

# CRIME PREVENTION STRATEGY FOR ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

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## **Crime Prevention Strategy**

AUSTRALIAN LEGAL AND BUREAUCRATIC SYSTEMS ARE ALIEN TO Aboriginal culture, practices and priorities. This in part explains the lack of Aboriginal participation in those systems. In Aboriginal communities issues are defined differently, and not particularised in the same way that they are in the broader community. For example, in the wider community, breaking, entering and larceny are high priorities, whereas the issue of violence, and particularly domestic violence, may have the highest priority in the Aboriginal community. This difference indicates a conceptual divide.

In the wider non-Aboriginal community, the focus is on events which may be symptoms rather than causes, for example, punishing car theft rather than addressing the needs of unemployed youth, disenfranchised from the consumer society. In the Aboriginal community, the focus is holistic and specific events cannot be separated from the whole of culture and community.

This conceptual difference is conveyed strikingly in the terminology used by the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal communities. For the non-Aboriginal community, programs focus on "crime prevention". Yet, for the Aboriginal community, "crime prevention" is not a meaningful concept. This is no lack of awareness or concern on their part. For Aboriginal Australians, the word "crime" is too closely associated with all of the following: the police, who are seen as the perpetrators of black deaths in custody, and the symbol of oppression; the realities of 200 years of dispossession; the heritage of colonial violence. To talk about crime *prevention* with Aboriginal communities would automatically sabotage any chance of success. Yet the issue of preventive *measures* stands.

Development of culturally appropriate methodologies is critical. Style, approach, appreciation and trust are central to community consultation

processes. Working with the community means acknowledging being on its land, recognising its elders and the importance of its history. Developing programs means interacting in culturally appropriate ways instead of imposing non-Aboriginal style. Language and style of interaction are critical for any success.

For Aboriginal people, the manner of sharing information is cultural. As Irruluma Guruluwini Enemburu (1989) and Dianne Eades (1990), amongst many others, have stated, Aboriginal style and ways of eliciting information are totally different from those of non-Aboriginal people.

You see two people can speak exactly the same words with the same grammar, but if their cultures are different then they cannot have the same meaning. Because the way people interpret each other speaking is not just a matter of words and grammar, it is all tied up with the way people relate to each other, the way people act and think about the world—in other words, their culture (Eades 1990).

Language and style are central to meaning. Also, policy needs to be translated into language that has meaning for Aboriginal people.

All this has profound repercussions for anyone working with Aboriginal communities, wishing to access and understand them.

The primary and fundamental aim of developing and implementing the Crime Prevention Strategy, which focuses on addressing underlying causes of crime in the Aboriginal community, must be driven by the following principles:

- self-determination for Aboriginal communities
- Aboriginal communities taking responsibility for identifying and addressing their own issues
- maintenance of traditional cultural values
- understanding of the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies

These principles need to take priority in the implementation of the Crime Prevention Strategy for Aboriginal communities, over and above existing vehicles (such as the Together Against Crime Program—*see* next section) for addressing crime in the general society.

## **Background**

Discussions held between State Aboriginal Affairs and the Crime Prevention Unit during 1990 identified that many Aboriginal communities have difficulty in developing programs which conform to the South Australian Crime Prevention Strategy, and in gaining access to crime prevention funds to implement programs. It was suggested that guidelines should be drawn up to enable Aboriginal communities to identify the crime prevention issues that most concern them and to develop proposals to address those issues within their communities. Aboriginal participation in all stages of the process would be critical.

The Aboriginal Program Crime Prevention Strategy in the Attorney-General's Department, South Australia, was established in January 1992. The strategy was foreshadowed in 1991 by the State Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, The Hon. Mike Rann, as the South Australian response to the proposal:

That the Commonwealth Government match the financial commitment of the State Government in establishing Crime Prevention Strategies in Aboriginal Communities. (Rann 1991).

The South Australian Government's 1991 crime prevention proposal stated the following:

The South Australian Government recognised that community involvement is crucial to reducing crime and in 1988 established its Crime Prevention Strategy to provide funding and support to a broad range of programs and activities which have crime prevention outcomes. Recognising the need for Aboriginal communities to undertake appropriate crime prevention initiatives, the Crime Prevention Unit of the Attorney-General's Department has earmarked \$1 million (over three years) of their funds to ensure Aboriginal access to Crime Prevention funding strategies. (Rann 1991).

The position of an Aboriginal Project Officer was created to assist the Crime Prevention Unit and Aboriginal communities implementing the Strategy.

The basic philosophy of the Crime Prevention Strategy is that crime prevention is a whole community concern. The aims of the program are as follows:

- To facilitate the participation of Aboriginal people in crime prevention programs.
- To improve the "quality of life" for Aboriginal people.

### **The Program**

The Aboriginal Program of the Crime Prevention Strategy is being developed through the following approaches: Local Community Committees, Aboriginal Community Committees, and Aboriginal Special Projects.

- n *Local Community Committees—Together Against Crime (TAC)*. At least two Aboriginal representatives will be members of local TAC committees. These representatives may be:

nominated by the Aboriginal community or

after consultations, nominated by the Project Officer providing they have community endorsement

n *Aboriginal Community Committees*

Aboriginal Community Organisations, which may already have a law and justice committee, nominate two representatives to give feedback from their community committee to the local TAC committee.

Where a local TAC committee does not exist, the project officer will consult with the community council and community to discuss what is appropriate for that community.

n *Aboriginal Special Projects*

The Crime Prevention Unit provides funding to pre-existing programs which are seen as having crime preventive outcomes, for example the Aboriginal Community Affairs Panel (ACAP) in Port Augusta has developed a Law and Justice Plan with funds from the Crime Prevention Unit.

In some cases it may be necessary to employ an appropriate Aboriginal person from the community to consult with the community and to record the issues that are the community's concerns. The Aboriginal person then works with the non-Aboriginal project officer to ensure that the Aboriginal issues are incorporated in the plan.

**Together Against Crime Committees: SA Crime Prevention Strategy**

The Crime Prevention Unit of the Attorney-General's Department has been involved in the development of local crime prevention committees. These committees undertake a planning process with assistance from the Crime Prevention Unit, to develop a crime prevention plan for their area. Membership of the committees vary, although they generally include but are not restricted to: Family and Community Services, local Councils, local service providers, Neighbourhood Watch and the police.

The development of a committee and its crime prevention plan fall into three stages.

n *Early development*

The Crime Prevention Unit works intensively in the local area to identify potential participants, and inform them of the approach involved in the development of a crime prevention plan. When the committee has formed, and has undertaken certain decisions relating to its operation, the committee presents a submission to the Minister for Crime Prevention on funding for a project officer for that local area. The time involved for this first stage of the process varies; however, once the committee has been formed, it is usually a matter of only a month or two until such time as a project officer is employed.

*n Employment of a project officer*

With the employment of a local project officer, the committee is able to undertake a research/development phase. The project officer (who is generally employed for three to four months full-time, or six months part-time) gathers relevant data on crime and perceived crime problems in the area. Information is provided through the Office of Crime Statistics, the Crime mapping system and other sources. Using this information, the project officer examines various strategies to address the problems identified, and engages in a community consultation process on the strategies. Finally, a crime prevention plan is presented to the Minister for Crime Prevention for funding over a two-year period.

*n Crime prevention plan*

With the endorsement of the crime prevention plan by the committee and the Minister, the committee undertakes the implementation of its plan over a two-year period. In the areas where agreements for funding of the crime prevention plans have been negotiated, an officer has been employed for the length of the Project to coordinate and manage the implementation process.

There are twenty-two Together Against Crime (TAC) Committees throughout South Australia. The twenty two TACs are defined by local government boundaries and are located in:

- |                                  |                         |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| . Adelaide                       | . The Parks (Enfield B) |
| . Ceduna                         | . Port Adelaide         |
| . Coober Pedy                    | . Port Pirie            |
| . Elizabeth/Munno Para           | . Port Augusta          |
| . Enfield A                      | . Port Lincoln          |
| . Gawler                         | . Riverland area        |
| . Henley-Grange/Brighton/Glenelg | . Salisbury             |
| . Hindmarsh                      | . Stirling/Mt Barker    |
| . Mount Gambier                  | . Tea Tree Gully        |
| . Murray Bridge                  | . Woodville             |
| . Noarlunga                      | . Whyalla               |

**Aboriginal Communities and TAC Committees**

While in some communities Aboriginal representation existed on the relevant TAC committee prior to the establishment of the position of the Aboriginal Project Officer, participation by those representatives was sporadic. This was due to a range of reasons.

Priorities for Aboriginal people are different from those of the wider community. Aboriginal people feel frustrated at not being listened to, heard, or consulted. The Aboriginal community wants a reconciliation model for working with the broader

community on shared issues but there is a cultural gap in understanding the Anglo-Saxon justice system. The culturally diverse methods of non-Aboriginal Australians for eliciting information are intimidating for Aboriginal Australians. Confusion, alienation and an inability to participate in TAC planning and discussions are the results.

Overall focus has been on such areas as alcohol abuse, property protection and on car theft without an examination of "why". For Nungas, this concentration on events rather than on social justice is meaningless. This style inevitably alienates.

Individuals who are not truly representative of a given Aboriginal community act as a barrier to that community's involvement on the TAC.

Often the power-brokers of a community may not be in touch with the ordinary people, thereby servicing the minority of people with the loudest voices and depriving the ordinary people of access to program.

The Anglo-Saxon style of meeting procedures and of identifying single individuals as representatives, is inappropriate to Aboriginal culture.

### **Aboriginal Project Officer, Attorney-General's Department**

One of the major tasks of the Aboriginal Project Officer in the Crime Prevention Program is to develop culturally appropriate styles for Aboriginal participation in TACs. It would be easy to list the job specifications of this position. But what is much more relevant to share is the appropriate way of doing things.

Aboriginal culture and priorities determine role definition, style and activities in accessing communities and administering the program. The question is that of ownership by Aboriginal people.

An Aboriginal Project Officer may visit and interact with a community on three to five occasions before any talk of "crime prevention". During those visits, the talk is about the kids and the relations. People reminisce about families, events and places, about what has happened in those places and in their community; problems, fears, anxieties, troubles and hopes; and about the community's plans, who's doing what and the politics of their concerns. Establishing one's credentials and building trust are essential first steps. This is, of course, true in any society. But in Aboriginal society, with the history of disillusionment and broken promises, particularly by government agencies, this requires a "softly, softly" approach. In addition, many subjects are taboo and cannot be approached directly. Gender differences in the community, women's and men's business, elders' business, and factional disputes, may all impose constraints on information. However, through the language and Aboriginal style of sharing, information can be elicited without either direct reference to the taboo areas or to "crime prevention".

The process is, therefore, laborious—given the fact that one needs to access a community and then develop a consultative process by working from the grassroots people up to the power brokers and not from the top, down.

#### *The project officer*

The project officer identifies key Aboriginal people of a particular area and telephones these key people, rather than sending written information. The officer then introduces the program, its connection with the Royal Commission, their community's priorities, and discusses the project officer's role.

The key people then nominate the time, date and place for the project officer's visit for community consultations. Other Aboriginal agencies and groups of that area are informed of the visit to the community, to ensure that a broad spectrum of views is heard.

A series of visits then occurs. From that consultative process, the length and degree of which varies between and within communities, the community's concerns are identified.

Consultations with appropriate agencies which may include, Health, Housing, Legal Rights, Police and Family and Community Services are also held.

#### *Criteria for TAC membership*

During the visit to the community as arranged, the following criteria are used to determine who will represent that community on the TAC committee:

- the representatives will be Aboriginal;
- the person concerned feels comfortable representing his/her community;
- the representative will work for the community's interest, and not factional agendas; and
- the representatives will be directed by the Aboriginal community.

Having held such consultations, the community concerns are communicated to the local TAC project officer who will follow up in that community with further workshops. Such workshops are designed to inform the TAC project officer of the community's wishes.

The TAC project officer will then take the information back to the TAC committee for endorsement and incorporation in the TAC strategies.

### **Results**

Since January 1992, the author has consulted with twelve communities throughout South Australia. Of these, three have a particularly high Aboriginal population and a history of high Aboriginal criminal justice involvement. The high crime rate per local population was a factor in focussing on those three communities. The three approaches of the program: Local Community Committees (TACs), Aboriginal Community Committees and Aboriginal Special Projects are present in the work with these three communities. They are referred to here as Towns A, B and C and the brief summary of my consultations to date follows.

#### *Town A*

Town A has an Aboriginal population of approximately 4,000 people of which about 150 reside on the out of town Aboriginal community area. There are also about 2,000 non-Aboriginal residents. In addition to the permanent residents, Town A is, from time to time, subject to an influx of transient Aboriginal people from the north west.

In Town A, a TAC committee, with equal Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal representatives, has been established. The Aboriginal community is participating in

the TAC. The TAC has identified the issues that need addressing within the whole Town A community.

The TAC's approach is focussing on the whole community, not on "Aboriginal problems". The above has been achieved over four visits of one week's length spread over four months as well as numerous telephone conversations. The TAC is now in the process of employing a project officer. The Town A experience is now being used as a model of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents working together for their whole community.

### *Town B*

Town B is a small rural town of about 3,000 non-Aboriginal people and 1,000 Aboriginal people. There are at least three distinct groups in the Aboriginal population. These Aboriginal people were forcibly moved from their tribal lands as a result of the closing of the Reserve in the early 1950s. The pain of this dislocation is still very real.

In Town B, the non-Aboriginal project officer had difficulties accessing the Aboriginal community. The author consulted with the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community. The initial information so gained required follow up field work. That preliminary work helped initiate effective Aboriginal participation in the TAC. An Aboriginal project officer was needed to continue the initial field work, to identify the issues and have those issues incorporated into the TAC Strategy, and work with the non-Aboriginal project officer. The Aboriginal project officer has now been appointed (mid June 1992). The above processes have been achieved with five visits of three to five days each over four months, and by numerous telephone conversations.

### *Town C*

Town C provides a contrast to Towns A and B. It has a population of approximately 12,000 of which 1,500 are Aboriginal people. It is a prosperous, clean, quiet, rather genteel area. Aboriginal people living in Town C have come "from the west", there being no descendants of the original Aboriginal owners in the area.

Prior to 1992, the local Aboriginal organisation had initiated steps towards setting up a TAC in this town. A Law and Justice Committee had

been in operation in this Aboriginal organisation for two years, had identified needs and run programs. In 1990, the Aboriginal organisation approached the Attorney-General's Department for assistance in the development of Town C's crime prevention plan. A local steering committee was formed with Aboriginal input and representation. The author's role has been to ensure that the Aboriginal community is represented by Aboriginal people according to the criteria listed, and to assess funding requests for Aboriginal Special Projects. This has been achieved during two, two-day visits over two months and with numerous telephone conversations.

There are problems associated with these as with any programs, for example, ensuring that Aboriginal communities are represented by Aboriginal people, and that plans are implemented according to the criteria of meeting the needs of the Aboriginal community.

## **Conclusion**

Because Aboriginal culture is the keystone of this program, not white bureaucracy, Aboriginal people are taking control in their communities. The work is being done by the people at the grassroots level. Aboriginal models of participation are being used rather than the Anglo-Saxon style which "depended on notions of free elections, universal suffrage, public debate, decisions based on majority vote, and other notions alien to Aboriginal procedures of decision-making and governance" (Williams 1987, page 231). The emphasis is on developing opportunities and leadership for Aboriginal people. It is also based on utilising existing resources and coordination of agencies rather than on concentration of funding for quick fix programs. This gives both greater effectiveness and ongoing long-term success. Unrealistic expectations are not being placed on Aboriginal communities because of their involvement in the crime prevention strategy process from start to finish. Trust in and understanding of, the consultative processes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians is beginning. The preference for a reconciliatory process that many Aboriginal communities have expressed is starting to be realised. The result is the beginning of an educative process for non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians.

## **References**

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