

# Variety Analysis of Northbridge Curfew

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## Overview

In 2003, the Western Australian government initiated an interagency project to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour by young people in Northbridge, Western Australia. Northbridge is the primary night time economy area in Perth city. Historically, Northbridge is also a key cultural meeting point for Aboriginal families coming into Perth.

In 2003, the government decided to formally control access of young people to Northbridge in the evening and night. This was a way to address the public view that Northbridge was adversely affected by crime and anti-social behaviour, and complaints by businesses that this public perception was affecting their revenue.

The intervention was formally named the Northbridge Policy Project (NPP). It was informally referred to as the Northbridge Curfew. The NPP was officially conceived as being a policy to protect 'at-risk' young people in an adult entertainment precinct. Although officially the NPP was not racial, in fact, it acted primarily against Aboriginal young people.

The Northbridge Policy Project comprised a multi-agency collaboration involving Police, Child Protection, Trans Perth security, Education, Youth Justice, Mission Australia and Noongar Patrol and operated under existing government regulations to remove young people from areas in which they were considered at risk and provide support services for them and their families. The Department of Sport and Recreation was an additional agency that was somewhat external to the primary multi-agency group

The NPP at first appeared to be successful on the basis that it appeared that there were apparently lower numbers of young people (primarily Aboriginal young people) in Northbridge, and as time went past, the numbers of apprehended young people also fell.

The multi-agency collaboration was initially problematic, but this was resolved - just before the project was unilaterally closed by the Department of Child Protection.

The actual outcomes were that there was a significant displacement of the at-risk young people to an even higher risk area - in the unmanaged areas outside the city centre close to the casino. In terms of effective action, the Department of Sport and Recreation ran Midnight Basketball programs that resulted in large numbers of Aboriginal young people no longer coming into Northbridge.

## Variety Analyses

### Background – point of origin

The variety in Northbridge comprised that produced by local businesses and their adult customers. The control variety came from a combination of control exerted by the businesses and from police. This latter in most cases was a stable situation. Additional variety came from the young people visiting Northbridge with several culturally unconventional, and in some cases illegal, behaviours.

The existing control variety was less than that required (i.e. insufficient requisite variety). See figure 1.

### **Triggering the NPP Intervention**

The variety of the government control activity in Northbridge was stable and reflected public opinion on the equitable distribution of public resources.

Business people and crime identities with an interest in Northbridge increased their variety by new activities putting pressure on government ministers privately and through the public via their access to TV, radio and print media to generate a moral panic.

The initiative became supported by some managers in government agencies who were short of sufficient variety themselves to enable their own interests.

The response by the Western Australian government was to simultaneously increase their own variety to maintain control and to reduce the potential variety of other players. They did this by creating the NPP intervention that used existing laws of child protection and required a group of agencies to work together in a specific way and used public pressure through the media by redirecting the power of public opinion generated by the moral panic to support the NPP. The use of a compulsory collaborative multi-agency initiative reduced the available variety of these agencies because it prescribed their activities and thus brought them (slightly) more under central government control. See figures 2 and 3.

### **Northbridge Policy Project Intervention (Northbridge Curfew) active time**

The Northbridge Policy Project increased the control variety available to those wishing to control the activities of young people in Northbridge. This was done by adding the control variety available from the joint actions of the multiple organisations that were part of the NPP. This additional variety included: sending young people back home out of Northbridge (if necessary with a free rail ticket); pulling young people off the street into a holding area and either arresting them or arranging for them to be taken home; Indigenous patrols picking young people up and taking them home or to somewhere safe out of Northbridge; child protection checks, involvement and support; family support services; provision of hostel bed if no other option available; provision of food; and young people support services.

A direct product of this was also to attenuate the variety that the young people could bring into Northbridge environment. This attenuation of young people's variety resulted directly from them being taken off the street and held in a fixed location and being sent home – thus neutralizing any variety that they might bring onto the streets of Northbridge.

Providing variety (control or system variety) always has a cost. For the young people, bringing the variety of their actions into the streets of Northbridge has a cost in terms of their energy, tiredness, need for food and financial costs of travel etc.

For the agencies partnering in the NPP, the control variety that they brought to bear to control young people in Northbridge had costs in terms of salaries, resources, rents etc.

As the level of complaints about young people in Northbridge fell along with the number of young people apprehended, one of the controlling partners of the NPP decided to close the program.

### **Northbridge Policy Project Intervention (Northbridge Curfew) Aftermath**

The young people being controlled by the additional control variety brought to bear by the NPP agencies redirected the variety they have available to outside Northbridge.

Instead of meeting in the traditional Aboriginal meeting places of Northbridge, they chose to meet on another traditional meeting place on relatively unused and unpoliced and unmanaged ground in Burswood near the Burswood Casino and the Burswood railway station (which was on the rail line that gave easy access from home for many young people).

In variety terms, the young people had redirected their variety to situationally avoid the control variety previously delivered by the Police and other partners in the Northbridge Policy Project. Instead they were now able to become a controlling element of the new Burswood location.

In terms of the overt aims of the Northbridge Policy Project to protect young people at risk, this transition to Burswood and its environment (dark, violent, unpoliced, high availability of alcohol,) placed the at-risk young people at much greater risk than they had been in Northbridge

Two of the agencies in the NPP (Transperth security and the Noongar patrol) were able to provide an active controlling presence that reduced some of the risks.

After a short period of time, the Police reinstituted a form of the NPP which they unilaterally applied to all young people across the whole of Western Australia. This was a significant unilateral increase in control variety that had the effect of potentially restricting the freedom of young people everywhere in Western Australia (freedom being the right of an individual to implement variety subject to law, i.e. the freedom to do whatsoever they want providing it is legal).

This secondary police initiative has many implications and not only for potentially illegal restrictions on freedoms and rights of individuals> there are implications due to restrictions (from resource limitations) on the variety that police can bring to other crimes and locations. There are a variety of possible variety increasing responses that the Aboriginal young people can bring to the table in different ways at different locations. These will require other variety responses from police and other agencies.

### **Commentary**

Applying a variety analysis to events such as the Northbridge Policy Project can provide a simpler and clearer understanding of the management of power and control than focusing on the concrete details and explicit factors.

By focusing on the variety distributions and flows, it is possible to identify the best intervention of increasing or attenuating variety. Then as an easier secondary process it becomes straightforward to identify the best practical means of introducing or attenuating variety in different parts of the situation.

