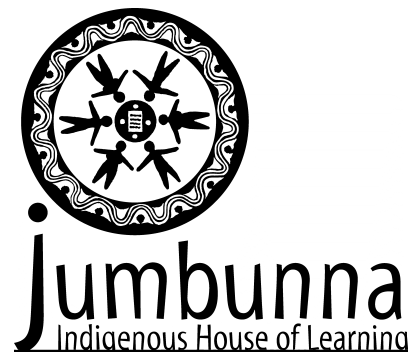


Factors affecting crime rates in Indigenous communities in NSW: a pilot study in Bourke and Lightning Ridge

COMMUNITY REPORT NOVEMBER 2010

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It was our privilege to be allowed access to the ideas and expertise in Bourke and Lightning Ridge that are reflected in this report. We were struck by the generosity of those who participated in our study, both in giving their time to be interviewed but also in their willingness to reflect deeply and honestly on the circumstances of the two communities. Participants took the time to carefully check and amend the quotes we selected from their interviews that we considered as reflective of common views and important elements arising from the research.

We respect the decision of some of the people we spoke with to not be identified in the report. Given the nature of the research with its investigation of community dynamics and dealing with the sensitive issue of crime, anonymity for some people was vital, especially for the performance of their jobs. However, it is important to note that the themes that we have identified emerge from the conversations with all participants. Although not all participants are quoted, all made a significant contribution.

We would like to acknowledge and thank everyone who generously gave up their time and shared their thoughts and expertise with our Research Team.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the findings of a pilot study undertaken in the communities of Bourke and Lightning Ridge. An earlier pilot study was carried out in Wilcannia and Menindee in 2009. This pilot study was completed with the support of an Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Research Grant. We were grateful for the support that made the study possible.

There are notable differences in the rates of crime between different Aboriginal communities in NSW. While there has been important research undertaken into the characteristics of individual offenders, there is a lack of qualitative research on the factors affecting crime rates in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In this context, Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology Sydney, with support from the NSW Bureau of Crimes Statistics and Research (BOCSAR), is exploring factors that may be considered to have an impact on crime rates being higher in some Aboriginal communities and lower in others.

This report is intended to reflect the views of the people that we spoke to in November 2009 and March 2010. Given that our focus is on understanding the political, social, cultural and economic dynamics contributing to crime rates, we interviewed a range of community and organisational representatives and others working in relevant criminal justice and service delivery roles, as a way to better understand the dynamics and experiences of the community as a whole. The findings of this pilot study are preliminary and are by no means comprehensive and we do not pretend that we have captured the views of the entire community.

Our approach

We are very aware that all too often, research is something that is 'done to' Indigenous people that might contribute more to the researchers' own purposes with little benefit to the community. Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning is committed to an approach that focuses on issues of concern to Indigenous communities and which should be assessed in terms of accountability and benefit to the people with whom we work.

Indigenous people have wisdom and insight regarding the dynamics of their own communities that is too often overlooked or disregarded. We are aware of the way that stereotypical media representations and outsiders' perceptions of many Indigenous communities have had a negative impact on the people who live and work there. While Indigenous communities may share similar histories or experiences in certain areas, such as the impact of government policies and practices, an understanding that Indigenous communities are not all the same is the starting point for our research.

We hope that our research may start to document whether there are particular characteristics or strategies that may have a positive or negative impact on crime rates in certain Aboriginal communities in NSW. We believe that there is much to be learned from people living and working in Aboriginal communities regarding how the needs and aspirations of those communities could be better supported. This study will form part of a longer-term project on these issues, with the aim of better informing policy and practice in this area. However we are not suggesting that programs or approaches that succeed in one community would necessarily work in the next. It is the point of this study to reflect themes or common factors raised by

people working in Bourke and Lightning Ridge, but also to engage with and have respect for the unique contexts and experiences in both communities.

We are aware of the sensitivities involved in asking people about the dynamics, structures and aspirations of their community. In any community there are conflicting perspectives about why things are the way they are. We respect the fact that people's views are sincerely held, and it is not our place to make a judgment about whose view is correct. It is certainly not our aim to cause division or conflict within or between the communities in this study.

Our interest is in understanding the dynamics of the two communities that may explain the differing crime rates. Again, we must emphasise that we do not claim to have definitive answers or represent all views on these issues held in the communities, but hope to reflect the particular perspectives of those who we spoke to in Bourke and Lightning Ridge.

Due to confidentiality undertakings, a list of people that we interviewed or organisations represented in the study cannot be provided. However, representatives of a wide range of organisations were interviewed for the study.

The research team conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. It was important in this first stage of the study that the interviewees be allowed to reflect and express their views, rather than being 'led' to particular potential causes of crime. Thus, different factors that may impact on rates of crime or social cohesion – either positively or negatively – were raised in relation to the two communities. For example, while the relationship between the community and the police was raised in Bourke by a number of people, it was not raised in Lightning Ridge. That does not mean that it is not a significant issue but was one that was not at the forefront of people's thinking. While it was not possible to follow up such differences in the pilot study, they will be an important starting point in the next stage of research in the two communities.

The next step

We hope that this report may be a useful tool for people living and working in Bourke and Lightning Ridge in negotiating with government agencies or funding bodies and in contributing to relevant policy development in this area.

Jumbunna has been awarded an Australian Research Council Linkage grant in partnership with the Department of the Attorney-General to expand the research to consider six communities in NSW with significant Aboriginal communities, three of which have high crime rates, three with lower crime rates. Therefore, the research team will be returning to Wilcannia, Menindee, Bourke and Lightning Ridge during the latter part of 2011. The fifth and sixth communities to be explored are Kempsey and Gunnedah.

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2. Bourke and Lightning Ridge

Bourke and Lightning Ridge are communities situated respectively within the Bourke and Walgett Shires in the far north west of New South Wales. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), the Walgett Shire experiences extreme disadvantage, third in New South Wales only to the Local Government Areas of Central Darling and Brewarrina. The Bourke Shire is ranked 53rd in New South Wales out of 153 Local Government Areas (LGA).

According to the 2006 census, the localities of Bourke and Lightning Ridge have respective populations of 2145 and 2602. Both communities have large Indigenous populations: Indigenous people in Bourke constitute 36% of the total population, while Indigenous people in Lightning Ridge constitute 21.3% of the total population.

Under the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA), the localities of Bourke and Lightning Ridge are both classified as remote. However, Bourke is part of a broader LGA that is classified as 36% very remote, while the LGA for Lightning Ridge is classified 5% very remote. Despite its location, the Bourke Aboriginal community is able to access services from many locally based providers. By contrast, there are very few services in Lightning Ridge and the Aboriginal community must rely on service providers located in Walgett, 78km to the south.

The nearest major urban centre to both communities is Dubbo, with a population of 30,574 of which 12.1% are Indigenous people. Bourke is 369km north west of Dubbo and Lightning Ridge is 355km north of Dubbo. Lightning Ridge is also located close to the urban centre of Moree (263km west), with a population of 8,083 of which 22.4% are Indigenous people.

Bourke is within the traditional lands of the Ngemba people and Lightning Ridge is within the traditional lands of the Yuwaalaraay people. The Ngemba occupied the east bank of the Darling River around Bourke and Brewarrina while the Yuwaalaraay lived on the west bank of the Darling River.

3. Profile of crime

This pilot study did not have the scope to investigate the changes in crime rates or population in the two communities over time. The statistics set out below are taken from New South Wales Recorded Crime Statistics for the period January to December 2008. They indicate the number of Indigenous Persons of Interest proceeded against for the 17 major crime categories.

Offence	BOURKE		LIGHTNING RIDGE	
	Number**	Rate per 1000 population***	Number**	Rate per 1000 population***
Murder*	0	0	0	0
Assault – Domestic Violence	62	7,588.7	13	2,317.3
Assault – Non DV related	28	3,427.2	11	1,960.8
Sexual Assault	2	244.8	1	178.3
Indecent Assault, Act of Indecency and other sexual offences	0	0	0	0
Robbery without a weapon	0	0	0	0
Robbery with a firearm	0	0	0	0
Robbery with a weapon not a firearm	0	0	0	0
Break and enter dwelling	18	2,203.3	9	1,604.3
Break and enter non-dwelling	8	979.2	1	178.3
Motor vehicle theft	18	2,203.2	1	178.3
Steal from motor vehicle	8	979.2	0	0
Steal from retail store	10	1,224.0	5	891.3
Steal from dwelling	6	734.4	1	178.3
Steal from person	0	0	0	0
Fraud	0	0	0	0
Malicious damage to property	43	5,263.2	3	534.8
Total of 17 major offences	205	25,091.8	45	8,021.4

*Number of victims.

** The number of Indigenous Person's of Interest (POI) proceeded against by suburb of the POI's residence. Persons of interest (POIs) are suspected offenders recorded by police in connection with a criminal incident. The number is comprised of POI's formally proceeded against to court by way of Court Attendance Notice or proceeded against other than to court by way of Youth Justice Conference, Caution Young Offenders Act, Cannabis Caution, Other Drug Caution, Criminal Infringement Notice, Infringement Notice or Warning, Legal Process Not Further Classified.

***For the rate calculation, population data was obtained from the ABS 2006 Census. The Indigenous population for Bourke was 817 and for Lightning Ridge was 561.

4. Bourke

4.1 BACKGROUND

Aboriginal History

In the 1840s white settlers began to move into the western region of NSW.¹ The violent struggle between the Aboriginal inhabitants and white settlers is well documented. By 1845 the Aboriginal population of Bourke had been drastically reduced, primarily as a result of European diseases.² The first significant influx of Aboriginal people settling in Bourke was the Wanggamurra people who had escaped the notorious Brewarrina Mission in the 1930s.³ The Brewarrina Mission was the first institution formally established by the Aboriginal Protection Board in 1886. Aboriginal people from the Brewarrina area were relocated to the mission, which was established 10 miles east of Brewarrina on the opposite bank of the Barwon River. The Wanggamurra originally started walking towards their homeland, Tibooburra, but were prevented by the flooded Paroo river and so they settled in Bourke.⁴ From 1938 onwards other Aboriginal people from the surrounding area moved to Bourke to work in the abattoir.

The modern township of Bourke is home to a proud and extremely diverse Aboriginal community. A recent mapping exercise identified the presence of Aboriginal people from over 20 language groups. The traditional owners, the Ngemba, are a minority alongside other major language groups including the Wanggamurra, Murrawari and Barkindji.

The Bourke Aboriginal community suffers extreme disadvantage and many people described low levels of self-esteem and community-wide negativity. However, although life in Bourke is tough, the people who live there love it. Despite its hardship and notwithstanding outsiders' perceptions of the town as violent and dangerous, it is described as a "tremendous spot" to live and many commented positively on the lifestyle. Although heavily impacted by drought, the surrounding environment is very beautiful (especially the river when it is flowing) and filled with cultural significance. Despite declining opportunity, allegiance to family and community leaves people reluctant to leave.

Rural decline

Bourke has experienced significant decline over a long period of time with progressive loss of rural industries that once provided employment to the local community. Unemployment rates are high, incomes are low and the condition of housing is poor that, when added to a high cost of living results in considerable hardship.

Segregation

Unfortunately, Bourke was also described by Aboriginal and non-Indigenous interviewees alike, as a segregated town with minimal interaction between the

¹ Rick Flowers, "We're the same mob fighting for the same thing", (1989) Aboriginal Community Development and Adult Education Training Strategies, 4.

² Id.

³ Id.

⁴ Id.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. While several people described community relations as “pleasant” and “polite” on the surface, there was widespread acknowledgement of the underlying division between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Many people labelled Bourke a racist town, but described the racism as “subtle and hidden”, “not openly racist”, “underlying and not very exposed”, “don’t care racism”, “closet” or “passive”. This was said to impact on the town in profound ways, ranging from lack of employment opportunities to the failure to recognise Aboriginal institutions or support Aboriginal initiatives and autonomy to the impact arising from people who do not know each other, which can cause distrust and suspicion and breakdown in cohesion.

4.2 TYPES OF CRIME IN BOURKE

The recorded crime rates are much higher in Bourke than they are in other parts of NSW. During the period surveyed, the highest rates were predominantly in the areas of assault, domestic violence related assault, break and enter dwelling, motor vehicle theft, malicious damage and breach of bail. According to BOCSAR, the Bourke LGA has consistently ranked highest in the state for the rate of recorded incidents of domestic violence, sexual assault and breach of bail (across the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community) in recent years. People that we interviewed were, understandably, most concerned about violent crime, although many also referred to car theft and break and enters as major problems.

Interestingly, the reputation of Bourke held by outsiders as a violent and frightening town might be overstated to some degree. Undoubtedly, continuing high rates of crime combined with several high profile incidents have contributed to this perception. Some interviewees who work in Bourke but do not live there, described random acts of violence where that people walking down the street might be attacked but this was not supported by people living in Bourke. While there are high levels of violent crime, the feedback was that violence occurs largely within families and relationships, or at parties or gatherings with large amounts of alcohol. The streets, we were told, are largely safe:

“I think Bourke does get a bad rap. You don’t see any drunks around town. I can take my kids into any park and you won’t see smashed bottles. Once in a while down the street you’ll find the odd argument. But considering the Indigenous population and the issues we have in the community, it’s pretty good. So yeah, I think it does get a bad rap. And that’s from people who only read what the media puts in there. As soon as something goes wrong, you know what the media’s like, they sensationalise it.”

Youth Case Manager, NSW Police Force Youth Command, Bourke PCYC

“Opportunistic crime is very low. You don’t get randomly robbed or bashed walking down the street. Bourke is not nearly as dangerous as everyone makes it out to be. If you’re in a domestic relationship, Bourke might be pretty dangerous. Or you’re at a party with 100 people, and they are all intoxicated, that can be pretty dangerous. But walking down the street there’s no danger at all.”

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service, Bourke

“One of the problems that Bourke faces is that crime is not the biggest issues, it’s the perception of crime. The perception of crime can be a real killer in

these towns. If people think they are going to go out and get robbed or whatever, that to me is as bad as the crime itself.”

Crime Manager, Darling River Local Area Command

When discussing crime in the town, people naturally divided crime into adult and youth categories. Violent crimes such as family violence and assault were associated with adults, while more ‘petty’ crime such as car theft and break and enters were associated with young people. Breach of bail was also specifically discussed in relation to young people. We have addressed both categories of crime separately in this Community Report.

The reported rate of sexual assault involving Indigenous offenders is low and sexual offences were not widely raised by the people we spoke to. However, a Joint Investigative Response Team (JIRT), comprised of DoCS, NSW Health and NSW Police, has been recently established in Bourke to target child sexual assault leading one person to surmise that there might be more child sexual assault than what is reported.

Many interviewees were concerned about perceived high levels of illicit drug-use in the Aboriginal community. It was said that there are “plenty of drugs in Bourke” because the town is located on a significant drug transit route. However, only one person observed that Aboriginal people are engaging in drug distribution, compared to the many comments of Aboriginal involvement in drug use.

Driving charges were raised as an “overwhelming” problem in the Aboriginal community; driving while disqualified, driving while unlicensed. A number of people referred to the difficulties in getting a driver’s licence in Bourke. People fail the learner’s test because of problems with literacy, or they don’t have access to a car to drive sufficient hours to obtain their licence or cannot afford to take the test. Licensed drivers lose their licences because they can’t afford to pay fines or for driving offences.

4.3 PRIMARY CAUSES OF ADULT CRIME

When asked to identify factors affecting crime rates in Bourke, there were some clear and common themes raised by the people we spoke to. In particular, community dynamics, high-risk alcohol and drug use, unemployment and lack of meaningful activity, conflict within the Aboriginal community, anger and frustration, the history of Bourke, and the housing situation.

4.3.1 Alcohol and drugs

The people we spoke to painted a picture of a heaving drinking town – among Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people alike – described by one person as a “rowdy, alcohol driven community”.

“In rural areas, alcohol problems are mainstream, it isn’t an Aboriginal specific problem. It highlights the fact that there is a culture of drinking there – enjoyment, success, being happy is connected to alcohol.”

CEO, NSW Outback Division of General Practice

Every person that we interviewed raised excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs as either a direct cause of crime or an exacerbating issue. In particular, alcohol was identified as the trigger for much violence, particularly family violence and social violence at large gatherings, that dominates crime rates in Bourke. It was said that domestic violence usually occurs while a person is under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs.

“They get into the parties and the out of towns come in and they get in their big groups and they’re all intoxicated and the problems seem to get out of hand. That’s where the domestic violence comes into it.”

Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, NSW Police, Bourke

Many people described underlying factors which may lead people to drink, such as boredom caused by unemployment, isolation, low self-esteem or the stress of poverty, having no money and overcrowded living arrangements. In these circumstances, alcohol was viewed as “fuelling” violence. As one person put it, “If you are already struggling, then just add alcohol and it certainly won’t improve things”.

“Husband, wife, siblings, extended family will all live in the same house. The family will have a domestic. Fuelled by alcohol, money problems, drugs, gambling, a huge problem.”

Community Worker, Bourke

“If you are bored and there’s nothing else to do, you are going to be drinking. So this is about looking at where people live, their environments, what things are going on around them to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Are there parks and gardens? Is there a place to sit under a tree with the kids? It’s looking at how you maintain healthy lifestyles.”

CEO, NSW Outback Division of General Practice

Alcohol consumption was described as being at such an extreme level that passive effects of drinking are having a negative impact on the community:

“It is at the point where the discussion is moving to the impact of passive drinking – lost productivity, impact on relationships and children, underachievement of children, limited funds, no holidays, lack of family engagement, impact on social settings from alcoholics wanting to fight people, being rude, even down to infectious diseases because people can’t be bothered washing their hands. There are real passive alcohol issues in the community.”

CEO, NSW Outback Division of General Practice

There was a range of views about whether drugs or alcohol are a bigger issue in the community. A minority of participants felt that drugs were more of a problem than alcohol. These concerns were acknowledged, but disputed by other participants and notably by police and health professionals:

“The problem is that people will blame drugs and refuse to think that alcohol is an issue as well. Sometimes people will write it off and just say, ‘Oh the drugs are bad, why are you doing so much about alcohol?’ But it’s shown that alcohol causes so much damage. I suppose that’s why I jump on the alcohol bandwagon. I’m not saying drugs aren’t an issue, as they are in most communities, but they are very hard to measure too.”

Many interviewees observed that there are insufficient alcohol and drug support services in the town, in particular, too few drug and alcohol counsellors. There are no local 'drying out' or rehabilitation facilities. We were told the closest treatment centres are in Orange and Kempsey.

Importantly, in response to what has been described by many as an overwhelming problem in the town, a five-year alcohol management strategy was introduced in Bourke (described in more detail below). The plan is a joint initiative of the police, the Bourke Alcohol Working Group and the Outback Division of General Practice. It must be acknowledged that the strategy has been somewhat contentious, especially in relation to the practicality of restrictions; whether the restrictions represented the best available option; whether the curbing of individual civil liberties could be justified by community benefit; and the manner of their implementation, in particular, the degree of community consultation (Lyford, August 2010). However, the strategy's proponents point to an urgent need to reduce alcohol related crime – particularly violence – and to reduce adverse health effects.

The strategy is being assessed by the George Institute for Global Health and a preliminary evaluation noted the 'overwhelming opinion' that restrictions had been an 'effective mechanism for addressing health and social impacts' and that the majority of interviewees supported its continuation. It reported a significant decrease in non-domestic alcohol related assault, while other categories of crime were reported as stable or no change and recommended the plan's continuation (Lyford, August 2010). Most of our interviews also supported its continuation and described benefits, although questions about the breadth of support were raised. Interestingly, criminal justice and health workers reported that while there may not have been a dramatic decrease in violent crime in some categories, anecdotally there had been a decrease in the severity of crime and they expect to see positive results emerging from the evaluation.

4.3.2 Unemployment and lack of purposeful activity

Unemployment and a lack of other purposeful activities for adults were raised by most people as a factor influencing the high crime rate. According to the 2006 census statistics for Indigenous persons aged 15 years and over in the Bourke Local Government Area: 37.5% are in employment (including CDEP participants); 12.3% are unemployed; 40.1% are "not in the labour force"; and 10.1% were "labour force not stated".

Unemployment was linked with boredom, poor self-esteem and poor self-confidence and it was suggested that these factors, in turn, lead people to drink alcohol, which was strongly linked to violent crime.

"With some employment things would change dramatically. Helping employers to employ more people. Any work is good work, but it has to be something that pays them. A lot of the guys that I talk to are bored. There is drinking and that is affecting relationships."

CEO, NSW Outback Division of General Practice, Bourke

“Give them something to do. I can guarantee it will build their self-esteem up. Because a lot of them have got low self-esteem. They’re low educated and they feel there’s no hope.”

Youth Case Manager, NSW Police Force Youth Command, Bourke PCYC

Value of employment

The people we spoke to described the importance of employment in social terms as well as economic terms. Employment provides a social network and the feeling of being part of something. Many people described employment as contributing to improved self-confidence, self-esteem and physical health.

Money is important, but it’s not the only thing that you get out of your work. You get lots of other things apart from just money. The more senior up you can get a car. You get recognition, you have a place and you are contributing. There is real merit in acknowledgement and engagement. Esteem comes from being able to tick off milestones in life. Getting their licence, getting out of strife, redeeming themselves, being recognised for that, having a job that contributes to improving the community, even if it’s fishing all day.”

CEO, NSW Outback Division of General Practice, Bourke

Employment and purposeful activity was described as a social determinant of a healthy lifestyle. One person referred to an employment program conducted in Wilcannia that had a direct impact on health and rates of crime. “New Work Opportunities” was a work skills program that provided additional funding for employers and employment programs to provide work and training for Aboriginal people. Everyone that could work was given four days of work a week, The jobs included working in the canteen, fixing the cemetery, building gardens, sweeping streets, cleaning out the river and building houses.

The New Work Opportunities program had a number of significant impacts. The local Magistrate in Wilcannia at the time observed a dramatic reduction in the number of Aboriginal people coming before the court. Police incidents and call outs were also significantly reduced. In spite of the program’s success, it was ended by the Howard Government that was pursuing a policy of “real jobs” for Aboriginal people:

“We said, well ministers, we are in Wilcannia, what else are they going to do? We were stopping people from just sitting around. And they were enjoying it. And they were healthier. After the program was axed they were expected to get a job somehow. What were they going to do? There is no farming or anything. It’s a statistic that has haunted many of us in this region. Work is a social determinant of health.”

CEO, NSW Outback Division of General Practice, Bourke

An associated concept, perhaps linked to self-esteem, was the link between purposeful activity and employment and the undermining of ‘masculine pride’ or cultural authority. As part of a broader narrative of undermining of cultural authority through colonial policies and failure to support Aboriginal autonomy, the story was told of men losing their place in their community: “The responsibility of the man in the family has been stripped away from him.”

Barriers to employment

There were mixed perspectives on the availability of employment in Bourke. Some people felt there is scope for new business opportunities if the relevant support was available. One person identified a shortage of carpenters, electricians, builders and

mechanics and expressed frustration that tradespeople from Dubbo and Orange are constantly visiting Bourke. However, lack of education and skills were consistently identified as a barrier for Aboriginal people:

“Whilst there’s some employment here, it depends on what you want to do. Yet if your education’s behind, you’re probably not going to get to the jobs that you want to do either.”

Crime Manager, Darling River Local Area Command

In particular, some participants were concerned that young people are falling behind with their education and they will inevitably fall into unemployment:

“A lot of young kids aren’t even turning up to school so they aren’t getting an education. They’re getting as far as year 7 and not even being able to read and write. And they get lost through that system. A lot of them, I think, just feel like they’ve got no hope. They’ve got no real education, they’ve got no hope of getting a job or doing anything with their lives, so they’re turning to other means like drugs and alcohol.”

Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, NSW Police, Bourke

People we spoke to identified other barriers faced by Aboriginal people in accessing the opportunities that do exist. Several participants felt that racial discrimination might explain the lack of Aboriginal participation in the private sector.

Several people noted that Bourke is a small community and it is difficult to get a job if you have a reputation as a criminal offender, drug user or drinker. Many of the employment opportunities for Aboriginal people in Bourke are in public sector government agencies or NGO service providers in identified positions. One participant felt that some people are reluctant to apply for identified positions because of their criminal record, even if they could be eligible for the job. Reputation was also described as a particular barrier for young Aboriginal men who have been involved in juvenile crime and are trying to turn their lives around:

“Anyone who has a history of crime in Bourke, because of the community size, any of the ones that want to reengage in the local workforce, are just not given the opportunity. But that’s a two-way street. You can’t begrudge an employer for not wanting to give them a go. But how can these young people turn their lives around if people are not willing to give them a chance?”

Community Service Provider, Bourke

Lack of employment opportunities / decline of rural towns

Most people we spoke to agreed that employment opportunities in Bourke are declining. Whereas once Bourke was a community with an abattoir and thriving cotton, shearing, and agricultural industry, the long-term drought has had a devastating impact, compounding the decline seen in rural communities across Australia:

“Unemployment has increased since the drought and whatnot and the river, they’ve been selling off the cotton farms and that and it has gone downhill because cotton was a big employer. That has probably halved or more now.”

Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, NSW Police, Bourke

The decline of these rural industries has heavily impacted on Aboriginal people. According to many of the people we spoke to, Aboriginal participation in these rural

industries was historically quite strong, with many stockmen, horsemen and shearers. The decline is also felt more heavily by Aboriginal people in that Aboriginal people are not as willing as their non-Aboriginal counterparts to leave Bourke to pursue employment opportunities in other regions now that these industries are failing.

Some people felt that the decline of industry had led to welfare dependency, which they contrasted to 20 or 30 years ago. Aboriginal people were said to be “happier and self-sustaining” then because of greater employment opportunities.

“Welfare dependency, that in itself is a huge issues for Indigenous communities, because it’s been there from day one. Once that gets a hold of anyone it’s a terrible thing because you’re trying to get people self-motivated to get them out and active in the community and learn new things or be putting them on a career path.”

Community Service Provider, Bourke

4.3.3 Conflict within the Aboriginal community

Division in the Aboriginal community was described as “rife” and was viewed by many as a product of historical legacies of colonisation such as dislocation and dispossession. A number of people referred to the impact of the Brewarrina mission. Conflict was described as occurring along family and language group lines and some people felt it had become generational. One participant referred to the number of different Aboriginal language groups in Bourke “even though we all look the same” and felt that through the generations people have been taught “we don’t get on with those people, you stay away from them”. This conflict can be manifest in threats, violence and on occasions, over the years, had escalated to affray:

“There are a number of factors that affect crime rates. Firstly, there is a sense of dislocation and conflict within the community as a whole. It’s a very fractured community divided along family lines and local language groups. You get conflict between these groups and I think that’s part of the problem.”

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service, Bourke

“You also have to think about all the different tribes that live together in a community. You see we’re not all from one tribe. In Bourke there’s probably about 60 different tribes and that’s where all the conflict is too. We don’t get on with those people, you stay away from them. And it’s been taught to our kids, through the ages, not to associate with them fellas. And it’s still happening today and that’s where you get all this conflict too. And that’s where you get the assaults and all the abuse. We are all different tribes, different people, even though we look the same.”

Community Worker, Bourke

One interesting comment made by several people was that, in the past, disputes and conflict sometimes led to physical fights but there was very quick resolution. The fight was over and done with and the issue dealt with. While not condoning violence, there was disappointment in long-standing and continuing enmity that is more apparent today. One person commented that, in the absence of quick resolution, there are so many AVOs in the town, that at some point, there will be an AVO on everyone:

“With Aboriginal people back in the old days of the west, so to speak, if there was a difference they would sort it out. At times, unfortunately, it resulted in

physical violence. But if it had to result in a punch up, it did. But they were best friends 5 minutes later. Not like today, where enmity has become intergenerational. It goes back to your great grandfather, someone might have sworn at him.”

Acting Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

One aspect of this conflict is the inter-family conflict played out among young women. A number of people working in the criminal justice area and service provision referred to insulting text messages being sent to each other by young people defending their family’s position. The insults were increasing in severity and there was concern that these insults may escalate to violence.

A common experience in Aboriginal communities throughout Australia is that particular Aboriginal families become associated with particular organisations or service providers and Bourke is no different. Some people expressed concern that there may be a lack of transparency in recruitment processes that may lead to resentment within the community. One person noted that people need to be aware that even though they may work for a service, “they don’t own it; the whole community owns it”.

The Community Working Party conducted a mapping exercise that identified 21 language groups in an attempt to explore historical legacies and build harmony in the Aboriginal community:

“We wanted to demonstrate acceptance of people who were forcibly relocated or relocated under voluntary arrangements to Bourke under past government policy. Trying to find common ground among all the groups and demonstrating ownership is the complexity of what we’re up against. These people are here. We need to work with them. They have a lot to offer. It has been in the last 40-50 years the largest groups have dominated in Bourke and the TO’s, as a minority group, have been on the fringe of everything. We are trying to have people acknowledged so that we can move forward. Whatever benefits the TO’s have, they are for everybody. The whole process is daunting and absorbs everything, takes everything out of you.”

Acting Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

4.3.4 History of Bourke

While it might be expected that historical legacies might be identified as underlying causes of crime, one stark theme emerging from interviews was the contemporary impact of these legacies on current crime rates. The history of Bourke is so fundamental to the dynamics of the community and contemporary relationships that several senior Aboriginal people mentioned it as a *primary* cause of crime; that crime is directly attributable to Bourke’s colonial history.

“I think racism has got a lot to do with it. There’s this underlying issue that hasn’t been dealt with. People in Bourke walked on a road called Poverty Road. They weren’t allowed to go anywhere else. They weren’t allowed to come into town. Once they crossed that border of that road, then they’d go straight to jail. When I was a young fella, I was sitting around on the reserve and there was this old man. The toilet was on the opposite side of the road to his house. So one day he walks across the road to go to the toilet and walks

home. The paddy wagon rides around on the stock reserve, pulls up and the police say, 'You're intoxicated, you're going to jail.' All he had to do was walk another five metres and he would have been home. But that legacy is there. You don't want to forget that old fella, so he passes it down. That what's happening here right now. That's why a lot of our people from Bourke are in prisons and juvenile justice and in courts – that legacy. Not because they've brought the legacy – it's the legacy that's been given to them by just a simple act like that. So it's only a little thing, but that old fella remembered that."

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer, NSW Department of Environment,
Climate Change and Water

If not raised as a primary cause, most people raised history in discussions about the underlying factors that influence the fabric of the community and impact on crime rates.

"Violence is a strong cycle that we're trying to break around the communities, but it's not a cultural thing. We don't believe it was there, that's not what we're about. We're a loving, nurturing group of people. We believe the violence has come in with cultural change and the impact of colonisation, with removal of land and culture and the dependency started way back then. We just don't realise that it's ongoing, it's been an historical and generational event that's just very difficult."

Community Service Provider, Bourke

Many people described feelings of frustration and, at times, anger at the lack of acknowledgement of the way Aboriginal people have been treated historically and the lack of acknowledgement of the continuing impact of this treatment. One worker in the criminal justice system drew a direct correlation between this anger and crime, especially in the areas of property crimes, resist arrest and assault police.

"There is a lot of post colonisation anger here that is raw and it is fresh, it's not something that's historical."

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service, Bourke

"We were picked on from a racist point of view, by police, by farmers and all that. They ended up sending me and my brother away to school because we would have gotten into deep trouble. If we had stayed in Bourke, then we would have ended up in prison because we were angry, too, very angry. We were very angry young boys. It was because of the way we were treated. We used to walk home from school and soon as we'd see the paddy wagon come, we were gone, we were out of there We had this mental thing – run, run, here they come."

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer, NSW Department of Environment,
Climate Change and Water

"There's a lack of local history being shared and told within this local community. Australian history is a must. If you don't know and understand Australian history then you won't know and understand all those triggers for drugs and alcohol. You can't get away from the past treatment of Aboriginal people in Australian history. You can't. Because what happened then still impacts on Aboriginal people today greatly, if not more."

Community Worker, Bourke

Others described disempowerment and destruction of culture that had impacted on respect – respect for culture, for Elders, for Aboriginal authority and respect for self.

“The respect is just lost. I don’t know if it can ever come back because there is just so much disempowerment. People have no control and that started right back when they were first moved off their homelands. Disempowerment started in the men and woman and slowly evolved into how people feel now. People have only heard the bad stories. They don’t hear the good stories. You can imagine the heartache and hatred that caused. That comes down through the families and slowly eats into the respect – it eats it away.”

Community Worker, Bourke

The stolen generation was raised by several people as having had a profound and intergenerational impact on Aboriginal families in Bourke. In particular, it was said that as a result of the stolen generations many Aboriginal people “don’t know who they are or where their family came from”.

“The greatest thing was the stolen generation. They took our children away and people still affected over that today. But that’s still going on today too. You got children who is in foster care and they are cared for by white people. What about their families? Why are they placed with white people? With all due respect, they are not giving those children culturally appropriate education nor the care and comfort these little people require.”

Community Worker, Bourke

4.3.6 Housing and overcrowding

Overcrowding, poor quality housing and homelessness in Bourke were of great concern to many people we spoke to and overcrowding in particular was raised as a cause of crime. There was a perception that public housing in Bourke is unnecessarily expensive to build and inappropriately designed for Aboriginal people which contributes to discontent and frustration. When linked with unemployment, poverty and lack of purposeful activity, overcrowding and poor quality housing become a potent mix:

“There are overcrowding issues. People get shitty with one and other. No-one likes looking at the same people everyday. Especially when there is no money, you don’t have anywhere to go or anyone to visit and you all have to sit there and look at one and other. It gets very hot here and sometimes it’s too hot to walk around outside.”

Indigenous Community Worker, Bourke

“I can see a pattern of where they are housing people all together in these little spots. Sometimes that causes a problem in communities. It comes back to whether that family gets along with that family. Or whether that family are a bunch of people that really like to drink. And then this family will come over and join them because they are close. One little group can end up being one really big group that’s intoxicated and causing problems.”

Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, NSW Police, Bourke

Youth homelessness was raised as one area of urgent need where children and young people are “just floating everywhere” from Aunty to Aunty or to someone else. A number of people described unsafe or unpleasant homes with “huge drugs and alcohol” as a major contributor to children and young people being on the streets in the evening and susceptible to becoming perpetrators or victims of crime

themselves. The Safehouse provides crisis accommodation for homeless adults but cannot accommodate homeless young people.

Poor maintenance and repairs for Aboriginal housing was an area of bitterness at the time of our visit to Bourke. In protest, some people had stopped paying rent and there was broad anger at the perceived injustice in them receiving eviction notices. In a similar vein, one interesting observation was on the impact of the physical environment on well-being. Several people reflected bitterly on the state of the physical environment of Alice Edwards village and expressed frustration at the perceived reluctance of the local council to address the situation.

4.3.7 Relationship with police and over policing

Over policing and the large number of police in Bourke were raised by a number of people and notably by some working in the criminal justice system as a factor contributing to the high rate of crime. Bourke has 30-40 police, which was said to result in crimes being detected and acted upon that would not be detectable in big cities. As one person described, “the mechanical effect of the numbers and the transparency of the Aboriginal population to the police is a big issue.”

There were both positive and negative comments about police and their relationship with the Aboriginal community in Bourke. Unfortunately, it is apparent that the relationship is primarily negative, which appears to have a strong historical dimension. We were told that police cars have been bottled at the Alice Edwards Village and that police officers have been bottled when intervening in disputes. It was said that one source of tension was that Aboriginal people feel that the police are expecting violence. It was also suggested that this antagonism towards the police may contribute to police reluctance to intervene, especially in large parties or gatherings with large amounts of alcohol.

At the same time, the important role of the police was identified in a very challenging environment. The police were commended for using their discretion and utilising cautions under the Young Offenders Act but it was also recognised that “there comes a point where they can’t do any more and it has to be brought before the court.” It is clear that the relationship between the Aboriginal community and police is complex and difficult where people simultaneously rely on but resent the police:

“When there are problems in the community, a lot of times people would come straight to the police. But then they have a great hatred for the police. I think that’s a generational thing too, with everything that has happened with the stolen generation and everything like that. They just have this real negative feel for the police, hatred for the police. But then, when things go wrong, the first people they really depend on are the police. Any complaints or issue they have with other families within the community they’ll come to the police.”

Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, NSW Police, Bourke

The history of policing in Bourke was a recurrent theme. It was acknowledged by one police officer that the police have a “terrible history” of policing in Aboriginal communities and that there is “some ground to make up”.

“The dislike of Police that Aboriginal people have, other people can’t understand it. It goes a long way back to things like segregation and the Stolen

Generation and it has just gone on from there, people are still living with the effects of those events.”

Indigenous Community Worker, Bourke

However, it was also acknowledged that the police are attempting to open the lines of communication through networking meetings and the Aboriginal consultative committee meetings. One police officer observed that the consultative committee meetings had formerly been “fairly sanitised” but police had relocated the meetings to the village in an attempt to broaden consultation. The need to build confidence to report crimes and, crucially, to report complaints about police was described as an important development by one police officer.

The vital role of Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers (ACLOs) and Aboriginal police was highlighted as critical to improving community relations. Several people emphasised the value of Aboriginal people in the police force and the benefits that can be derived from their expertise. Aboriginal police were said to manage things differently because they “operate in a different paradigm, with different focus”. It was suggested that police reconsider their Indigenous employment strategies to include more ACLOs, with some of the ACLO’s training to be police at the same time.

Bourke was described as a “learning area for probationary constables”. However, the importance of recruiting experienced police was highlighted by many people, particularly in their attitudes towards Aboriginal people and willingness to engage with the community. It was said that it is better for everybody if police get out to meet people and develop relationships:

“I don’t really see a problem with too many police but I think it is about the sort of police they are. You’ve got to have the right sort of police out here to do any good. You get someone straight from the city and they’ve got different attitudes.”

Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, NSW Police, Bourke

“I think our communication is very good. There are some police officers who work well in Aboriginal communities and the community has the confidence to report complaints against police and crimes which is important. It’s never going to 100 per cent, given the history of police and Aboriginal people.”

Police Officer, NSW Police, Bourke

4.4 PRIMARY CAUSES OF YOUTH CRIME

Bourke has a large youth population (the 2006 Census identified more than 1000 children and young people in a town of just 3000). Most people identified youth crime as a major problem in Bourke. Car related crimes – car theft, stealing from cars and breaking windows – were described as the biggest youth problem in Bourke. Other issues include breach of bail and property crimes including criminal trespass, break and enter and malicious damage.

Many referred to young people being on the street especially in the evenings, expressing the need to understand why youth are there and to address the “push” factors including boredom, lack of stability at home, lack of parental supervision,

alcohol, violence and suspension from school. These push factors contribute to a range of problems – giving young people opportunity to commit crime, contributing to breach of bail and reinforcing older, more experienced offenders as role models:

“I think a lot of the kids in town don’t have a lot of discipline at home. Sometimes home is a pretty bad place - a lot of alcohol, no food, sometimes violence to mum or dad. So often they are out and about with their mates because they are safer out with their mates than being at home. That’s also behind a lot of the breaches of bail. There are a large number of breaches of bail relative to other places. Kids don’t want to be home, there is nothing there for them and they are safe with their mates roaming the streets.”

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service, Bourke

Breach of bail was consistently raised as a problem, especially among youth. According to BOCSAR statistics, Bourke has ranked highest in the state for breach of bail conditions for the past seven years. These figures are for reported incidents of breach of bail conditions for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons.

“There are large numbers of breach bail relative to other places. Kids don’t want to be home. There’s nothing for them and they are safer with their mates roaming the streets. Police are well aware of who is on bail and they have an obligation to act. They can’t ignore it ad nauseum and I understand that, but there are a lot of police in Bourke. We are trying to get a bail safe house for kids, which would cut down on breaches of bail. They could go stay there, be fed and be happy. But we haven’t got any money for that yet.”

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service, Bourke

The word “structure” was raised in relation to youth in various contexts by a number of people – in terms of the lack of structure in young people’s home and school life and recreation and in terms of the need for structure as a solution to youth crime:

“They’re quite good kids. And they’re like any kids – people tend to forget they’re kids. They are high maintenance kids a lot of them. They need a lot of attention. You’ve really got to engage them. But that’s why you just structure stuff for them. You keep them structured and they’ll stay between the barriers.”

Youth Case Manager, NSW Police Force Youth Command, Bourke PCYC

While youth crime is a serious concern among community members, we were reminded that these are disadvantaged kids facing difficult circumstances who are part of a broader community. Several people reflected upon a time in Bourke when people knew each other and young people were part of a broader network:

“Surely we must be able to find a way to celebrate all this youth, to identify who they are, to own them, to be proud of them, to encourage them. Do we need to put in a submission into a State Government department to teach us how to do that because we are no longer intuitive or no longer connected? It’s not unique to Bourke at all, but it is one of things we used to celebrate about living in these outback communities. We did have a strong connectedness. We did know each other.”

CEO, NSW Outback Division of General Practice

Key members of the local community propose to conduct a two day youth forum. The aim is to engage young people to determine their aspirations and how they may be achieved, with the expectation that it may also generate potential solutions for

youth crime in Bourke. The proposal is that the forum be conducted by young people and that proposals be implemented by them.

4.4.1 Boredom

In the same way that boredom and lack of work were recognised as contributors to crime for adults, boredom was identified by every person we spoke to as a cause – if not the number one cause – of youth crime: of car theft, trespass and break and enter. The overwhelming refrain in relation to children and young people was that there was not nearly enough for them to do that was safe and positive and that “every day is the same”. In relation to car theft, one person observed that kids “find it fun to get the police to chase them”.

There are few activities for children and young people after school in Bourke. People commented that there is little sport, no dance classes and no BMX track or skate park. The high cost of participating in sport was noted by several people. A positive development has been the commencement of a mid-week junior rugby league competition in 2010 with 12 months financial support from Country Rugby League. While many people mentioned the work of the PCYC, it was also viewed as not reaching its full potential. In particular, people could not understand why the PCYC is not open until later in the evening or why it is not open for extended periods on weekends. There was also confusion about the cost of admission, which deterred some families from using the facilities.

4.4.2 Family background

One theme that emerged strongly, particularly from those working with young people, was of the need to understand the circumstances of young offenders, many of whom experience neglect, or live in unsafe circumstances, moving from house to house, or who might not know where their next meal was coming from. One person asked, “how can you ask young people to settle down at school if they are hungry or haven’t had a proper night’s sleep?”

“People say, ‘why don’t the police get those kids off the street?’. But if only you knew where those poor little buggers slept, you wouldn’t be saying that. And they would say, ‘Well that’s not our problem, it’s their problem.’ Well it is our problem. What happens to these young people will eventually come back to bite us.”

Community Worker, Bourke

“People need to see how these kids live and what they’re up against. It’s not their fault they were born into it. They don’t know any different. Some people in Bourke say terrible things about these kids but the kid doesn’t know anything different. It’s nothing for him to go without a feed or to stand there at five years old and see domestic violence at home.”

Youth Case Manager, NSW Police Force Youth Command, Bourke PCYC

Several people noted that some children and young people feel safer on the streets at night than at home, sometimes at a very young age. A number of people lamented that children in Bourke become independent too early. As one person commented, “they start to become independent at four or five years old and by ten or eleven, they are very, very street-wise.” Family background, including a stable home

life and structure, was considered pivotal for positive outcomes and for young people not becoming involved in crime. Adult supervision – knowing where your kids are and what they are up to – was identified as a deterrent.

“All the social issues come from home, who their parents are, whether they drink and how many kids they planned for.”

Community Worker, Bourke

“I think it comes back to the parents really, controlling their kids and keeping them off the street and keeping them out of trouble.”

Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, NSW Police, Bourke

“There are a lot kids on the streets too. They sometimes get around in little gangs. It might be they don’t have any air conditioning at home and it’s just cooler to be out and about. But it’s what they are getting up to when they are out and about. A lot of them aren’t supervised. In a town this size people may think that the kids will be OK, but I don’t know what they are thinking really.”

Indigenous Community Worker, Bourke

It is self-evident that parents love their kids and want to do what is best for them. One reason given for why some people find parenting more difficult than others was because they themselves came from unstable families with many children raised by aunties or grandparents. A number of people referred to young people themselves becoming parents, who want the security of family but “have been brought up without those [parenting] skills.” Aboriginal women spoke of their concern for the wellbeing of young, inexperienced women having children and while they may be caught up in unstable or abusive relationships.

“The young girls are getting tied up in relationships at an early age and even if they don’t want to, they want out. Though generally not, because as soon as they say they want out he’ll just stand over her. I’ve seen it heaps of times. Next thing they’re pregnant. Next thing you’ve got babies on the way and then it goes from being a small problem, to a huge one. To her it looks insurmountable and she feels there is no way out. I think this is a huge problem, young girls are just getting pregnant a lot earlier, and they want it to work. They’ll tell you they want to have a baby because they want their own family, they want it to work. It’s not happening for them, but they want it desperately.”

Community Service Provider, Bourke

Thus, the need for intensive support for parents was raised. On the other hand, the problems was considered to be so extensive that some non-Aboriginal people suggested direct intervention into those families.

“I think you have to take kids out of the environment for a while. But because of their extended family you can’t just send them to stay with their uncle for a little while because their uncle lives just a block away and the trouble still is there. There are just a few that have full maintenance problems and you have to take them out of the environment. Counsellors or health workers could spend a day with a kid trying to turn them around, getting rid of their anger management problems but then they go home to the same environment. The problem is so big.”

Community Worker, Bourke

The fraught issue of what to do with children and young people whose families struggle to provide them with what they need or whose family environments are unsafe was raised. An urgent need for some kind of evening Safehouse for young people was raised by several people. Foster care was both praised and criticised – while on the one hand, it may provide security and safety, on the other, it may not provide the appropriate cultural environment. Appropriate Aboriginal carers seem to be urgently needed.

4.4.3 Role of education and school

Education – including mainstream education and the education of young people in Aboriginal heritage and culture – and school attendance were identified as factors that reduce the likelihood of children and young people becoming involved in crime. Unfortunately, non-attendance at school appears to be common for a number of reasons including poverty and hunger, lack of positive role modelling and the need for culturally and socially appropriate curriculum:

“A lot of young kids here in Bourke also don’t go to school. That’s for a variety of reasons. I mean the cost of living these days, it’s so hard. They might not have any food in the house or some kids lose their shoes and parents can’t afford to buy new ones until payday. I wouldn’t say that people don’t have food in the house all the time. It’s just hard to make ends meet when it’s coming towards the end of the week before you get paid, you got nothing. That is common with families who have low incomes, it’s just a fact of living.”

Indigenous Community Worker, Bourke

Many people observed that Aboriginal children are getting behind in their education from the very beginning, which puts them in a position of never being able to catch up. Young people leaving school without the requisite skills to gain employment, leading to boredom and hopelessness was frequently referred to:

“A lot of young kids aren’t even turning up to school so they aren’t getting an education. They’re getting as far as year 7 and not even being able to read and write. They got lost through that system. A lot of them feel like they’ve got no hope. They’ve got no real education, they’ve got no hope of getting a job or doing anything with their lives, so they’re turning to other means, like drugs and alcohol.”

Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, Bourke

“Picture that by year 6 you’re that far behind that you leave school. Spare time, they get caught up with older kids, who are not old kids, and then they start committing crime. So education is absolutely crucial. If they’re not doing the year to year, they are that far behind, it is nearly pointless going to school. They think it’s pointless going to school, so they have nothing to do. It’s not even about making BMX tracks if you’ve got nothing to do. But they get in and they have to survive and keep going and generally they’ll commit crime.”

Crime Manager, Darling River Local Area Command

Concerns about discipline approaches taken by schools in Bourke were raised by a number of people, especially the suspension policies. Some people identified schools as adopting a “zero tolerance policy”, which was criticised as inappropriate because it does not “deal with the issues”. Lengthy suspensions were spoken about with some degree of bitterness for creating a situation where children and young

people facing suspension get behind and can never catch up. It was perceived that suspending these kids without alternative structured activities pushes the problem onto the streets.

However, the question of appropriate school discipline is a complicated issue. As one education worker identified, school needs to be a safe caring and environment for ALL students, so that education can occur. To some extent, suspension policies are out of schools' hands. The Department of Education and Training mandates suspension for any student who is involved in serious criminal activity, including drugs, weapons, violence and threats of violence, or persistent misbehaviour. The most important part of the suspension process is the returning from suspension. This always involves parental interviews, counselling, ongoing monitoring, the development of teacher strategies and feedback to home. Bourke High School is developing a new discipline policy underpinned by "respect, safety and learning" and is beginning to implement the positive Behaviours for Learning Program; the eight ways of learning philosophy introduced to all staff.

With 65% Indigenous students, the High School is endeavouring to develop relationships with the Aboriginal community in Bourke. It has an active AECG and employs a local Aboriginal Engagement Officer and is currently conducting a community survey. These efforts appear to be necessary as many people commented on a historical lack of connection and perception that the Aboriginal voice is not particularly welcome in the school.

The High School operates a Tutorial Centre to provide short-term intensive support for students in two classes of seven students, each supported by a full time aide. Students stay in the Tute Centre until they "get things rolling again smoothly, turning up for class, working properly and independently". Ideally, students attend the Centre for a 10-20 week intensive placement and transition back into mainstream classes. However, historically some have stayed for longer continuous enrolment for a variety of reasons. The Centre has recently been reviewed and is going to change the terms of its operation.

The Tute Centre was described both positive and negative terms. Some people believe it caters appropriately to the needs of high needs students. However, there was also a perception that the Centre is where 'bad kids' are sent so that they are out of the way and that they never return to mainstream. It was criticised by some for providing a 'soft option', where students finish at lunchtime and get so far behind their peers that they never catch up. In fact, the issues are very complex and not capable of simple resolution. For example, ending the school day at lunchtime (note that the Centre now operates for the full school day) was an attempt to engage students who would otherwise not attend school at all. Some students who attend the Centre are disengaged with education – they may have learning difficulties or undiagnosed medical or psychological issues or face family problems that dramatically impact on their school attendance. Reintegration into mainstream is extremely difficult and may not be possible, revealing the lack of suitable options for young people with such challenging needs.

The short tenure and inexperience of teachers – and other professionals in Bourke – were cited as problems, although it must be emphasised that this was not a criticism of the teachers themselves. Several people spoke of the need for more experienced teachers. There was strong criticism of the Education Department policy of placing inexperienced teachers in challenging locations for a few years, with the lure of transfers to more desirable locations on the coast. While it was certainly not a widespread perception, concern was raised that some teachers are 'time servers'

who struggle with difficult conditions but 'hang in' term by term. This was considered to be a poor result for both teachers and students.

The need for teachers coming to Bourke to undergo cultural awareness training was emphasised but also that teachers become aware of the circumstances of the particular children that they teach. One person spoke passionately of the need for teachers to be aware of the difficulties faced by children and young people, who may appear to be trouble makers:

"You'll get a young, 24 year old school teacher out here who doesn't know that this fella could have been abused last night at home and he slept in a corner because he was frightened that this fella was going to walk in and touch him. Or his parents had a big blue last night cause they were both drunk and they'll both be drunk when he gets home today. He's got dirty clothes. He wouldn't have had tea the night before. He's definitely had no breakfast. Now he is supposed to sit in the classroom side by side with other kids who haven't been through all that? And act the same? And take in the same amount of education? You see the comparison? The teachers have to know these things."

Community Worker, Bourke

The issue of educating Aboriginal people in the mainstream system was touched upon by several people. One person thought the school should have a separate area specifically for Aboriginal youth where they can go and "feel a lot more freer instead of having a set regime". Another Aboriginal educator thought an Aboriginal school, based on a property, would be able to deliver better mainstream educational outcomes and culturally appropriate educational outcomes. While not the role of the school or education department, several people emphasised the importance of putting kids in touch with their culture and heritage.

"I find that putting them back in touch with their culture and heritage, you can see that lift in them, that spark. I don't know how to explain it, but you can actually see the change in their personality."

Community Worker, Bourke

Need for long-term education, training and employment strategy

A common perception was that of the young Aboriginal person who continues to progress through school even though they may not have basic literacy and numeracy skills, described by some a "falling through the system". People were critical of this practice and stressed that the education department needs to be more flexible, realistic and responsive to the specific needs of the community; that perhaps education and training should be tailored to vocations or activities appropriate for Bourke. As one person put it, there needs to be "more things for the kids that are never going to come up to an academically high standard to enjoy".

"If these guys are not going to leave town and there is no employment we need to be aware of this very early on, so we are working with 14 year olds thinking about where they are going to be when they are 24. What skills do they have? What's going to be useful in our community? What do we need in this town? And often it will take that long to work with these guys."

CEO, NSW Outback Division of General Practice

People stressed the importance of having local, relevant vocational training and higher education facilities. Education was described as vital to the community moving forward and creating new employment opportunities for the families that are not willing to move.

“Let’s look at accommodation and proper training facilities to up skill the community, to look at educating the community how to actually go forward. If families aren’t going to move, how do they work as a community to create new employment?”

Community Service Worker, Bourke

However, lack of resources, funding and institutional support were identified as barriers. For example, one person said they had enquired with TAFE about the possibility of offering a childcare course in Bourke for a small group of young Aboriginal women. However, TAFE will only offer courses where there are at least 15 enrolled students. This policy was criticised on the basis that even if you could get 15 students, there are not enough jobs in childcare in Bourke for those students at the end of the course and so “you get the deflation of ‘well, why did I do it?’”.

4.4.4 Intergenerational offending

A number of people described continuing or evolving or intergenerational offending where role models are older offenders – whether family members or friends or simply people who seem adventurous and who they admire. One scenario was described of young people getting into trouble with police, following in the footsteps of their fathers and grandfathers who also had been in trouble:

“The problem that we’re having in town at the moment is that the role models of your eight to 12 year olds aren’t your football players, aren’t your sportsmen, aren’t your scientists – their role models are locked up in juvenile detention. So they look up to these kids – he stole a car, he’s good at stealing cars. Let’s go talk to him and hang out with him. So that’s a really big cycle you’ve got to try and break somehow is to change the mindset of these young kids. Because their thoughts are – Joe Blow, he’s in jail again you know, he’s doing great. He stole two cars when he got out and didn’t get caught, or he took the police on a chase through town – What a champion!”

Youth Case Manager, NSW Police Force Youth Command, Bourke PCYC

Many interviewees described a cycle of violence in some Aboriginal families that is being passed from parents to children. For example, it was said that boys who grow up with domestic violence learn from what they observe. When these boys get into relationships with girls, it was said “if they don’t know any other behaviour, then when it comes time to deal with emotional issues or relationship issues, they don’t know how to handle it or deal with things they don’t necessarily agree with, they lash out.” It was said that they don’t have the skills to deal with their anger in a non-violent manner.

“A lot of time domestic violence is cyclical because you have either the male or the female that’s growing up with it – it’s their upbringing. Their mum and dad might have grown up like that too. Statistics show us that a woman who’s grown up in it, she’ll end up with a partner that’s violent”.

Community Service Worker, Bourke

A similar issue was raised relating to more experienced offenders, who are already familiar with the criminal justice system, recruiting younger boys to commit crimes, counting on the fact that the younger person will not face serious trouble. Another aspect of the intergenerational offending described by several people, was the evolving seriousness of criminal behaviour as more experienced offenders recruit less experienced offenders who step up to the next level:

“From what I can see, a lot of the older boys are actually grooming these young boys to commit these crime for them and with them. I think they know these young boys can’t really get in much trouble because they have been through the system themselves.”

Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, NSW Police, Bourke

Sadly, once within the criminal justice system, several people described custody as an attractive option for some young people as providing meals, a warm bed and safety. It was acknowledged that the appropriate sanction for juvenile offenders is a vexed question. On the one hand they are just kids, while on the other hand crime must be stopped. Juvenile detention was largely considered to have been a failure and the need for alternatives was discussed by numerous people. In particular, the Brahminy program operating in the Northern Territory was identified as potentially having positive outcomes in Bourke.

4.4.7 Authority to discipline kids removed

A recurrent theme raised by nearly every person we spoke to was the perception of many Aboriginal people that their authority to discipline their kids has been removed, which undermines parental authority, which in turn leads to juvenile crime. This theme was raised as part of a broader picture of the undermining of Aboriginal authority and of Aboriginal family structure.

“Parents feel disenfranchised because their rights have been taken. Take Aboriginal people, they can’t chastise their children, or only to a certain degree. They have just given up because they have been told what to do their whole lives under laws, Acts and legislations and all these kinds of things.”

Acting Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

The undermining of authority has contributed to frustration and a feeling of powerlessness. While the community expects Elders to take responsibility for their kids, the Elders feel they cannot do anything, “they’d like to but they don’t want to be locked up over it”.

“The Elders have had the authority taken off them. Then the police come knocking on their door and say ‘why don’t you do something with your kid?’ Really, they can’t do nothing. They’d like to, but they don’t want to be locked up over it”.

Community Worker, Bourke

On the other hand, some people noted that whereas once it may have been acceptable to physically punish children, those days are over and alternative means of discipline or punishment must be found.

As in many communities – Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike – a frequent lament was that young people lack respect, whether it be respect for parents, teachers, the

police, themselves, authority or other people's property. Several reasons were given: some believe it is the influence of outside factors that have come with globalisation and, in particular, the Americanisation of Australian young people; others felt that parents are responsible for not teaching their children respect. One person felt it basically boils down to treating the kids themselves with respect which will then be reciprocated.

4.4.8 Youth bail issues

A significant number of participants working in the criminal justice system observed major problems with young people breaching bail. Lack of structure and discipline at home, substance abuse and violence were identified as factors driving young people from their homes and rendering a specific bail address ineffective:

"There are a large number of breaches of bail here relative to other places. Kids don't want to be at home. There is nothing there for them and they are safe with their mates roaming the streets. Police are well aware of who is on bail and they have an obligation to act. They can't ignore it ad nauseum and I understand that, but there are a lot of police in Bourke."

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service, Bourke

"I am a believer in the concept of curfew and bail. I do agree with it, but in some cases it doesn't work, because their home life is too unsatisfactory. You're setting them up to fail. We need to consider the idea of a Safehouse / bail house."

Youth Case Manager, NSW Police Force Youth Command, Bourke PCYC

Several people suggested a youth bail house would have the dual benefit of ensuring child safety and cutting down the number of breach bail offences. Some participants went further and suggested a youth hostel or safe house, comprising both long-term and short-term accommodation for children and young people at risk.

4.5 UNDERLYING ISSUES

During the course of our interviews, people raised some clear and common social, cultural, legal and economic issues which underlie the high crime rates in Bourke. Many of the issues can be described as "unfinished business" and are indicative of the powerlessness and ongoing marginalisation of Aboriginal people that was described in Bourke. These underlying issues are complex and interrelated. There was a strongly held belief that unless these issues are addressed in a holistic fashion it is unlikely that there will be a reduction in the rates of Aboriginal crime.

4.5.1 Bourke: a rural town in decline

In terms of long-term viability, Bourke is a community that has faced, and continues to face, many challenges. Many people talked about Bourke as a rural town in decline. The gradual loss of rural industries caused by drought and other factors has led to rising levels of unemployment, loss of income and, as described earlier, the absence of the kind of meaningful activity that builds pride and self-esteem. The local economy is becoming increasingly reliant on services and government investment. As one person put it, "if the government were to pull out its investment, Bourke would just fold".

Nonetheless, allegiance to family and country leaves Aboriginal people reluctant to leave Bourke for educational or employment opportunities, which was viewed in positive and negative terms. On the one hand, maintaining tight knit extended family relationships was viewed as a great attribute of Aboriginal people. On the other hand, by remaining in Bourke people may become trapped in a pervasive cycle of disadvantage that is compounded by the lack of local educational opportunities and declining employment.

There was acknowledgement that, from governments' perspectives, there are questions about whether the level of government investment in the town can be sustained and whether the community is viable long-term. However, these questions are based on the assumption that if governments decide that Bourke is unsustainable, then people will simply move away (presumably to larger regional centres) to pursue employment opportunities. This is not the case. As one Aboriginal person we spoke to pointed out:

“Even if that happened and the other people moved away, the Aboriginal community will stay here. That’s why I’m always advocating our position with the services.”

Acting Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

In light of these challenges, several people identified the need for a long-term community plan or “roadmap for a contemporary community” that holistically addresses the issue of long-term viability.

“When I say big levers, we definitely have to pull some big levers. If country communities are going to be viable, resilient communities they have to have the resources that make other communities viable, functioning and resilient. There needs to be employment, something meaningful.”

CEO, NSW Outback Division of General Practice

Socioeconomic disadvantage

The Aboriginal community in Bourke experiences extreme hardship, described as being in crisis. Unemployment is high, incomes are low and people frequently live in overcrowded conditions in poor quality housing. The difficulties faced by any person relying predominantly on social security entitlements are compounded by the isolation of the town and the high cost of living:

“They talk about terrorism, but I look at the price of things here and that’s commercial terrorism, especially with disadvantaged people. People may not have a job and they’re expected to pay rent, pay for the upkeep of their homes and send their children to school on nothing.”

Acting Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

Poverty and dependency on welfare was seen to sap people’s self-motivation and make it hard for people to be engaged and active in the community.

4.5.2 Racism and segregation

Bourke is described as a segregated town with minimal interaction between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. While inter-community relations were described as “pleasant” and “polite” on the surface, there was widespread

acknowledgement of the underlying division between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people: “You have your whitefellas that don’t want to mix with the blackfellas and blackfellas who don’t want to mix with whitefellas.”

Many people – Aboriginal and non-Indigenous – labelled Bourke a racist town, but described the racism as “subtle and hidden”, “not openly racist”, “underlying and not very exposed”, “don’t care racism”, “closet” or “passive”, manifest in the lack of employment and educational opportunities. On the other hand, there was the recognition that non-Indigenous people of goodwill are present in the town and need to be engaged. One person thought that the situation was better described as a “lack of engagement and social opportunity” which manifests in “crime; lack of achievement for individuals; lack of respect for people and property; and a loss of identity”.

While some participants commented that the Bourke community is very supportive and cohesive, others noted that the support can be very uneven. While there might be community-wide support when fundraising to send an Aboriginal boy away to play representative football, there might not be support for an Aboriginal family whose house burned down. The Aboriginal people of Bourke do not have a specific or celebrated role in the Australia Day celebrations for example and non-Indigenous people were perceived to have little interest in NAIDOC events.

Some people referred to non-Aboriginal people not understanding Aboriginal ways of life and being unsupportive of Aboriginal aspirations, whether traditional or contemporary. Numerous examples were given ranging from being unable to get a kangaroo or emu without someone reporting you; failure to support community initiatives like the alcohol management plan or Community Working Party initiatives; or failure to formally acknowledge Aboriginal representative organisations.

There were mixed perspectives about whether racism is worse today than in the past. Some older Aboriginal people felt that there was less racism when they were young and that the community was “all in together”. Other Aboriginal people observed that Bourke has always been a racist and segregated town. Indeed, it was said by one person that “racism is part of the social fabric of the river towns.” The formal equality granted to Aboriginal people after the 1967 referendum was also identified as an event which elicited a racist backlash:

“Things just steam rolled after the referendum and there was the right to walk down the street. That right to walk down the street created a lot of other stuff. People would say ‘what’s that black so and so doing in the main street?’”

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer, NSW Department of Environment,
Climate Change and Water

Segregation between the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous communities has arguably also been exacerbated by the high rates of Aboriginal crime in Bourke. Several people alluded to fear of crime and people no longer knowing their neighbours as contributing to segregation – people are reluctant to engage. Distressingly, it was said that Aboriginal kids don’t feel welcome at some sports clubs because “people look at them as though they might steal something.”

Disconnect between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous worlds

Although the western way of life has been forced on Aboriginal people, Aboriginal people continue to live in the Aboriginal domain. Several Aboriginal people we spoke

to described the inherent disconnect between these two domains as an underlying cause of crime in Bourke:

“We chase the dollar, that’s the road we take. We’re tied up in that world. The land’s been taken away so we can’t use the land anymore. It’s been replaced with something else – with the house and the fence. We can’t go hunt for kangaroo and emu and wild tucker anymore. It’s been replaced by the supermarket. You get to the supermarket and you need this money so then, obviously, you’ve got to go to Centrelink or go get a job. So now you’re right over that [the non-Indigenous] side of the fence. Then, ‘Oh well you’re not good enough to do this job’, so you go to Centrelink. Next minute, ‘I’m sick of this’, and then you’re up there Monday morning at the court house.”

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer, NSW Department of Environment,
Climate Change and Water

Several Aboriginal people described the tension of straddling both the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal worlds and their frustration that Aboriginal people must learn to operate in the non-Indigenous world while non-Indigenous people are not even aware that the Aboriginal world exists. Even if they are aware, they do not understand or acknowledge a parallel way of life:

“Back in the old days, under traditional law, ... there were all these systems in place, but they were all taken away. But we are expected to comply with the way things are today without any of those traditional systems being acknowledged. It’s really difficult when you have a foot in each world”.

Acting Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

“I know all about your lifestyle. I know everything about your world. But you still don’t know our world at all. You need to understand that and that’s not what is happening at the moment. But there’s that invisible line that we move across.”

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer, NSW Department of Environment,
Climate Change and Water

Different Aboriginal people had different views about what needs to happen to negotiate this disconnect. One felt that Aboriginal people are within the western system now and must operate entirely within that system. Similarly, another felt that Aboriginal people cannot ignore the western system and need to understand it in order to negotiate the rules and regulations: getting licences to hunt and fish or requiring permission to access significant sites. On the other hand, other senior Aboriginal people argued that the criminal justice system cannot afford to ignore the Aboriginal world and that change will only occur when Aboriginal people are empowered to solve their problems themselves – that non-Indigenous people need to know that there is another legal system in place that has always existed and that operates to different standards:

“I believe that outback towns, like the Koori people and like the police, because they are two different laws and our people just struggle right through from when the law was taken off them. I believe now that the police law and the old fellas law, Koori law, should come together and be able to work together to solve our problems. It’s been too long now that the police have tried their way, their laws, and it’s not working. So what they need to do now is recognise the Elders in the community and work with them and get their law from them and come up with an outcome for sentencing”.

Community Worker, Bourke

“When the justice system comes along we’re invisible. Yet the justice system is full of our people. When you’re up at court on Monday morning in Bourke all you see are our people standing out the front, ready to go to court. We’re invisible. We’re not being a part of it, not being a part of saying, ‘Well all right this is your deal. How do you fix it?’ They’re saying, ‘This is your deal. You fix it, but you can only fix it [the way we tell you]’. So it puts us away from that system big time and therefore we end up in place like prisons, juvenile justice centres and women’s refuges. You end up with programs – alcohol programs – that just, culturally, don’t fit who we are and we are always ending up, on a Monday morning, in the court. It’s the system that just doesn’t fit. It just doesn’t fit culturally.”

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer, NSW Department of Environment,
Climate Change and Water

4.5.2 Land justice

Land was frequently spoken of as central to Aboriginal identity, as “who we are and where we come from”. Several people passionately argued that access to land, land ownership and land rights are pivotal to addressing the social issues faced by Aboriginal people.

“From a personal perspective as an Aboriginal person, we could sit here all day and talk about the same old rhetoric – health, housing and education – but it really comes back to the core issues of being disconnected to country, no access to country and there is no land ownership. They are the underlying issues that contribute to the social issues.”

Acting Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

“If you really, really want to get to the core of the issue, it’s land. It’s all about land. Whoever gets the land will get the power and they get the money. For us, it’s not about the power or the money, it’s just about having that land. Having that access to their country. The only access we had was in the yards and in the stock reserve that we now call Alice Edwards village – that’s where we were allowed to go. If we were found outside of that, then we’re trespassing on somebody else’s land. Fellas have big blocks of land fenced off. They don’t use it. They might run a few sheep on it, but they don’t use it. But we get people who are screaming just to be on country, just to do their own thing on their own country. On land, near the river, wherever. Just a place where they can go without looking over their shoulder to see the fella in the blue uniform chasing them down the road.”

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer, NSW Department of Environment,
Climate Change and Water

Aboriginal people expressed a deep sense of injustice that is not historical, over dispossession and the continued denial of access to land:

“I am a traditional owner in this country, sitting in my own country, where everything I do is controlled by other people. At the end of the day this land is ours and we don’t have access to it. We have to seek permission to go onto land and seek authorisation to go on the river.”

Acting Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

4.5.4 Lack of autonomy / self-determination

There was widespread frustration at the lack of recognition of Aboriginal authority and autonomy. Some Aboriginal people seemed to describe being constrained by a framework that prevents them from realising their aspirations.

“There are times when you just feel like you are up against the world. At the end of the day, we are simple people. We just want to do what we want to do without interfering from others. We’d like somewhere to go where we can really call home. Not just for an individual or dominant group, but for the whole community.”

Acting Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

The importance of Aboriginal people setting the terms of engagement was stressed. One senior Aboriginal person described the frustration of coming to the negotiation table, only to be told that non-negotiable terms have already been set.

“I come to the table to make a decision. I can come to the table and make a decision, but other people come to the table and they can’t make a decision, they’ve got to go back. Someone else makes the decision for them. Well I can make a decision. Who can make the decision? They come to the table with a book, with all these squares, saying we can negotiate, but we can’t negotiate on these issues here.”

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer, NSW Department of Environment,
Climate Change and Water

Many Aboriginal people described wanting to exert their autonomy – whether by determining solutions to problems or taking ownership of initiatives – but of being thwarted at every turn. Where support is offered for Aboriginal initiatives there is a perception the support is “tokenistic”. One Aboriginal person said “we find ourselves in small pockets trying to do everything with nothing”. Similarly, the lack of funding for Aboriginal community initiatives was a significant issue. People provided examples of local initiatives that struggle to get off the ground, such as the proposed waste water project. The effect of this continued lack of support cannot be overstated. One Aboriginal person told us: “most of the stuff that happens in Bourke is all talk and never comes to fruition”. There was a definite sense that it is pointless to get involved in community initiatives when getting them started requires so much physical and emotional energy or, once started, can’t be sustained.

4.5.5 Role of elders and community leaders: the undermining of authority

There was some degree of cynicism around the disconnect that Aboriginal autonomy is not supported but that non-Indigenous people expect that Aboriginal people in Bourke should take responsibility for fixing their social problems and be active in initiatives aimed at solving those problems. There was a clear call from non-Indigenous people for the Aboriginal community in Bourke to “step up” in this regard. Other Aboriginal people we spoke to echoed these calls for more leadership and participation but were mindful of the fact that these social problems have been “inherited”, they were not created by Aboriginal people. One Aboriginal person noted bitterly that non-Indigenous people were always calling for Aboriginal volunteers to run programs and join committees but that Aboriginal people had already ‘volunteered’ their land and their authority; “What else do they want?”

The important role of elders and respected persons in Aboriginal society and as community leaders was raised by most people. Reference to the tension between the calls for Aboriginal elders and respected persons to take responsibility but that their decisions are ignored if they do not neatly conform with mainstream approaches was raised. One poignant example was given of a public meeting held to deal with a community crisis. Elders and senior Aboriginal people were asked for their direction, only to be immediately told that their suggested solution was not legally possible. It was widely acknowledged that the authority of elders has diminished over time, being undermined on different fronts.

“Their role as leaders hasn’t been nurtured. When I was growing up there were a number of very outspoken Elders who were instrumental in getting heaps of change delivered for Aboriginal people. They were very engaged. They were outspoken – some would say too outspoken. They had a sense of where they wanted their communities to be. They had a sense of the sorts of things that needed to be made available and achieved by their people if they wanted to be there. I don’t know if those leaders as there now the way they were before.”

CEO, NSW Outback Division of General Practice

People described the impact of colonisation, the missions and interventionist government policies as having displaced cultural authority. For example, the division between the different language groups resulting from colonisation policies was described as preventing elders from taking leadership roles in Bourke, where people might say, ‘You can’t speak for me and I can’t speak for you’. It was said by one person that the missions “broke our elder’s lives, taking that authority off them.”

“The missions actually broke our elder’s lives, taking that authority off them because they became under government law then. I believe that’s where it actually affected Koori people, right back then, and then it just followed through. The Elders weren’t involved in decision making anymore.”

Community Worker, Bourke High

Other pressure on the authority of elders and cultural authority more broadly include globalisation forces:

“Back then they didn’t have mobile phones, we didn’t have YouTube, we didn’t have the rubbish we watch on telly, music videos. Everything that kids read or see is of such a sexual nature now. It’s either sexual or fighting. The elders didn’t have that back in their generation at the same level. So the elders are saying, ‘What do we do now? They don’t listen to us anymore.’ I don’t know how we turn that around. I believe by taking little steps, coming to places like this and just sitting kids down and reading with them and being seen with kids may be a little step in helping.”

Youth Case Manager, NSW Police Force Youth Command, Bourke PCYC

One very interesting reason given for the dismantling or undermining of authority was the extent to which government bureaucracy is replacing community resilience. It was said that as government policy becomes more and more interventionist, institutional memory and authority are weakened. People lose confidence and turn to government institutions for solutions, rather than being self-reliant.

“Perhaps some of the fabric of the Indigenous community – the resilience that was there – has been taken up by state government departments, whether it’s juvenile justice, probation, parole or DoCS. There are now layers upon layers

upon layers that are continuously introduced. Whereas all that would have been done for nothing by some strong families. They would sort themselves out. Layers of bureaucracy are replacing community resilience. You don't even think about it. It's psychological almost. It comes naturally, people are reared in it. It's like women don't learn from a book how to be a good little girl. They learn from their mum and from their aunty about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. If you lose that, you can't replace that. I think that's what they're trying to do at the moment.."

CEO, NSW Outback Division of General Practice

4.5.6 Local Council

There was a general perception of Bourke Shire Council as having obligations to address Aboriginal disadvantage in Bourke that had not been fulfilled. Unfortunately, there was widespread criticism from a range of people – Aboriginal and non-Indigenous from a number of organisations – who were highly critical of the Council for failing to be proactive in promoting or providing Aboriginal opportunity or responding to perceived need. Criticisms varied from lack of representation to inadequate provision of employment opportunities to lack of support for community initiatives, including the alcohol management plan to failure to provide municipal services to Alice Edwards village.

Although there have been Aboriginal councillors, there was some feeling that the Council was not representative of Aboriginal interests, despite the increasingly large Aboriginal population in the town. One person suggested that the local council should have dedicated positions for Aboriginal counsellors, “unless you have black faces it will never really reach its potential for what it can contribute”. It was argued the council should actively support the participation of Aboriginal councillors by investing in their professional development and facilitating access to meetings if necessary. This was also seen to have a particular importance in a town where the non-Indigenous population was declining as the Aboriginal population was increasing.

The Bourke Shire Council is a large employer in the town and employs a number of Aboriginal people, particularly in outdoor maintenance. However, there was some degree of anger that there are no Aboriginal people as the public face of the Council; that you are not greeted by an Aboriginal person sitting behind a desk when you walk through the front door. Given the background of high levels of Aboriginal unemployment and lack of meaningful activity that was so frequently described in Bourke, the Council was seen to have a social and economic responsibility to increase the number of Aboriginal people it employs. The local council was repeatedly identified as a key part of any long-term employment strategy and participants felt strongly that they should be leading the way in this regard.

Boredom and lack of activities for children and young people was seen to be the number one reason for high levels of youth crime in the town, yet, in relation to youth issues, the council was also viewed as being inactive; again by Aboriginal and non-Indigenous interviewees across a range of organisations. One person said the council needs to take responsibility for providing activities for the kids. A number of interviewees unfavourably compared the Council with other local councils in the region who were proactive with the development of youth representation, youth development opportunities and activities for young people including youth groups and skate parks. Several people were frustrated at the Council's lack of support of a community proposal to build a BMX track near the PCYC, which they considered

would provide something for young people to do but could also provide a safe place where they could gather. One person remarked that the Council did little to support young people, "Yet they are the first ones in the Western Herald to say they are bad kids."

Despite the negativity towards the Council, there was hope that a meaningful partnership can be forged between the Council and the Aboriginal community based on being proactive rather than reactive. One positive achievement is the integration of the Community Action Plan and Aboriginal Crime Prevention Plan with Council planning. Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly is also in the process of negotiating partnership plans with local councils, which is also considered to be a positive development.

"We really need to develop that meaningful partnership with council. What tends to happen is that when something happens we have always been reactive to it. It is one of our community action plans to develop a statement of commitment and have the TO's and the other language groups that share the community acknowledged."

Acting Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

4.5.7 Support services

There was general acknowledgment that there are a large number of support services in Bourke to address Aboriginal social issues, to variable effect. However, given the specific attributes and needs of the town, there are some profound deficiencies. In particular, given the scale of the problem, there are no locally based alcohol and drug treatment facilities and little available counselling. Aside from the deeper systemic issue of such services not being under local Aboriginal community control, people raised many other problems with the method of service delivery that impact on their effectiveness. In addition, several people also observed that, Aboriginal people "don't seem to access" those services that are available. Several people thought that concerns about confidentiality could underlie this.

A common theme was the lack of a holistic approach to providing support to individuals and families in crisis. People were critical of the number of small services that "nibble at the edges", but fail to deal holistically with people in need. It was said that many people in Bourke live in crisis and that they need services that "wrap around them."

"The other contributing factor in relation to the issues Aboriginal people have in offending is that the infrastructure just doesn't support them. Huge amounts of money are pushed into these communities that doesn't offer coal face support to Aboriginal people in times of need or crisis. There are all these little agencies who give a little bit of support here and there, but nothing that wraps around the whole group as a whole."

Community Worker, Bourke

The holistic approach was needed to extend beyond the individual seeking assistance: that it was ineffective to deal with one member of the family without addressing the broader issues. As one person noted, you may spend the day working with someone on dealing with anger issues or strategies for coping with excessive alcohol consumption but, at the end of the day, that person has to return to the same environment that contributed to the problem in the first place. A specific

example of the importance of a holistic approach was provided by one community support worker who observed that while it is important to support victims of domestic violence it is equally important to support the perpetrators.

“Where the violence is endemic to the family, you can support the female, but then she’ll return to that situation or that environment. She had received assistance here but she’ll return home and nothing has changed at home. What we are saying is that to be effective you don’t only deal with the female alone, it has to be everyone – male, female, parents.”

Community Service Worker, Bourke

In spite of the comparatively large number of support services in Bourke, almost every person we spoke to said that there is a serious gap in mental health services. In particular, there is no local child and adolescent mental health worker and few drug and alcohol councillors. Mental health services were generally viewed as under resourced and culturally inappropriate. Several people commented that the closest detox / rehab facilities are in Orange and Kempsey and that Aboriginal people are reluctant to seek treatment so far from their home and the support of their family. It was a commonly held view that a local facility would be a great asset.

Many people were critical of the short tenure in these support services, particularly police, health professionals, DoCS workers, teachers and ALS solicitors. Inconsistency caused by high levels of staff turnover in government agencies was viewed as a barrier to effective service delivery and a source of great frustration to people trying to bring about change on the ground.

“You have change over of staff all the time, particularly so with government agencies. It’s very difficult. Whilst you have to get them to the table, you have no consistency and that’s problematic. Some government agencies have people coming in for three months and going. And you cannot, I don’t care who it is, you can’t move forward when you’ve got that sort of inconsistency.”

Crime Manager, Darling River Local Area Command

“We have the outback division and the AMS, but they really only fly in doctors once a month. The problem with that is that, especially with Aboriginal youth, they need to have a constant. Each month the kid might have a different psychologist.”

Community Worker, Bourke

It was suggested that government needs to rethink the way it delivers services – whether health, education, employment or justice – to better meet the needs and demands of remote communities. One suggestion was to engage and train local case workers to support the fly in/fly out professionals to ensure continuity of service delivery. The importance of long-term support, continuity and ongoing case management was repeatedly emphasised.

“It has got to be really long-term support. Not just something where they walk in and say they want to [take out an AVO against their partner] and then we say now you’ve been told, you’ve got your information, see you later. I’ve worked with one client for 12 months just as a court support and helping them get housing and counselling. While they were in and out of the refuge then you’ve got to go there each time, that sort of thing. You can’t walk away because every time you visit you’ve got to do phone calls and just keep a follow up so they know something’s happening and they know they’re not alone.”

Another source of frustration was the lack of education given to workers in these support services before they arrive in the community. The importance of understanding the community that you are coming to and respecting that the community, rather than the professional, may have some worthwhile solutions was frequently identified. There was some degree of wariness of the next new person coming to town, wanting to start something but when they leave it falls apart because they didn't engage the local community to build lasting solutions:

"Educate people before they even come here because we are not going anywhere and a new wave of people will come through with the same over the top attitude that they are going to fix Bourke, but they never will."

Community Worker, Bourke

4.6 RESPONSES TO THE HIGH CRIME RATE

4.6.1 Criminal Justice System

Circle Sentencing

Circle sentencing was generally viewed in positive terms as a successful initiative with noticeable reductions in recidivism in relation to some crimes. However a lack of resources means that only a small proportion of cases can be sent for circle sentencing and there was desire for its dramatic expansion.

"You very rarely see them come back for the same crime. They will come back for different crimes, but not the same. Its not blanket block on recidivism but on the particular crime yes."

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service, Bourke.

While generally viewed in positive terms, some caution in terms of expectations was counselled. One Aboriginal participant felt that circle sentencing was still too embedded in the mainstream criminal justice system where it is limited to advising on available options within the mainstream system, rather than enabling the Aboriginal justice system to operate, which has greater potential to deal with the crime in a broader context, taking into account all of the offender's circumstances:

"I do circle sentencing and while we get some say in that process, in the end there are a limited number of things we can say. We don't get to say what we really want to do because it's still being handed to us."

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer, NSW Department of Environment,
Climate Change and Water

The "circle" concept is also being extended into relationship counselling where both partners are committing domestic violence against each other. The partners come together with elders to "address the issues that are leading to violence on both sides".

Failure of juvenile detention and need for alternatives

Many of the people we spoke to in the criminal justice system, especially as they related to young people, identified a number of failures and gaps. For example, the

effectiveness of cautioning under the Young Offenders Act was questioned, as was the effectiveness of youth conferencing and sentencing in court. Some people observed that it can take over six months for the matter to be heard or for the conference to be held and that by that time the kid “can’t remember [the crime] or doesn’t care”. Alternatives for young people were strongly advocated.

A number of people working in the criminal justice system highlighted the failure of detention, particularly the failure of juvenile detention, in terms of deterrence and rehabilitation. . “The kids we are getting back here in Bourke from detention are just doing the same things as soon as they get out.” In some cases, incarceration made “people worse”: “they’re more knowledgeable” and “institutionalised already at 15 or 16.” On the other hand, the lack of support on returning home was problematic where young people moved from a structured environment in detention to return to their previous lives.

A common narrative expressed was the need for alternate ways of dealing with crime and punishment. Aboriginal people said that the western system needs to recognise Aboriginal law, for example banishing people from the community, punishing crime more expediently and empowering local Aboriginal elders and respected persons who know their own communities to act. Other people stressed the need for “realistic, hard, tough diversionary destinations” for offenders as well as increased access to psychological support.

A number of people suggested some form of cultural and heritage bush camp as a youth diversionary program, but it was stressed that we should not wait until the kids have come into contact with the criminal justice system before these opportunities are made available. The connection between young people, land, culture and their elders was strongly viewed as a way to prevent crime.

“Our elders should be taking the kids out and telling them about respecting our elders and about their culture and how the old people lived off the land before the European people. Why wait until the kid gets into trouble before you take them out? Why not do it so they can keep out of trouble?”

Community Worker, Bourke

PCYC

The PCYC was generally viewed as an asset to the community, however many felt that its potential has not been fully realised. Several participants felt the opening hours of the PCYC are inappropriate. The PCYC is only open until 8pm and is not open for long on Saturdays and not at all on Sundays. The PCYC case manager was explicitly commended by a range of people for his commitment to working with young people and was seen as a positive role model. He was seen as someone developing plans and initiatives for young people with the potential for success.

Exacerbating sanctions

As in other communities, some available sanctions were considered to be inadequate or potentially exacerbating. Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs) in particular were raised. While AVOs play an essential role in the protection of the vulnerable – especially women in violent relationships – the number of AVOs issued in Bourke and the circumstances in which they are issued was problematic. We were told stories of friends or family members who drink together having a falling out resulting in the issuing of an AVO but who continue to drink together in breach of its terms. AVOs in response to ‘feuding’ family members were described as so prevalent

that soon, everyone in town would have one. Also police AVOs, when people did not understand how to have them removed, were described as problematic.

4.6.2 Community Initiatives

The Bourke community is actively addressing crime prevention and several initiatives that are having a positive impact were identified.

Aboriginal Bail Support Project pilot

The Bourke Aboriginal Community Justice Group ('ACJG') identified bail related issues as a major priority in their Aboriginal Community Justice Plan; specifically inequitable access to bail and high number of breaches of bail for Aboriginal defendants. Common barriers to Aboriginal people being granted bail is the lack of a fixed residential address or inability to meet monetary or surety requirements. The bail pilot was designed to include respected Aboriginal people in the bail process to explore alternatives to traditional bail requirements, allowing alternatives to be presented to the court.

ACJG members are asked to provide advice on bail conditions where special conditions are being considered or have been imposed. The ALS or defendant can request that the ACJG report on police bail conditions before review by the Magistrate; or the Magistrate or Registrar can request an ACJG report before imposing bail conditions. Bourke was the first site for the pilot, which is apparently being extended to further towns in NSW.

Bourke Alcohol Working Group

As described above, the community established the Bourke Alcohol Working Group that was responsible for driving the development of a five-year alcohol management plan. The plan emerged from a two day community forum and is viewed as a unique achievement in the region:

"What other [river] communities are putting their hand up and saying, geez we've got a problem with alcohol, let's do something a little bit radical and let's get out there and work on it. We don't want any government to come in and start telling us what we can do with our money."

Crime Manager, Darling River Local Area Command

The Bourke Alcohol Management Plan is a joint initiative of the police, the Bourke Alcohol Working Group and the Outback Division of General Practice. A vital and deliberate aspect of the strategy is that it applies to everyone in Bourke, despite the suggestion by some community members that it should only target 'problem drinkers'. It is a multilayered strategy including restrictions on alcohol sales and a range of community and school education and awareness activities and funding for a new drug and alcohol counsellor who is based at the Outback Division of General Practice. Several proponents of the Plan observed that Bourke is the first community in the western region to introduce an alcohol management plan and expressed pride in the proactive stance they had taken to a community wide problem.

While much of the focus on the Plan has been on restrictions on the sale of alcohol – for example, "heavy" alcohol cannot be sold before 2pm and you must be in a car or taxi to purchase alcohol – the plan's proponent's emphasise that the alcohol restrictions are just one, albeit significant, element:

“Legislative change is simple compared to the adaptive challenges of changing people’s mindsets, their culture and what they’re used to. I would prefer to move away from the restrictions, even though I mention them as being important, they’re not the answer. They never will be in these places. You need to change the mindsets and to do that you have to start young.”

Crime Manager, Darling River Local Area Command

There were divergent views about the level of consultation with the community undertaken by proponents of the alcohol management plan. There were also questions raised about community support for the measures. However, the plan’s proponents contend quite strongly that an appropriate consultation process was undertaken, especially when the desired health outcomes are taken into account.

Several people commented that alcohol is seen as a “black problem” in Bourke and there was disappointment at a perceived lack of support, particularly from some business representatives (see also Lyford, August 2010). The strategy’s proponents noted that there was a tendency from opponents to object to restrictions applying to everyone. The sentiment was summarised as, ‘Why don’t you just worry about the excessive drinkers and leave us good people alone?’ However, the proponents emphasise a community wide approach. If there is a community problem, then it is not appropriate to have one rule for some people and another for others. The reality is, as one person observed, it would be one rule for blacks and another for whites, which would be discriminatory and unacceptable. It would also arguably be less effective.

Anecdotally, health and criminal justice workers reported their perception of a striking impact of the Alcohol Management Plan being, not a large reduction in the *number of incidents*, but in the *severity* of violence:

“In terms of crime and alcohol related assaults, domestic violence related assaults, they’ve kind of remained stable or decreased. Initially sort of decreased in domestic violence and alcohol related violence, but it’s kind of evened out a bit now. But six months in it was like a 50 per cent reduction in severity of assault, which was huge.”

Crime Manager, Darling River Local Area Command

A formal evaluation of the Bourke Alcohol Management Plan is currently being undertaken by the George Institute for Global Health. It is still early days, however, an initial progress report has highlighted some positive preliminary findings (Lyford, August 2010). In particular, the majority of people interviewed were said to be supportive of the Alcohol Management Plan, including the takeaway alcohol restrictions. Business representatives were the only main source of criticism. The report also noted:

“The overwhelming opinion was that, while further actions are required, the restrictions have nonetheless been an effective mechanism for addressing health and social impacts”.

Bourke is described as being a “better place” since the restrictions and, anecdotally, we heard that people are healthier. At this stage, the George Institute’s evaluation has little quantitative data but one promising finding was a 9.6% reduction in non-domestic alcohol related assault (Lyford, August 2010). We look forward to the more detailed evaluation down the track, particularly to see whether there is evidence of a reduction in the severity of violence as reported by interviewees.

Brahminy program

Emerging from the observation that juvenile detention is not having the desired outcomes for many young offenders, a range of people spoke of the need for a bush camp with a strong cultural element as a youth diversionary program. One group of community members have identified a program, run by Allan Brahminy in the Northern Territory, as a successful model that could be established in Bourke. The "Brahminy program" provides a youth residential program for marginalised and at risk young people. Youth from all over Australia are sent to remote camps in the Northern Territory. They are put through an intensive three to six month training program. The program includes non-stop work, training and education and access to counsellors, psychologists and doctors. On proponent of the program felt "it's about taking them out of their community and putting them in a situation where they don't know anyone and they basically have to grow up."

While the program is very resource intensive (it costs approximately \$40K per person), it is viewed as a cheaper alternative to detention and reportedly results in low levels of reoffending.

Pit Stop Program

The Pit Stop program is offered by Centacare and is run in conjunction with the Local Offender Program which supports Juvenile Justice clients. The main aims of the program are to use motor mechanics combined with driver awareness to help curb the high rate of youth motor vehicle related crime. The youth work on donated cars under the guidance of a qualified mechanic learning basic mechanics. They also work on cars that have been damaged through crime and return them to the victim. Youth in danger of disengaging from school who attend school are also welcomed at the workshop. As part of the program, participants can get their learner driver permit and be taught to drive, gaining enough log-book hours to obtain their provisional licence. A long-term ambition is that the program will have a pool of cars that are fixed and maintained by the young people that they can borrow for short periods of time.

5. LIGHTNING RIDGE

5.1 BACKGROUND

The word most commonly used by interviewees to describe Lightning Ridge is 'unique'. It is a town full of contradictions where things may be actually quite different to how they first appear.

Lightning Ridge is an opal mining town, described by one interviewee as 'opal centric'. In fact, one interviewee observed that one reason for good relations within the community was that opal was a topic of conversation common to everyone. The town has a relatively recent history for the region. While opal has always been known to the traditional owners, black opal was only discovered by Europeans in the 1880s. It took some time for demand to build but, ultimately, Lightning Ridge became a thriving mining town.

Lightning Ridge was described as being penalised for being too successful. It has areas of great need (particularly mental health and housing), but because it has lower crime statistics than other towns, those needs are not being met.

Aboriginal History

Lightning Ridge is located in the traditional country of the Yuwalaraay (Ualaroi or Ualari) people. The Barriekneal watering hole, located approximately 10 km from the current township of Lightning Ridge, was a significant camping ground for local Aboriginal people.⁵ The township of Lightning Ridge on the site as it exists today was established on the discovery of opal.

The occupation by colonists and pastoralists who travelled up the Darling River and its tributaries during the mid 1800s forever changed the lives of the traditional owners of the lands along the inland rivers. The Aboriginal populations were forced into pastoral and town camps and provided a source of labour for the colonists. The harsh life in the camps resulted in a steady decline in the Aboriginal population from 1880 to the mid 1900s. This was due to a number of factors including a reduction in the availability of traditional foods in the early years and then through the on set of diseases, poor nutrition, poverty, environmental health problems, and alcoholism that resulted from the sedentary life experienced in the town camps particularly during the depression years.⁶

In 1882, the Aborigines Protection Act passed through the NSW Parliament, and a Protector of Aborigines was appointed. Soon after, the establishment of reserves and government ration stations for Aboriginal people commenced. Angledool Reserve, about 60 km north of Lightning Ridge near Goodooga, was gazetted as the site of a Government reserve under the Aborigines Protection Act and opened in 1912. It was located on the traditional land of the Yuwalaraay people, close to the boundary of lands traditionally belonging to the Gamilaroi and Kooma language groups and was the only supervised reserve in the Walgett North area. At its peak,

⁵ Lightning Ridge Community Working Party, Lightning Ridge Community Action Plan (May 2006), 1.

⁶ Ibid.

the mission accommodated up to 180 people who were forcibly relocated, or moved, into the settlement from both Yuwalaraay and Gamilaroi country. Memories of Angledool unite the Aboriginal communities of the area, recalling strong community ties as well as the harsh repression of the 1930s and its restoration and potential development as a site for cultural tourism were mentioned by a number of interviewees.⁷

With the closure of Angledool Reserve in 1936, the Aboriginal Protection Board destroyed the homes and attempted to forcibly relocate its residents to Brewarrina Mission under a centralisation policy.⁸ The decision resulted from a reduced need for pastoral labour on the local stations in the light of the imminent subdivision of a group of the larger properties, including Angledool Station, to smaller holdings. The passing of the need to maintain a ready Aboriginal workforce for the benefit of the pastoral properties lifted the obligation placed upon the Aborigines Protection Board to provide segregated schooling and rations at Angledool during periods of unemployment and the Mission was closed. Approximately 110 people were forcibly relocated but a number of families who had secure work on pastoral stations in the region, and who were safe from the threat of removal of their children, resisted and stayed in Angledool. Other families also escaped, hurriedly packing up during the night and relocated to Lightning Ridge or Collarenebri, among other places.⁹

Conditions at Brewarrina Mission were poor and the promise of “fine houses” never kept. As time passed, many of the Angledool families escaped from the mission to head home. By the late 1930s/early 1940s, some had returned to Angledool, others went to Collarenebri, Lightning Ridge and Walgett where they remain today.

Population estimates

Several people described Lightning Ridge as a great place to live if you want to disappear, whether to enjoy the solitude, an alternative lifestyle or to live under the radar or to hide out. It was also suggested that Lightning Ridge has a large “criminal element” who have chosen it to live so as to escape detection.

“People can come here if they want to disappear from the world, maybe. People live on camps, some by choice, others because they have to, but some people like that lifestyle and it’s a harder lifestyle for sure, you know, to have live with a generator, no running water, no electricity, or no septic or anything like that. But that’s how a lot of people choose to live.”

Manager, Safehouse, Lightning Ridge

The population of Lightning Ridge is unknown but the majority of interviewees observed that the Census data significantly understates the population, given the large number of people living in camps or on mining claims – often in very poor conditions – many of whom, it was claimed, had little contact with the town. Some estimates put the population as high as 6000 based on post office box numbers.

The obvious problem arising from such an underestimation is that it results in inadequate planning for service needs by local, state and federal governments. Many people observed that Lightning Ridge has very few services for the estimated

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ For a description of the closure of Angledool Mission and forcible relocation to Brewarrina Mission see Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales 1770-1972* 2nd ed) (Australia, Sydney University Press, 2008), 243-250.

population, including that the town has no public housing at all, apart from housing provided by Barriekneal Housing and Community Limited.

“We estimate that there are 6000-7000 people in Lightning Ridge - nothing like the ABS stats. We have 4 hospital beds, low level of acute care beds, they can admit no children to the hospital. Any procedures you have to go to the base hospital in Dubbo; here they can give you bedrest and a drip. There are 20 aged beds and that’s the only reason that we have a 24hour medical service because the Commonwealth weighed in with aged beds but before that happened, we had a 16 hour a day accident and emergency centre. The place is being starved of infrastructure.”

President, Yawarra Meamei Women's Group Inc., Lightning Ridge

Low profile of Aboriginal community

One curious phenomenon in relation to Lightning Ridge is the relative ‘invisibility’ of Aboriginal people. Numerous people questioned our classification of Lightning Ridge as a town with a significant Aboriginal population and contrasted Lightning Ridge with other townships such as Bourke or Walgett. However, when we observed that ABS statistics put the Aboriginal population at between 21-27%, there was general agreement that this could be accurate for the town itself, excluding the large number of people who live on camps.

It is not clear why the perception of Lightning Ridge as a non-Aboriginal community has prevailed. Similarly, a number of people suggested that the reason for a low crime rate in the Lightning Ridge Aboriginal community was because the population was not large. Again, it is not entirely clear what was meant by this and this is an area that requires further investigation in the next stage of the study.

Multiculturalism

One observation about population that created no dispute was that Lightning Ridge has an extremely multicultural community. People estimated that there are 50-60 different nationalities represented in Lightning Ridge, arguing that it would be second only to Sydney in the range of communities represented. It was suggested that this multiculturalism had resulted in a high degree of mutual respect and tolerance between peoples that created a harmonious community, noting in particular a high degree of intermarriage. This was one of the reasons given for the reported lack of segregation and relatively low levels of racism in the town compared to other towns in the region.

Anomalies

As noted above, Lightning Ridge is a town full of contradictions and certain anomalies were most striking. For example, interviewees reported very high levels of drug and alcohol consumption – said to be primary causes of crime in Bourke – but this did not translate into high crime rates. A further contradiction relates to perceived levels of prosperity in the town. While outsiders described Lightning Ridge as a prosperous town with high levels of individual income, this was not supported by either ABS statistics (noting their claimed inaccuracy) or, more importantly, residents of the town who reported extreme socioeconomic disadvantage among Aboriginal people. Indeed, according to Tony Vinson’s mapping of disadvantage in Australia, Lightning Ridge is in the band of most disadvantaged communities in NSW. Finally, Lightning Ridge’s description as a frontier type of town, reliant on vigilante, sometimes violent, justice or peace keeping did not correlate with the relatively peaceful town described by its residents.

5.2 TYPES OF CRIME AND PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME

When asked about the type of crime that occurred in Lightning Ridge, most people identified break and enters, alcohol related assault and drug use and distribution. There was general acceptance that the crime rate was low but nonetheless was a concern to residents.

“As far as crime is concerned, we’re not too bad off here. We do have a bit of petty crime, like break and enters and things like that. And even though I say it’s petty, too people who own property that’s stolen it’s not petty to them. We just get a spate of them every now and then.”

Mayor, Walgett Shire

Solicitors from the Aboriginal Legal Service and others working in the criminal justice system identified that they dealt with large numbers of driving offences – ‘unlicensed, unregistered, uninsured’. Most of their dealings were with alcohol related assault matters, although not necessarily domestic related. In particular, one solicitor noted that “there were not a lot of offences of dishonesty at Lightning Ridge, full stop.”

Many people referred to periodic crime involving break and enters or car theft. Car theft was firmly linked to people visiting Lightning Ridge from out of town and a number of people contrasted Lightning Ridge with Bourke where the perception is that cars are stolen and burned on a regular basis. People also referred to periods when there would be a number of break and enters – that might involve young people – that would cease when a person was caught. Peaks of break and enters were also attributed to periods of time over summer when residents leave town, leaving their premises vacant.

Alcohol and drug use were identified as factors affecting crime rates, albeit with low public visibility. Alcohol was related to assaults and domestic violence in particular, although there are few other alcohol related crimes. One interviewee observed that Lightning Ridge has “surprisingly negligible alcohol related issues”. A local liquor accord has been introduced in Lightning Ridge that, anecdotally, is achieving good results.

One very specific Lightning Ridge phenomenon is crime related to the mining industry, especially stealing machinery or ‘ratting’ – that is illegal mining on another’s claim. When on the rare occasion that people disputed the crime statistics to claim that Lightning Ridge did, in fact, have a high crime rate, it was ratting that they were referring to. However, it was also clear from a number of interviewees that it is not Aboriginal people who are ratting.

In fact, crime involving Aboriginal people in general is very low. Some people attributed this to a small population of Aboriginal people living in Lightning Ridge. It was said that crime in Lightning Ridge does not have the “Aboriginal connotation to it” as it does in neighbouring towns.

Drug use was identified as a serious problem in the Aboriginal community and the broader community, although several people noted that visibility for drug use was low. Others, however, suggested caution, claiming that drug use in Lightning Ridge was no worse than in any other town. There were contrasting views as to the relationship between drug use and property crime. Several people claimed that stealing and break and enters were committed to support the perpetrators’ drug use. This was not a view supported by the police however.

A number of people also claimed that Lightning Ridge acted as a drop off point for drug distribution. The rumours are that drugs come to Lightning Ridge from Queensland for distribution to the other states but that there are also sophisticated hydroponic enterprises for growing marijuana. Unsurprisingly, the perception is that whatever drugs are available in the major centres and large cities are also available in Lightning Ridge.

Young People

Crime rates involving young people are low in Lightning Ridge. Nonetheless, as in all communities, there is concern about levels of crime and especially crime involving young people. The biggest “perceived problem” was said to be kids on the street. While acknowledging that the kids should be at home, local police said the kids are usually not doing anything wrong.

Crime involving young people was observed to be ‘patchy’ or ‘sporadic’, peaking occasionally and then quietening down. A common narrative was that of crime involving young people being committed by outsider visitors to town. The sense was that when they left town or were caught, the spate of break and enters or car thefts would cease.

“I think it is fair to say that at one point here there was lot of havoc with kids but that has slowed down now. Remember there [used to be] a lot of break ins, car stealing, those kinds of things. But in the last 12 months, it has quietened down a hell of a lot. There was a little gang, a little group that got around together. I don’t hear anything anymore.”

Member, Wirringah Women’s Group, Lightning Ridge

Again, interviewees found it difficult to articulate why crime rates involving young people are low but described an environment where families and the broader community is engaged, where there are activities for kids and a good relationship between the school and the Aboriginal community.

“It comes back to the parenting, education, the support of the interagencies, the community as a whole, the business people offering employment to kids. When you do look at it as a holistic picture, the Aboriginal community is functioning well and functioning within the wider community. We just take it for granted.”

Member, Wirringah Women’s Group, Lightning Ridge

The Walgett Shire Youth Development Officer identified the existence of role models as important, notably members of the Youth Council and members of the Shire’s youth development team. Encouraging the Youth Council and youth workers to act with autonomy encourages ambition, pride and self-respect, which other young people also aspire to. He also identified the Shire’s school to work program, which “puts a few dollars in a young person’s pocket” but is only available to those students attending school, as also creating positive role models.

5.3 PRIMARY FACTORS AFFECTING CRIME RATES

5.3.1 Prosperity and the black economy

Several people identified the prosperity of the town – both legal and undeclared income – as a significant factor leading to low crime rates. On its face, there would seem to be some truth to the suggestion – Lightning Ridge does have the appearance of a prosperous town with jewellery shops and cafes lining the road into town. The rationale was that in Lightning Ridge, it was possible to obtain employment or be engaged in the cash opal economy so that people did not need to be involved in crime in order to make money.

“The simple fact is that people can actually make money here. That’s what it boils down to. People thief for money don’t they?”

Community Service Provider, Lightning Ridge

While it is clear that large numbers of people go ‘specking’, it does not provide the windfall that outsiders claim. Several outsiders claimed that it was possible to make very large amounts of money – from \$200 to \$300 a day up to \$2000 to \$3000 a day – through ‘specking’ and/or dealing in opal. However, these suggestions must be treated with caution as in each case they were made by people – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – who are not resident in the town.

By contrast, Lightning Ridge residents bluntly rejected the notion that Lightning Ridge was as prosperous as outsiders perceived. As one resident put it “because it’s a mining town, [outsiders] think people are rich and that certainly isn’t the case”. Some residents instead referred to the statistics of Lightning Ridge that illustrate its disadvantaged socioeconomic status. As noted above, according to Tony Vinson’s mapping of disadvantage in Australia, Lightning Ridge is in the band of most disadvantaged communities in NSW.

“For every seven out of ten families the main source of income is welfare. Lightning Ridge is the poverty capital of NSW according to University of Canberra study in 2001. Along with Brewarrina, it is also in the most disadvantaged group in the Tony Vinson study. Tony Vinson has done 3 studies since 1999 and we have been in the top group every time but infrastructure and government funds haven’t flowed. People come to this town and see there are no bars on windows and that it is a tourist town – you get a completely different feeling. Volunteerism is quite well developed. They look at Brewarrina and Walgett and Wilcannia and Bourke and they say that’s where the money should go, rather than here.”

President, Yawarra Meamei Women's Group Inc, Lightning Ridge

There was the perception that Lightning Ridge had once been a more affluent town but this was no longer the case for a number of reasons. In particular, the downturn in the price of opal was described as having a devastating impact on the town. The recent global economic downturn was also described as impacting on the town so that it had “changed from being an affluent community to a welfare type town.”

In relation to Aboriginal residents of Lightning Ridge, in particular, interviewees observed that Aboriginal people “were doing it tough”. While there may be some people who potentially picked up the odd opal, the days where anyone, including Aboriginal prospectors, made large amounts of money through prospecting were well

and truly over. One reason was that the industry is now more regulated which prevents people from specking as easily as they had historically. Also, the mining of opal is literally more difficult and requires the use of heavy machinery, which limits Aboriginal people's ability to be involved in the industry.

"When we were growing up we'd sort of all get together and even when we got up to 18 and onwards from there we'd still all be together as a group and we'd go out probably for specking, looking for opals and that and we'd find a bit of opal and that, the next minute we were all there partying, all together still. So one day we've got a heap of money the next day we were broke again but we'd go out again. We had that luxury of going out. There was still that industry was here and we could tap into it and it cost us nothing."

Community Worker, Lightning Ridge

5.3.2 Employment/meaningful activity

Several people raised the availability of meaningful activity as having a positive impact on crime rates in Lightning Ridge. Although there are few employment opportunities, the opal industry is central to life in Lightning Ridge for all residents. Although it seems that there are few Aboriginal people who lodge mining claims, the importance of specking was described by nearly all interviewees. Its importance is in giving people additional income but also in providing them with purposeful activity.

"A lot of our people do a thing what they call specking and it's after the people who own the claims and work after they have finished their process they're just going through the leftovers and usually pick up a little bit here and a little bit there but it all adds up to opal."

Community Worker, Lightning Ridge

Barriekneal Housing and Community Ltd was frequently cited as a major employer within the Aboriginal community, particularly through the CDEP program. In addition, Barriekneal owns a service station, a number of shops and a cattle station. Barriekneal was described by one person as the "centre of the community". However, there has been a significant reduction in the scale of CDEP since the Commonwealth Government's downsizing. Whereas once the program employed up to 140-160 participants or more, it now provides employment for many fewer.

As with many rural towns, Lightning Ridge was described by some as a town experiencing decline. Whereas once there were opportunities for Aboriginal stockmen and shearers, with the advent of new technology, employment in those areas is virtually non-existent.

"There are no jobs out here, [including in] all the rural area outside of Lightning Ridge. Go back 40 years and you probably have five or ten Aboriginal stockmen working on each property. Now it's all taken over by tractors and stuff like that. But a long time ago every single property around this area would have had one or two or three Aboriginal people working as farm hands on those properties and now there's not one and that was our main source of employment."

Former Acting CEO, Lightning Ridge Local Aboriginal Land Council

Nonetheless, there is a reluctance to leave the town to pursue employment opportunities elsewhere.

“Employment is limited. Outside the CDEP, you’ve got to go away really to get employment but a lot of people are just quite happy where they are.”

Community Service Provider, Lightning Ridge

Lightning Ridge provides few opportunities to Aboriginal people for employment in the private sector. As one person stated, ‘You would be looking a long time to see an Aboriginal worker’ in the retail sector. A second area of underrepresentation related to the Walgett Shire Council, where Aboriginal people are predominantly employed outdoors. The Shire has acknowledged its inadequacy in the area and is attempting to rectify the situation and develop positive relationships with Aboriginal people across the local towns. The Shire have developed a school to work program with Lightning Ridge, Collarenebri and Walgett High Schools. Students complete a six-week placement at the Shire working one afternoon or morning each week. If the student is suitable, they continue with the Shire and are paid for their work. The aim of the program is to increase the number of Aboriginal people working in white collar positions in the Shire and to give students the opportunity to “see that there is a career possibility”.

Apart from Barriekneal, there seem to be few existing Aboriginal enterprises in Lightning Ridge, although certain areas were identified as providing potential, namely construction and tourism. One missed opportunity raised by several people was for an Aboriginal run building company in Lightning Ridge. Several people were frustrated that local Aboriginal people had been trained as carpenters, electricians and bricklayers through apprenticeships with the CDEP program but this had not translated into employment. Disappointingly, it was stated that some of those people who gained construction qualifications had dispersed.

Tourism was described as another missed opportunity which the Lightning Ridge Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) plans to take advantage of. The Lightning Ridge LALC hopes to develop cultural tourism opportunities in Lightning Ridge and Angledool.

5.3.3 Under reporting

There was a strong perception that under reporting might account for the low crime rate in Lightning Ridge. However, this perception needs to be treated with some caution as it was generally held by people who do not live there.

Under reporting was said to occur for a number of different reasons. First, some people claimed that victims of crime would not go to the police – especially in relation to break and enters or ratting – because the police are not likely to be at the station or are unresponsive. Second, reflecting the idea that there are people in Lightning Ridge who wish to avoid the criminal justice system, it was said that, “People are not going to draw attention to others when they are hiding things themselves.” Third, there was also a suggestion that victims of crime may deal with the matter themselves discussed in more detail below. This suggestion emerged from a narrative of Lightning Ridge being a frontier town with vigilante style justice. Finally, it was suggested that with few police in Lightning Ridge but with responsibility for a large area, it was more likely that minor crime would not be noticed or ignored.

“I’ll tell you another thing that’s got a lot to do with it too. You have got 30 odd coppers in Bourke and you’ve got six at Lightning Ridge. Six coppers, the

police in a town the size of Lightning Ridge and they turn a blind eye to a lot of stuff.”

Community Worker, Walgett Shire

The possibility of under reporting of crime committed by Aboriginal people in particular was raised by two people who suggested that perhaps Aboriginal offenders not identifying themselves as Aboriginal, which would reduce the statistics. It is, of course, impossible to determine whether this is true.

However, with the exception of under reporting of ratting, the police did not support a view that under reporting was unusual in Lightning Ridge. Police officers noted that under reporting of family violence was an issue in every community – Aboriginal and non-Indigenous – so it would be safe to assume that under reporting of family violence would be an issue in Lightning Ridge but there is no evidence of under reporting in other areas.

5.3.4 Outsider offenders

There was a strong narrative of particular types of crime – particularly break and enters and car theft – being caused by offenders from out of town.

“Every now and then we have a spate of [break and enters] here, but it’s usually when we get some of the boys visit us. They might decide to come up from surrounding areas and stay for a couple of weeks. It’s usually when that happens that we have a lot of break and enters. And then either they get caught or decide to move one and then everything will go very quiet.”

Mayor, Walgett Shire

5.3.5 Frontier, vigilante style justice

One very unusual suggestion for low crime rates in Lightning Ridge – which emphasises its unique status – was the narrative from a small number of people of Lightning Ridge as a frontier style town where people do not want to have attention drawn to them and deal with problems themselves: “People keep themselves nice”.

“When there are problems, people usually sort it out themselves. A lot of it probably is taken into their own hands. That’s why we probably don’t see a lot of it going through the police station, people getting charged and people reporting – dobbing people in. A lot of it is dealt with. ‘Cause you’ve got all the other mobs here too, like all different nationalities. They deal with it that way too. They’ll go confront the person. That’s where a lot of it gets done.

Community Service Provider, Lightning Ridge

At the extreme level, interviewees alluded to threats and intimidation – even disappearances or people carrying guns. One person told a story of one young ratter who received a bullet in the mail.

Given the nature of the allegations, it is of course, not possible to determine to what extent they may be true. However, even if the suggestion of a criminal element wanting to keep a low profile, or people with guns taking things into their own hands is valid, it appears to be limited to the theft of opal or mining equipment or drug distribution. It seems unlikely to provide an explanation for low levels of crime in the

town more broadly but is a fascinating story about the town. Furthermore, there was broad agreement that it is generally not Aboriginal people who are ratting and so it is not clear to what extent Aboriginal people would be coming into contact with these people.

5.3.6 Things for kids to do/structure

As in many country towns, a number of interviewees noted that young people in Lightning Ridge would benefit from having more to do after school and on weekends. Nonetheless, Lightning Ridge has a range of sports for young people, including junior rugby league, soccer, netball, basketball and swimming, although sporting programs are not available for high school students. The Central School employs an activities officer who organises structured activities at lunchtime and recess.

Walgett Shire Council was commended for building a skate park (although it is uncovered which makes it unusable in hot weather) and for its youth programs. The Youth Development Officer and his team of youth workers were spoken of in very positive terms, especially the youth centre, youth holiday programs and Shire Youth Council. Activities include painting murals, conducting a competition to design a bike helmet, cooking and encouraging healthy food choices, information sessions with local service providers who talk to the kids about relevant issues such as sexual health, discos and visits from touring theatre companies. One program – the cultural connections program – engages young people with Aboriginal Elders in Lightning Ridge who talk to them about women’s and men’s business and dreaming stories.

The Youth Development Officer attributes the success of the youth programs to the fact that young people have input into the centres and know that the youth workers are “happy to have them there and happy to listen to what they want to do.” Youth team leaders are encouraged to respond to young people’s suggestions and use their own initiative to facilitate activities that fall within the Shire’s youth strategy. Young people are encouraged to design and run activities, which encourages a sense of responsibility and promotes them as role models.

One source of frustration, however, was the limited access to the impressive sport centre and pool complex. While it was appreciated that they are private enterprises, there was some degree of bitterness that community support had contributed so heavily to the construction of the pool complex – both in fundraising and actual construction – but the entry fee was prohibitive for some families. It was also rumoured that the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs had contributed a significant amount to the building of the diving complex, which caused some resentment that “Indigenous funds” would be diverted in that way. Several people contrasted the facilities used to conduct the youth group – the Ella Nagy Hall, which is in need of constant maintenance – with the new large sports centre, which was difficult for Aboriginal and other disadvantaged kids to access.

There were different views as to why youth activities were more successful in Lightning Ridge than in other nearby towns. On the one hand, there was the view that Lightning Ridge is more prosperous than neighbouring towns and can afford to provide programs such as rugby league. On the other hand, it was contended that the major difference is the level of support from parents and other adults, who act as officials and coaches and are active in fundraising. Lightning Ridge is in New South

Wales but plays in the Queensland junior rugby league competition and must raise funds to play.

“We get no funding from New South Wales and we get no funding from Queensland. So we have to raise \$10,000 - our little local club - every year to keep busses available to our kids. Everyone said to us, you'll never get kids on a bus at 5.30 in the morning to travel three hours for a game of football. That bus is full every Saturday. And we've got mothers down there and fathers hopping on the bus. There's great support you know.”

Community Service Provider, Lightning Ridge

Importantly, it was claimed that it is not the existence of activities alone that is sufficient to occupy kids and reduce crime. Rather, there has to be support for the activities from parents and adults. Some people observed that other towns also have activities for kids but that, unlike Lightning Ridge, it was difficult to engage parental support, which reduced their chance of success.

5.3.7 Good relationship between school and community

Approximately 40% of Lightning Ridge Central School's population is Aboriginal and there appears to be a strong and positive relationship between the school and the Aboriginal community. The school has obviously gone through a period of turmoil with four principals in four years, and was described by one person as having previously been “dysfunctional”. Nonetheless, the general impression seemed to be of a positive and respectful learning environment. Academic achievement is celebrated – in 2008, everyone who wanted a tertiary place got their first choice – but there is also recognition that not all students have academic aspirations and their needs must be catered for.

It was claimed that Aboriginal perspectives are welcome and sought by the school. There is a visible Aboriginal presence including a now active and engaged Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), a large number of Aboriginal employees and local Aboriginal Elders hold a respected position in the school. The school hosted an extremely popular Aboriginal cultural day for staff hosted by local Elders to increase knowledge and engender mutual respect. A Language other than English program (supported by Barriekneal) teaches Kamillaroi and Yuwalaraay and will undergo significant expansion with the building of a dedicated language centre under the Commonwealth's Building the Education Revolution program. The School Board consists of four Aboriginal members and four non-Indigenous members and is chaired by the Principal.

In addition to two Aboriginal Education Officers, the school employs three Aboriginal Education Workers and a number of Aboriginal in class tutors who had been employed under the Schools in Partnership (SIP) program. Importantly, the Aboriginal Education Workers and in class tutors work with all the kids in the school. There was frustration with the all too familiar story of successful programs ending resulting in the constant battle to source funding to sustain them and to retain valued staff.

“The school's one of the biggest employers in this town, but every three years or so one scheme finishes and another starts.”

Principal, Lightning Ridge Central School

For example, numeracy and literacy rates of Aboriginal children in Lightning Ridge are lower than their non-Indigenous counterparts but there are phenomenal rates of improvement through the 'Reading to Learn' program. The improvement was attributed to the program being supported by the in-class tutors, who initially had been funded to assist Aboriginal students but, recognising their worth, the school was ultimately able to supplement the program to assist all low achieving students. Unfortunately, with the end of the SIP program, the school is left searching for alternative funding to employ excellent workers who do not have job security.

The school is constantly looking for means to engage parents with the school, including formal programs such as the Commonwealth Government's Parental and Community Engagement Program, which is designed to improve the educational outcomes of Indigenous school students. It is a challenge, however, to encourage Aboriginal parents to feel comfortable in visiting the school.

"Before the [SIP] money came in and now I don't see new community members coming into the school. One of the criteria was to form effective partnerships with the community. We have done a lot of stuff with the money but I suppose it's the same old thing where people are not feeling comfortable coming into the school. Or they have had bad experiences when they were at school or they feel that if they are coming into the class they will be stepping on the teacher's feet. They don't want to cause any conflict there."

Education Worker, Lightning Ridge

At the local level, the school has developed some innovative ideas such as Local Blokes day, designed to encourage fathers, brothers, uncles and grandfathers to visit the school.

"Last year we bought a kite for every kid in the school and when the blokes came in they flew the kites. It happened to be a really windy day and down on the oval there were all these kites and the look of joy on the kids', fathers', uncles' and grandfathers' faces was just lovely. This year we just had a barbeque and they went and visited classes and next year we're going to do tree planting. The [men visited the school] because that's what you do in Lightning Ridge, you visit the school on Local Blokes' Day. You might never go any other time, but on Local Blokes' Day you've got to do the right thing by your kids and go to the school. Some of them were very shy. Some of them were inarticulate, but they were there. They went with their sons or daughters or grandsons or granddaughters, because we have kids from all sorts of blended families, but it was really lovely."

Principal, Lightning Ridge Central School

The introduction of a simplified discipline program that seeks to engage parents has had prompt results with suspensions falling dramatically. The school worked with students and parents to devise four or five simple rules that encompass what is expected of the students. Aboriginal community members devised visual representations of the rules using the tortoise and these diagrams are displayed throughout the school. The program's introduction was accompanied by intensive outreach with families.

Challenges facing the school

Two particular challenges facing the school are the profound shortage of adolescent mental health services and the challenge of engaging teenage boys who are no longer interested in school.

The Central School's Principal identified the need for a paediatric psychologist and a paediatric psychiatrist, at least on a visiting basis, and several child and adolescent counsellors in Lightning Ridge alone, observing that adolescent mental health is an area inadequately addressed by society. Not only is there a shortage of specialists to treat children and adolescents with a diagnosed condition, but children and young people who may benefit from assistance are not able to receive that assistance because they cannot be diagnosed due to the lack of professionals to make the diagnosis.

"We've got two special education classes here that we can't allocate kids to because they don't have a diagnosed condition. The reason they don't have a diagnosed condition is we haven't been able to get them to someone to diagnose it, even though we know full well they have it, so it's a Catch-22. Starve your town of people who can do the diagnosis and then you don't get clients for your special-ed room and they tried to close one of the special-ed classes this year."

Principal, Lightning Ridge Central School

A second area of specific need identified by those working within the education system and others is a strategy to deal with teenagers – especially boys – who have lost interest in school. The availability of reasonably well paid, unskilled work in Lightning Ridge and surrounds also provides a challenge to educators to encourage students to finish their education. A strong relationship with TAFE goes some way to providing options but more is needed.

"I think there is an issue of - and it's not just in Lightning Ridge but I think it's probably particularly noticeable here - 14-year-old boys are just over school. School is very meaningless to them and we need some alternative structure in place to meet their vocational and interest needs where they can thrive. I've seen it. We have a work experience placement out in one of the shearing sheds at shearing time. I've seen those boys transformed, out there working knowledgeably, efficiently, effectively and capably."

Principal, Lightning Ridge Central School

"It's hard for our older boys in years 9,10,11 and 12. They don't know what's going to happen. ... They are all sort of manual boys. They are not finding the importance of an education. It's hard to say to them that they need a yr 12 certificate to even get a job interview anywhere these days. The kids say 'I will go work on the opal mine and work in the shearing sheds'... You have to say that's good to fall back on but you're a young bloke now, you want to finish school, you will be 18 years of age, now is the time to go and see what's out there. The opal mining industry is not going anywhere, Lightning Ridge is not going anywhere, shearing sheep is still going to be here. You are not going to miss out if you don't do it for the next 4 or 5 years. Put your hand up to do something, don't be afraid to fail if it doesn't work out, you done it, you tried it, you attempted to do something. Whatever it will be it will make you wiser whichever way you go, if you do succeed or you don't."

Education Worker, Lightning Ridge

5.3.9 The importance of family

The importance of family is fundamental to Aboriginal people and this was reinforced in both Bourke and Lightning Ridge.

"[The Aboriginal community] is based around family, kinship – everyone are aunties and uncles, you have your parents and grandparents. You even welcome in other people as your kin – you refer to them as aunt and unc. If we see kids down town, you hunt them home. When alcohol and drugs are involved, the drinking and fighting starts and the kids are subject to it. They grow up and it is all repeated and you have no family. You have a house full of drunks, drug addicts, kids not going to school, young kids are out in the street, they break and enter for money to feed younger brothers and sisters. If Aboriginal people maintain their family, things will be alright. We always say that Aboriginal people are very family orientated, they always lived in their little family groups."

Member, Wirringah Women's Group, Lightning Ridge

Indeed, some people described the existence of "good families" in town and positive parenting as a specific reason for low crime rates in Lightning Ridge among young people.

"I think a loving family is important. I think that kids sort of go off and do things when their family home is not right... So it comes back again to the parent of that child, stepping in and putting them on the right track, or the parent, aunty, uncle, grandparents, whoever helps look after those kids."

Member, Wirringah Women's Group, Lightning Ridge

One person claimed that if he could bottle Lightning Ridge's people's parenting skills he could sell them.

"You can see it in [other towns] - it's quite out there when you see kids walking around at two in the morning you know. Admittedly they're older kids, but even like 10 and 11 year olds, they're still out running around the park out here till 10 o'clock at night. ... You don't see that much at Lightning Ridge. You've got your little crew, but we know them. Something with the parenting is amiss. The parents in Lightning Ridge are supportive."

Community Worker, Walgett Shire

The Principal of the Central School described parents as "incredibly cooperative, incredibly helpful", citing support for the school's discipline program and illustrated by support of events like Local Blokes Day. Others referred to support for local sport and parents on the bus on Saturday mornings.

"But to compare this with Bourke, like here, you don't see the mothers and fathers in the streets drunk and the kids hanging around; you don't see any of that, like you do down in Bree and Bourke. There's a difference there. The parents go to the clubs and go home. Is it because people came here, as we said, back in the 60s to try and better their lives? Trying to better themselves; they wanted a different life. There was opal; there was good living here then. Not so much of late, the big machinery has come in. Then they set up a housing company here and got homes for the Aboriginal people and those people have looked after these homes, where down in Brewarrina and Bourke they've re-built those homes three and four times for them. So what's gone wrong?"

Community Worker, Lightning Ridge.

Nonetheless, support for parents and especially support for young mothers was clearly identified as an area of crucial need.

“At the crucial time teenage mums have no support and no parenting skills. If you could just intervene at the right moment, you would make the hugest difference to their lives.”

President, Yawarra Meamei Women's Group Inc, Lightning Ridge.

5.4 UNDERLYING ISSUES

5.4.1 Cohesive community

There was a strong and consistent narrative of Lightning Ridge being a cohesive community; where “everyone gets on with everyone else”, “people pull together” and are “not divided”. Indeed, some interviewees described good relations and interconnectedness within the community as a primary cause of low crime rates. One word that was used by different people to describe Lightning Ridge was “equality”. Notwithstanding real poverty in the community, the suggestion was of a community striving for similar things.

“A sense of community as a whole I think is stronger in Lightning Ridge and it always has been in my time. That can be identified with the sport and the parents involved in the sport and the building of the pool and community drive. That is a difference.”

Community Worker, Walgett Shire

A range of examples were given of community members volunteering or local businesses acting to support community initiatives. These range from volunteer support for junior rugby league or the AECG; to Elders providing cultural education and engagement with school groups and young people; to community lobbying for needed services such as public housing or counselling; to the Wallangulla motel donating the food for the school's breakfast program; to the school never having difficulty in finding work experience placements for students. Barriekneal Housing & Community Ltd maintains the Ella Nagy hall, sponsors membership of the swimming club, funds the Aboriginal language program at the school and even sponsors an Indigenous golf tournament.

Lightning Ridge is unique in many respects but perhaps the most striking example is in its enormously diverse population, described by one person as “astoundingly cosmopolitan”. Every interviewee referred to the 50-60 different nationalities represented in the town. Interestingly, a number of people referred to that fact that such a multicultural environment seemed to contribute to a tolerant, “live and let live” approach to life. As one person said “it is the colour of the opal that matters, not the colour of your skin”.

“All the other towns like Bourke, Brewarrina, Walgett, Goodooga, they're mainly non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal populations, whereas Lightning Ridge is a multicultural community. So I think everyone gets on with everyone, you know. I think that's what it makes it different to other communities.”

Manager, Safehouse, Lightning Ridge.

"It's unique, for a start. It's unique in its diversity I believe. I mean the multiculturalism in that town. So there's not a high population of one individual group if you know what I mean. There's quite a lot of Indigenous people. There's quite a lot of non Indigenous people. You've got ethnics. You've got a bit of everything. So these kids are growing up with a little Yugoslavian boy or a Japanese girl in the same class. It's less of an 'us' and 'you' thing, it's a we. You know what I mean. There's a community spirit in Lightning Ridge and it's a live and kicking."

Community Worker, Walgett Shire

"It's quite astounding, there are people from all over. I think they share very much a kind of battler mentality. I think they share very much a we're all in this together mentality. It's quite lovely, you know."

Principal, Lightning Ridge Central School

5.4.2 Aboriginal/non-Indigenous relations

Relations between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people appear to be relatively harmonious. Some people attributed this to hard working people – whether Aboriginal or non-Indigenous – coming to Lightning Ridge with the common purpose of making money.

"People living here in Lightning Ridge perhaps haven't got as high a crime rate as it is in Bourke and we feel that it's through opal that these people have lived here to try to better themselves."

Community Worker, Lightning Ridge.

Other reasons given include the presence of so many different cultures leading to greater awareness and respect for other people, high levels of intermarriage between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people and that racism – while existing in the town – was not the issue that it is in other towns

"[You don't find divisions in Lightning Ridge between black and white] because we are all battling for housing and we are all battling to be a part of society and to be equal. Lightning Ridge offered that as a mining town. Our parents could come here from the missions, get a little bit of land, build a little tin shack on it, pay the \$20 a year mining fee and live in harmony. It made us equal; the same as the neighbour next door or down the road. Other people still called us coloured but we felt good about ourselves as kids. Racism was still there not to the extent of other communities. My father was a shearer and he went shearing with white people in town. They were all shearers and miners; that's all the town had to offer."

Member, Wirringah Women's Group, Lightning Ridge

"Aboriginal people travel from properties from all over to come to Aboriginal people's funerals – Goodooga, Dubbo, Toowoomba. They come because of the relationship they had with the families over the years. It still happens."

Member, Wirringah Women's Group, Lightning Ridge

Many people noted that racism was inevitably going to exist and does exist in Lightning Ridge. However, the common theme was that it was not as serious a problem as in other towns.

“Racism is here, don't worry about that. It's not as bad as any other town. Not as bad as most other towns. It's not too bad but it's everywhere you go.”

Community Worker, Lightning Ridge

“You know I've heard one racist remark since I've been here and it was made by a visitor to the town. It's very interesting, people here don't think in racial stereotypes at all.”

Principal, Lightning Ridge Central School

When asked how racism is manifest in Lightning Ridge, one person pointed to the lack of Aboriginal employees in the private sector and, in particular, in the retail sector.

Physical segregation between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people is apparently not an issue in Lightning Ridge in contrast to its neighbouring towns. From this early stage of the research, it is not clear whether people are socially or economically divided but, on its face, there appear to be many connections. While people noted that different racial groups largely “stick together” it was also said “you can mingle with them”.

Lightning Ridge has a relatively recent history of permanent occupation and does not have an Aboriginal reserve or town camp history, such that there is not the historical segregation that some interviewees referred to as occurring in other towns.

“The other thing also I think is another thing that breeds discontent and breeds crime in communities too are these reserves. Now you go to Lightning Ridge, no one lives in an Aboriginal reserve, but you go out to Bourke, you go to Brewarrina and that they are all living on reserves, which automatically brings them together.”

Community Worker, Walgett Shire

In addition, Barriekneal, which was established in the 1970s as a vehicle for Indigenous self-determination, has adopted a policy of spreading Aboriginal housing throughout the town. As one person observed, the disadvantage is that Aboriginal people are very family oriented and would prefer to live closer to family. On the other hand, others pointed to the fact that Aboriginal housing being spread throughout the town means that there is no separation between different sectors of the community.

“It is hard for people to get out of this mould that people get put in. ‘Cause they've got to get off the mission first, you know what I mean? This mentality of it, which is silly. It's only just the thought of mind basically or an excuse. So that's what they've done here, they've tried to stop that. The local Aboriginal housing company tries to buy blocks of land around the town. They are aiming to avoid that mission type feel, or being classified as mission just because there's a group of Aboriginal people living there.”

Community Service Provider, Lightning Ridge

“I'll tell you the advantage that Lightning Ridge has – it hasn't got the high concentration of Aboriginal housing in one spot like the Walgett's and the Bourke's where they concentrated all these Department of Housing estates. We haven't got that here which could be another reason why the lower crime rate as well because they're spread from one side of the town to the other.”

Former Acting CEO, Lightning Ridge Local Aboriginal Land Council

“So you drive up the street and there will be Aboriginal housing then private housing, then teachers’ housing. I think that’s why we are a bit successful too. Because its not us blackfellas and everybody else, because they are not all in the one area. Like a mission or a reserve, I think that’s what makes us a unique little community too.”

Education Worker, Lightning Ridge

5.4.3 Aboriginal community relations

In addition to reasonably harmonious Aboriginal/non-Indigenous relations, within the Aboriginal community itself, there was also the sense that people were generally united. Unlike other towns in the region, one person described the Lightning Ridge Aboriginal families as generally “uniform with each other” and as able to “work together, on most things”. Although there are disputes from time to time, “it’s not to a point where there’s a full on feud, like a 20 year feud and stuff like that”.

A couple of people noted that one of the reasons that Aboriginal people in Lightning Ridge had good relationships with each other was because their parents and grandparents had formed bonds of kinship when they lived together on Brewarrina Mission – “we all call each other cousins or aunts and uncles because our parents formed the bonds of that relationship.”

“You ask most people who are in the Ridge and [they will tell you] that they have come from Brewarrina. When they closed down Angledool mission, they took them all to Brewarrina mission. Those friendships and family all bonded back in the mission days when our parents were all together. I have a relationship through Christianity, through nan and pop, and that’s from the mission days – going to church and travelling around to the different towns. It’s those things that sort of make us.”

Member, Wirringah Women’s Group, Lightning Ridge

One example given of the Lightning Ridge Aboriginal community being a unified community was that of people looking out for each other. One person described the importance of greeting kids by name and said that when you see kids down town, you know who they are and automatically pick them up and take them home. On the other hand, some people were disappointed that the community is not as tight as it once was, describing an earlier time when “people had good memories of everything” and “were expected to look after each other”. The change was put down to the death of important Elders and generally, that society had changed for everyone.

Interestingly, there was recognition that the majority of Aboriginal people in Lightning Ridge were not on their own traditional country. It appears to be a contemporary community developing a unique identity while acknowledging the specific rights of the traditional custodians.

“We have different tribal groups in Lightning Ridge. A lot of Aboriginal communities were formed and based on water settlements – a river, a creek, a lake, you need water to survive of course. As far as my knowledge goes there has never been a permanent settlement of Aboriginal people here in Lightning Ridge where it stands today. Looking at some of the names of Aboriginal people here in town, they are all from around the area – Brewarrina, Goodooga, Walgett, Moree. So it’s good that we are getting all these traditional descendants of those lands that they are coming here to

form this new community. I think that's important because there are going to be different ideas coming in from everybody and I think that's going to make us unique. And everyone here recognises the traditional custodians of this land, which is the Eurayl/Kamilaroi people. We know that these fellas lived on this land."

Education Worker, Lightning Ridge

Of course, conflict arises and division occurs such as that caused over native title but there did not appear to be entrenched divisions. There had been dispute arising about the operation of Barriekneal Housing & Community Ltd but some people claimed that this had settled down and was in the past.

5.4.4 Respect

Respect was a word used by different people in different contexts and in a positive and negative sense – respect for property, respect for environment and respect for others or lack of it.

Lightning Ridge was described as a town where Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people have respect for each other. As described above, the multicultural nature of the town was described as having an impact - where children and young people attend school together and learn to respect each other's cultures and each other.

Respect for authority or institutions, and the fact that it seems to be declining, is an issue discussed in most communities and Lightning Ridge is no exception. As in other localities, it is a contentious issue and different views were raised. On the one hand, a couple of people described their disappointment that respect for "school, police, teachers and people in general" appeared to be in decline. However, it was also acknowledged that this was not limited to the Aboriginal community of Lightning Ridge but was being seen among all young people. It was said that one factor impacting on respect might be the undermining of parental authority by the legal system but this was not widely raised.

The role of elders in the community and respect for elders was specifically raised. It was noted that there are not a large number of Aboriginal Elders in town but two were mentioned by name by a number of people. They were praised for their contribution to fostering Aboriginal heritage and for never hesitating to speak to young people and educate them about Aboriginal culture. They were said to be intimately involved in every function that the school conducts and are involved in a number of youth programs. It seems that they are held in high esteem in the community. Tellingly, they noted the two way street of respect – that if you respect young people, then they will respect you back.

Aboriginal history, culture and language appear to be important to self-respect.

"I have noticed that in communities where you have a strong Indigenous community and where there is an emphasis on health and living clean through things such as mens/womens groups and Elders groups, I think that plays an important role in Aboriginal society. Nobody wants to shame their family or to put any shame on their family. From my personal experience that's what a lot of this comes down to, the shame factor has always been a big part within Aboriginal communities, you always want to respect your

Elders and you want to walk in the footsteps that they walked in before you I suppose and you don't want to bring a bad name to your family name."

Education Worker, Lightning Ridge

Interestingly, the impact of the physical environment on self-respect was also raised.

"I don't care what anybody says, that's one of the main reasons why there is no crime in Lightning Ridge because they haven't got the bars and that on the windows. People respect the community."

Community Worker, Walgett Shire

Similarly, one factor that was raised by a couple of people was the impact of an Aboriginal housing company providing "nice homes" that people wanted to look after. The contrast was made with other towns where homes were considered not to be of the same quality and "have been rebuilt several times".

5.4.5 People are resourceful, self-reliant and ambitious

You cannot visit Lightning Ridge or speak to people about Lightning Ridge without hearing about the resourcefulness of Lightning Ridge people and the "can do" attitude, described variously as people having "get up and go" or as "having a strong reputation for just getting on with it and doing things for themselves".

"That's the reason why the crime rate is low – it's because things get done in the community. There is nothing in Bourke. There is nothing in Walgett."

Community Worker, Walgett Shire

Young people were described as having the same resourceful attitude as adults.

"They're not from particularly well-off families but they're very resourceful, practical kids who just get on with stuff. They don't go, 'Oh woe is me and what a terrible lot I've been served up and everything's hopeless'. They just go, 'Oh yes I work here there and everywhere and I do a bit of this and a bit of that. Last week a couple of them weren't working at the café and that's because they were working at the wheat silos getting the harvest in, or weighing or grain testing. I said, how do you know how to do that? They said, oh they taught us, we learn. So they're very doer kids and I find that about the town as a whole, people just do stuff."

Principal, Lightning Ridge Central School

Ironically, while some people raised concerns that the admission price prevented use by some families, the construction of the pool complex was perhaps the most frequent story that we heard during our visits – told by Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people. It is almost a symbol of a town pulling together, even though some people had concerns about accessibility.

The story of the pool complex, as told to us by several people, was that in the 1970s, six girls, four of whom were Aboriginal, were members of the local swimming squad but had to train in Walgett. Having to travel every day for training was quite a grind and provided the impetus for a local pool. The Shire Council was not able to assist and told the local community that if they wanted a pool, then they would have to build it themselves. The State Government at the time agreed to match funding raised by the local community. The local community moved into action – people raised funds,

they provided machinery, they worked on the site without payment. The result is a FINA accredited Olympic sized swimming pool. Surrounding it is an incredible children's water park. More recently, the community has built a diving tower and FINA accredited short course pool.

This approach to the local community acting together to achieve outcomes extends to responding to local need, including service provision and advocacy. Lightning Ridge has few locally based services and residents often have to leave to access services, such as medical treatment. A number of services such as the Aboriginal Medical Service and the Aboriginal Legal Service cover Lightning Ridge but are based in Walgett. The Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer and the Local Court Aboriginal Client Service Specialist are also based in Walgett. The shortage of services requires a proactive and flexible approach from local service providers.

"In order to cope with community demand, you call in the community resources. Yawarra Meamei does a range of things. We decided that we would be flexible enough to deal with whatever is thrown at us and we would find a way to deal with it. But we were not going to send people away saying we can't help you sorry, if we couldn't then we would find someone that could."

President, Yawarra Meamei Women's Group Inc, Lightning Ridge

"Years ago we never had anything, we didn't even have an ambulance or a hospital or a school. There are a lot of good services here now. All those have come through the community raising money and volunteering or a lot of hard lobbying to get the hospital, the ambulance, the pool."

Member, Wirringah Women's Group, Lightning Ridge

Problems arising in the community elicit a prompt response. For example, there was significant concern at the revelation that many children had been removed from their families by DoCS and put in placements a long way from Lightning Ridge or separated from their siblings. Without making any judgement as to whether any or all removals were justified – that is not an issue that we have any expertise to deal with – a number of local women were concerned that DoCS was potentially being over zealous and that children were being removed from poor but loving families. As noted above, the living conditions for many in Lightning Ridge is very basic and some people were concerned that allegations of neglect were not justified. Importantly, local women were concerned that DoCS had made insufficient effort to tap into the local Aboriginal community to find suitable carers. Wirringah Women's Group was formed to advocate on behalf of the families to reunite the families and to negotiate with DoCS to establish better procedures to increase the possibility of placement with Aboriginal families. Partly in response to the advocacy of the Wirringah Women's Group, the Safe Families Program has been introduced to Lightning Ridge. It provides community education about child sexual assault and supports frank discussion. The Safe Families team also works with vulnerable children, young people and their families.

A strong theme from people living and working in Lightning Ridge and outsiders was of people who sort issues out for themselves. As described above, some people stated that this had a negative side, claiming that some people used fear and intimidation to keep the peace and prevent crime. However, a range of people also referred to the positive side where people solve issues themselves "rather than letting it go too far". Some people referred to the role of the Community Working Party in acting as a forum where issues can be discussed.

Being self-reliant and resilient is not necessarily easy and a couple of people referred to the very difficult conditions in which some people live – especially those living on claims. While some have seemingly chosen to live on claims, others have had no choice. Apart from Aboriginal housing provided by Barriekneal Housing and Community Ltd, there is no public housing in Lightning Ridge. Years of lobbying various NSW governments have been unsuccessful. Thus, many people live without the most basic of services. One person described people having to shower in bore water that at times could be scalding hot.

‘Self-employment’ seems to be one important factor in people exercising self-reliance. In other mining towns, large mining companies harness the resources and people are reliant on those companies for employment. However, that is not the case in Lightning Ridge. People are able to stake a claim or go specking to generate income and are not necessarily dependent on others for income.

Several people referred to the Aboriginal cultural centre, Goondee, established by Roy and June Barker, as an important asset to the town. The Goondee provides the opportunity to meet with Roy and June and learn about Aboriginal culture, heritage and history. This cultural centre was built of their own initiative and without financial or other assistance.

5.4.6 Aboriginal enterprise and ownership

One aspect of the type of resourcefulness and self-reliance referred to above is manifest in the establishment of Aboriginal organisations and enterprises. Notwithstanding that there has been recent conflict about its operation, Barriekneal was cited by many people as an example of Aboriginal people exercising rights to self-determination. Barriekneal has been operating for approximately 30 years and started with the sole mandate of providing housing for Aboriginal people. It has currently has about 75 houses, run by the Barriekneal office in Lightning Ridge. Importantly the organisation is independent from the Aboriginal Housing Office and the Department of Housing. Barriekneal also owns several businesses and provides some employment to the Aboriginal community.

“Barriekneal has always been the centre of it all for the community here. So everyone had got employment from them one way or the other, either through CDEP or office work or through the Shell. They own a service station here down in Main Street. They own a property about 20 Ks out the road, it’s about 27,000 acres. So yeah, there’s always been a job for the indigenous people here through Barriekneal.”

Community Service Provider, Lightning Ridge

The Community Working Party was also mentioned by some people as having an important role in liaising between the community and government and non-government organisations.

The concept of Lightning Ridge as one of many rural communities in decline requires long term planning that recognises the changing demographics. Both Aboriginal people and Shire representatives acknowledged the need to facilitate Aboriginal people gaining adequate skills to run the municipality.

“We have a decreasing population out here and an increasing Aboriginal population. That’s true for all of the western region. So that means local

government has an obligation to ensure that Aboriginal people out here know how to run local government, know how to staff local government and make decisions. The local government has undertaken an introduction to local government with the community. Students come through the council through the school to work program. They can stop and talk to staff members who can tell the students a bit about what they do.”

Community Service Provider, Walgett Shire

6. Ideas for reducing crime

Everybody that we spoke to had ideas about particular community characteristics or strategies that may have a positive impact on crime rates. Some of these ideas were big picture measures aimed at addressing systemic issues and others were more reactive, designed to address specific community problems and needs. There were important lessons from both Bourke and Lightning Ridge for this study.

6.1 WHAT HAS WORKED

There were three programs that were specifically identified as having had a positive impact on crime rates in the region:

- **New Work Opportunities program**
“New Work Opportunities” was a work skills program introduced in Wilcannia by the Keating government that provided additional funding for employers and employment programs to provide work and training for Aboriginal people. Everyone that could work was given four days of work a week, The jobs included working in the canteen, fixing the cemetery, building gardens, sweeping streets, cleaning out the river and building houses. The New Work Opportunities program had a number of significant impacts. The local Magistrate in Wilcannia at the time observed a dramatic reduction in the number of Aboriginal people coming before the court. Police incidents and call outs were also significantly reduced.
- **Alcohol Management Plan**
The Bourke Alcohol Management Plan is a joint initiative of the police, the Bourke Alcohol Working Group and the Outback Division of General Practice. It is a multilayered strategy including restrictions on alcohol sales and a range of community and school education and awareness activities and funding for a new drug and alcohol counsellor who is based at the Outback Division of General Practice. Several proponents of the Plan observed that Bourke is the first community in the western region to introduce an alcohol management plan and expressed pride in the proactive stance they had taken to a community wide problem. The strategy is being assessed by the George Institute for Global Health and a preliminary evaluation noted the ‘overwhelming opinion’ that restrictions had been an ‘effective mechanism for addressing health and social impacts’ and that the majority of interviewees supported its continuation. It reported a significant decrease in non-domestic alcohol related assault, while other categories of crime were reported as stable or no change and recommended the plan’s continuation. Anecdotally, workers in the health and criminal justice systems observed that while there may not have been a dramatic decrease in the number of alcohol related assaults, there has been notable improvement in the severity of assaults.
- **Walgett Shire Council’s youth development strategies**
The Walgett Shire Council’s youth development strategies were repeatedly identified in terms of their benefit to young people in the Shire. Successful elements include:

Youth Council, which consists of six representatives from Walgett, Lightning Ridge and Collarenebri. Among other things, the Council plans and implements community activities, advises the Shire on policy relating to youth affairs, encourages debate and discussion on matters affecting young people; and advances the interests of young people within the Shire boundaries.

Youth team leaders who are encouraged to respond to young people's suggestions and use their own initiative to facilitate activities that fall within the Shire's youth strategy.

School to work program – work experience program.

Cultural connections program – program that engages young people with Aboriginal Elders in Lightning Ridge who talk to them about women's and men's business and dreaming stories.

Wellbeing and development activities.

6.2 BIG PICTURE SOLUTIONS

What was striking about this study was the clear assertion that the dismantling of Aboriginal authority through interventionist government policy, undermining of community resilience and the tyranny of bureaucracy had resulted in a fractured and conflicted community in Bourke. Racism and segregation compound poor self-esteem and stifled ambition. Almost the opposite was said of Lightning Ridge, which notwithstanding its genuine problems, is a respectful and generally positive community.

Given the factors that were identified as contributing to undermining community resilience and community cohesion, it is unsurprising that the measures that were identified – in both communities – as necessary to combat crime are measures designed to build community capacity, strengthen relationships and foster self-esteem. There was a forceful narrative around needing to restore authority to and recognise the legitimacy of Aboriginal institutions and solutions. As one person identified, "we have tried your way and it hasn't worked."

In particular, the emphasis – in a range of suggestions – was on long term approaches that embodied a vision for the community and that was not simply promoting short term fixes. On the other hand, the urgent need for some immediate strategies to deal with specific problems – and in particular, strategies to deal with the needs of young people – was also acknowledged.

6.2.1 Recognition/self-Determination/Autonomy

One theme – perhaps the central theme – emerging from the interviews and how communities might become more cohesive or resilient was the need for Aboriginal self-determination and autonomy. That Aboriginal people have a voice that is heard and respected and that their institutions have formal recognition in the community. Aboriginal people constitute large proportions of the community, especially in Bourke, but there was a perception that they were not given due recognition in either community. As one person noted, "Australia does really well with multicultural issues and that should be celebrated but we have still not got it right when it comes to

Aboriginal people. There is every reason why we should be doing more – look at our history.”

Many people felt that formal recognition of history to redress past injustices are critical to moving forward. The historical legacy of a town like Bourke was stated as a reason for high crime rates. It was said that you could go into every prison or juvenile detention centre in NSW and you would find someone from Bourke there; that the legacy of Bourke’s history is in prisons and the juvenile justice system and women’s refuges. Programs, no matter how well meaning, will not succeed until the historical legacy is dealt with. While the intent of the Government’s “Closing the Gap” policy may be based on the admirable aspiration of reducing Aboriginal disadvantage, some Aboriginal people observed that it is doomed to fail because it does not address underlying historical issues.

“Just tell the truth, straight up, and then we move on. You’ll find that there’s still a little bit of mist there and you can’t move forward. That is a reflection of history. Justice, education and all the values that non-Aboriginal people have to close the gap misses the point, because the issues are still back here in our history.”

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Officer, NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water

Autonomy

Greater autonomy was described as the solution in that it allows people the opportunity to accept responsibility, instead of relying on others to do it on their behalf. Being in control of your own destiny changes everything – “being accepted equally and not being undermined and all these things that go on behind the scenes. It’s having the opportunity to say we own this and not be controlled or supervised.” Crucially, exercising self-determination and autonomy also requires room to learn, including from mistakes. Transparency and accountability are necessary but do not require suffocating levels of scrutiny. It was acknowledged that mistakes will be made but that the response should be support not condemnation.

Recognition of the Aboriginal justice system

Circle sentencing was praised as a positive initiative but there was the suggestion that it doesn’t go far enough. The proposals for expansion revolved around moving beyond involvement in sentencing to utilising local knowledge about offenders, the nature of local crime and local circumstances to deal with the offender holistically. The current system was described as much too slow and not in keeping with Aboriginal conceptions of restorative justice.

6.2.2 Land and culture

Connection to country was repeatedly emphasised as fundamental to a thriving Aboriginal community, especially in Bourke. Land rights, access to land and water and support to re-establish connection to country were highlighted. In particular, there was strong support for cultural programs to teach kids about culture, heritage and local history including through bush camps.

6.2.3 Expansive, long-term employment strategies

In the context of rural towns experiencing the pressure of declining industry and fewer employment opportunities, the need for a long-term, community wide

employment strategy was identified. Flexibility is the key – it may not be the case that there can ever be full time “real jobs” for everyone but that the economics of subsidised employment opportunities may have long-term benefits. Given that Aboriginal people are committed to family and country and are not likely to leave town, the need to rethink what is meant by employment is crucial.

Traineeships in identified areas, with flexible training delivery and adaptation of policies relating to minimum numbers of students were considered essential. It was observed that there was no point in imposing a minimum class size for essential skills and qualifications if there weren't sufficient employment opportunities at the end. Traineeships were described as wonderful opportunities to gain self-confidence and skills to build upon.

Flexibility and lateral thinking were also highlighted in dealing with the shortage and difficulties in recruiting professionals. The role of Aboriginal liaison officers as support to professional service providers and as essential cross-cultural communicators was heavily emphasised.

Finally, the local councils were highlighted as key employers in both towns with the responsibility of addressing Aboriginal disadvantage, including through employment opportunities. Importantly, it was suggested that employment levels should reflect that of the proportion of the population and, crucially, should be reflected in the array of jobs available – that is professional, office and outdoor jobs.

6.2.4 Education and training

Genuine engagement between schools and other education providers and the Aboriginal community was seen to be a key element of building positive relationships in communities. High quality and nurturing mainstream and cultural education are fundamental to developing self-esteem and self-assurance needed to navigate contemporary life. Interviewees emphasised the importance of culturally appropriate education that focused on local history, in particular as it related to Aboriginal people and the place of Aboriginal people in building the prosperity of communities.

Recruitment of teachers was frequently spoken about. There was a preference for longer tenure for teachers and a preference for more experienced teachers. If recruitment would be aided by principals having more flexibility in offering conditions, then that flexibility should be granted. Cultural awareness is of course necessary, but interviewees also reflected on the importance of teachers becoming aware of the circumstances of the children that they teach, which may explain lack of concentration or misbehaviour in class.

Opportunities for young Aboriginal people to learn more about their culture and heritage were described as vital and numerous people recommended the establishment of a bush camp where young people could meet with elders and respected persons in a relaxed atmosphere. Importantly, they shouldn't have to wait until they got into trouble before they had the opportunity.

Appropriate discipline policies that were not punitive and that encouraged school students to respect others and understand their own behaviour were preferred.

6.2.5 Housing and environment

Addressing overcrowding and inadequate housing was repeatedly raised as a priority. The need for appropriate housing able to accommodate extended family was identified. Importantly, it was said that pleasant homes – the sort of homes that people can be proud of – was significant to encouraging well-being. The design should be developed through engagement with the Aboriginal residents and construction should provide employment and training opportunities. The maintenance budget should be a component from the outset.

The broader physical environment was also raised as significant in its impact on well being. Overall community design and how the town's physical environment can be improved to foster healthy lifestyles are important considerations in community development strategies. Such planning must be long-term, taking into account changing environmental factors. Parks, gardens, walking tracks, sports grounds and other public spaces need to be included in this planning.

6.2.6 Reconciliation and community building

One message that was delivered loud and clear in both communities was that the starting point for any meaningful relationship is formal recognition of the Aboriginal community; its institutions and history; both traditional owners and those with historical connections to country. There needs to be an understanding that these towns are on Aboriginal land, where local people have suffered injustice. Non-Indigenous people need to understand the sacrifices of the past and ongoing sacrifices. The challenges of the communities need to be faced as communities in their entirety; there is nothing to be gained from the 'not my problem' mentality.

6.3 REACTIVE MEASURES

6.3.1 Health

Unsurprisingly, considering the dangerous levels of alcohol consumption in Bourke, many of the suggestions related to better health outcomes related to the continuation of the Alcohol Management Plan and counselling services to support those with alcohol dependency issues. More locally based drug and alcohol counsellors are needed.

The lack of consistency was highlighted as a problem. The difficulty in recruiting local health professionals was acknowledged and the need for flexible solutions highlighted. One suggestion was to recruit and train local case managers to support the fly in/fly out health professionals to ensure consistent treatment plans.

- **Ongoing funding for Bourke Alcohol Management Plan**
There was general support for the Alcohol Management Plan to continue, incorporating alcohol restrictions at one end and school and community education activities at the other. The need for secure funding to employ a coordinator of the program was emphasised.
- **Increased local mental health services in Bourke and Lightning Ridge**

Youth mental health was a significant issue in both towns and there was said to be urgent need for adolescent mental health workers who are locally based and who understand the cultural and social nuances of the town. It was noted that young people need consistency, yet a different adolescent mental health professional may arrive each month. Recruiting and training local case managers to carry out treatment plans was recommended. However confidentiality remains a significant concern, particularly for young people, who may not access local services if they are known to the service provider.

- **Local drug and alcohol treatment facilities in Bourke**

Given the scale of alcohol related health and social problems in Bourke, local treatment facilities were seen as of paramount importance. It was said that Aboriginal people are reluctant to leave their families and country and local facilities would be an asset, providing a realistic referral option for magistrates.

6.3.2 Youth

The primary cause for youth crime identified by most interviewees was boredom. There are approximately 1000 young people in Bourke and few facilities or activities to engage them. When linked with the fact that home is not necessarily a safe or pleasant place for some children and young people, suggested proposals involved structured and safe activities – sporting activities, cultural engagement and somewhere safe to hang out such as the suggested BMX bike track or PCYC. A youth Safehouse and/or bail house was identified as essential for Bourke. The need for a youth Safehouse was also identified in Lightning Ridge, particularly for boys aged between 14 and 18 years.

- **Youth forum in Bourke**

One of elements of success of the Walgett Shire youth development strategy is that young people have a voice and their suggestions responded to. This kind of strategy is missing in Bourke. One suggestion was to hold a two day forum for young people, run by young people to develop initiatives that can be implemented by young people.

- **Alternatives to juvenile detention**

There was a widespread perception that juvenile detention was not achieving its intended outcomes and that it may in fact be worsening outcomes for young offenders. Alternatives are being sought and there is hope that the Brahminy program may prove to be successful.

- **Bourke PCYC**

The Bourke PCYC was generally spoken of in positive terms, although people would prefer longer opening hours, especially in the evenings and on weekends. Dissemination of information around the cost and available facilities would also potentially increase its use. A female PCYC case worker was also identified as being beneficial.

- **Safe house/hostel and/or bail house for adolescents – short and long term accommodation**

Crisis accommodation for young people in Bourke is very limited. Children under the age of 12 may accompany their mother to the Safehouse but there is no facility for unaccompanied children or young people who need safe short-term accommodation. Separately, long-term hostel style accommodation was also identified as beneficial for young people who may need to leave home, which

perhaps could be associated with the school. As described in the report, a specific bail address is not always realistic for some young people and a suitably supervised bail house is needed.

- **Driving programs**

Car related crime is a major issue and means of facilitating young people getting their licence and – importantly – providing access to road worthy cars were raised as promising initiatives. The Pit Stop program was referred to by a number of people with hope for positive outcomes.

- **Cultural bush camp**

As described above, there was strong support for education for young people in culture, heritage and history. There was frequent reference to establishing a cultural bush camp that would provide an opportunity for young people to have time away from town with senior Aboriginal people.

6.3.3 Reforms to service delivery

As in many other rural towns, there was a very forceful message that service delivery to rural and remote communities must change. Difficulties in recruitment are not going to lessen and innovative approaches are essential.

Considering the level of need in the community and the proportion of people said to be in crisis, holistic, long-term services that deal with all aspects of a person's need rather than compartmentalised service delivery was emphasised – services that 'wrap around' the whole person.