

## COMMUNITY-BASED STRATEGIES FOR COMBATING INDIGENOUS VIOLENCE

PAUL MEMMOTT\*

### I INTRODUCTION

It is well established that family violence, in a variety of forms, is prevalent in many Indigenous communities. These forms include spousal assault, homicide, rape and sexual assault, child violence, suicide, self-injury, one-on-one fighting between adults of the same sex, inter-group violence, psychological violence, economic abuse, cyclic violence, and dysfunctional community syndrome.<sup>1</sup>

This article argues that community-driven programs should be used not only as the primary method for resolving, combating or preventing these forms of Indigenous family violence, but also for treating the harm and stress arising from them. A range of community violence program types are discussed, along with different ways in which they can be incorporated into the design of an overarching 'Community Action Plan' against violence. This approach to violence is in contrast to, although does not necessarily have to be exclusive of, mainstream government approaches (which include responses by police, judicial and correctional systems, ambulance services, hospitals, and clinical approaches by medical and psychological professionals). It is suggested that the role of governments should be to support community-based projects at a regional level and to form strategic partnerships with communities.

### II THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PROGRAMS

In order to solve problems of violence in Indigenous communities, it is necessary to work from the premise that an Indigenous community has the potential to solve these problems on its own. Many Indigenous groups firmly

---

\* Associate Professor; Director, Aboriginal Environments Research Centre, University of Queensland.

1 Cyclic violence and dysfunctional community syndrome are categories that describe complex and large-scale forms of family violence. The former consists of violent episodes occurring across generations, while the latter consists of simultaneous occurrences of multiple violence forms within a community: Paul Memmott et al, *Violence in Indigenous Communities: Full Report* (2001) 51, National Crime Prevention Programme <<http://www.ncp.gov.au/ncp/Publications/PDF/violenceindigenous.pdf>> at 11 June 2002.

believe that the community has its own answers. Unless the community generates solutions, it will neither own them nor maintain a commitment to make them succeed. Social problems and unacceptable behaviour are inseparable from community life. Preventative and rehabilitative responses are more likely to be effective if they are planned by people who possess an intimate knowledge of the offending behaviours, the social capacities of the community, and the solutions that are likely to work. Even if violence prevention models are drawn from elsewhere, they will require the application of a good deal of local commonsense to render them relevant to a particular community.<sup>2</sup>

According to Paul Chantrill, successful violence prevention strategies are community-based, conform to community needs and priorities, and involve local people in the administration of justice and in planning community-wide responses. For example, when the local people at Kowanyama seized an opportunity to take part in the administration of community justice, community authority was re-established. This occurred because the strength of local traditions, structures and patterns of authority could be drawn upon to promote a greater sense of community ownership and responsibility for local justice issues and problems.<sup>3</sup>

Noel Pearson has called for responses to problems that assist in restoring Aboriginal authority and law 'because at the end of the day the values and standards that our people live under need to be understood as being our own'.<sup>4</sup> Pearson rightly argues that communities must develop socially and culturally in order for them to be able to address their problems, and must build an internal intolerance to crime and abuse.<sup>5</sup> The best laws are not those that are imposed externally but are those that arise locally as a legal expression of this intolerance.

A strong argument in favour of community-driven programs is that they possess the capacity to incorporate 'shaming' methods through existing social mechanisms such as Elders groups. Harold Finkler has written of Inuit

---

2 Barbara Miller, 'A Community Development Approach to Crime Prevention in Aboriginal Communities' in Sandra McKillop (ed), *Aboriginal Justice Issues: Proceedings of a Conference Held 23-25 June 1992* (1993) 17; Jane Mugford and Diana Nelson, *Violence Prevention in Practice: Australian Award Winning Programs* (1996) 2; Paul Chantrill, 'The Kowanyama Justice Group: A Study of the Achievements and Constraints on Local Justice Administration in a Remote Aboriginal Community' (Paper presented at the Australian Institute of Criminology Occasional Seminar Series, Canberra, 11 September 1997) 12, Australian Institute of Criminology <<http://www.aic.gov.au/conferences/occasional/chantrill.html>> at 11 June 2002.

3 Chantrill, above n 2, 12; Paul Chantrill, 'Community Justice in Indigenous Communities in Qld: Prospects for Keeping Young People Out of Detention' (Paper presented at the Partnerships in Crime Prevention Conference, Hobart, 25-27 February 1998) 9, Australian Institute of Criminology <<http://www.aic.gov.au/conferences/partnership/chantril.pdf>> at 23 June 2002.

4 Noel Pearson, 'Building a New Order', *The Courier Mail* (Brisbane), 8 April 2002, 9.

5 Noel Pearson, 'Call for Intolerance', *The Courier Mail* (Brisbane), 6 April 2002, 30.

communities that:

Presently, the offender's removal precludes the opportunity for accountability to the community or his confrontation with self. Consequently, the involvement of leaders, Elders, and church people in counselling, through the traditional means of group confrontation, enables the community to emphasise to the offender that his actions are disrespectful of Inuit lifestyle and culture, and that he must learn to be accountable for his actions.<sup>6</sup>

John Braithwaite was one of the first researchers to analyse this technique of 'reintegrative shaming', expounding that it 'implies shifting responsibility for monitoring illegality back into the community along with responsibility for dealing with that illegality by informal processes of social control and conscience building'.<sup>7</sup> This approach is based on the proposition that the way in which a society shames its members will influence the level of crime it experiences. As Carol La Prairie summarises, 'sanctions imposed on offenders by those whose opinions are most important to him or her will have more effect than those imposed by a remote legal authority'.<sup>8</sup> Conscience thus becomes 'a much more powerful weapon to control behaviour than punishment'.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, community members are often in the best position to take swift action in relation to violent episodes. Aboriginal Elder Elsie Roughsey has written that tribal law dealt with grievances relatively swiftly, whereas Western law now 'wraps the trouble up in a bundle' and keeps it for a long time before dealing with it, thereby allowing anger and hate to 'bubble up' again in the community. She argues that this is hardly necessary for less serious offences.<sup>10</sup> By implementing community-based programs, such matters can be handled by Elders who are respected and empowered by the community to prevent them from escalating. For example, if members of a community are known to have been regularly arrested for being drunk and disorderly, it is better to organise supervised lifts home for them rather than to leave them roaming at large until trouble occurs.<sup>11</sup> This approach has been utilised by the night patrol programs in the Northern Territory, and the Wunngagutu Patrol in Western Australia for young substance inhalers.<sup>12</sup>

Another important argument for community-driven programs is that a setting of communal and cultural familiarity and security is essential to the success of psychological therapies that are deep, personal and aim to heal individuals and

---

6 Harold W Finkler, 'The Role of Traditional Inuit Measures for Social Control in Correctional Policies and Administration' in Anthony Allott and Gordon R Woodman (eds), *People's Law and State Law: The Bellagio Papers* (1985) 321, 324.

7 John Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (1989) 150.

8 Carol La Prairie, 'Aboriginal Crime and Justice: Explaining the Present, Exploring the Future' (1992) 34 *Canadian Journal of Criminology* 281, 284.

9 Braithwaite, above n 7, 71.

10 Paul Memmott and Robyn Horsman (eds), *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New: Labumore: Elsie Roughsey* (1984) 210.

11 Mugford and Nelson, above n 2, 24-5.

12 *Ibid* 69.

their families. Judy Atkinson points out that she

can provide a series of case studies which show the changes in people who have been courageous enough to look at themselves and work to transform their attitudes and behaviours. These include men who have a history of domestic violence and sexually abusive attitudes, women who had been frozen in their childhood victimising experiences and who had been continuing to experience violence in their adult lives, Elders who have been working constructively to de-colonise themselves from the attitudes and behaviours they inherited from the colonisers. These changes have not occurred as a consequence of systemic legal processes however, but rather through an integration of Indigenous cultural processes for conflict management and group healing with therapeutic skills for trauma recovery in experiential learning workshops. This is the work of healing however, not legal institutions, which tend to continue to cause more problems than they solve.<sup>13</sup>

Once such community-based 'grassroots' programs become successful and are publicised, they are likely to spread and be adapted elsewhere in Indigenous Australia. This pattern is evident in the case of the night patrols, which started in Tennant Creek, spread to Alice Springs and Katherine, and then appeared in remote central Australian communities. They have now been adapted for use in both urban and remote settings in Western Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales, as well as in the Northern Territory. Other examples of community-based programs are men's support groups, Elders groups (male and female), and project ideologies and authority structures based on Aboriginal systems of laws and customs that have been adapted for contemporary contexts.

The most effective programs have thus been local, voluntary, community-based initiatives, set up 'on the frontlines' of violence to intervene on a one-to-one basis. Due to their potential for effective application in an Indigenous community context, other communities often adopt such programs. Programs not designed around the premise of community management through community authority are destined to fail by perpetuating the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness that actually cultivate cycles of violence. They also run the risk of worsening the various types of family violence.<sup>14</sup> Relying solely on police or other non-Indigenous authority structures to enforce justice in communities serves only to reinforce the disempowerment of community authority.

### III THE DESIGN OF COMMUNITY VIOLENCE PROGRAMS

An analysis of violence programs running in Indigenous communities during the 1990s generated nine program types. These can be summarised as:

- (1) Support programs (counselling, advocacy);
- (2) Identity strengthening programs (sport, education, arts, cultural activities, group therapy);
- (3) Behavioural reform programs (men's and women's groups);
- (4) Policing programs (night patrols, wardens);

13 Judy Atkinson, 'A Nation is Not Conquered' (1996) 3(80) *Aboriginal Law Bulletin* 4, 9.

14 Harry Blagg, *The Derby or Aboriginal Community Model* (1998) 5 (copy held at Aboriginal Environments Research Centre, University of Queensland).

- (5) Shelter/protection programs (refuges, sobering-up shelters);
- (6) Justice programs (community justice groups);
- (7) Mediation programs (dispute resolution);
- (8) Education programs (tertiary and other courses, media awareness); and
- (9) Composite programs (comprising elements from all programs).<sup>15</sup>

When designing a violence strategy for a particular community, a mix of programs can be selected in a balanced way to take both a reactive and a proactive approach. This can be achieved through the consideration of several temporal categories. Collectively, these approaches deal with all ages of victims, offenders, their families and the entire at-risk community.

Firstly, 'early reactive programs' are those that are implemented during or immediately after the occurrence of a violent incident, but usually before any police prosecution. These include night patrols, youth suicide intervention strategy, women's refuges and sobering-up shelters.

Secondly, 'late reactive programs' are implemented some time after an act of violence has occurred and seek to resolve the negative outcomes of that violence (examples include mediation, conflict resolution, counselling, group therapy, justice group meetings, offenders' alternate programs).

Thirdly, 'early proactive programs' aim to counter any likelihood of violence as early as possible. These work on the assumption that there is some risk of violence occurring in the future and that members of a community need to be motivated to undertake sustaining and diversionary activities, such as education, creating communal definitions of acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour, training Indigenous violence counsellors and developing alcohol management strategies.

Fourthly, 'late proactive programs' occur immediately prior to violence occurring. Triggered by signs of imminent violence, these programs are targeted at vulnerable persons. Examples of late proactive programs include mediation, group therapy, counselling, night patrols, wardens, removal of at-risk youths to safe houses, youth centres, out-stations, and youth suicide prevention strategies. Many of these methods are similar to those in reactive programs, but they are targeted at a different category of people – mainly vulnerable individuals as opposed to offenders or victims.<sup>16</sup>

It is useful to consider this system of classification when a composite violence program or strategy for a community is being designed. Composite programs include a number of sub-programs that may either: target different forms of violence in a community or different categories of offenders or victims; or employ different methods of combating or preventing violence. When a composite program is devised to deal systematically with all types of violence in a community, and to take both a reactive and proactive approach, it is often termed a 'holistic approach' or a holistic program.

Designs for community violence programs should start with a careful analysis of the extent and nature of violence in the target community. A 'Community

---

<sup>15</sup> Memmott et al, above n 1, 59–60.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* 3, 4.

Action Group' should aim towards the development of a community-based action or strategic plan. Other key steps in establishing one or more violence programs in a community include identifying where the community 'energy' lies in regard to opposing and preventing violence (eg, with the 'grannies')<sup>17</sup> and determining the sites or locations where violence intervention would best take place. There is also a need to identify whether suitable community-based organisational structures or agencies already exist that can be extended and supplemented to incorporate anti-violence programs, or whether new structures need to be established.<sup>18</sup>

Establishing a holistic approach to preventing violence in a community is an ambitious endeavour, and there are many reasons why such an approach may fail. For example, perpetrators may occupy positions of power in Indigenous community councils and agencies.<sup>19</sup> Another problem is the strain caused by continually preparing applications for short-term, stopgap grants in the absence of recurrent funding from governments. Many grassroots programs are dependent on volunteers to ensure that they are effectively led and operational. Elders and other middle-aged leaders (or 'middle managers' as they are called at Wadeye in the Northern Territory) typically fill these roles. 'Burnout' is a common problem due to the constant stress experienced by those who run violence programs and regularly provide support and protection for victims.<sup>20</sup> Violence workers often have their home life disrupted when victims call for assistance in a traumatised state, or when abusers and protagonists visit to complain about the worker's unwanted interference in their private family lives. Thus there is a need for governmental support for those who run such programs.

#### IV THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The argument for community-driven programs in Indigenous communities should not be interpreted as a directive to minimise the role of governments. Rather, it is argued that the scope of governmental involvement is in need of redefinition. One clear way that governments can demonstrate that their intention to address Indigenous violence is genuine is to direct funding into community-defined areas of need. Programs that effectively change patterns of violence may take several generations to heal particular families, and funding must therefore be sustained beyond individual entire units of political time (in the case of the federal government, across three year periods).

A sensitive aspect of this discussion is therefore how State (and Territory) government agencies may best instigate violence prevention programs in communities where they are obviously needed, and at the same time create a climate wherein the programs are truly community-originated, motivated and

---

17 Jan Hammill, 'Granny Rights: Combating the Granny Burnout Syndrome Among Australian Indigenous Communities' (2001) 44(2) *Development* 69.

18 Memmott et al, above n 1, 97.

19 Ibid 86.

20 Ibid 77; Hammill, above n 17.

controlled. To achieve such an outcome, it is recommended that government agencies take a regional approach both to supporting and coordinating local community initiatives, and to assisting communities to prepare 'Community Action Plans'. Partnerships between Indigenous program personnel and mainstream services such as the police, judiciary, prisons, ambulance services and hospitals should be developed.

The facilitation by government of a regional support network for violence programs makes sense in terms of the potential value of that support, the logistics of scale and the social organisation of Aboriginal communities into cultural regions. Holistic programs involving multiple sub-programs that are targeted at a range of violence types need to be given priority support by governments in regions experiencing high rates of violence.

Governments also have a critical (but so far unfulfilled) role in training community violence workers. There are an insufficient number of trained para-professionals available to facilitate or deliver special treatment techniques in many communities, particularly in remote areas, despite the desirability of incorporating such para-professionals into particular holistic programs. Skills are required in family mediation, conflict management, anger management, and in more specialised psychological methods such as trauma recovery in Indigenous experiential learning workshops (such as those developed and practiced by Judy Atkinson).<sup>21</sup> This highlights the need for governments to implement accredited TAFE training courses in responding to Indigenous violence, which are accessible at a regional level for local community-based Indigenous trainees.

## V CONCLUSION

Any coherent program aimed at preventing Indigenous family violence must address the full range of causal factors involved. Programs should seek to provide support and practical assistance to those in immediate danger, to treat the trauma resulting from experiences of violence, and to seek permanent change in the perpetrator through a variety of means, including appropriate punishment and rehabilitation. They should also allow communities to own the substantial share of any program's operation and subsidiary benefits, and to generally raise awareness within the Indigenous community about ways to identify and deal with the problem. The powerful value systems that draw people into cycles of violent behaviour must be eroded.

Best practice models and programs recognise that focusing on communities helps to provide culturally sensitive treatment for violent people. Communities involved in, or in control of, judicial and other matters benefit from an increased sense of cohesion and from learning about how the mainstream police, judicial and court systems work. Such programs recognise the benefits of encouraging

---

21 Judy Atkinson, *Lifting the Blankets: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia* (PhD Thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2001).

collaboration between agencies such as the police, the judiciary, local councils and corrective authorities. Best practice models also acknowledge that there are complex social and psychological factors involved in many forms of violence that need to be dealt with in a holistic manner, requiring community-wide attention. They also recognise alcohol as an important factor that needs to be addressed within an overall program.

Therefore, the advantages of community-driven programs are that they are empowering, encourage ownership of the problem and the solutions, and reinforce Indigenous authority and social cohesion. They provide the opportunity for capacity building in Indigenous organisations and for developing local Indigenous values that denigrate violence, and are more likely to be appropriate and effective compared with externally imposed programs. They also provide settings of communal familiarity and security in which such programs can most readily succeed. They can incorporate reintegrative shaming methods, make offenders accountable to their own communities, and allow incidents of violence to be dealt with in a culturally appropriate time frame.

The implementation of composite programs, particularly in communities displaying increasing and multiple forms of violence, is an emerging and preferred approach. It reflects a systematic way of combating violence, combining both proactive and reactive methods that target different age groups and sexes.