing, social cohesion, local economic development, advocacy, and political engagement over extended periods. This could entail investigating how sustained participation in community music may influence broader socio-political attitudes and behaviours and potentially impact local and national policy discourses.

References

Aird, M. (2001). *Brisbane Blacks*. Keeaira Press.

Anguelovski, I., Triguero-Mas, M., Connolly, J. J. T., Kotsila, P., Shokry, G., Pérez Del Pulgar, C., Garcia-Lamarca, M., Argüelles, L., Mangione, J., Dietz, K., & Cole, H. (2020). Gentrification and health in two global cities: A call to identify impacts for socially-vulnerable residents. *Cities & Health*, *4*(1), 40-49. https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2019.1636507

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2021a). *Regional population: Statistics about the population and components of change (birth, deaths, migration) for Australia's capital cities and regions*. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-population/latest-release#queensland

ABS. (2021b). *West End (Brisbane—QLD): 2021 census all persons quickstats*. http://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2011/SSC31746

Barreto, M., Doyle, D. M., & Qualter, P. (2024). Changing the narrative: Loneliness as a social justice issue. *Political Psychology*, *45*(S1), 157–181. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12965

Bartleet, B. -L. (2023). A conceptual framework for understanding and articulating the social impact of community music. *International Journal of Community Music*, *16*(1), 31–49. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/.10.1386/ijcm_00074_1

Bartleet, B. -L., & Heard, E. (2024). Can community music contribute to more equitable societies? A critical interpretive synthesis *Social Justice Research*. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-024-00431-3

Bartleet, B. -L., & Higgins, L. (Eds.). (2018). *The Oxford handbook of community music*. Oxford University Press.

Bernstein, A. G., & Isaac, C. A. (2023). Gentrification: The role of dialogue in community engagement and social cohesion. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *45*(4), 753–770. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2021.1877550

Blair, N. (2023). *Man on a mission: From Cherbourg to Lake Gkula*. AndAlso Books; Woodfordia Inc.

Bowman, J. (2021, 14 July). *'We did not consent.' Community reacts to Brisbane Olympics bid*. The Westender. https://westender.com.au/we-did-not-consent-community-reacts-to-brisbane-olympics-bid/

Bowman, J. (2021, 14 December). People's Park lights up. *Westender*. https://westender.com.au/peoples-park-lights-up/

Burt, J. (2023, 26 June). *West End was Brisbane's bohemian heartland, but now it's the front line of the housing crisis*. ABC News. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-26/qld-west-end-brisbane-gentrification-housing-change/102496236

Capelin, S. (Ed.). (1995). *Challening the centre: Two decades of political theatre. The work of The Popular Theatre Troupe, Order By Numbers and Street Arts Community Theatre Company*. Playlab Press.

Cheshire, L., Walters, P., & ten Have, C. (2018). 'Strangers in my home': Disaster and the durability of the private realm. *The Sociological Review*, *66*(6), 1226–1241. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026118754781

Cole, H. V., Mehdipanah, R., Gullón, P., & Triguero-Mas, M. (2021). Breaking down and building up: Gentrification, its drivers, and urban health inequality. *Build environment and health*, *8*, 157-166. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40572-021-00309-5

Connor, M. (2011). *Yesterday, today and tomorrow: A community profile of West End and Highgate Hill* [Community report]. West End Community House. https://communityplus.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/West-End-Community-Profile-2013-Yesterday-Today-and-Tomorrow.pdf

Davis, B., Foster, K. A., Pitner, R. O., Wooten, N. R., & Ohmer, M. L. (2023). Conceptualizing gentrification-induced social and cultural displacement and place identity among longstanding Black residents. *Journal of Black Studies*, *54*(4), 288–311. https://doi.org/10.1177/00219347231166097

Evershed, N. (2019, 19 April). Inequality in Australia: An interactive map of disadvantage. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/datablog/ng-interactive/2019/apr/19/inequality-in-australia-an-interactive-map-of-disadvantage

Gall, S. (2009). Grassroots 'flexible specialisation' in Brisbane's West End: Towards a politics of economic possibility. *GeoJournal*, *74*(6), 525–540. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-008-9244-7

Godwell, D. (2014, 1 May). Where are the Greeks? *Westender*. https://westender.com.au/greeks/

Granville, P. (2021, 19 January). The West End School of the Arts. *Highgate Hill and Its History*. https://highgatehill-historical-vignettes.com/?s=arts

Heard, E., & Bartleet, B.-L. (2025a). Community music as health promotion: Equity-related insights from urban context in Australia. *Health Promotion International, 40*(3), Article daaf057. https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daaf057

Heard, E., & Bartleet, B.-L. (2025b). How can community music shape individual and collective well-being? A case study of a place-based initiative. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, *36*(2), Article e921. https://doi.org/10.1002/hpja.921

Heard, E., Bartleet, B.-L, Spence, J., Deen, K., Eyles, S., Martinelli, J., & McGuire, K. (2024). How can community music help address loneliness? Insights from music for social connection programs. *Community Health Equity Research & Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1177/2752535X241304084

Heard, E., Bartleet, B.-L., & Woolcock, G. (2023). Exploring the role of place-based arts initiatives in addressing social inequity in Australia: A systematic review. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, *58*(3), 550–572. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.257

Holt-Lunstad, J. (2022). Social connection as a public health issue: The evidence and a systemic framework for prioritizing the 'social' in social determinants of health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, *43*(1), 193–213. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-052020-110732

Kerkhove, R. (2015). *Aboriginal campsites of greater Brisbane: An historical guide*. Boolarong Press.

Mayher, M. (2022, June 28). Local residents rally around resilience. *The Westender*. https://westender.com.au/local-residents-rally-around-resilience-2/

Molnar, L., & Walters, P. (2021). Communuity, aesthetics, and authenticity: The retail curatorship of a rapidly gentrifying Australian streetscape. *Space and Culture*, *24*(2), 328–343. https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331218821283

Rius Ulldemolins, J. (2014). Culture and authenticity in urban regeneration processes: Place branding in central Barcelona. *Urban Studies*, *51*(14), 3026–3045. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098013515762

Ulubasoglu, M. (2020, 27 February). *Natural disasters increase inequality. Recovery funding may make things worse*. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/natural-disasters-increase-inequality-recovery-funding-may-make-things-worse-131643

Walters, P. (2019, 31 January). *Why outer suburbs lack inner city's 'third places': A partial defence of the hipster*. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/why-outer-suburbs-lack-inner-citys-third-places-a-partial-defence-of-the-hipster-110177

Walters, P., & McCrea, R. (2014). Early gentrication and the public realm: A case study of West End in Brisbane, Australia. *Urban Studies*, *51*(2), 355–370. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098013489748

Walters, P., & Smith, N. (2022). It's so ridiculously soulless: Geolocative media, place and third wave gentrification. *Space and Culture*, *27*(1), 94–109. https://doi.org/10.1177/12063312221090428

World Health Organization. (2021). *Health promotion glossary of terms 2021*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240038349

Yeomans, C. (2022, 22 November). Brisbane charity Community Friends hits of its own solution to volunteer shortage. *ABC News*. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-02/brisbane-volunteer-shortage-west-end-group-bucks-trends/101605314