

POLICING, VOLATILE SUBSTANCE MISUSE, AND INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS.

NDLERF MONOGRAPH No. 16

Gray, Shaw, d'Abbs, Brooks, Stearne, Mosey, Spooner (2006).

Plain English summary and implications for police prepared by Roger Nicholas.

Methodology

The researchers first conducted a literature review on the topic of policing responses to volatile substance misuse. A qualitative case study approach was then taken to the project. This involved communities from South Australia (four communities in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands), the Northern Territory (Kintore and Alice Springs), Queensland (Mount Isa and Cairns) and Western Australia (Perth). The researchers conducted 160 interviews with 195 people as part of this process.

Key findings:

- Few policing interventions for volatile substance misuse have been systematically evaluated.
- Data on the prevalence of use of these substances is not systematically recorded. The researchers found that there was considerable variation in the estimations of the levels of use between communities and within communities.
- Strategies to address volatile substance misuse need to be part of a broad approach to reducing substance misuse. Otherwise, there is a risk of users substituting the use of one substance for another.
- In remote areas, the role of police often expands into areas that would normally be the responsibility of other agencies. Decisions about the extent to which they become involved in these non-policing areas should not be left to the discretion of individual officers. Rather this should be negotiated with their supervisors, members of community councils and health and welfare agencies.
- In general, communities do want police involvement in volatile substance misuse, although there are sometimes conflicting views about the extent of this involvement. Indeed, the mere presence and support of police officers can encourage community members to take action themselves.
- The effective policing of volatile substance misuse is dependent upon the existence of positive relationships between police officers and communities. This gives police the *authority* not just the power to intervene. Positive policing styles involve developing rapport, being caring and approachable, non-judgemental, respectful and consistent.
- Policing styles that undermine community relationships include: having limited communication with agencies and the communities themselves; a failure to observe local etiquette; having negative attitudes to volatile substance users and their behaviour; and the use of overly 'heavy handed' policing.

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- Where police employ Indigenous people as community constables or liaison officers, they should not be used as a major component of the police response to acute incidents of volatile substance misuse. Rather, they should be employed in building police-community relations and in proactive responses to the problem.
- Many police reported that they – or those that they supervised – had insufficient training to deal with volatile substance misuse. Specifically, they indicated that more training was required on: the effects of volatile substances; the assessment of users and their needs; dealing with intoxicated users; clarification of policing powers; background issues concerning volatile substance misuse; working with young people in Indigenous communities; and proactive responses to the problems.
- The way in which officers engage with intoxicated individuals is central to the outcomes of these interventions. Key principles that should guide these actions include: careful assessment and monitoring of any encounter or incident (this includes the behaviour of police); prioritising their own safety and that of their colleagues, users and members of the general public; treating users with empathy and respect; keeping users calm; maintaining effective communication; formulating a clear plan of action; maintaining control; and not acting in a manner that might exacerbate incidents.
- Proactive policing strategies include: supply reduction (both in terms of illegal supply and supply from retail settings); generalised and targeted patrolling; dedicated police operations targeting substance misuse, violence and other crime (which are effective but only in the short term); the use of alternative legislation (such as trespass legislation and restraining orders); the establishment of specialised units or dedicated officers to address problems among 'at-risk' young people; police involvement in recreational and cultural activities; police involvement in evidence-based community and school-based drug education; the coordination of policing responses with those from other agencies; providing active support to community groups that aim to reduce volatile substance misuse; and cooperating with, and supporting, night patrols.

Implications for police

While there is little in the way of formal evaluations of policing interventions to address volatile substance misuse, there is little doubt that police can make an important contribution to the protection of individuals, the communities in which volatile substance users live, and the wider society.

There is an opportunity to standardise police training and protocols for dealing with volatile substance misuse between jurisdictions. This is likely to be particularly useful in the tri-state area of Western Australia, South Australia, and the Northern Territory, where it is common for Indigenous people to move between jurisdictions.

Neither the researchers from this project or any of those they interviewed were able to suggest any radical new approaches to this problem. There is, however, an opportunity to improve the effectiveness of policing and other activities that are currently being undertaken. In particular, there is a need to strengthen partnerships between key stakeholders – particularly between Indigenous community members and police – and to enhance the provision of mutual support between agencies.

The researchers also pointed to a need for a greater commitment from the Australian and State/Territory governments to provide a wider range of appropriate and accessible support services. Without this, they argue, policing responses to volatile substance misuse will be severely constrained. Police may well have a role in lobbying for the provision of these services.

A full copy of this report is available on the NDLERF website at www.ndlerf.gov.au

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