

Why Do Some Aboriginal Communities Have Lower Crime Rates Than Others?

A Pilot Study

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Abstract

Crime data published by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) indicates that there is considerable variation in rates of Indigenous¹ offending from one area to another in NSW, including in areas that are comparable in terms of Indigenous population (Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2006). However, despite research findings that raise the importance of community context in relation to the offending of Indigenous individuals, there has been little investigation of the relationship between the dynamics of Indigenous communities and crime rates. In particular, there is a dearth of research that seeks to better understand the factors that may render Indigenous communities less prone to crime.

This paper outlines the findings of a pilot study undertaken by a research team from Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology Sydney, with support from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR). The pilot study sought to better understand the factors that contribute to variations in rates of Indigenous offending by conducting qualitative research in two communities with significant Aboriginal populations, Wilcannia and Menindee, that are demographically and geographically comparable but with contrasting crime rates.

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It is commonplace to observe that Indigenous Australians are significantly over-represented at all stages of the criminal justice system, as both victims and offenders (SCRGSP, 2009, 2.17, 4.139ff). Indeed, since Indigenous over-representation first came to prominence with the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991, rates have increased, despite various Commonwealth and NSW Government legislative and policy measures.² In NSW, the rate of Indigenous imprisonment is 12.5 times that of non-Indigenous people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008a), having increased by 21% since 2005 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). Over-representation by Indigenous people occurs in particular for violent offences, public order offences, and ‘justice related’ matters such as breaches of existing court orders (Cunneen, 2007: 145-146).

Nonetheless, Indigenous communities are not homogenous and there is considerable variation in rates of offending and victimisation in Indigenous communities across NSW and Australia (Cunneen, 2007, 146-147). With this variation as its genesis, this article outlines a pilot study undertaken by Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology Sydney, with support from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR), that sought to explore the particular social, economic and cultural circumstances of two communities in NSW with significant Aboriginal populations but markedly different rates of crime, and to investigate factors that may be contributing to rates of crime in these communities.

There is a growing body of research that seeks to identify factors that increase the risk of, or are associated with, individual Indigenous offenders’ involvement in crime. Weatherburn, Snowball and Hunter (2006) drew on data from the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) to examine economic and

social factors that underpin Indigenous contact with the criminal justice system. Their findings supported previous research identifying risk factors including poor school performance and poor school retention, child neglect and abuse, family disruption and dissolution, unemployment, poverty and low socio-economic status, overcrowding, living in a crime prone neighbourhood, lack of social support and involvement, social stress and, most importantly, drug and alcohol abuse (Weatherburn et al, 2006).

By contrast, there has to date been little research focus on the broader dynamics and characteristics of Indigenous communities and their relationship to rates of crime. Existing research on variations in crime rates in NSW rural communities, such as that undertaken by Jobes, Donnermeyer and Barclay (Jobes et al, 2004; Jobes et al, 2005 and Donnermeyer et al, 2007) illustrates a complex interaction of factors. Building on their 2004 research across six clusters of NSW rural communities that concluded that social factors were more important to crime rates than population size or economic factors, Jobes et al (2005) studied two NSW towns with Aboriginal populations of approximately six percent with significantly different crime rates to similarly conclude that social cohesion and social integration, rather than Aboriginality per se, explained the levels of crime and other social problems. However, a third study of four communities (the two with above average Aboriginal populations from the 2005 study and two communities with average Aboriginal populations and differing crime rates) concluded that social cohesion was a greater predictor of low crime rates in the communities with lower Aboriginal populations than the other two towns where social and economic inequality were more significant. Such research supports undertaking further qualitative community-level research to illuminate statistical data (see for example, Crime Research Centre, 1999; Jobes, Barclay, Donnermeyer and Weinand, 2000; Barclay et al, 2007; Lawrence, 2007).

Aim and methodology

The aim of the study was to better understand the factors that contribute to significant variances in rates of Indigenous offending in different areas in NSW by conducting qualitative research in two communities with significant Aboriginal populations that are demographically and geographically comparable but with contrasting crime rates. The research team was particularly interested in whether there may be identifiable characteristics or strategies that may have a positive impact on crime rates in Indigenous communities. Steps undertaken included:

- A survey of available statistical, demographic and policy data that identified Wilcannia and Menindee in western NSW as appropriate case study communities;
- A literature review of relevant studies regarding crime rates and Aboriginal communities;
- Development of a theoretical framework and methodology for the collection and analysis of data;
- Consultation with key Aboriginal community and organisational representatives;
- Field work in the selected communities, primarily conducting in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with key informants, selected on the basis of their organisational or representative role;
- Transcribing and coding of field work data to identify predominant themes and narratives;
- Analysis and communication of findings, including drafting of a community report for distribution to interviewees.

A Steering Committee of eminent individuals with extensive Indigenous, criminology, legal, research and policy experience was established to inform the pilot study.

The study relied on data using postcode boundaries. In seeking to explore the dynamics of the groups within those boundaries, while being mindful of problems in defining Indigenous ‘community’, we were guided by the definition of an Indigenous community developed by the Indigenous Community Governance Project at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, as a network of people and organisations linked together by a web of personal relationships, cultural and political connections and

identities, networks of support, traditions and institutions, shared socioeconomic conditions or common understandings and interests (Hunt and Smith, 2006).

In identifying a suitable framework for the study, the research team was aware of the questionable tendency of western criminology to simply extend existing conceptual categories to accommodate Aboriginal issues (Blagg, in Anthony and Cunneen, 2008, 131). In particular, Blagg questions the applicability of criminological theories that predominantly emerge from large cities in the United States that are essentially shaped by circumstances that are the antithesis of those experienced by Indigenous peoples. That is, the immigrant experience of diaspora and adaptation: learning new languages, cultures, values and political processes, versus withstanding the imposition of foreign laws, institutions, peoples, economies, beliefs while maintaining Aboriginality and distinct identity in their own country (Blagg, in Anthony and Cunneen, 2008, 133-134).

The study drew on social disorganisation theory to inform the interview approach and analysis of the data, as the most common theoretical framework employed by criminologists conducting research in relation to rural or regional communities (Donnermeyer 2007, 18). Concepts of social disorganisation have been described as aptly applying to Indigenous communities in terms of the breakdown of Indigenous informal social controls as a result of colonisation and dispossession (Snowball & Weatherburn, 2008). However, given the trial nature of the study and suggested limitations, the research team sought to draw on the concepts embedded in social disorganisation theory whilst being open to alternative theoretical explanations or findings that may not support any existing criminological or other theory.

In essence, social disorganisation theory emphasises the dual and interrelated impacts of a community's ability to realise common goals on the one hand and to maintain effective controls on crime on the other (Carcarch and Huntley 2002, 1). Central to the

theory is the assumption that crime is based on a lack of shared values and beliefs among members of a community, and an inability to solve common problems (Sampson & Groves, 1989; Bursik & Gransmick, 1999 cited in Donnermeyer, 2007, 18). Elements of social disorganisation that disrupt the informal social ties, internal cohesion and density of acquaintanceship that are posited by the theory to control criminal behaviour include residential instability/high population turnover; racial/ethnic heterogeneity; family disruption; low economic status (poverty, unemployment) and population (size, density and proximity to urban places) (Jobes et al, 2004: 119). Wilson and Kelling (1982) argued that even perceiving a local area as disorganised increases the likelihood that crime will occur there (cited in Jobes et al, 2005, 225).

Sampson (1995) identified three major dimensions of the social disorganisation model applicable to community-based research: a community's ability to supervise and control (teenage) group level behaviour; the density of relational networks (communities with strong, dense and high quality interpersonal networks arguably have a greater capacity for fostering environments that constrain deviant behaviour); and the rate of participation in voluntary associations and local organisations and stability and density of social institutions (low participation in local activities and weak community organisational structures tend to affect a community's capacity to reduce local crime) (cited in Carcarch and Huntley 2002, 1).

Jobes et al (2005, 224) identify types of controls operating in communities, namely 'supportive' vs 'reactive' controls, and 'natural' vs 'manufactured' controls. Supportive controls include the institutional framework in the community that helps prevent crime: organised institutions, family cohesion, employment, population stability, moral and ethical foundations, and ethnic and racial integration. Reactive controls include the social structures, such as police and the courts, which respond to social and behavioural

problems. Natural controls, norms and structures that have evolved locally through the activities of long term residents can be contrasted with manufactured controls that are introduced and maintained by external people, including government employees.

Given that the study's focus was on better understanding the social, cultural and economic factors that underpin variation in crime rates, our methodology was to engage with key community and organisational representatives and others working in relevant criminal justice and service delivery roles to gain an understanding of the dynamics and experiences of the community as a whole, rather than, say, individuals who had been victims or perpetrators of crime. Representative and service delivery organisations were key points of contact in identifying with whom to conduct interviews.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants were undertaken to gather information on and explanations of issues, circumstances and attitudes, both to better illustrate statistics and as a source of data in their own right. The interviews focussed on the issues central to the research question, but with questioning and discussion allowing for greater flexibility than a survey-style interview (Minichiello, 2008, 64). The approach was tailored to be receptive to alternative narratives and perspectives on a range of factors affecting crime rates in communities. Given the potentially sensitive nature of discussing issues of crime, the criminal justice system, community dynamics, and different approaches to leadership and service delivery in small communities, interviewees were given the opportunity to speak with the research team confidentially. Interviews were recorded unless interviewees requested that they not be, and data gathered through the interviews was transcribed and coded for key themes and common narratives using NVivo software. Thirty-six people agreed to be interviewed and to have their interviews recorded, twenty-one of whom are Aboriginal. A further eight people (seven Aboriginal) agreed to be interviewed but declined to have their interviews recorded.

Confidentiality proved to be a pivotal factor in eliciting agreement for involvement in the study. Seven people requested total anonymity, including that there be no reference to them personally in the acknowledgments. Four people specifically requested that the organisation for which they worked also not be identified. If quoted, interviewees were given the option of being identified by position title or by a generic descriptor such as 'community service provider' or 'community worker' but in each case, the description was chosen by the interviewee. Only thirteen people agreed to be identified by position title, although two participants withdrew their request for anonymity after reading a draft community report. Interviewees could withdraw their consent regarding involvement in the study at any point, and one did so after reading the draft community report.

Due to confidentiality undertakings, a complete list of organisations represented in the study cannot be provided. However, representatives of a wide range of organisations were interviewed for the study including the NSW Police Force (police officers and other employees), Aboriginal Legal Service, schools, community working parties, local Aboriginal land councils, Central Darling Shire Council, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, Local Court liaison officers, health services, counselling services, youth services, government and non-government service providers.

The general areas that the research team sought to cover in interviews with key informants related to their organisation's history and role in the community; community strengths and weaknesses and changing dynamics; community participation; solutions to community problems; level of volunteerism; cultural composition of the community; roles of women, young people and older people; activities for young people, experiences of education and prospects on leaving school; who takes responsibility for young people in trouble; non-Aboriginal perceptions/media representations of the community; employment opportunities, housing; mobility of community members; government and non-government

agencies, services and organisations and their effectiveness. Specifically in relation to crime rates, the research team asked about perceptions of rates of crime and Indigenous offending in the community; how and why crime rates may have changed over time; what kinds of crime are most common and why that might be the case; strategies or programs that may have reduced crime rates, how they came about, who was in charge of them and if and how they worked; and any ideas of what could work to reduce crime rates. Appendix 1 is the list of questions that was prepared for the interviewers for guidance.

Key themes that were raised by several different interviewees were identified and outlined in a community report, although the research team remained cognisant of the importance of the ‘outsider’ view. Where an observation was made by a single person, it was raised with other interviewees for confirmation or denial. For example, the claim made by one person that young children were ‘on ice’ in Wilcannia was rejected by numerous people living and working in Wilcannia and not reported.

Methodologically, it was important that the interviewees be allowed to reflect on topics covered in each interview and express their views, rather than being ‘led’ to particular topics. Inevitably, different factors that may impact on rates of crime or social cohesion – either positively or negatively – arose in relation to the two communities from different interviewees. For example, problematic alcohol consumption was repeatedly raised in relation to Wilcannia but only by one person in relation to Menindee; Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal intermarriage in Menindee was raised but not mentioned in relation to Wilcannia. It was not possible to follow up such differences in the pilot study but they will be an important starting point in the next stage of research in the two communities.

A draft ‘community report’ was provided to each interviewee requesting feedback on the report generally and confirmation that they had been quoted in context. The research

team returned to Broken Hill, Wilcannia and Menindee to discuss the draft report with some interviewees before finalisation. Others provided feedback by email or telephone.

Wilcannia and Menindee

Wilcannia and Menindee are communities within the Central Darling Shire in western New South Wales, the second most disadvantaged local government area in NSW (ABS, 2008d). In the 2006 Census of Population and Housing ('2006 Census'), the towns of Wilcannia and Menindee were recorded as having populations of 595 and 332 respectively³ with very large Indigenous populations: 67.4% of the total population surveyed identified as Aboriginal in Wilcannia, while 46.7% did so in Menindee. The nearest major centre to both communities is Broken Hill, with a population of 18,854 of which 6.4% are Aboriginal people. Wilcannia is approximately twice the distance from Broken Hill (approximately 200km) than Menindee (approximately 110km). Under the Australian Standard Geographical Classification, Wilcannia and surrounds are classified as very remote. The town of Menindee is classified as remote, while the broader region encompassing the town is very remote.

Wilcannia and Menindee are both within the traditional lands of the Barkindji people. European settlement in western NSW progressed along the rivers, having a devastating effect on the Barkindji who, despite their resistance, were forcibly dispossessed of their land along the Darling River and prevented from exercising their traditional economy and lifeways. The Nyampa, whose traditional lands are semi arid regions south west of Cobar, lived for longer without institutional interference until forced to Carowra Tank by drought and later relocated without notice or consent to Menindee in the 1930s. Barkindji people living in town camps in Wilcannia were also forcibly removed to the Menindee mission under a policy of concentrating Aboriginal people under Aboriginal Protection Board control. The Nyampa and Barkindji generally remained as

distinct cultural groups, speaking different languages and identifying with different country. With a second forcible relocation to Murrin Bridge in the 1950s, most Barkindji families returned to Wilcannia, while others remained in Menindee. Today, Wilcannia is a largely segregated town with the majority of the Aboriginal population living on the outskirts of town in areas referred to still as the 'Mission' or the 'Mallee'. Menindee is known as a more integrated town, its Indigenous population identifying as Barkindji and/or Nyampa with a significant degree of intermarriage with non-Aboriginal people.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Perhaps the most prominent disparity in the 2006 Census data relates to the recorded unemployment levels in Menindee that are double that in Wilcannia (39.6% compared to 19.5%), which contrasts so markedly with interviewees' observations of greatly higher levels in Wilcannia. Recorded participation in the Community Employment Development Projects (CDEP) program by the ABS is one possible explanation for this large discrepancy. CDEP participation data is only collected from people surveyed by the Indigenous Household Form (ABS, 2008a), which was utilised for Aboriginal families in Wilcannia but not Menindee. Thus, CDEP participation was not separately recorded in Menindee, whereas 26 of a total labour force of 120 in Wilcannia were CDEP participants (ABS, 2007a) and it is not possible to estimate how CDEP workers in Menindee may have responded. Interestingly, there were no unemployed non-Aboriginal people in Wilcannia at the time of the 2006 Census (ABS, 2007a) while 20 percent of non-Aboriginal men and no non-Aboriginal women were unemployed in Menindee (ABS, 2007b).

Crime Statistics

This pilot study did not have the scope to investigate changes in crime rates or population in the two communities over time. The statistics set out below are taken from crime data in for 2008 published by BOCSAR. Broken Hill is included as a reference point.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Findings

Wilcannia: High Crime Rates

High crime rates in Wilcannia in 2008 were predominantly in the areas of assault, break and enter dwelling and malicious damage to property. Certain definite and common narratives emerged when interviewees were asked about the possible causes of the high crime rate in Wilcannia. These involved high-risk alcohol use; lack of meaningful employment and activity; poverty and inequality; and the dry Darling River. Associated issues were identified as grief and mental health problems; the approach of police; an acceptance of crime; criminal justice processes; and government policy and priorities.

Alcohol. Whether as a cause of crime in itself or as an exacerbating or triggering factor, the high rate of crime, and violent crime in particular, was attributed by every interviewee who lived and/or worked in Wilcannia and others to regular and extremely high levels of alcohol consumption amongst many community members.

There is too much violence, way too much violence, from what I can see most of it appears to be alcohol-related, inspired, assisted... Aside from petty crime, theft, etc., I have seen very few incidents of assault where the people haven't been associated with each other, known each other, been in the same family, been in a relationship, an ex-relationship, and that seems to have been the pattern as I have seen it. So to me, the random crime that occurs in the capital cities doesn't seem to be occurring here.

Non-Aboriginal Business Operator, Wilcannia

Responses to public alcohol consumption and public order issues, such as restrictions on the trading of alcohol and the introduction of alcohol free zones in the town, were considered to have had unintended consequences. One police officer stated that the 'violence and alcoholism haven't gone away but has been pushed into the homes'. The

effectiveness of such measures in reducing the quantity of alcohol consumed was questioned, with the hypothesis forwarded by police employees and local residents that such restrictions may actually contribute to binge drinking. There are no social outlets or venues for people to gather that do not involve alcohol in the town.

After identifying alcohol as a major causal factor in high crime rates, interviewees often suggested reasons for dangerous alcohol consumption, highlighting mental health issues, trauma and grief.

Drug and alcohol use is one of the biggest factors. I think there are lots of reasons for that. People drink to forget things, whether it's sexual assault or domestic violence in their home. The only way they are ever going to change drug and alcohol abuse is to have counsellors living in the community, on the ground, for the people. Mental health is a huge issue.

Aboriginal Community Worker

Funerals, too often of young community members in tragic circumstances, were identified by police and community service providers as flashpoints for alcohol related crime and violence with a large influx of people often requiring additional police resources.

Despite the extent and gravity of dangerous levels of alcohol consumption in Wilcannia, the lack of culturally appropriate local treatment services was highlighted by police and by health, education and legal service providers. Even the most basic service where intoxicated people can go until they sober up does not exist. People who wish to undertake a rehabilitation program must leave the town and their families.

'Yarndi' or marijuana is reported to be widely and regularly used by many community members in Wilcannia but was not reported as impacting on crime rates. The consumption of alcohol and marijuana in Wilcannia can be contrasted with use of other drugs. A strong and proactive community stance is reportedly taken on 'hard drugs' such as amphetamines in Wilcannia, described by a counsellor as the town drawing the line at 'anything injectable': 'The boys go round to have a word, and empty it out on the ground'.

Lack of meaningful employment and activity. While Census data records

unemployment levels in Wilcannia at 20.5% for Indigenous people, a recent study estimated that unemployment levels are in reality much higher (Drewery, 2009, 5). Certainly the figures are affected by the fact that Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) workers are classified as employed, although this will be affected by the abolition of CDEP in the town after June 2009. The main employers in Wilcannia are the Central Darling Shire Council, Department of Education and Training, NSW TAFE and NSW Police (Drewery, 2009, 7).

The lack of opportunity for meaningful employment, or a sense of purposelessness combined with a lack of capacity to take up what opportunities there may be, was overwhelmingly identified by those who live and/or work in Wilcannia and others as a significant factor in high crime rates. Several interviewees referred to a letter written by the local magistrate at the time, praising a Keating Government job skills program which was reportedly accompanied by a dramatic decline in court attendance, domestic violence and ambulance call outs for the duration of the program.

A lack of employability in general terms was raised – lack of education, training or capacity – but specifically, having a criminal record on employment prospects was identified by police, court staff and members of representative bodies as a compounding factor. The potentially devastating impact of a criminal record has particular resonance in a community when it was said by police that the majority of young people would come to the attention of the police whether as instigators or ‘hangers on’ by the time they are 16.

The impact of an intergenerational pattern of unemployment on the aspirations of young people was also highlighted, where young people question the value of education.

That feeling of not being able to get meaningful work in the town for adults has a bit of a flow on effect to the kids, so it means you get more kids dropping out of school, more people thinking they’re worthless.

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

The Central Darling Shire Council was heavily criticised for not showing leadership as an employer itself or promoting employment schemes in the town. Despite employing Aboriginal people outdoors, the fact that there are no Aboriginal people in the Shire offices was angrily cited by some local Aboriginal residents as a failure to fulfil expectations of it as a representative body in the town. Its vision for the town was not seen to be one of empowerment for Aboriginal people.

As with adults, lack of a sense of purpose and engagement in meaningful activities for children and young people was regularly raised as a causal factor in Wilcannia's high crime rates. There is a local 'drop in centre' but virtually no other activities apart from a fortnightly film night run by a local resident on her own initiative.

People have to have something to do – something meaningful. You wouldn't see too many offenders who are employed, or if they're younger, who go to school regularly or come from a stable family background. They are not our customers.

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

The role of the school in providing appropriate and engaging curriculum was also stressed. There was general recognition that the Central School had improved in performance and engagement with the community, although past practices of informing children at age 15 that they were entitled to leave school along with low expectations in performance by teachers were cited with some bitterness. An Acting Principal had been appointed who was praised for his commitment and vision, although his 'Acting' status was a source of frustration when a long-term vision for the school was considered to be crucial.

Poverty and inequality. Interviewees identified the corrosive effects of systemic poverty and inequality as major factors underpinning high crime rates in Wilcannia. The cost of living in Wilcannia is high with just one small supermarket and one roadhouse selling fast food and a small range of grocery items, and the cost of fresh food is exorbitant. The stark contrast between the high cost of living and the low economic status

of the local Aboriginal population who are predominantly receiving social security entitlements was forcefully made.

I think if people really knew what an empty stomach was, when you see more meal times than meals – it's not a good feeling. You will do all sorts of things you wouldn't normally do, but we don't provide for that. If the government were providing access to food a lot cheaper than what we have now, you wouldn't have half the crime rate.... They are the sorts of things that while they are neglected will always lead to crime, while communities are in poverty like this one.

Acting CEO, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council;
Chairperson, Wilcannia Community Working Party

There was also a strong perception of uncoordinated programs and strategies dealing with the symptoms of poverty but failing to address underlying causes.

What you tend to see is a lot of symptoms of living in poverty and every agency or organisation that's involved in Wilcannia just deals with one aspect of it, so there's never any joint effort to try and change things... if you've got some sort of employment strategy happening, then you probably need something along the lines of a training strategy happening as well, a health strategy happening at the same time, a domestic violence strategy going, but they'll need to actually work together and not be totally isolated because one's with the police and one's with DOCS and one's with the hospital and one's with whoever, and not enough of that happens.

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

Wilcannia is a divided and segregated community, socially and economically with reports of direct and indirect racism. There is limited informal interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents, who tend to live in different parts of the town, reflecting the historical marginalization of Aboriginal people in town camps and on the mission. Non-Aboriginal residents are perceived to fall into two categories; short-term external service providers – police, teachers and health workers, and permanent residents. There was a sense of injustice and resentment at the obvious disparities between the two communities, intensified by poverty in a town with a high cost of living. The majority of the population is Aboriginal, yet the organisations that exist in the town to service the community – that essentially exist because of the Aboriginal population – were criticised for not employing local people or engaging local people in the formulation or implementation of services.

Poor quality housing and overcrowding were consistently identified as issues requiring urgent attention. It was said that if you can't get a good night's sleep, then it is difficult to function properly at school or at work. Inadequate, flawed housing projects that have failed over decades to produce positive outcomes were frequently reported.

Dry river. The effects of the drought and the long-term lack of water in the Darling River were regularly cited as a factor in high crime rates.

What also affects the [Wilcannia] community is the river, it's a really important one here. It takes you back to the cultural side, and how connection to our river and our land is really important... Early 90s, we had a stage there when we were in a drought really bad, people were really down and crime rates right up. By the end of that year when the river had filled, friends of mine appeared, they'd come over for court, here they do a court circuit, rocked up: they only had one case. And the river was absolutely full, kids were swimming in the river, people were fishing, the spirit was just really high. Everything that affects our environment for blackfellas, it really has big impacts on people's spirit.

Aboriginal Community Health Worker

Associated Issues: Wilcannia

Grief and mental health problems. Service providers and community representatives consistently raised the issues of significant and untreated mental health issues as major problems in Wilcannia compounding other factors affecting crime rates. The inadequacy of treatment services in general and counselling in particular was repeatedly noted by police and health, education and other service providers, where people in serious need must leave their community for help and others with less urgent problems must wait for the next available appointment with a counsellor who drives from Broken Hill once a week and 'God knows what will happen in the meantime'.

[Grief counsellors] come out once a week from Broken Hill. Two hours driving out. They arrive at 11, 11:30 and they're leaving by 3 pm. [Wilcannia] needs six full time [counsellors] for grief, for alcohol, for drugs, for mental health. And not just two, they get burnt out. ... They need them desperately. But they say, 'Where do we get them?' Sometimes they say, 'The money's not there' and sometimes they say, 'We can't get the people.'

Principal, St Therese's Community School, Wilcannia

Similarly, in a community where the life expectancy for men is 36.7 years and for women, 42.5 years (Wilcannia Health Service Development Transitional Plan cited in Wilcannia Community Working Party, 2005), unending, intergenerational grief for Aboriginal people in Wilcannia dealing with sudden and premature deaths in tragic circumstances was repeatedly raised. Again, however, the lack of coordinated services in response was referred to, particularly at the time of funerals when the need is acute.

Police approach. The high numbers of police located in Wilcannia – 12 police stationed in a town with a population of 600 – and the style of policing were mentioned as factors relevant to better understanding the rates of crime in Wilcannia by a significant majority of interviewees who lived and/or worked in Wilcannia. The potential contribution to high crime rates of a large police presence in itself was raised. In relation to style, opposing views were expressed of, on the one hand, incidents that would pass without notice elsewhere being prosecuted, contrasting with a perception that anti-social behaviour was accepted in Wilcannia that would not be acceptable in other rural communities.

There was a general sense that the approach to policing in Wilcannia had improved over recent years and that the police now play an important welfare role in the absence of other services, since, ‘If you are the only door open, people will come to you’. However, such observations were prefaced with a strongly stated preference for greater involvement by individual police in community activities. Two Aboriginal Client Liaison Officers (‘ACLOs’) are stationed in Wilcannia but their role was not raised by interviewees.

In a place like Wilcannia, it depends on who the cops are; the personalities of the police. If you get someone there who is a little bit more relaxed and laid back and a little bit more experienced, they tend to build a relationship with people - and that's the way to do it with Aboriginal people. You've had instances there where the police would get out and do walking patrols, and just wander around the town, and that's good, because people see them, kids see them, they talk to them: they sort of become less of an ogre or a mystery to people. But it just depends on who's running the local police force.

Aboriginal Community Service Provider

Difficulties in recruiting police to Wilcannia has led NSW Police to introduce the shortest term of tenure in NSW and other incentives, including preferential relocation. The high turnover of police officers and inexperience were identified as exacerbating problems in the relationship between the police and community members, where, by the time police become known, it is time for them to leave. Appropriate recruiting and training were identified as important factors; especially where it is recognised that what is acceptable in Wilcannia in terms of ‘anti-social behaviour’ may differ quite markedly to other towns.

Despite the high numbers of police in Wilcannia and opportunities for anonymous disclosure, under-reporting of certain crimes, including sexual assault, was observed by community members and acknowledged as a problem by police.

Criminal justice processes. Despite the common experience of contact with the criminal justice system for Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, there was a reported lack of understanding by community members of its workings. The implications include examples of missed court appearances, breaches of bail and a broader sense of alienation from the legal system and government services.

A number of interviewees working in the criminal justice system identified the lack of available and appropriate options – both in terms of prevention and diversion in sentencing – as a serious shortcoming in Wilcannia. One example referred to was that of Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs). While AVOs play an important role for women in particular in providing police protection against interpersonal violence, in the absence of broader programs or strategies to assist perpetrators and victims of violence there were often seen to exacerbate problems. People in relationships – friends, relatives or spouses – regularly take out AVOs that are breached, leading to criminal proceedings.

The issuing of fines was a particular concern in an environment where people frequently couldn’t afford to pay them, compounding contact with the criminal justice

system for adults and young people through the resultant loss of or inability to attain a driver's licence. The reality of a subsequent criminal record and incarceration for unlicensed driving was referred to by workers in the criminal justice system.

Acceptance of crime. Several people described acceptance of criminal behaviour, and specifically violent crime, as a particular characteristic of Wilcannia that was both a cause and contributor to the high levels of violent crime. Contact with the criminal justice system and incarceration were described as a rite of passage for young Aboriginal men in the community, and even serious criminal behaviour did not invoke significant stigma. The welcoming back to the community of those who had been incarcerated for violent crimes was mentioned as both a problem and a strength in Wilcannia, where people will accept you regardless of what you have done. Analysis of what constitutes good or bad behaviour or what is socially acceptable or unacceptable was reportedly lacking. One police officer described the phenomenon: 'No-one addresses the fact that you stabbed that person because you were drunk and out of control. No-one says, 'you've had enough', or 'you're not having any' or 'we're going to keep an eye on you'.'

Wilcannia's unique in that it has a really high percentage of Aboriginal people within the community, so when you've got the majority of a town being suppressed, the effect of that over a number of generations means that people tend to drift more towards the violence and other socially unacceptable things. If you're feeling resentful or a bit downtrodden and you tend to want to try and resolve that somehow, and if what you're learning at home is a setting of if someone does you wrong you punch them in the face, then that's what you'll go through life doing.

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

Acceptance of violence and particularly domestic violence is an intergenerational reality, with an expectation that boys, although now highly defensive of their mothers and grandmothers, may become perpetrators themselves. Frequent contact by children and young people with such high levels of violence was described by interviewees living and working in Wilcannia as normalising it to the point where children casually use domestic violence terminology. They reportedly learn to accept and then exhibit anti-social

behaviour. Some interviewees were concerned that there were not adequate expectations of or boundaries provided to young people.

However, there were also examples given of community members intervening and working with police to address crimes by young people, including the community response to the break-in of the local Catholic school and theft of the school bus.

Government policy and priorities. Raised by all but one of the interviewees were problems associated with disjointed, inappropriate, remote service delivery, which was seen as undermining the building of community capacity or infrastructure. Short-term program funding and remotely located staff of multiple federal and state government agencies and non-government organisations who do not operate in a planned or coordinated fashion were identified as persistent and significant problems for the community. In response, the Central Darling Shire Council recently conducted a service mapping survey identifying 46 different human services being offered to communities in the region without a central point of coordination (Drewery, 2009, 9).

The millions of dollars ostensibly allocated to Wilcannia to address dire need in areas such as housing, child protection and crime prevention were described as being principally spent on government employees and consultants 'driving up and down the highway from Broken Hill' and as 'dead money'. This was perceived as leading to a surface appearance of great sums of money being poured into Wilcannia and a distorted reflection of actual resources realised in the town.

A lack of evaluation and accountability by agencies working in the community is endemic. Top down, short-term programs are implemented but rarely genuinely assessed in terms of their effectiveness. Lack of consultation with and accountability to the community was a source of frustration, resulting in exhausting repetition where the same community

needs and ambitions are identified but not acted upon. Ultimately, this was seen as creating a reluctance on the part of community members to engage in consultation.

We do everything short term. We never plan for 25 years with milestones along the way and measure what we are doing. We never do that. You never see somebody with their \$3 million sit down... to see how it's going and what it's doing. It puts a bit of money into the town but there's nothing long term. I have seen all these short-term programs go for a couple of years. In three years' time, they might rename it, give it a funding injection, employ different people to do exactly the same thing all over again... It's got no substance. We should be ashamed of ourselves.

NSW Police Officer, Broken Hill

The lack of accountability of service providers and government departments in a community where individuals, especially parents, are frequently lectured about taking responsibility for their actions was keenly felt, with anger at such simplistic analysis.

The heavy handed accountability imposed on parents and kids' attendance at school has to be imposed on agencies as well. Being heavy handed on the local people of Wilcannia who are very disempowered is to pick on people who have been picked on enough. I would like to see government agencies and people responsible... up the line [be held accountable] – the people who should know better.

Acting Principal, Wilcannia Central School

The increasing tendency to regionalise services and strategies was strongly criticised, with service provision coordinated from hundreds of kilometres away. While the difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified people to work in Wilcannia was acknowledged, there was a strong sense that government policy and processes were not flexible enough and did not provide sufficient incentives to make Wilcannia a realistic option for employment. There was a strong preference for locally based services employing local people.

The absence of a community-based approach by governments was also criticised in the context of inflexible funding guidelines that require a 'product' to fit bureaucratic guidelines, rather than responding to the needs of particular communities.

Importantly, there was also criticism of government programs and priorities that failed to consider or integrate Aboriginal culture as central to their operation. While health, housing, education and cost of living were identified as essential responsibilities of

government, there was a need identified amongst local Aboriginal people to foster the spiritual and cultural elements in the community.

Community dynamics. Despite its high rates of crime, the perception of Wilcannia as a frightening town and dangerous to strangers is clearly overstated. The violent crime, in particular, is not random but was reported, especially by workers in the criminal justice system and interviewees resident in Wilcannia, as occurring within friendships, families and relationships. The particular issue of violence against women was referred to as endemic and devastating in Wilcannia. The work of the locally based Women's Safehouse in providing support and temporary accommodation for women leaving abusive relationships was lauded, however the lack of appropriate services to assist perpetrators and offer support for children and families more generally was consistently raised.

Interviewees regularly referred to deep-seated problems in the community that could be connected back to a lack of ownership of planning and decision-making regarding issues affecting Aboriginal people. The service delivery by 'remote control' identified above and the lack of representative organisations in the community able to facilitate community aspirations was considered to have a deeply disempowering effect. The ongoing effect of lack of community control was described as resulting in a lack of meaningful long-term vision and purpose or sense of hope. Community led initiatives have been ignored or overridden leading to demoralisation and reluctance to engage. A recent housing project completed without genuine consultation with the community that has resulted in poor outcomes for the funds and time taken was raised by all interviewees living and working in Wilcannia and others as an illustration of the failure of imposed external strategies. A strong preference was expressed for local initiatives. There was also, however, recognition of an accompanying lack of capacity to make the significant changes needed and to engage in long term strategic planning and implementation of decisions.

Wilcannia is described as the centre of Barkindji culture and the majority of Aboriginal people living there identify as Barkindji, the traditional owners of the land, though distinct factions and divisions based on historical events were alluded to by police and other service providers and residents. There were competing discourses on the significance of traditional culture and spirituality; and similarly, competing narratives on the role of Christian churches. Wilcannia was described as having a rich Barkindji culture and high degree of adherence to tradition, praised by some Aboriginal interviewees for resisting assimilation. Simultaneously, there was concern that high levels of substance abuse were undermining respect for, and practice of, culture. Frustration was expressed, especially by older Aboriginal interviewees, at the loss of respect for elders and the perception that with the loss of elders, peacemakers were absent to deal with conflict and to overcome relationship breakdowns between individuals and families. The breakdown of certain cultural norms and respect was raised by some Aboriginal interviewees in the community as a cause of anti-social behaviour and as blocking positive change in the town.

However, while a number of people expressed frustration that respect for elders was decreasing, there was also recognition that there were respected people in the community, who with the right support could play a crucial leadership role, although there was no clear statement of what it might entail. Indeed, there was cynicism about self-appointed 'leaders' who may not have legitimacy with the community. Key individuals were recognised as making an important voluntary contribution to the community, but were generally not well supported and tended to burn out. Other interviewees emphasised community strengths and the importance of family connections and loyalty as important positive elements that need more recognition in Wilcannia.

The Aboriginal population of Wilcannia is transient and the criminal justice system tend to intensify this mobility. For example, violent feuds may be addressed by court

orders that require individuals to leave town; people seeking, or being ordered to receive treatment for alcohol addiction must leave; people incarcerated or youths put into detention also leave. Families often follow, staying with relatives or friends in other towns, leading to further overcrowding and children frequently do not go to school for the duration.

Menindee: Lower Crime Rates

Research participants described difficulties in articulating reasons for the comparatively lower rate of crime in Menindee, describing instead that ‘it had always been this way’ or that ‘people here don’t want trouble’. Interviewees described the community as generally law-abiding, cohesive and as able to solve problems locally and that the community had ‘worked well for years’. The narratives regarding the possible causes for lower crime rates in Menindee involved community support for crime prevention; better employment prospects; a sense of expectation and hope; and a strong school/community relationship. However, under-reporting was also mentioned as an important factor. Associated issues identified were the important role played by a group of women leaders in the community; and emphasis on local solutions to local problems.

A law-abiding town. Menindee was stated to be a community that generally had a good working relationship with the police and relevant government agencies in relation to crime prevention. The role of the police Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, who is a member of a prominent family and a key community figure, was considered to be particularly important in keeping police informed of potential concerns and, equally, in insisting upon cultural appropriateness from the police.

Community mobilisation was also raised as important in crime prevention in Menindee, where people tended to take certain matters into their own hands, being seen as unnecessary to involve the police.

Couple of outsiders come into town caused a lot of the rot. Parents are quick to jump on it... One mother heard about it through the group of women I'm involved with. We rang the police, rang the health service and the school. Some parents had a meeting there and then. Someone went to the shop and told them not to sell fly spray to kids. Had another incident at about the same time with kids burning one another with deodorant. Next morning the school banned deodorant at school. Parents were notified – notices were put up saying that police were going to check bags. Police didn't need to because the parents put a stop to it. Parents will get together at the drop of a hat and say, we're going to do this. That needs to be done. Couldn't wait for DoCS to come out or Mission Australia because it won't happen.

Aboriginal Community Worker, Menindee

The tendency for the community to deal with issues internally was characterised both positively and negatively. While some matters were seen as able to be satisfactorily resolved within or between families, there was also a perceived danger of serious crime such as domestic violence going unreported and remaining hidden, or situations escalating when people don't feel that their grievances are sufficiently considered by police.

One of the strongest themes emerging from interviewees regarding Menindee was the importance of informal social controls on lower crime rates, historically and today. Interviewees living and working in Menindee and others regularly described Menindee as a place where there is a sense of pride and where there is a stigma attached to criminal offending. In fact, one Wilcannia community service provider and resident expressed his frustration at the local level of pride in Menindee, which he considered to be 'over the top'.

The community [in Menindee] is stronger – they take care of their own. There is more employment. There is more self respect and self esteem.

Aboriginal Client Service Specialist, Broken Hill/Wilcannia Local Courts

We have some [people who have been convicted of crimes] here and they're just not treated as well as others... In Menindee, the stigma stays with you. In Wilcannia people forget. Will be drinking up and laughing up alongside the people who have taken other people's lives. In Menindee, they're not treated the same if you do something like that. You're looked at quite differently but you're not cast aside either.

Aboriginal Community Worker, Broken Hill

Better employment prospects. As previously stated, ironically, the 2006 Census records that unemployment for Aboriginal people in Menindee is twice that of Wilcannia (39.6% compared to 20.5%) (ABS, 2007c, 2007d). Yet better employment prospects in

Menindee was consistently referred to by the vast majority of interviewees from Menindee, Wilcannia and Broken Hill to as a contributing factor to lower crime rates and greater self-esteem. Employment opportunities are provided locally by irrigated viticulture, horticulture and tourism and the pastoral/grazing industry as well as to opportunities in Broken Hill (Drewery, 2009, 7).

Economic opportunity is probably one of the contributing factors to the difference in crime rates... There is that reflection in the two communities where Menindee has that difference of employment opportunities all the time, rather than Wilcannia only having [employment] part of the time.

Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

However, some interviewees still raised challenges faced by Aboriginal people in Menindee in terms of accessing employment.

A lot of people will employ Aboriginal people when there are the traineeship dollars but when it comes to the actual jobs... A lot of people are happy when the blackfella is below them but don't like it when the blackfella is level to them. That's a different kettle of fish.

Aboriginal Community Worker, Broken Hill

Other people observed that it was too simplistic to attribute differences in crime rates between Menindee and Wilcannia to employment opportunities, highlighting many of the problems facing Aboriginal people living in bigger towns and cities where employment is more readily available.

Expectation and hope. Menindee was described as a town with a vision for a positive future by interviewees in Menindee and Wilcannia alike. Parents' values were described as being of paramount influence, reflected in high expectations of young people, encouraging them to experience life outside Menindee, ensuring they attend school and encouraging them to undertake vocational training and get their drivers' licence.

Forget about Indigenous/non-Indigenous, straight across the board. Not only with the dramas that I've seen here but in 21 years of policing, the problems we have with kids. Generally speaking, kids in trouble don't come from stable family backgrounds and don't regularly attend school. In Menindee, a greater proportion of kids come from stable family backgrounds and they regularly attend school, as opposed to Wilcannia. With juvenile

crime leading into later in life crime, adult crime, a huge influencing factor, probably the biggest are the values imposed by parents. In any community.

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

The consequences of involvement in the criminal justice system for future employment and opportunity is reportedly emphasised with young people, especially by those employed in the criminal justice system and school. The fraught question of how to deal with juvenile offenders was raised in the context of what is appropriate intervention to halt a progression from juvenile to adult offending. In particular, there was tension perceived between the acknowledgment of custody as rightfully a sanction of last resort and an expressed need to prevent adult offending.

They need to be hard on, say a 17 year old kid. I know that cautioning thing is a good idea, but say a 17 year old kid goes and does something. You'll find they start from about 14. Mum sticks up for them. [There is a] difference between supporting your kid and sticking up for them. If they've stuffed up, they've stuffed up... Problem is that start when you're 14, you get a smack on the wrist, a smack on the wrist, a smack on the wrist. You turn 18 and bang, you're inside. That's the biggest problem. They need to be really drilling those kids and giving it to them. For some kids in Menindee, conferencing has worked. Put the wind up them. But there are others who just go there and their parents tell them, 'Go along and make out you care'... You need to be hard on them.

Aboriginal Community Worker, Menindee

School/community relationship. The strong relationship between the school and the Aboriginal community was identified as a key factor by interviewees in and outside Menindee, with the school being perceived as playing a key role in neutralising disadvantage. In particular, having an active, experienced principal committed to working in partnership with the community was acknowledged. There was an important sense of community input into the school direction and approach, especially through the Schools in Partnership program, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and external Aboriginal mentor, and respect for Aboriginal staff and content. The school conducts an evening Aboriginal history and culture class and teachers are strongly encouraged to attend. The role of a young Aboriginal male educator was referred to as a useful model for engaging Aboriginal young people in the activities of the school. Traineeships with local businesses

and organisations for students in later years of school were seen as an important bridging step to employment, with a high degree of support from within the community and more broadly and with ambitions for expansion. While interviewees identified ongoing challenges facing the school and a certain fragility, there was a sense of commitment to having a functioning, nurturing school that provided a future for Aboriginal students with innovative responsive strategies and one that ‘will not give up on the kids’.

There was, however, broad recognition of the lack of organised activities for children and young people outside school hours. The need for a drop-in centre was raised, although community members emphasised the need for it to be a facility tailored to the specific needs of the community.

Under-reporting. The issue of under-reporting, particularly of domestic violence, was widely acknowledged as a possible explanation for lower crime rates in Menindee, including by police. Explanations for under-reporting fell into two main categories. First, that local police were unavailable or unresponsive. The comparatively lower levels of police staffing (2.5 police for a community of 330) whose availability was further limited by the occasional requirement to assist in other communities such as Wilcannia or Ivanhoe was described as problematic. Further, that emergency calls went to Broken Hill rather than to the local police station and often not responded to in a timely manner was identified as leading to lower reporting of crime. A description was given of this lack of responsiveness leading to the perception that the police were not interested, so that people take matters into their own hands in a negative sense. Workers in the criminal justice system argued that such under-reporting may distort data, making it difficult to discern patterns that could inform crime prevention strategies.

Second, as described above, there was a broad description of Menindee as a town that has historically and continues to take care of its own problems, particularly in dealing

with juvenile offenders. One person described people undertaking their own investigations of break-ins and approaching the parents of young people allegedly involved. This was seen as having both positive and negative aspects: positive in that young people can avoid the criminal justice system, negative in the potential for retribution and inadequately informing crime prevention strategies and resourcing levels.

Notwithstanding alleged under-reporting, there was a prevailing sense that Menindee had a markedly lower crime rate than Wilcannia. Only one person claimed that crime levels in Menindee were equal to Wilcannia, which was discounted by other interviewees, including police. Further, police call out data confirms that 000 calls and other incidents where police have radioed to send a police car are markedly higher in Wilcannia than Menindee, particularly for domestic violence.

[Insert Table 3]

Associated Issues: Menindee

Interviewees elaborated on these factors by identifying various issues, some of which may be unique to Menindee and others of which may be reflective of more cohesive communities generally.

Strong women leaders. The influential role played by a group of women community members in Menindee, most of them related, was regularly identified as a key factor in the dynamics and functioning of the community by police and health and education service providers. The majority of interviewees were positive about the role played by this group of women and highlighted their commitment to the community and hard work. Other Aboriginal interviewees described their leadership role in negative terms.

Menindee women will put themselves out and do a lot for other people because [Menindee] just doesn't have the services here. No one else will do it. That's just what you do.

Aboriginal Community Worker, Menindee

[The women] may be seen to be greedy. They may be seen to be unpopular but without them, this would be a much lesser town. They are a formidable group.

Principal, Menindee Central School

This group of women plays an important role in the Community Working Party, the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, in the school and in running the local rugby club and Meals on Wheels.

Lack of government services. Every interviewee living and/or working in Menindee and others referred to the lack of government services and programs in Menindee. This was described in both negative and positive terms. All observed that not being seen as a ‘problem community’ like Wilcannia meant that there was not sufficient focus on the needs of people living there. Nonetheless, some Aboriginal interviewees felt that the reason Menindee continued to function better was, ironically, in part due to a lack of government interference in or control over the way things operate in the community.

We don’t get nearly as much as what Wilcannia does. There’s been lots of talk around town like maybe our crime rate should go up so we can get some of the funding.

Aboriginal Health Worker, Menindee

Similar themes emerged in relation to Menindee as had arisen in Wilcannia in the context of delivery of government services – problems with regionalisation, remote service delivery and a homogenous approach to all communities. As in Wilcannia, the lack of mental health services was particularly highlighted. One specific example given was of the cessation of the role of Community Facilitators, arising from the Murdi Paaki Partnership project and designed to strengthen the operation of local Community Working Parties. A new role has been created, community engagement officers, employed by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs but not be based in the communities. There was frustration at the removal of an accessible community-based resource, especially one designed to facilitate capacity building in the community.

Local solutions to local problems. The aim of the Community Working Party (CWP) in Menindee was stated by members to be finding local solutions to local problems, based on what local people know would work. Members of the CWP considered community control to be central to its operation, which resists intervention from outsiders in terms of its method of operation and identifying priorities.

People come to work with us, we want references from them. We want references from the communities; the black people. We want contact numbers from some of the tenants. We want contact numbers from people on the ground. We don't want people up top telling us that this is all pretty.

Aboriginal Community Worker, Menindee

One reason given for a lack of services in Menindee was the CWP's policy of rejecting funding or programs from government or non-government agencies that did not fit in with the long-term vision of those working at a community level. This included what was referred to as the 'boys' club' dominating some Aboriginal organisations. The tendency for government agencies in particular to adopt a 'blanket approach' when delivering services or programs to Aboriginal communities was particularly criticised.

[Government agencies are] duplicating a lot of things in communities. It's one size fits all. No, sorry, we're out of shape and we need it to be designed for us.

Aboriginal Community Worker, Menindee

Community dynamics. The discourse of Menindee wanting to find its own solutions to problems in the community was a prominent one. The importance of organising training and opportunities for people in the community, particularly young people, was emphasised. Consciousness of the need for succession planning was explicitly stated. Divisions within the community were acknowledged, including between Nyampa and Barkindji, exacerbated by land rights and native title processes. However overall there was a sense that there was a contemporary, cohesive culture in the town, and people were seeking to work together for the town to have a positive future.

[Menindee] has its factions. Every town has its factions. It's not Indigenous communities. Every town has its factions but they are at a point where they are prepared to say, how about we agree to disagree and move on in the best interests of the town.

Duty Officer, NSW Police, Broken Hill

Aboriginal people living and working in Menindee described a high level of intermarriage within the Aboriginal community, so that everyone was related. This was said to create a strong bond where people looked out for each other. When problems emerge, there historically has been and continues to be swift community action. The stability of the Aboriginal population was also noted with the same Aboriginal families in town since the days of the Menindee mission. Interestingly, only one person raised the influx of seasonal workers (Drewery, 2009, 7) as impacting on crime in the town.

There was also particular emphasis on Menindee as an integrated town with a high level of intermarriage and collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal interviewees in Wilcannia and Menindee contrasted the segregation in the Mission and Mallee in Wilcannia, observing that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Menindee live together and grow up next to each other.

Discussion

As described above, the pilot study drew on social disorganisation theory to inform the broad issues raised with interviewees and analysis of data. In summary, the theory proposes that a high level of collective efficacy or social cohesion among neighbours, combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good, is linked to reduced crime (Sampson et al, 1997, 918). Interestingly, on its face, it is arguable that social disorganisation theory might hypothesise higher rates of crime in Menindee than Wilcannia. While both communities have similar household weekly income and proportions of one parent families, unemployment in Menindee is double that in Wilcannia; both communities are bi-racial, yet Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are

predominantly traditional owners on their own country and described as ‘traditional’, while the Aboriginal population in Menindee consists of historical rivals forced together under a policy of assimilation; Wilcannia is larger than Menindee but both are small, remote towns with very high proportions of Aboriginal people.

The three studies exploring variations in rates of crime in NSW rural towns, referred to above, investigated the applicability of social disorganisation theory (Jobes et al, 2004; Jobes et al, 2005, Donnermeyer et al, 2007). Arising from their exploration of two communities with Aboriginal populations of approximately 6%, Jobes et al (2005) concluded that the community with the higher crime rate suffered social disorganisation, being larger, more diverse and fragmented. The Aboriginal members of the community came from all over Australia and there was animosity between Aboriginal groups as well as strained relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The community with the lower crime rate was more homogenous and cohesive, exhibiting ‘successful integration’ where Aboriginal people, who were largely the traditional owners, exhibited ‘white mainstream values’ (Jobes et al, 2005, 237). However, the findings of the third study of four rural towns with variation in proportion of Aboriginal population and variation in crime rates could not be fully accounted by social disorganisation or conflict theories, which should be seen to complement each other (Donnermeyer et al, 2007). Interestingly, the authors concluded that crime rates in the towns with the larger Aboriginal populations were better explained by conflict theory, while social disorganisation theory better explained crime rates in the towns with average Aboriginal populations. Reflecting on their previous finding that economic conditions are not directly related to crime, (Jobes et al, 2004) they noted that unemployment and economic decline may underlie the relative cohesiveness of rural community social structures (Jobes et al, 2007, 240).

Wilcannia

Wilcannia's reputation as a 'wild west' town to be feared and avoided due to its high crime rates does not reflect the reality that crime in Wilcannia is primarily committed by Aboriginal community members against each other. Interviewees described a cycle of powerlessness and hopelessness, involving significant alcohol abuse, poverty, poor mental health and contact with the criminal justice system from an early age.

Interestingly, a number of social disorganisation theory's indicators of social cohesion that would predict a low crime rate are clearly evident within the Aboriginal community of Wilcannia. High density of acquaintanceship, shared values and strong relationships exist but do not operate to inhibit crime and indeed may operate to support criminal behaviour. Strong informal controls reportedly operate within the Aboriginal community in Wilcannia, including pressure from some members to adopt 'anti-social' behaviours such as heavy alcohol consumption. The language of shame is reportedly used to support anti-social conformity and there is little stigma attached to contact with the criminal justice system, even that involving serious and violent criminal behaviour. However, while there is widespread, dangerous levels of alcohol abuse, the community reportedly does not tolerate 'hard drugs' and acts quickly and proactively to prevent their use, including anonymous disclosure to police.

There is no apparent cohesion, however, across a wide Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal divide, physically, economically and socially with little informal contact and reports of direct and indirect racism. There was hostility to such obvious disparities in socioeconomic circumstance and opportunity.

Controls inhibiting crime are largely consistent with the characterisation by Jobes et al (2005) of a community utilising reactive or manufactured controls. When asked about responses to crime or where people go to when there were problems in the town, interviewees referred to programs or institutions, particularly the police, rather than

individuals or community initiatives. The undermining of respect for elders and practice of culture was lamented, while simultaneously, adherence to a rich Barkindji culture was described. Some individuals have attempted to make positive changes at a community level but tend to receive little support and are likely to experience burn out.

Menindee

Interviewees found articulating reasons for lower crime rates in Menindee less straightforward. 'People just don't want any trouble' was a regular refrain.

Notwithstanding that community members experience many of the same challenges facing people in Wilcannia in terms of the legacy of low educational and employment outcomes, poor health and housing, there was a different discourse around community control and effecting positive change. There is clearly resilience in the Aboriginal community in Menindee that is lacking in Wilcannia. A group of Aboriginal women, most of whom are related, is prominent in Menindee community dynamics and functioning although the respective histories and geographic context of the two communities were also referred to.

Menindee was routinely described as, historically and today, a generally united community with good relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, including significant intermarriage. While a small number of Aboriginal interviewees disparaged Aboriginal people of Menindee as 'assimilated', a 'manifestation of white mainstream values' that Jobes et al (2005) describe is not evident in Menindee. Rather, there is observable assertion of, and pride in their Aboriginality and enthusiasm to explore local Aboriginal history and culture, such as through an adult Aboriginal education class held at the school. Thus, while there are high conventional expectations of young people and pride in their success at school and in traineeships, there are strong and insistent expectations that institutions in the town such as the school and the health service would embody Aboriginal perspectives. In particular, the school takes pride in formal and informal

Aboriginal input, which is integral to its operation. Thus, while the hypothesis proposed by Donnermeyer et al (2007: 13) of lower crime rates in small bi-racial towns where conventional behaviours and values are shared is on its face supported but not as integrated communities. Instead, Menindee could be better described as an Aboriginal domain that is confidently interacting with its non-Aboriginal neighbours.

Reported divisions exist between the Barkindji, the traditional owners, and the Nyampa, which reflect the legacy of colonisation and dispossession that profoundly affected the town and the region, more recently exacerbated by land rights and native title processes. There were competing versions of the level of animosity, although many interviewees commented on the level of intermarriage between the two groups. Two Aboriginal residents noted that the same Aboriginal families had lived in Menindee since the days of the mission and that everyone was related.

In terms of controls, Menindee does exhibit some of the supportive or natural controls also described by Jobes et al (2005). There are few bureaucratised programs and initiatives, leading to the motto that 'if we want something done, we have to do it ourselves'. This is partly out of resignation at the lack of available or appropriate services, but also a manifestation of an ethos of community control. Where crime does occur, it is sometimes dealt with at the local level, particularly as it relates to young people.

There were competing narratives on the effect of controls on outsiders. On the one hand, strong informal controls were said to exist to pressure newcomers or outsiders to conform. It was said that 'troublemakers' knew better than to come to Menindee and cause trouble. The example was given of public drinking and anti-social behaviour not being tolerated from visitors on days of inter-town rugby matches. On the other hand, crime was described as being perpetrated by outsiders to the community but it is not clear who these outsiders are. There is an influx of seasonal workers to nearby agricultural properties but

this was raised by a lone interviewee as a factor impacting on crime rates. Importantly, however, there was the recognition that there was potentially significant underreporting of local crime, especially domestic violence.

The community dynamics of Menindee largely supports the description given by Donnermeyer et al (2007, 5) of the conforming community, where there is both nurturing and encouragement, and gossip and ostracism to informally control deviance. However, residents more frequently used the language of expectation and ambition when describing community dynamics than overt control.

In summary, social disorganisation theory does not provide a clear explanation for the contrasting high rates of crime in Wilcannia compared to those in Menindee. While both communities exhibit dense networks of acquaintanceship and shared values and beliefs, those in Wilcannia operated in a negative sense, manifest in norms that tolerated and did not stigmatise criminal and anti-social behaviour, albeit with intolerance to 'hard drugs' culminating in community action. On the other hand, Menindee exhibited the positive attributes of social cohesion, while nonetheless displaying elements of social disorganisation. Of particular interest is the building of cohesion in Menindee from a 'distressed and disorganised state' (Goodall, 1996, 202) arising from a policy of forcible concentration of Aboriginal people regardless of historical enmity, in contrast to Wilcannia's inability to show resilience in the face of oppressive colonisation.

This cohesion exhibited by the Menindee community and its lack in Wilcannia is illustrative of the need for caution in generalising about Indigenous communities. The community in Menindee is made up of traditional owners and other Aboriginal people, with reportedly little connection to 'traditional' Aboriginal customs or culture. As suggested by Snowball and Weatherburn (2008: 219), given such breakdown of traditional society and history of conflict, there might be an expectation of social disorganisation.

However, Aboriginal people in Menindee describe themselves as a proud, contemporary Aboriginal community with a strong sense of identity and vision for a positive future.

Issues For Further Research

Hogg and Carrington's (2006, 200) finding that crime problems and other social and economic ills of rural Australia are unlikely to be satisfactorily addressed without constructive, inclusive, long-term strategies resonates with this pilot study.

While Indigenous communities may share common histories or experiences, such as those stemming from the impact of government policies and practices, Indigenous communities are self-evidently not homogenous and as Homel et al identify, local factors are critical in the balance between risk and protective factors in Aboriginal communities (Homel et al, 1999, 185). This was a small, time-limited pilot study and our findings have raised a number of issues for further research. The research team proposes to undertake a second phase of research in the two towns to explore in more depth the issues emerging from this early pilot, commencing with an exploration of factors that were raised in one community but not the other, such as the impact of alcohol in Menindee, which had been such a prominent narrative in Wilcannia.

Informal social controls apparently operate to opposite effect in the two towns, which will be the crux of further exploration, including an investigation of the histories of the two towns for changes over time. The impact of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in the two bi-racial towns requires further investigation, especially in terms of whether shared values and behaviours across communities are important. Similarly, given that serious crime occurs predominantly in the Aboriginal communities, types of crime as potential indicators of different causal, local factors in the community will also be explored.

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Table 1: Wilcannia and Menindee in profile

	Wilcannia	Menindee	Australia
Population	596	332	19,855,288
Indigenous people	67.4%	46.7%	2.3%
Median age	29	38	37
Indigenous median age	23	26	20
Children aged 0-14 years	27.5%	21.1%	19.8%
Indigenous children aged 0-14 years	33.5%	33.8%	37.6%
Persons aged 55 years and over	15.6%	25.9%	24.3%
Indigenous persons aged 55 years and over	9.2%	8.4%	8.2%
Unemployed	11.2%	20.4%	5.2%
Indigenous persons unemployed	20.5%	39.6%	15.6%
Median household weekly income	\$805	\$572	\$1,027
Indigenous median household weekly income	\$628	\$561	\$721
Indigenous completed Year 10 or equivalent	27.8%	43.6%	28%
Indigenous completed Year 12 or equivalent	4.1%	7.9%	19.4%
Indigenous persons aged 15-19 in full time education	3.4%	14.9%	7.7%
Indigenous persons with a qualification	14.7	33.7	35.7
One parent families	24.6%	33.3%	15.8%
Persons born overseas	2.5%	3.3%	22.2%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 Census of Population and Housing.

Table 2: NSW Recorded Crime Statistics 2008: Number of Indigenous persons of interest¹ whose place of residence was either postcode 2836, 2879 or 2880, selected offences

	2836 (includes Wilcannia)		2879 (Menindee)		2880 (Includes Broken Hill)	
	<i>Indigenous POIs</i>	<i>rate per 100,000 pop</i>	<i>Indigenous POIs</i>	<i>rate per 100,000 pop</i>	<i>Indigenous POIs</i>	<i>rate per 100,000 pop</i>
Murder	0	0	0	0	0	0
Assault ²	93	22682.9	11	6250.0	151	12207.0
Sexual offences	5	1219.5	0	0.0	7	565.9
Robbery	1	243.9	0	0.0	2	161.7
Break and enter Motor vehicle theft	29	7073.2	3	1704.5	75	6063.1
Stealing ³	26	6341.5	0	0.0	15	1212.6
Fraud	9	2195.1	1	568.2	44	3557.0
Malicious damage to property	1	243.9	0	0.0	4	323.4
	16	3902.4	4	2272.7	55	4446.2
<i>Indigenous population⁴</i>	410		176		1237	

1. Persons of interest (POIs) are alleged offenders or persons who the police suspect have been involved in a criminal incident. Some POIs are formally proceeded against by police and some are not. POI details are recorded by NSW Police Force on the Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS) in connection with a recorded criminal incident. Criminal incidents involving multiple offenders can have more than one associated POI. Correspondingly, no POI information will be recorded for criminal incidents in which there is no known suspect.
2. Includes domestic violence assault, non-domestic violence assault and assault police.
3. Includes steal from motor vehicle, retail store, dwelling, person, stock theft and other theft.
4. Indigenous population data was sourced from the ABS and is from the 2006 census.

Source: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (jf09-8277)

Table 3: Police Call Out data for Wilcannia and Menindee

	Wilcannia	Menindee
	<i>Rate per 100,000 for 2008</i>	<i>Rate per 100,000 for 2008</i>
<i>Selected categories</i>		
Assault	12,751.7	4216.9
Brawl	2,349.0	602.4
Break & enter	4,362.4	602.4
Domestic violence	56,879.2	8433.7
Malicious damage	3,523.5	301.2
Neighbour dispute	167.8	903.6
Noise complaint	3,355.7	1204.8
Sexual assault	0.0	602.4
Steal from motor vehicle	335.6	0.0
Stealing	1,006.7	301.2
Stolen vehicle	1,006.7	602.4

Source: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research

Appendix: Questions for Interviewees

- **Organisational history and role**
 - What is the role and history of your organisation in the community?
 - Who are your constituents/stakeholders/clients?
 - What is your funding source/relationship to government?
- **Community perceptions**
 - How would you describe the community?
 - What is the community's history? What has/how have things changed over time?
 - How would you describe the community's strengths/ weaknesses?
 - Where/who do people go to when there is a problem?
 - What would you say the level of community participation/social involvement is?
 - What are the main community organisations in the community?
 - What voluntary organisations/groups exist in the community? Who organises them? How many people belong/are involved?
 - What networks or mechanisms are there for supporting community members?
 - What are the main community events of the year? Who organises them?
 - What is the community's cultural make up?
 - What is the role of women in the community?
 - What is the role of older people in the community?
 - How do young people in the community spend their time? What do they do when they leave school? What is the relationship between young people and others in the community? Who takes responsibility for young people in trouble?
 - What are the non-Aboriginal perceptions/media representations of the community?
- **Socio-economic context**
 - Who are the main employers of Indigenous people?
 - What is the housing situation like here for Indigenous people?
 - What is young people's experience of education?
 - How mobile are members of the community?
 - What services do you think the community needs that it doesn't have?
- **Role of government**
 - What are the main government agencies represented in the community? What do they do? How are they perceived?
- **Crime rates**
 - What are your/the common perceptions about the rates of crime/Indigenous offending in the community?
 - Have crime rates changed over time? In what ways? What factors do you think may have influenced this?
 - What kinds of crime are most common? Why do you think that is the case?
- **Positive initiatives**
 - Have there been any strategies/programs that were designed to have reduced crime rates/increased community cohesion? How did they come about?
 - Who was in charge of them? Did they work? How/why?
 - What strategies/programs do you think might be useful to reduce crime rates/increase community cohesion? How/why?

Possible questions related to community cohesion, autonomy and social capital

- Can most people be trusted to do the right thing?
- Do most people feel they can influence local decisions?
- Are there forms of networking? If so
 - Who is included?
 - Who isn't accepted/has a tough time/is excluded?
- How strong is pressure to fit in? what happens to people who don't?
- Who are seen as troublemakers?
- Who sees the laws as fair? Who obeys? Who transgresses?
- Do some people get away with things? Are there others who cop it?
- Is good work recognised? Are new ideas welcome?
- If there is community conflict, are there processes to sort and solve these out? How?

¹ In this paper, the term Indigenous will be used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. The term Aboriginal will be used in reference to particular communities in NSW with populations that identify as Aboriginal.

² Most recently, the NSW Government State Plan (NSW Government, 2006) commits to reduce re-offending, to reduce levels of antisocial behaviour and to increase participation in community activities, especially in Aboriginal communities, by 2016. Strengthening Aboriginal communities is identified as a key goal. The NSW Government Aboriginal Justice Plan *Beyond Justice 2004-2014* (NSW Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council, 2003) also specifically commits the Attorney General's Department to funding research that assists in reducing Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system.

³ Note that the populations of the broader postcode areas encompassing the towns for which crime data are available are respectively 759 and 631. Crime data was not available for the towns alone. Nonetheless, the pilot study focused on the towns as the primary residence of Aboriginal people: 155 Aboriginal people live in the town of Menindee of the 176 who live in the postcode, while 402 Aboriginal people live in the town of Wilcannia of the 410 who live in the postcode.