
PERSPECTIVES ON INDIGENOUS CRIME IN A REMOTE COMMUNITY

by Rebecca O'Hara

INTRODUCTION

It is well documented in the literature that Indigenous Australians are over-represented in prison and are more likely than non-Indigenous prisoners to return to prison.¹ In order to address this over-representation, it is important to understand the factors which may contribute to Indigenous people committing crimes. This article explores perspectives on the factors that contribute to crime among Indigenous people in a remote community in Australia.

The research informing this article was part of an evaluation project which examined an Indigenous Community Justice Diversion Program in Mount Isa, Queensland ('Qld').² North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services ('NWQICSS') received funding from the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department to implement a diversionary rehabilitative bail program operating through the Indigenous Sentencing List³ (formerly the Murri Court). The program incorporates case management, Murri Men's and Women's Groups,⁴ referral to other community services and Bush Healing.⁵

This paper presents a brief overview of the context of the research and literature review highlighting contributing factors associated with Indigenous people offending. An analysis is then presented of the data collected during the evaluation which focused on participants' perspectives on the factors that contribute to crime among Indigenous people in the Mount Isa community. Perspectives on crime were collected from Indigenous offenders (male and female clients of the program), stakeholders and staff who run the program. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for addressing Indigenous offending in the region.

BACKGROUND

This research was conducted in Mount Isa, a remote community located 904 kilometres west of Townsville in North Qld.⁶ The town has a population of 21 237 and an estimated Indigenous population of 15 per cent (compared to an Indigenous population of 4 per cent in Qld).⁷ The traditional owners of Mount Isa are the Kalkadoon people.⁸ Mount Isa's remoteness and main industry of mining create

some challenges for residents including a shortage of affordable or adequate housing and a strain on available infrastructure and social services.⁹ There is a shortage of GP, dental, psychology, allied health, child development and youth services. Furthermore, the region's Medicare Local has identified a need for drug and alcohol prevention programs and for increased health education.¹⁰ There are disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous households in Mount Isa. Firstly, median weekly income is lower among Indigenous households compared to non-Indigenous households (\$1363 compared to \$2190 respectively).¹¹ Additionally, 34 per cent of all Indigenous households were rented from the state housing authority.¹² Average household size was larger among Indigenous compared with non-Indigenous households (3.5 persons compared to 2.6 persons, respectively).¹³

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature outlines a number of complex and inter-related factors that may contribute to crime or recidivism among Indigenous offenders. From an analysis of the literature reviewed for this project, contributing factors can be classified into three broad groups including historical practices, community welfare and individual factors. It is important to note that many of the individual factors apply to all offenders regardless of Indigenous status; however, the prevalence of these factors may be greater amongst Indigenous people.¹⁴

It is noted in the literature that the historical practices of colonisation have contributed to many of the community and individual risk factors associated with crime among Indigenous offenders.¹⁵ Colonisation resulted in social, cultural and economic dispossession among Indigenous communities.¹⁶ Community welfare factors relate to the overall wellbeing of the community, acknowledging that Indigenous communities are often disadvantaged across multiple areas when compared to Australia as a whole. The literature outlines disadvantages in the following areas: health (eg poor physical health and life expectancy); education (eg lower educational attainment); employment (eg high unemployment levels); social (eg community conflict and low cohesion) and

housing (eg overcrowded housing).¹⁷The community and historical factors outlined contribute to disadvantage and may contribute to individual circumstances such as unemployment or under employment; overcrowded living conditions; lower resilience; stress and anxiety; lack of self-esteem; boredom; high levels of alcohol consumption and poorer health outcomes (physical and mental).¹⁸

It has been noted in the literature that the risk factors for Indigenous offending may be more prevalent for Indigenous people living in remote locations. Indigenous people aged 15 years and over, living in remote areas, were more likely than their major city counterparts to have been arrested in the last five years (19.4 per cent compared to 14.0 per cent, respectively).¹⁹ Increased prevalence of risk factors for Indigenous people living in a remote location have been related to increased disadvantage across a range of indicators when compared to their major city counterparts including a:

- lower proportion of Indigenous people living in a remote areas completed grade 12 compared with Indigenous people living in major cities
- greater proportion of remote residents experienced at least one life stressor²⁰
- lower proportion of Indigenous remote residents believed they could get support in a time of crisis
- lower proportion of Indigenous remote residents were home owners and higher proportion lived in dwellings that had major structural problems or were overcrowded.²¹

Authors have highlighted the association between excessive alcohol consumption leading to alcohol related crime and disorder.²²The incidence of high risk alcohol consumption is more prevalent in rural and remote areas when compared to urban areas.²³ A slightly higher proportion of Indigenous residents who live in a remote community consumed alcohol at levels considered to be high risk, compared with counterparts who live in major cities (5.7 per cent compared with 4.5 per cent respectively).²⁴ The contributing factors of alcohol misuse in rural areas has been linked to limited recreation and socialising venues, values such as 'mateship' and boredom.²⁵ This review has highlighted the complex and inter-related nature of issues which may contribute to crime and the increased prevalence of these factors that may be experienced by Indigenous people living in a remote location.

PERSPECTIVES ON INDIGENOUS CRIME

During the broader program evaluation, participants discussed factors that contributed to offending and reoffending by Indigenous people in Mount Isa. There were three participant groups that contributed to this research; NWQICSS staff, stakeholders and Indigenous offenders who are clients of the program. Both male and female clients of the program were typically registered with

the program for offences related to domestic violence breaches, breach of bail conditions and driving related offences.

The research utilised a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews with staff and stakeholders and yarning sessions²⁶ with Indigenous clients of the program. The Elders Advisory Group for the NWQICSS program were consulted during the development stage of this project to discuss the appropriate protocol for collecting data, provide feedback on the participant question guides and to provide their perspectives on factors that contribute to Indigenous people committing crime in the region. Ethics approval for the project was granted from James Cook University's Human Research Ethics Committee. A total of 33 individual interviews were completed including seven NWQICSS staff interviews, twelve stakeholder interviews and fourteen yarning sessions with Indigenous offenders who are clients of the program (ten male and four female clients).²⁷ Data for this paper was analysed thematically using the framework approach.²⁸

The perspectives provided by staff, stakeholders and clients of the NWQICSS Indigenous Justice Program highlighted the complex and inter-related nature of factors that contribute to Indigenous people committing crime in the area. Participants provided factors related to historical practices, community welfare and individual circumstances. There was some congruence in the perspectives provided by the different participant groups. Alcohol and family conflict were two factors that were mentioned frequently, both at the community and individual level.

HISTORICAL PRACTICES

Participants in each of the three participant groups indicated that there was a loss of Indigenous culture in the region. The literature identifies that a loss of culture has been associated with the historical practices of colonisation.²⁹ This factor was mentioned by two clients, one staff member and one stakeholder. As well as affecting cultural identity, this loss of culture was seen to affect people's behaviour and understanding about how to lead a good life. This factor is best illustrated by an excerpt from an interview with a NWQICSS staff member:

All these young fellas lost their culture, most of them wouldn't have a clue what it is to be an Aboriginal person...A lot of them been through...the court system because they're a lost person. They can't fit into white society; they can't understand Aboriginal society because they don't know, and I find when you don't know, you're sort of a bit lost.

COMMUNITY WELFARE FACTORS

Respondents indicated a number of factors related to community welfare which were perceived to contribute to crime including a lack of appropriate housing, unemployment, lack of education,

normalised behaviours and family stability. Participants noted that homelessness in the region as well as overcrowding within houses were significant challenges for clients. Two clients focused on overcrowding, one stakeholder highlighted homelessness, while a staff member and stakeholder mentioned both housing factors. Two clients, a staff member and a stakeholder also perceived that a lack of employment for Indigenous people in the region also contributed to crime. The staff member and stakeholder noted that the lack of employment of Indigenous people may be linked to a 'skill gap' particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy skills. Participants also indicated that conflict and violence (partner, family and community), high alcohol consumption and crime had become normalised behaviours within the local Indigenous community. One staff member and three stakeholders indicated that these normalised behaviours impacted family stability. It was noted that these detrimental behaviours were seen to be repeated in subsequent generations.

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Discussions with participants revealed a number of individual factors which contributed to Indigenous people committing crimes in the region. Two clients, two staff and one stakeholder indicated that the number of tragic or traumatic events that many Indigenous people experience can lead to anger, stress, unresolved issues and high alcohol consumption—which contributed to crime in the region. It was noted that people may not get assistance to deal with these unresolved issues. Three clients also indicated that a lack of support may contribute to crime. Behavioural factors at an individual level were noted by clients in relation to committing crime, namely mimicking others behaviour, committing crime for the 'thrill of it' and boredom due to unemployment. At an individual level clients reflected on their own situations and acknowledged they were living in overcrowded houses (two clients) and had difficulty finding employment (two clients). These circumstances created stress and caused conflict amongst partners and family members. Five clients identified that they would like to change their employment situation and find a job. Conflict was repeatedly mentioned by all participant groups as a major contributor to Indigenous people committing crimes within the remote community (five clients, two staff and four stakeholders). The influence of alcohol was among the responses that had greatest congruence between the participant groups with regard to contributing to crime in the region (six clients, five staff and nine stakeholders highlighting this factor).

DISCUSSION

The research revealed a number of important implications for addressing Indigenous offending in this region. Firstly, this research identified similar factors as the literature, which may contribute

to crime at both an individual and community level. The research highlighted the complex nature and circumstances of many of the clients' lives, with clients often experiencing unemployment, overcrowded housing/homelessness, conflict, alcohol issues and a loss of culture. These issues are consistent with the literature in relation to risk factors for crime. However, the extent of clients' life circumstances and issues with housing has been identified as more prevalent for Indigenous people living in a remote location compared to their urban counterparts.³⁰

As well as affecting cultural identity, this loss of culture was seen to affect people's behaviour and understanding about how to lead a good life.

The greatest congruence in perceptions from participants regarding factors which contribute to Indigenous people offending related to conflict and high alcohol consumption. This is consistent with the literature showing a higher proportion of people living in rural and remote areas consuming alcohol at high risk levels.³¹ Additionally, tragic and traumatic events, lack of support and lack of family stability were also revealed in this research as contributing factors to Indigenous offending. While participants did not explicitly discuss historical practices, they did mention a loss of Indigenous culture in this region as a contributor to Indigenous offending, which has been linked to historical practices.³²

The contributing factors identified in this analysis raise some important implications for service delivery in this region in order to address Indigenous offending. Firstly, the research highlighted some systemic factors such as housing, education, and employment which need to be addressed in the region. The provision of additional housing options such as men's and women's shelters, public housing or transitional housing is required in this region as clients had experienced homelessness and overcrowding. The research highlighted the need for skill development among Indigenous offenders particularly in relation to numeracy and literacy skills in order to improve employment opportunities. Additionally, clients identified difficulty and/or a need to find employment. Greater access to, or a dedicated job search and traineeship services, is needed for Indigenous people in the region to link them to employment opportunities (eg relevant trades for the region such as those associated with the mining or construction industries). Broader access to, and funding for, cultural development programs for Indigenous people in the region is also required in order to build a sense of cultural identity

among the Indigenous people in this community. Currently, NWQICSS offer a Bush Healing program to provide an opportunity to reconnect with culture, however, at this stage this program is only accessible to people through the justice program.³³ Given that alcohol and conflict were repeatedly mentioned by all participant groups in this research, there exists a broader need for alcohol and conflict resolution education at a community level. Further research is required to determine whether factors contributing to Indigenous offending vary between urban, rural and remote settings.

CONCLUSION

This research and the literature indicate that factors contributing to crime need to be targeted at both an individual and community level. Given the complexity and inter-relatedness of these factors, a holistic and cohesive approach to addressing these factors is needed at a community, state government and federal government level in order to begin to address Indigenous offending. One approach that may be useful in addressing these factors is adopting a justice reinvestment approach to addressing Indigenous offending in the community. Under this approach a portion of funds that are typically spent on imprisonment are diverted to community initiatives that seek to address the underlying causes of crime in the community.³⁴ In Mount Isa this money could be used to fund community based justice programs (such as the one provided by NWQICSS); purchase housing to be used as shelters or transitional housing and fund education and skill development programs for Indigenous people in the community. Utilising a justice reinvestment approach could therefore assist with addressing both individual and community level factors that contribute to crime in the region.

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- 1 Troy Allard, 'Understanding and preventing Indigenous offending' (Research Brief 9, Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse, Attorney General's Department New South Wales, 2010) 1; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Prisoners in Australia' (Catalogue number 4517.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).
- 2 Rebecca O'Hara, *Evaluation of the Marapai Ngartathati Murri*

Women's Group and Yurru Ngartathati Men's Group - Indigenous Justice Program for North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services, (November 2013) Australian Indigenous Health Infonet <http://www.healthinfonet.edu.au/uploads/resources/26663_26663.pdf>.

- 3 Department of Justice and Attorney-General, 'Indigenous Sentencing List', (Factsheet, 2012).
- 4 The Murri Men's and Women's groups are gender specific groups that form a part of the NWQICSS justice program. These groups provide an opportunity for clients to meet stakeholders, discuss risk factors such as intoxication and work towards its mitigation or elimination. They are facilitated by NWQICSS staff and Indigenous Elders involved in the Indigenous Sentencing List.
- 5 Bush healing involves trips with clients in gender groups to the bush located outside of town. It is facilitated by local Elders and provides an opportunity to learn traditional practices such as setting up camp, making fire, preparing and eating bush tucker and preparing traditional artefacts like didgeridoos, clap sticks and boomerangs.
- 6 Central and North West Queensland Medicare Local, A health needs assessment in consultation with community health profile: Mount Isa (March 2013) <<http://www.cnwqml.com.au/assets/files/Health%20Profiles/MOUNT%20ISA%20COMMUNITY%20HEALTH%20PROFILE.pdf>>.
- 7 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census 2011 Basic Community Profile Mount Isa LGA* (September 2012) Australian Bureau of Statistics <http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/communityprofile/LGA35300?opendocument&navpos=230>; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Australian Demographic Statistics', (catalogue number 3101.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).
- 8 Central and North West Queensland Medicare Local, above n 6.
- 9 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Australian Government Survey of Employers' Recruitment Experiences - Mount Isa Employment Service Area* (June 2011) <<http://foi.deewr.gov.au/documents/survey-employers-recruitment-experiences-mt-isa-employment-service-area>>.
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- 11 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census 2011 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Indigenous) Profile - Mount Isa LGA* (September 2012) <http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/communityprofile/LGA35300?opendocument&navpos=230>.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Allard, above n 1.
- 15 Joy Wundersitz, 'Indigenous perpetrators of violence: Prevalence and risk factors for offending' (Australian Institute of Criminology, Research and Public Policy Series 105, 2010) 30.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid; Alison Vivian and Eloise Shierer *Factors affecting crime rates in Indigenous communities in NSW: a pilot study in Bourke and Lightning Ridge* (Community Report, Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning - University of Technology Sydney, 2010).
- 18 Allard, above n 1; Wundersitz, above n 15; Talina Drabsch *Reducing the risk of recidivism* (NSW Parliamentary Research Service, 2006); Robin Jones, Mary Masters, Alison Griffiths *et al.* 'Culturally relevant assessment of Indigenous offenders: A literature review' (2002) 37(3) *Australian Psychologist* 187.
- 19 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2008*, Table 1a: Law and Justice, (Catalogue number 4714, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010).
- 20 Stressors are measured by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey* and include life experiences such as death of a family member, illness, pregnancy, relationship factors and behavioural issues (e.g. trouble with police, gambling, alcohol). Further information is available: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2008* data item list (Catalogue number 47140, 2010).

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- 21 Wundersitz, above n15; Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2008*, (Catalogue number 47140, 2010).
- 22 National Rural Health Alliance, 'Alcohol use in rural Australia' (Fact Sheet 30, National Rural Health Alliance, November 2011), 1; Anthony Morgan and Amanda McAtamney 'Key issues in alcohol related violence' (Research in practice summary paper, no 4, Australian Institute of Criminology, December 2009), 1.
- 23 National Rural Health Alliance, above n 22.
- 24 Australian Bureau of Statistics, above n 20.
- 25 National Rural Health Alliance, above n 22.
- 26 Yarning sessions are a method of Indigenous research used to establish a relationship with Indigenous participants and gather information about their experience with the justice program that later emerge as a source of research for analysing and understanding community reaction to risk factors. In this instance the yarning sessions were held individually with an experienced interviewer tied to the community.
- 27 O'Hara, above n 2 demonstrates that male offenders access the program more frequently than female offenders (84% male compared with 16% female clients as at January 2012 – June 2013). This is because of offence rates i.e more male offenders than female.
- 28 Framework analysis refers to a qualitative approach to analysing and managing data. In this approach the data is analysed according to pre-set standard questions or objectives. It is similar to thematic analysis but provides a process to maintain 'an audit trail' while analysing the data. For more information please see Joanna Smith and Jill Firth 'Qualitative data analysis: the framework approach' (2011) 18(2) *Nurse Researcher*, 52.
- 29 Wundersitz, above n15.
- 30 Ibid; Australian Bureau of Statistics, above n 20.
- 31 National Rural Health Alliance, above n 22; Morgan and McAtamney, above n 22; Australian Bureau of Statistics, above n 20.
- 32 Wundersitz, above n7.
- 33 O'Hara, above n 2; Australian Indigenous Health Infonet, *North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services* (October 2013) <<http://www.healthinfontet.ecu.edu.au/key-resources/organisations?oid=1204>>.
- 34 Smart Justice *Justice Reinvestment: investing in communities not prisons* (April 2012) <http://www.smartjustice.org.au/cb_pages/files/SMART_Reinvestment.pdf>.
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Seedtime. 2013

Bindi Cole Chocka

Pigment print on rag paper

Courtesy of the artist and Nellie Castan Projects

Seedtime seeks to gently acknowledge the sometimes painful history of the Aboriginal community's engagement with the Royal Women's Hospital. The artwork depicts that history as the beginning of a long-term relationship that is now being repaired and restored. At the centre, the shape of a baby is constructed out of lots of bottles and dummies painted in solid shades of skin colour – beige, brown, dark brown - symbolising all the Aboriginal babies born at the hospital throughout its history. The Australian native seeds surrounding the baby shape represent the beginning of the relationship between the hospital and the community and the potential for a flourishing future.

