

*Domesticating violence:
Homicide amongst remote-dwelling
Australian Aboriginal people*

David F Martin

Anthropos Consulting & CAEPR, ANU

An ancient charter ... the *Pungk-Apalacha* Brothers Myth of the Wik people, Aurukun, Cape York



“Culture” ...

“Sets of ideas, understandings, values, norms and meanings (many held tacitly), together with the practices they inform, more or less shared by members of a particular culture or society”

Culture is not just what people *think*, but how they *act*

Cultures are neither static, nor are they bounded isolates

“Culture” ... contd

Reality of significant socio-economic disparity and high levels of social problems (including violence) in remote Aboriginal communities in particular

But, false dichotomy between ‘structural’ and ‘cultural’ factors underlying social phenomena

Aboriginal lifeworlds can’t be fully understood in terms of statistical deficits

“Culture” ... contd

There have been profound changes in Aboriginal societies, but also extraordinary continuities

both long-term cultural continuities and cultural transformation exist simultaneously and inter-dependently

Culture, violence, & the 'abnormal enculturation of violence'

Annual death rate due to assault significantly higher for Aboriginal Australians

Remote Aboriginal communities particularly impacted by high rates of violence

Is this entirely explicable in terms of factors such as ongoing social exclusion, disadvantage, exclusion, and racism? These *are* implicated ... but

Culture, violence, & the 'abnormal enculturation of violence' (contd)

for Wik people, conflict and violence seen as intrinsic features of the 'order of things'

They are ever-present features of everyday Wik life

Violence is part of a repertoire of direct action within a society with a high stress on the right and obligation of people to address wrongs done to them and to kin

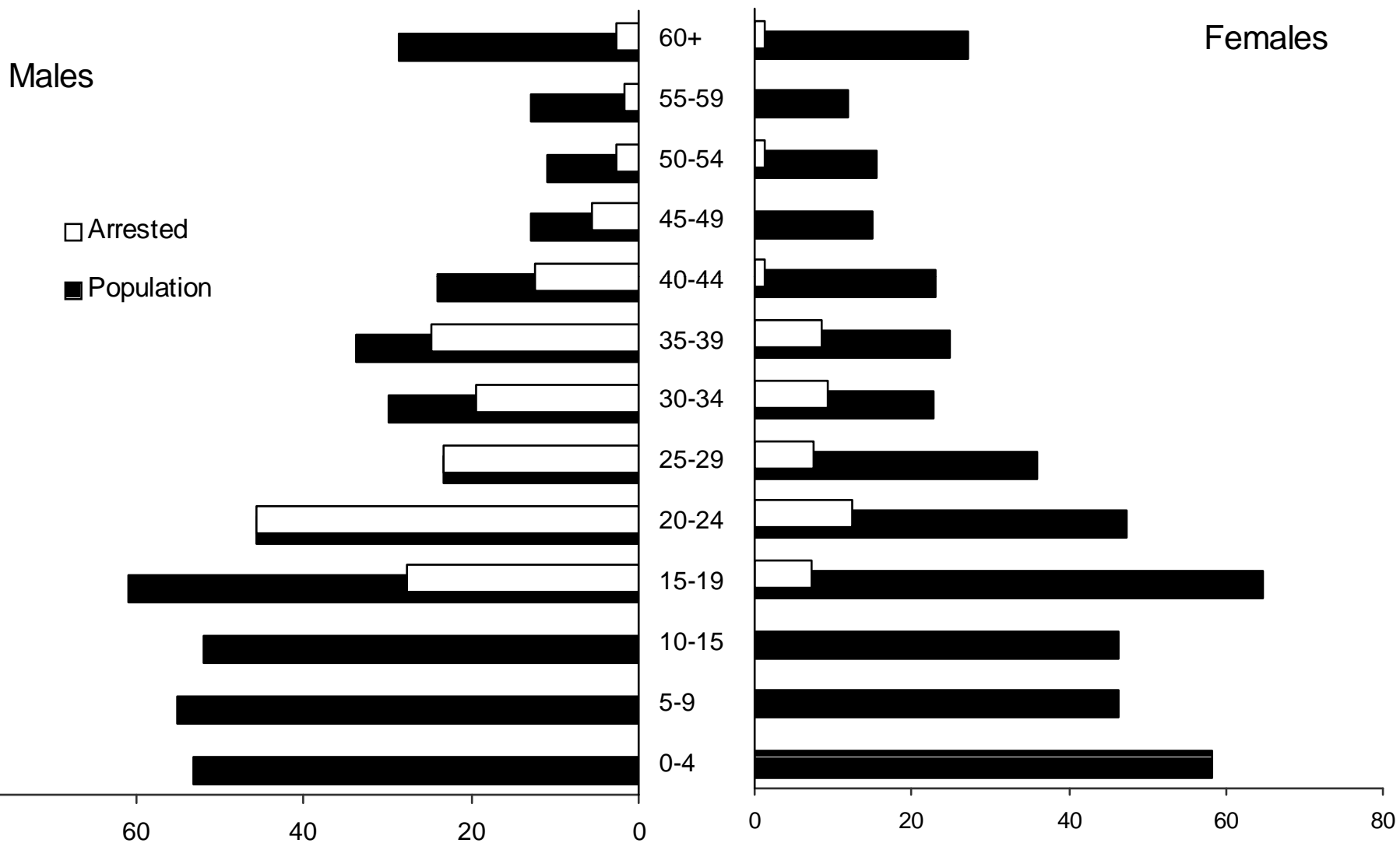
Retaliation is an instance of principle of reciprocity ₇

Culture, violence, & the 'abnormal enculturation of violence' (contd)

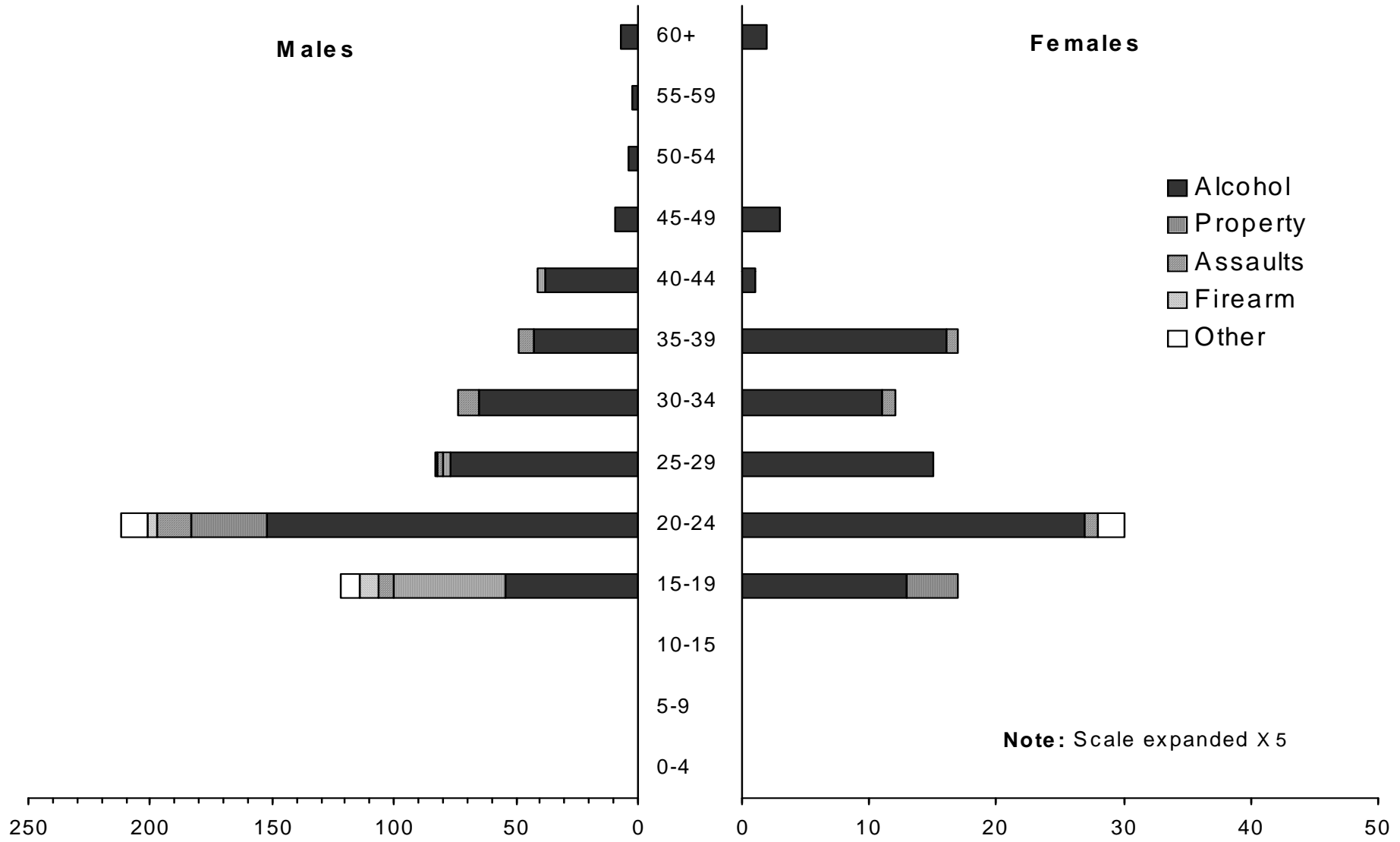
Anger and violence can arise in range of contexts; e.g.

- Failure to share
- Sexual jealousy
- Rejection
- Grief
- Both grief and anger structurally akin to 'demand sharing'

Arrested at least once, Aurukun, 1987



Offence categories by age and gender, Aurukun 1987



Culture, violence, & the 'abnormal enculturation of violence' (contd)

These data paint suggestive picture

- Major differences in the way Wik men and women have responded to changes in 'structural' circumstances
- Particular practices are encultured, engendered and specific to particular age and gender groupings
- Over time, endemic conflict, chronic violence, heavy drinking have become normalised

Implications for policy development

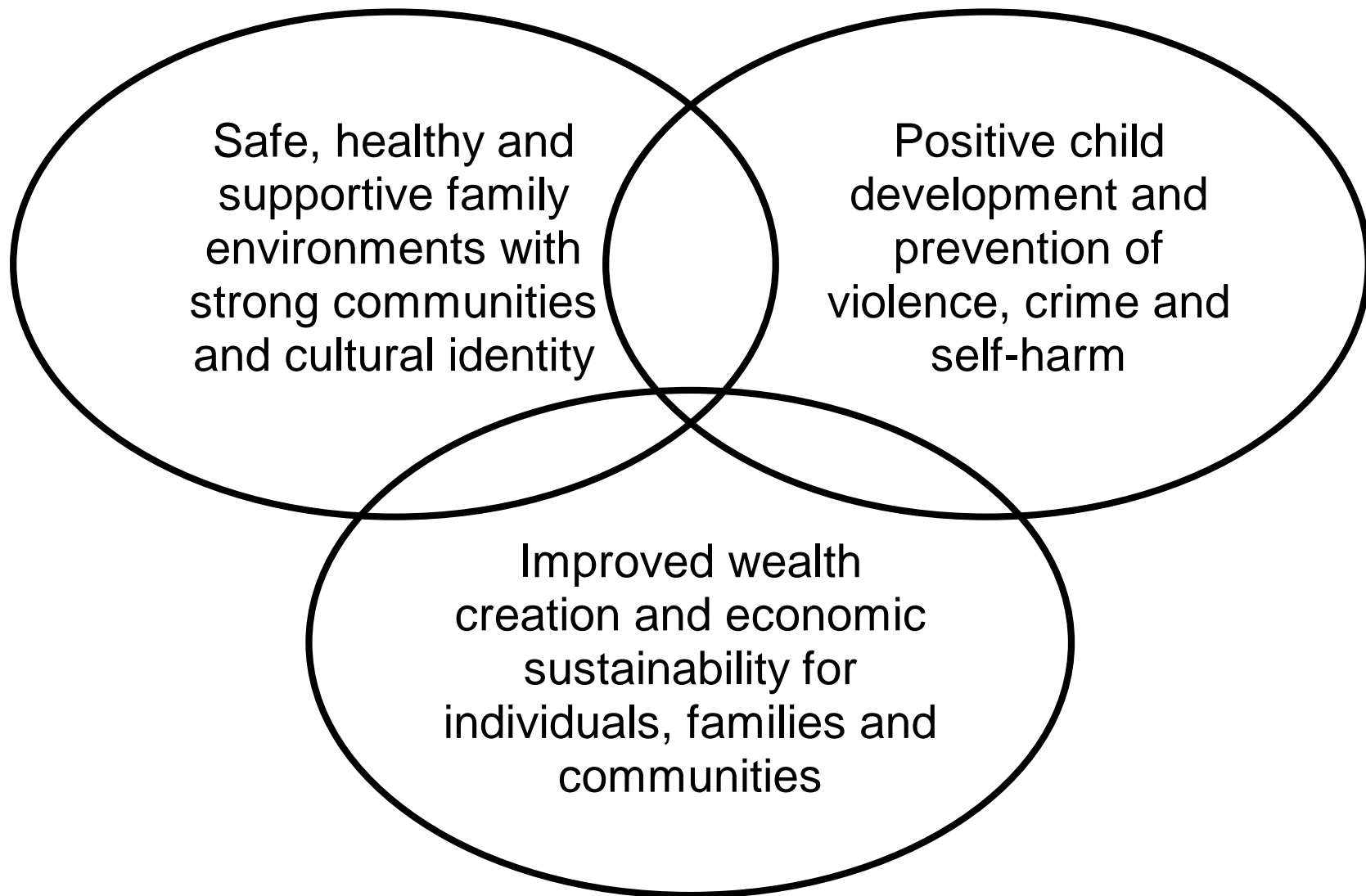
The framework adopted for analysis and interpretation of social phenomena impacts on policies

Especially in Aboriginal affairs, competing / diametrically opposed explanatory paradigms and thus policy frameworks proposed

e.g. alcohol policies

e.g. violence and homicide; 2003 Productivity Commission's framework to address 'root causes' of Aboriginal disadvantage

Priority Indigenous outcomes, Productivity Commission 2003



Priority Indigenous outcomes, Productivity Commission 2003



Implications for policy development (contd)

Understanding and addressing Aboriginal violence and homicide necessarily involves cross-cultural issues

This has significant implications for

- Aboriginal people's own understandings of the phenomena; and

- the data used in developing explanatory frameworks and in designing, implementing & monitoring policy

The recognition space between Aboriginal lifeworlds and policy frameworks



The 'Translation' space: Statistical measures and social indicators

Implications for policy development (contd)

Care needs to be taken when social indices are not directly measuring the phenomena themselves but analytical and administrative constructions

A failure to take cross-cultural factors into account can lead to false assumptions

e.g. causal relationships can be implicitly (and wrongly) assumed between social phenomena and particular indicators

Implications for policy development (contd)

Result can be to “confuse the model of reality with the reality of the model”

Must be understood that social indicators lie in a ‘translation space’ between Aboriginal lifeworlds and policies designed to impact on particular social phenomena in those lifeworlds,

Otherwise, policies may be directed to impacting on the indicators rather than on the phenomena

Implications for addressing violence and homicide?

Overarching Government framework of 'Closing the Gap' – laudable, but huge challenge

Issue of cultural difference and its implications for social and economic integration rarely given policy attention

Raises difficult ethical, political issues as to extent to which diversity should be accepted & supported in a pluralist society, if it is implicated in significant disparities in socio-economic status

Implications (contd)

Have argued that in dealing with phenomena such as violence, essential to recognise we are dealing with a cross-cultural arena

We need more sophisticated analyses to ensure that policies impact on the phenomena themselves, not on assumed proxies for them

Cultural transformation is essential, but is never easy, and success never guaranteed.