

# **A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO CRIME PREVENTION IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES**

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THIS PAPER EXAMINES A CASE STUDY OF A NORTH QUEENSLAND Aboriginal community which is trying to come to grips with a number of problems threatening its social order. In response to community unrest and high levels of juvenile offending, the council closed its canteen in April 1991. However the sly grog trade increased. Later in the year, in response to growing community violence, the government told the school's thirteen state teachers they could leave Aurukun if they felt unsafe. The eight who took up the offer have not been replaced.

The council and the government agreed to send in a task force or support group of three people to devise recommendations to deal with the situation. John Adams, Phil Venables and the author of this paper became the support group. A community development approach was taken because of a firm belief that the community itself had the answers to the problems and that unless solutions were generated by the community, it would not own these solutions and not have the will to make them successful.

## **The Community**

A fundamental issue, however, was that this community had a large number of clan groups and their culture was still strong, so the settlement could not be treated as a single community. People in this community identify with family, clan and regional ceremonial associations. The church, with government support, created an artificial community and this is a major clue for present tension within the settlement.

In talking of community development, the concept of community needs to be defined. Our approach was to have discussions with all the major clan groups, and families in the settlement, as well as community organisations like the women's clan group, and the church group, the Aboriginal Shire

Council, the Aboriginal company—Aurukun Community Inc, and government representatives—teachers, nurses and police. We also made out-station or homeland visits.

After a one-week visit in September 1991 a letter was sent to the community outlining the preliminary findings. In October another week's visit was made for extensive consultations with the people in their natural groupings. A draft report was prepared and in November another visit was made to gain feedback on the draft report. The people chose their own language name for the report and decided to go to Brisbane to present it themselves to government in December 1991, which demonstrated community ownership of the report. A number of government ministers including the Deputy Premier decided to visit Aurukun especially after further trouble erupted. Uncontrolled juvenile violence including vandalism and break and enters in January 1992 resulted in six council workers going on strike. In February about forty rioters, mainly juveniles, caused some residents to fear for their safety. Alcohol was not involved but family feuding is believed to be partly responsible. This increased the government's commitment to respond to the demands of the Aurukun people. The Aurukun Council has done a tremendous job under a great deal of pressure and is happy to share power and responsibility with clan leaders.

Some representatives of government departments on the community felt left out because they thought we were a government appointed team who should have been acting on their behalf rather than promoting Aboriginal views. Tension in the settlement arose from the fact that the roles of various government departments and the Aboriginal Council were not clearly defined and a situation of unmet expectations had arisen on both sides. Role clarification was needed.

The report entitled *Woyan Min Uwamp Aak Ngulakana* or *Finding the Right Road Ahead* pointed out that divisions within the community are often viewed by outsiders as a breakdown of law and order and social cohesion. In reality, they are part of the order of social organisation at Aurukun. Even though conflict and hostility might be heightened by excessive alcohol consumption and associated violence, the origins of the social divisions are historically and culturally based (Adams et al. 1991, p. 26).

## **Crime Prevention**

Efforts at crime prevention or any service delivery must work within theoretical social structures to be effective. Conflict between some groups existed before the mission was established at Aurukun and is basic to their relationship. The clan or land owning group is the primary focus of spiritual and social identity at Aurukun and there are over thirty clans.

Added to this artificial community is a situation of overcrowding, lack of community amenities and alcohol. It is no wonder that long-standing hostilities between family and clan groups are played out in ways outsiders see as a crime, involving community breakdown or law and order crises.

The usual approach to crime is to treat its results through rehabilitation-community service orders, alcohol treatment centres, victim support groups, male perpetrator groups and so on, all of which are important. However, it is also important to take a primary prevention approach to find the social and personal causes of crime. It is important not just to aim at stopping negative incidents but to promote good things happening in the community to promote harmony, wellness and

healing on all levels: physical, mental, spiritual, cultural, social, economic and political.

Desire + Ability + Opportunity = Realising Our Vision

to realise our visions, we have to make a choice to pursue our vision—and then act on that choice (Hazlehurst 1990, p. 3)

Hazlehurst suggests that crime prevention proceed by three avenues.

- n Remove people's desire to commit crime through personal growth and providing alternatives, for example recreation for bored youth.
- n Remove their ability to commit crime via gaol.
- n Remove their opportunity by locking buildings, community policing, neighbourhood watch, women's shelters and so on (situational crime prevention).

However, while it is important to have a vision of the future, we want Aboriginal people at places like Aurukun to look more to their past and to their cultural traditions for inspiration and guidance and this strength needs to be utilised by them in developing crime prevention programs. Implicit in Hazlehurst's position is that individual factors are the most salient in the commission of crime and therefore a personal development approach would be the best way to prevent crime. Her emphasis on environmental manipulation similarly tends to ignore the social and structural causes of crime.

Unless Aboriginal people regain their land, which is their spiritual force and key to economic sufficiency, and unless they are empowered to regain control over their communities (that is self-government) Aboriginal people will be over-represented in the lower socioeconomic group and be at more risk of committing crime. There is a resistance by Aboriginal people to conforming and obeying the laws of white Australian society when they do not have a stake in it. Marginalised by disadvantage and discrimination, they have little commitment to white society's goals and methods.

The structured use of violence as a means of social control in Murri communities prior to colonisation has eroded under the impact of colonisation to produce the current high rate of crimes of violence in Murri communities (*see* Miller 1992).

Disputes used to be sorted out in public with blockers to control the level of violence. However, with the advent of alcohol and European law and order, this process has been interfered with. The aggression of the colonisers which included murder, rape, castration, poisoning waterholes and lacing flour with arsenic has led to feelings of anger, powerlessness and aggression. This aggression has been displaced to other Aboriginal people through homicide, assault, domestic violence and child abuse.

While the author's work has focused on socio-historical and inter-cultural factors as more salient, it is necessary to take cognisance of individual factors.

### **Personal Violence**

To understand Aboriginal personal violence, it is necessary to take a functional, eco-cultural view on Aboriginal intra-cultural aggression and violence and to focus on

socialisation, structural variables and parenting style factors such as compensatory machoism (an attitude that boys can develop in absent father households); a view of the environment as sentencing due to discrimination; availability of aggressive models; earned helplessness and lack of perceived control over the environment; the development of aggressive habits and beliefs, poor self-esteem; psychological reactive and confrontational coping mechanisms all contribute in varying ways to Aboriginal intra-cultural aggression and violence. Socialisation of Aboriginal children, in particular boys, in a colonised discriminatory environment has led to the above individual factors interacting with frustration and conflict to cause aggression and violence (Miller 1992, p. 314).

Hazlehurst has further suggested the formation of community crime prevention groups which would undergo teamwork training, survey their community resources, gather statistics, target the crimes to be dealt with and target the group to be reached.

Establishing goals, action planning, implementation and evaluation should be discussed. Planning action revolves around finding out why the target group commits crime, for example, youth may be bored and find other ways they can deal with their boredom through learning traditional dance. Opportunities to reduce crime are also decreased by installing lights around the store. This approach which is similar to the Community Approach to Drug Abuse and Prevention Project (CADAP) has successfully been operating at Weipa Napranum under the guidance of Jean Jans. The action group was formed about two years ago and there has been a decrease in domestic violence and youth offending in the community.

Applying such a model to Aurukun, however, would have its problems unless at least two community justice committees were formed. There is one basic social division between "top-end" and "bottom-end" between inland and coasts or eastern and western peoples respectively. However, more than two committees may have to be formed as major groupings exist regionally around river systems or between north and south, or by nearness of land to the township. Although the strength of the community development approach is that people own their problems and own their solutions and it is empowering, the way of involving people must be culturally appropriate and this needs to be negotiated with people rather than assumed.

### **An Integrated Community Development Approach**

The Aboriginal Coordinating Council (ACC) followed an integrated community development approach to crime prevention dealing with personal, social and political factors, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation.

One of the important elements of this approach was setting up mediation or alternative dispute resolution training for local Aboriginal people living on communities, as this approach is an empowering one where mediators are neutral third parties who aid disputants to work solutions to which both or all parties can agree. This means they are more likely to abide by agreements, mediation can be used to prevent the occurrence of crimes and it can also be used as a sentencing option of community courts. Victims and offenders may work out reparation or restitution agreements. Care must be taken once again to work within appropriate community structures and bolster rather than weaken traditional modes of dispute resolution. Aurukun people, for example, have been keen for some time to have local people trained as mediators, but decided that tensions were such that they preferred to have outside mediators for some time who would be more able to be neutral. Their own people could be trained later.

The people of Aurukun say the right road ahead is for the government to support their homeland movement. There are already twelve main out stations or homelands and another nine that are occupied from time to time. These people have moved out of the township back to their own traditional lands and homelands have two-way radios, access to tractors for transport and are supplied with provisions by light plane. They are well serviced by their own company which is run by the various clan leaders. However, basically they live off the land and live in basic shelters made of bush timber and tarpaulins.

No alcohol is allowed on these homelands and no crimes are committed because people live in their traditional social groupings and the traditional social controls operate well. The people believe this is the answer. However, there will probably always be some people still living in Aurukun because there are more amenities there and people are used to settlement life, so crime prevention strategies need to be developed for the township. Government agencies need to change their strategies and priorities to provide health, education, housing and infrastructure services to these homelands. Also government agencies need to negotiate with appropriate family and clan leaders about the how, when, where and why these services will be provided.

The truancy rate at the Aurukun school was so high that attendance rates have been as low as 6 per cent. Children cannot sit in the same classroom because of inter-clan differences. Schooling is not working because:

- n elders and parents have little say over the running of the school;
- n the school is structured in such a way that it is culturally unworkable because it assumes the cooperation of socially incompatible groups; and
- n children on homeland centres receive no schooling.

The Education Department needs to negotiate with each of the major family groupings at Aurukun to establish the most suitable structures for group schools and the content and method of schooling to which families are committed.

Because of the desire of the Aurukun people for greater community control of health services, the *Finding the Right Road Ahead Report* recommended the establishment of a local Aurukun Health Authority, to be formally reorganised and placed within the new Regional Health Authority structure. The powers and responsibilities of such a group need to be negotiated but should include establishing local health policy, employment of nursing staff, provision of health services to homeland centres and training Aboriginal health workers.

Aurukun people want to employ a community development worker to work with clan and family groups around alcohol issues. In a submission to the Alcohol Audit Committee, the Aurukun Council requested legislative changes to give greater community control over alcohol including requests for the council to operate a permit system for people wishing to bring alcohol into Aurukun and for more effective policing of the sly grog trade.

The Council also wants to be able to declare alcohol free areas on homelands and in the township. Aurukun people have requested the Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs to provide services to deal with child abuse and neglect and juvenile offending. However this statutory service should be used to empower the decisions of families, not override them. Cooperation occurring between the Corrective Services Commission and Aurukun on the sending of youth offenders to Wathaniin homeland centre for rehabilitation. Further community consultations

need to occur as to the extent that customary law should be recognised by the European legal structure at Aurukun, and Shire Council by-laws need to be reframed so that they are culturally appropriate not framed in legalise. Irrelevant provisions are cut out and provisions are inserted relating to community control of social issues. The Aboriginal Coordinating Council has been trying to work on both of these issues without specific funding for that purpose. A number of clan leaders who are Uniting Church members have formed a group called Woyan Min to work with the youth and it is closely liaising with Corrective Services Commission regarding cooperation with community service orders.

## **Conclusion**

The Aurukun people have the cultural strength to find the "right road ahead" and need to be supported to do so by government agencies who treat them as equals, as partners, not as part of the white man's burden. A community development approach to crime prevention means that the people themselves create their vision for the future based on their strengths and continuing traditions. White Australia needs to support that process as much as possible given a situation of internal colonialism and ethnocentrism that is embedded in the Australian way of life. In the long term we need to go beyond crime prevention in creating whole, healing, just, harmonious communities within black Australia, within white Australia, and black and white Australia.

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