

Communities working to reduce Indigenous family violence

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Introduction

The issue of family violence in Indigenous communities across Australia has been described at various times over the past decade as a 'national emergency', 'Australia's Tsunami', and a 'national disgrace' (Howard 2007; Lawrence 2002; Bamblett et al. 2002). It is not a 'new' issue: state commissioned inquiries and government reports, particularly since 1999, have found that Indigenous communities are more vulnerable to violence and more likely to be victims of violence than any other section of Australian society (Gordon et al. 2002; Memmott et al. 2001; Mow 1992; Robertson 1999; Wild & Anderson 2007).

Available evidence clearly establishes that there is no single factor, but rather a multitude of interrelated factors that contribute to the occurrence of family violence in Indigenous communities. Significant attention has been drawn to the relationship between the disruption and distress attributable to colonisation, dispossession and the removal of Indigenous children from their families, and Indigenous experiences of violence. In addition, Indigenous people are much more likely to experience socio-economic disadvantage including unemployment, welfare dependency and overcrowding in households. Physical and mental

health issues, low self esteem, a sense of powerlessness, and destructive coping behaviours including substance abuse, may be further contributing factors to the incidence of family violence. All of these experiences, separately but especially in combination, are risk factors for family violence. (See further Al-Yaman et al. 2006; Cripps 2007; Robertson 1999; Weatherburn et al. 2006).

Mainstream responses to Indigenous family violence have typically arisen in the context of a crisis, thus their focus has largely been on policing, prosecution and punishment, as well as providing safe accommodation for women and children. Mainstream responses also involve multiple agencies each with heavy workloads and limited time, and therefore effective communication between agencies can be compromised. Such agencies also generally have limited cultural awareness and/or experience working in Indigenous contexts and are often unfamiliar with the situations confronting many Indigenous families (Cripps 2007; Gordon et al. 2002; Wild & Anderson 2007).

In response to the challenges and shortcomings of mainstream responses, recommendations for reforms across all sectors have been put forward (Gordon et al. 2002; Wild & Anderson 2007; Cunneen 2010) and many Indigenous-specific programs

and policies have been introduced. Government agencies have responded positively to recommendations for reforms. Over the past decade the justice sector has: increased the employment of Indigenous staff; made training opportunities available to improve cultural awareness and understanding of the complexities and contexts of violence in Indigenous communities; enhanced interagency collaborations to provide more integrated services; and implemented alternative mechanisms for engaging Indigenous community stakeholders in the justice process (e.g. Indigenous sentencing courts, community justice groups) (WA 2002; NSW 2007; Qld 2000). It should however be noted that there have been few formal evaluations of these reforms. Similarly, there is little evidence of the effectiveness of Indigenous specific programs due to minimal investment in evaluation (HREOC 2008). This brief therefore generally relies on reports of good practice.

This brief will describe some of the promising efforts to reduce Indigenous family violence in Australia and overseas, including both government and community initiatives, as well as support mechanisms and measures for victims. Some of Memmott et al.'s (2001) nine categories of violence program types are adopted as headings: support programs; behavioural reform programs; community policing and monitoring

programs; justice programs; mediation programs; education and awareness programs; and composite programs. Evaluations of alcohol restrictions are also considered.

Definition

The term 'family violence' in an Indigenous context, is used to describe the range of violence that takes place in Indigenous communities including the physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that may be perpetrated within a family. The term also recognises the broader impacts of violence; on extended families, kinship networks and community relationships. It has also been used in the past decade to encompass acts of self-harm and suicide, and has become widely adopted as part of the shift towards addressing intra-familial violence in all its forms (Gordon et al. 2002; Robertson 1999; Wild & Anderson 2007).

Support Programs

These programs provide services to victims of violence. They generally focus on counselling, legal advice and advocacy, and are often modelled on mainstream services. They seek to respond to family violence but do not actually seek to reduce its incidence.

Indigenous Family Violence Prevention Legal Services

Indigenous Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS) have played an important role in addressing the needs of victims of family violence. They provide culturally appropriate and holistic assistance to victims of family violence and/or sexual assault in the form of legal services, information, counselling, referral and practical support. They may also undertake preventative initiatives, such as community education and awareness programs.

The findings of a 2006 audit of 13 FVPLS units were positive, with the majority achieving the desired outcome of working collaboratively with other service providers to deliver appropriate, accessible,

equitable, efficient and effective legal assistance and related services to victims of family violence (Australia. Department of Finance and Deregulation 2006). There are currently 29 FVPLS units, 26 of which are located in very remote, remote or outer regional areas across Australia. Given 70 per cent of the Indigenous population resides in urban and large regional settings, several bodies have recommended that similar services be offered in urban areas (Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit 2005).

Tu Tama Wahine o Taranaki and Tu Whare Ruru hau o Meri

In New Zealand, the *Domestic Violence Act 1995* provides for programs for 'adult protected persons' (usually women). The associated regulations require that *Tikanga Maori* (Maori values and concepts) be included in program design and delivery. Two 12-week programs for Maori adult protected persons, grounded in *Kaupapa Maori* (Maori practices and philosophies), *Tu Tama Wahine o Taranaki* and *Tu Whare Ruru hau o Meri*, have been evaluated (Cram et al. 2002). The programs aim to protect participants by providing education and information, building support networks and assisting them to explore options for the future.

An evaluation found that women participants spoke highly of the programs but noted that 12 weeks is only 'a small step on the pathways that Maori women must tread in order to become free from violence' (Cram et al. 2002: 20). The evaluation affirmed that programs need to come from a cultural base to address the needs of protected persons in a holistic fashion. Brown and Languedoc came to a similar conclusion in their review of successful Canadian Aboriginal family violence programs, noting that programs must be 'grounded in the traditional teachings of each community' (2004: 482).

Behavioural Reform Programs

Behavioural reform programs are rehabilitative in focus and seek to

work directly with perpetrators of violence with the aim of changing their behaviour to prevent future acts of family violence.

Ke Ala Lokahi

The *Ke Ala Lokahi* program, conducted in Hawaii between 2000 and 2005, aimed to implement a culturally-based intervention program for Native Hawaiian perpetrators that would build skills and increase knowledge of Native Hawaiian cultural values, beliefs and traditions. Participants attended 24 weekly two hour sessions with a final two day session held at a cultural site.' before the sentencing beginning 'Case managers worked with participants, maintaining contact. Case managers worked with participants, maintaining contact with probation services and providing individual counselling, advocacy, support and referrals. Perpetrators were randomly assigned to either *Ke Ala Lokahi* or the standard mainstream intervention, which used a cognitive behavioural approach.

A formal evaluation of *Ke Ala Lokahi* reported positive outcomes, for both victims and perpetrators, in their knowledge about themselves and their relationships. However, a recidivism rate of 36 percent was reported for those who had completed 80 percent or more of the program, a similar rate to those who completed the standard intervention (Kanuha 2007).

Community Policing and Monitoring Programs

Through community policing and monitoring programs, community members 'police' their own communities for violence or the precursors of violence.

Night Patrols

Night patrols are common in the Northern Territory, and also exist under different names in most other states in Australia. Night patrols involve a group of volunteers who routinely patrol the main street, keeping an eye on community members affected by alcohol. The object is not to remove intoxicated persons from the streets

but to resolve problems and settle disputes before they escalate and potentially draw in extended families or entire tribal groupings. However if violence has already taken place, the night patrol will transport victims to refuges or medical centres, and perpetrators to sobering up shelters (Curtis 1993). Critical to the success of night patrols is police support; but police must also have a physical presence in maintaining law and order in the community (Higgins 1997).

Despite night patrols having been in operation since the 1980s, there is little data available for evaluation (AIC 2011). With the aim of addressing this issue, the AIC has developed a new performance and reporting framework for the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department (Beacroft et al. 2011).

An evaluation in 2003 found that night patrols were moving beyond their traditional function to 'developing sophisticated case-work arms and ... engaging in multi-agency liaison in their localities' (Blagg & Valuri 2003:7). Community members reported that the presence of a patrol in combination with a safe house had reduced and prevented family violence (Blagg & Valuri 2003). More recent evaluations confirm that night patrols are highly valued across the Northern Territory, and that communities view them as directly contributing to improvements in community safety (AIC 2011; ANAO 2011). The importance of community involvement and support, and good relationships between the police and night patrols were highlighted as critical to the success of patrols (ANAO 2011). However it has been noted that in building relationships with local police, it is important that patrols maintain a distinct and culturally appropriate contribution to crime prevention and community support rather than becoming a de facto police service (AIC 2011).

Shelter / Protection Programs

While not seeking to directly address the underlying causes of violence in communities, Memmott et al.'s framework (2001) identified shelter/

protection programs as inextricably linked to the success of night patrols and as an important response to high levels of violence in Indigenous communities. Sobering up shelters are predominantly aimed at men affected by alcohol who are potential perpetrators of violence. Safe houses provide safe places for women and children when escaping violence. As well as accommodation, they provide activities that promote and build the capacity of women and children to make informed decisions about their safety and healing options (Australia. National Homelessness Strategy & QLD. Department of Communities 2004).

The Yuendumu Women's Centre, a community-controlled organisation founded by Aboriginal women in the late 1970s, established a safe house in 2003 to address escalating violence in the community. The Social Justice Commissioner has recognised the Yuendumu Safe House as a 'promising practice' in reducing violence (HREOC 2008: 158). It is 'well respected and valued' by community members who view it as a community owned and conceived solution to violence (HREOC 2008: 159). This example reinforces the view supported by substantial literature that community-based initiatives aimed at reducing violence, where the community exercises a degree of ownership over its establishment, development and operation, are more likely to be successful (Memmott 2001; Keel 2004; HREOC 2008).

The support of men in the community is also emphasised as critical to the success of safe houses, as is the support of the police (HREOC 2008).

Justice Programs

Alternative justice models have been developed in Australia and internationally to reduce family violence.

Healing Circles

The Hollow Water community in Canada developed the Community Holistic Circle Healing (CHCH) process in response to sexual abuse.

This program works with perpetrators who have agreed to plead guilty, and combines healing and sentencing circles to allow sexual abuse to be openly discussed. In collaboration with a variety of services, perpetrators are confronted by, and held accountable to their victims, their families and the community.

A 2001 evaluation of CHCH found that two clients out of 107 (7%) reoffended in its first ten years of operation, compared with a general recidivism rate for sex offenders of approximately 13%. Community members also perceived an improvement in the community's health and wellness because of the program (Native Counselling Services of Alberta 2001). The CHCH process has been cited by many Australian reports as a best practice initiative (Gordon et al. 2002; NSW Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce 2006; Wild & Anderson 2007). However, it is important to note the small number of clients involved in the evaluation. Significant concerns have also been raised that healing circles tend more to the needs of offenders than those of victims and may fail to address underlying power inequities (Cripps & McGlade 2008; La Rocque 1997).

Indigenous Sentencing Courts

In Australia, most jurisdictions have implemented Indigenous sentencing circles or courts. These courts apply Australian sentencing law and procedure but allow Indigenous Elders and Respected Persons to participate in the process. Family violence offences can be heard in some courts, but this is controversial and Northern Territory guidelines indicate that 'caution needs to be exercised' for offences that involve violence against women (Marchetti 2009). Evaluations have indicated that the courts can provide a culturally appropriate process and that the participation of Elders can increase the accountability of offenders (Morgan & Louis 2010). They can also increase Indigenous ownership of the administration of the law (Borowski 2010). However there is no strong evidence of reduced recidivism (Fitzgerald 2008). Furthermore, evaluations

have focused on offenders and little research has been undertaken into the experience of victims.

Mediation Programs

Indigenous mediation programs have arisen both in Australia and internationally over the last two decades. They provide culturally appropriate dispute resolution services to assist in addressing issues that may escalate into violence. Bauman and Pope (2009) provide examples of community approaches to dispute resolution, however there is little information available on their effectiveness in family violence contexts.

Mainstream services generally discourage the use of mediation in cases of family violence and some researchers question whether restorative justice is safe or effective for victims of family violence (Stubbs 2004). However, several commentators have reported that some Indigenous people would like mediation services to assist with family violence (Cunneen et al. 2005). Kelly (2002) argues that while mediation is not suitable to resolve violence, it may be possible to mediate issues in a relationship where violence is present, without condoning violence. Critical evaluations are needed to ascertain whether appropriate processes can be developed in the Indigenous context to mediate family violence related disputes without compromising the safety of victims or condoning the violence (Cunneen et al. 2005; Bauman & Pope 2009).

Mawul Rom

Mawul Rom may be a promising initiative in developing practices and processes to respond to family violence using mediation. The *Mawul Rom* Project, which began in 2004 is a collaboration between the Yolngu people and non-Indigenous alternative dispute resolution experts. Through ceremony, discussion, education and performance, Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants learn about dispute resolution, cross-cultural decision making, mediation and leadership

skills. Participants have returned to their communities and applied these skills to community problems, including family violence (HREOC 2008). No formal evaluation has been conducted, but the *Mawul Rom* program was recently accredited as a Masters program by Charles Darwin University (CDU 2010).

Education and Awareness Programs

Education and awareness programs are critical to the engagement of all community members in confronting violence in the home and in the community. They provide information and resources on violence and challenge community members to actively take a stand against violence and become involved in initiatives to create safer communities.

Mildura Family Violence and Sexual Assault Campaign

The Mildura Family Violence and Sexual Assault campaign was developed by Mildura Aboriginal Corporation, Murray Valley Aboriginal Cooperative and a number of Aboriginal justice and family violence organisations, in close consultation with Victoria Police. Funded by Victoria Police, the campaign included posters and three television commercials, each with different themes: women, children and men. Each discussed the impact of violence and referred victims to appropriate services.

The campaign has not been evaluated but Victoria Police have reported that the process of creating the advertisements improved the community's knowledge and awareness of family violence, and also improved the relationship between police and the Aboriginal community (HREOC 2008).

NgatiPorou Community Education Project

The *NgatiPorou* Community Education Project took place in a rural area of New Zealand where 62% of the population identify as Maori. The Project aimed to reduce injury by addressing road safety,

alcohol-and drug-related harm, playground safety, and family violence. It incorporated *Tikanga Maori* (customary knowledge) and was based on the *marae* (community meeting places). The family violence work began by identifying a network of those already interested or involved in family violence prevention. Wananga (education sessions) were conducted using language and situations relevant to Maori, and a *hui* (meeting) and concert were held to raise awareness about the need to prevent violence (Brewin & Coggan 2004).

In their evaluation, Brewin and Coggan (2004) found that the program allowed the community to have ownership over the initiatives through development and implementation of the program. However, pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys of 476 Maori community members only found a small increase (27% to 31%) in those who would now 'walk away from a threatening situation at home' (Brewin & Coggan 2004: 11).

Aboriginal Women Against Violence Project

The Aboriginal Women Against Violence Project in southwest Sydney aimed to train Indigenous women to become trainers, mentors and advocates, to increase community understanding about the impacts of family violence on women and children, and to increase the capacity of participants to report violence. Five training programs were held and an Aboriginal Women Against Violence Committee was established to advocate for service provision, raise awareness and support Aboriginal women's networking.

An evaluation (Rawthorne 2010) found that participants had increased knowledge of the local service system, were more confident in accessing services, and had built networks to challenge violence against Aboriginal women. An unanticipated outcome was the challenge to local services to consider how they can better support Aboriginal women (Rawthorne 2010).

Composite Programs

'Composite' or 'holistic' programs attempt to target the offender, victim and community as a whole and are particularly appropriate when addressing dysfunctional communities with multiple problems (Memmott et al. 2001).

Balgo Women's Law Camp

The Balgo Women's Law Camp, a highly regarded cultural initiative established in 2007 by the Kapululangu Aboriginal Women's Association, is a composite program that aims to use Aboriginal law and culture and community development theory to tackle violence. The Law Camp was a response both to intergenerational violence in the community and the Northern Territory Emergency Response. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner reported that the Camp has had a positive impact on the community and especially for women, who found it empowering to work toward finding solutions to the problems in the community (HREOC 2008).

Aboriginal Family and Community Healing Program

The Aboriginal Family and Community Healing Program, delivered by the Central Northern Adelaide Health Service, included a structured eight-week family wellbeing course for women, a men's group, individual counselling and camps. An evaluation found that the program met its primary objectives of: building community capacity to support safe families; improving participants' communication and conflict resolution skills; supporting families in crisis; and building the capacity of mainstream agencies (Kowanko & Power 2008). Its strengths included its holistic approach and Aboriginal cultural focus (Kowanko et al. 2009).

Alcohol Restrictions

Alcohol management plans and other restrictions on the sale and use of alcohol have been in place in a number of areas for many years, however there have been few formal evaluations. (*Note: A Research Brief*

published by the Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse is forthcoming on this topic.)

Evaluations have been published on restrictions in WA and NT communities. The evaluation of alcohol restrictions in Fitzroy Crossing and Fitzroy Valley demonstrated that two years after implementation, health and social benefits were continuing for local communities (University of Notre Dame 2010a). While alcohol restrictions had not stopped family violence, the evaluation found good evidence that the severity and incidence of family violence had reduced significantly. In Halls Creek, reported domestic violence decreased in the twelve months following the introduction of alcohol restrictions (University of Notre Dame 2010b), and there were similar decreases in Groote Eylandt and Bickerton Island (Conigrave et al. 2007).

Evaluations of restrictions in Alice Springs (Senior et al. 2009) and Katherine (d'Abbs et al. 2010b) were less encouraging, with an initial reduction in harm that was not sustained over the longer term. These evaluations suggest that the extent to which the community is consulted and supports the restrictions is relevant to their effectiveness (AIC 2011). The evaluation of Tennant Creek restrictions (d'Abbs et al. 2010a) did not report specifically on family violence. Further research and evaluation of alcohol restrictions as a behaviour change mechanism in preventing and reducing violence is required.

Common Factors For Effective Family Violence Program Design

The material reviewed for this brief highlights both a lack of solid evidence of the effectiveness of programs designed to reduce the incidence of family violence, and some positive signs emerging from evaluations of program design that is inclusive of Indigenous communities. Qualitative evidence suggests that effective programs require the involvement of Indigenous communities in

defining the problem and its context, and in setting the parameters for how to engage with the issue(s). Interventions can then be developed by and for the community in which they operate so that they recognise and respect Indigenous diversity, embrace Indigenous cultural values, and foster community engagement in decision-making processes. Overall, this would ensure that the community is vested in the issue, the intervention and its outcomes.

The type of interventions that have consistently been identified as being most effective in responding to family violence are those designed to be flexible and holistic in their approach, responding to the multiplicity of factors contributing to the occurrence of violence and to the many people affected by it (HREOC 2008).

It is widely recognised that the skills and resources needed to respond to the problems associated with family violence involve multiple professionals and organisations, who must work in partnership towards the mutual goals of healing individuals, families and communities, breaking the cycle of violence and creating safer, healthier, nurturing environments. Working effectively in partnership requires:

- Making use of local structures and developing relationships with a variety of key players including other services, Indigenous organisations, Elders, and most importantly, community members of both sexes and different ages
- Establishing effective and functional leadership and decision-making structures
- Establishing processes where services work together 'respectfully' and as 'equal partners', and
- Making the time for full and open dialogue between all stakeholders.

A partnership approach, if appropriately structured, can meet program goals but can also strengthen the capacity of the existing workforce through both the sharing of knowledge and training resources between organisations.

Planning for sustainability is a further critical element to the success of any

initiative seeking to reduce Indigenous family violence. The reliance on short-term government funding can compromise the effectiveness and impact of programs.

Conclusion

Despite the myriad of programs that exist there is a lack of robust, formal evaluations of Indigenous violence programs (Memcott 2006). This makes it difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of such interventions, whether they are designed to reduce the incidence of family violence, or to build the capacity of communities and individuals to cope with violence. It also means that the evidence base from which policy makers can draw on to design effective programs is reduced. Evaluations are required at various intervals, recognising that the benefits of programs may only be apparent at two or five years after the intervention, not the typical six months post-intervention evaluations that currently take place.

The other clear conclusion from this brief is positive and encouraging: of the evaluations that exist, some show on a qualitative level, that genuine partnerships, a sense of ownership, and participation in programs increases the receptiveness of the community.

Indigenous communities are working hard, often despite immense odds, to tackle the problem of violence within their communities.

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