

# Preventing crime in rural and remote Indigenous communities

This tip sheet brings together information from a range of sources to provide practical advice for those organisations that are planning a crime prevention project in a rural or remote Indigenous community.

*Prepared in partnership with the Australian Institute of Criminology*

## Crime prevention benefits for Indigenous communities

The over-representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system has been well documented. Their rate of imprisonment is almost 15 times higher than for non-Indigenous people (AIC 2007).

Crime prevention projects can address the underlying reasons for Indigenous people becoming involved in criminal and anti-social behaviour, which can reduce the risk that they will come into contact with the criminal justice system.

The living circumstances of Indigenous people pose particular challenges for crime prevention. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003), almost 70 per cent of Australia's Indigenous population live outside the major cities. Around one in four Indigenous Australians live in remote areas, compared with only one in 50 non-Indigenous Australians.

## Understanding crime in rural and remote Indigenous communities

The degree of contact with the criminal justice system reflects high rates of offending among Indigenous people. Most notably:

- Homicide rates for Indigenous people (as victims and offenders) are significantly higher than for non-Indigenous people.
- The incidence of violence is disproportionately high in some communities, particularly among young males (Memmott et al. 2001).
- Rates of family violence and violence against Indigenous women are highest within rural and remote communities.
- A large proportion of violent offences are alcohol related, and this proportion is higher in regional areas (Snowball & Weatherburn 2006).
- Reoffending rates are higher for Indigenous offenders (Snowball & Weatherburn 2006).

There is evidence of disadvantage across a range of health, education, income and employment indicators (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2007). Serious disadvantage within Indigenous communities is a significant contributor to high rates of offending.

Recent Australian research has identified the following social and economic factors as being associated with Indigenous people being in contact with the justice system:

- substance abuse – in rural and remote communities, this primarily involves the abuse of alcohol, cannabis, inhalants and, increasingly, amphetamines

- failure to complete year 12
- unemployment
- living within households that have experienced financial stress
- living in a crowded household
- living in an area with perceived neighbourhood or community problems, and
- being a member of the 'stolen generation'  
(Delahunty & Putt 2006a; Weatherburn et al. 2006).

Other factors have also been identified; for example, poor health; a lack of support from parents, families and friends; and the prevalence of family violence and abuse. Rural and remote communities are particularly disadvantaged as the infrastructure is often inadequate, and residents have limited access to services and they may not have local capacity to address problems (Delahunty & Putt 2006a).

## What types of projects are effective in reducing crime?

Crime prevention projects in Indigenous communities can reduce the risk of contact with the criminal justice system by aiming to:

- reduce rates of drug and alcohol abuse
- build cultural resilience
- improve school performance and retention
- strengthen social support and increase participation in social activities
- increase the level of employment
- increase access to adequate housing, and
- improve the quality of family life, in particular addressing issues relating to parenting skills, family violence and sexual abuse  
(Snowball & Weatherburn 2006).

A range of crime prevention projects has been implemented in Indigenous communities, with varying degrees of success. Few of these projects have been rigorously evaluated. Some of the more effective community based strategies include:

- night patrols (Blagg 2003)
- sobering up shelters and drug and alcohol services
- education, employment and training programmes
- intervention programmes for victims and perpetrators of family violence
- programmes that provide support to Indigenous people during their contact with, and exit from, the criminal justice system
- mentoring schemes for young people  
(see, for example, the Panyappi Indigenous Youth Mentoring Program)
- programmes that aim to strengthen cultural identity; for example, through sport, arts and cultural activities  
(beyond... 2004; Cunneen 2001; Memmott et al. 2006).

To be effective, crime prevention projects for Indigenous communities should:

- incorporate different strategies
- be community driven

- be culturally appropriate, and
- involve significant others such as family members and community elders (Cunneen 2001).

It is important to learn from what has been effective in other areas, particularly in communities that are similar to your own. However, don't simply copy what has been done elsewhere without making changes to suit your local community.

Rural and remote Indigenous communities are different from other Australian communities, and crime prevention activities must be designed for the specific circumstances of each community. There is little point introducing a project that has been developed for a non-Indigenous community if it won't work in an Indigenous community. Remember that each community is different, and you need to consider the traditional and cultural value systems when planning activities.

## Challenges for crime prevention projects in Indigenous communities

In some circumstances, projects encounter problems because an organisation is unable to meet its administrative requirements or effectively manage the various parts of a project. It is important that there is someone within your organisation who has some skills in budgetary control and acquittal, and report writing, and that the person will be around for the duration of the project.

If you are concerned about your organisation's ability to successfully apply for and manage funding for crime prevention, it may be useful to look to other organisations that work within your local community. There may be organisations willing to act as an auspice agency on your behalf. Previous experience has indicated that care should be taken with this approach (Memmott et al. 2006). If you adopt this strategy, be sure to:

- reach agreement regarding the term of the project and the role of both organisations and project staff
- establish clear reporting guidelines and procedures between the auspice agency and the organisation responsible for implementing the project, and
- regularly review the relationship between the organisations.

## Why projects need to be supported by the community

History has shown that crime prevention activities have little chance of being effective if they are imposed upon an Indigenous community by external organisations. Similarly, problems can arise where a project has been developed by a small minority of community members in isolation and without input or support from the broader community. It is vital that projects are community driven.

For crime prevention activities to work, local people must be involved in making decisions and doing the work. Community members should be encouraged to identify problems and come up with strategies:

- Unless the community develops solutions, they will not take ownership of the project or maintain a commitment to ensure it succeeds.
- Projects should be planned by people who have an intimate knowledge of the problem behaviours, the capacity of the community, and the solutions that are likely to work.
- Projects that are community driven and effective in one Indigenous community context are more likely to be adopted by other communities (Memmott et al. 2001).

Community consultation is therefore very important.

## Undertaking community consultation

Careful consultation with the local community should take place at all stages of the project.

For projects working with Indigenous communities, you must demonstrate you have the support and agreement of appropriate Indigenous communities, organisations and community leaders.

When consulting Indigenous community members:

- The process can be time consuming and the person undertaking the consultation should be flexible in their approach.
- It is important to invite the right people, and the right number of people, to the consultation meetings.
- Being sensitive to the nature of the communities being consulted is important, especially in acknowledging their culture and their different perspectives on key issues.
- It is important to listen well, hearing the issues from the participants' viewpoints, and to respond accordingly (Penman, 2006).

## Involving the community in crime prevention

### Tip 1: Form an action group with community members

Begin by forming an action group (often called a working group or local crime prevention committee) to help you plan, organise and run your activities. The action group should include people who:

- are concerned about crime in the community
- have time to be involved
- are dedicated to making things better
- are able to work with other people
- respect the opinions of others and are open to new ideas
- are representative of the community, and
- might be from relevant government departments

There may already be a group that meets in your community. The action group will discuss issues, look at what else is being done, suggest possible solutions, oversee the project's implementation and measure your progress.

### Tip 2: Explore the problem, its causes and possible solutions through community consultation

Projects should begin by analysing the problem. As well as looking at statistics, this should also involve at least some of the following:

- talking to people who know a lot about crime and anti-social behaviour in the community
- community surveys, and

- holding public meetings

You need to ask people:

1. What are the main crime and community safety issues in the community?
2. What causes them?
3. What are some possible solutions?

Public meetings are particularly important in identifying where the community 'energy' lies with regard to crime and anti-social behaviour issues (Memmott et al. 2001). Try to determine whether there is support for projects that have worked elsewhere. Use these forums to find out who is willing to help.

### **Tip 3: Work with people in the community to deliver activities**

Look for partners and people within the community who can work with your organisation and assist you to implement your project, such as:

- Indigenous councils
- Elders
- men's and women's groups
- church groups
- schools
- young people
- older people
- representatives of different clan groups
- local business
- police
- non-government organisations and service providers, and
- Government departments.

Make sure that everyone working on the project is working towards a common goal, and that you are clear on what people are required to do and when.

### **Tip 4: Build local capacity**

Look for opportunities to provide local people with training to develop skills that will help them to work in their local community. This could be formal training or it might involve experienced staff acting as mentors for new staff. It is also important that you provide staff with appropriate levels of support, and make sure that they are not overloaded with work or stress. Problems can emerge in communities where there is a lot of pressure on individuals or small services to work long hours on difficult issues.

Find out what else is taking place in the community. Tap into existing networks, services and resources. Rather than developing a whole new project, you might be able to build on something that is already in place. It's also important that you do not duplicate work that is already being done. For example, many Indigenous communities have Shared Responsibility Agreements to address local priorities. Think about how your project can contribute to these activities, and whether there are opportunities to work with other agencies.

### **Tip 5: Be realistic and review progress**

Keep your project focused and try not to expect too much too soon. Recognise the potential impact on the local

community of significant events such as funerals, and cultural and sporting events. There may be considerable fluctuations over the year in the number of people residing in a community.

Set realistic goals that can be achieved in the short term. You will build and maintain support for your project if you are successful in achieving something early on. Monitoring your progress during your project is an important way of ensuring you are staying on track. Evaluating how your project affects the local community is important in demonstrating how successful your project has been, and in some cases will be a requirement of your funding.

## References for practical resources

All URLs correct at February 2009

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