A series of Research Briefs designed to bring research findings to policy makers.

Research on strong Indigenous communities

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Ruth Lawrence
Written for the Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse

'Yuendemu's school has children in Year 12 – a great feat for a Central Desert Indigenous community. It is a community dealing honestly with its problems. And the Yuendemu night patrol is the longest-running service in Central Australia.' 'Yuendemu is a community of about 1,200 people, 300km north-west of Alice Springs in the Tanami Desert'. (ABC 2006)

Introduction

Those working in regional communities are often struck by the fact that one Indigenous community is successful in keeping crime rates low while another is not. This raises the question as to what are the essential differences between these communities? What are the defining elements of a strong Indigenous community? Does the size of the community make a difference, does it matter if cultural traditions are observed, is the form of leadership a key element, do strong women leaders or elders set the 'tone' in the community and does the vibrancy of the local economy make a difference? Knowledge about strong Indigenous communities could also tell us if the crime rate is linked to the strength of bonds between community members.

In each state and territory recorded crime rates vary markedly across local government areas. In Dubbo, NSW, for example, the rate of assault in 2005 was 1,263 per 100,000 while Shoalhaven was 695 per 100,000 and Kiama had a rate of 253 per 100,000 (Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2006).

There is every indication that Indigenous crime rates also vary according to geographical location. Indigenous population estimates are not, however, available, making it impossible to calculate up-to-date Indigenous crime rates. In Dubbo, for example, 423 Indigenous violent offences occurred in 2005, while 135 occurred in Lake Macquarie (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2006). Both areas had over 3,000 Indigenous people in the 2001 Census. The figures suggest that Dubbo has a high rate of Indigenous violent offences but without knowledge of population mobility and growth in the area the exact rate cannot be calculated.

Another example is the Shire of Boddington. Situated in the south west interior of Western Australia, this very small community is classified as 'outer regional' Australia (Crime Research Centre, 2006). There is a higher than state average percentage of Indigenous people in the area with 3.5% of the region's population Indigenous. However,

for all crime categories in 2004, there was a lower than state average crime rate for Boddington.

In the first part of this research brief various definitions of strong Indigenous communities are examined. In the second section, we explore what we know about strong Indigenous communities. Potentially, knowledge of the dynamics and defining characteristics of strong communities can be used by Indigenous people to understand their community strengths. This knowledge could also be used by policy makers to understand how Indigenous communities can be strengthened.

Defining strong Indigenous communities

At the state and national level, there has been a trend over the last 30 years (Hunt and Smith, 2006) towards promoting 'strong communities'. Popular concepts have included 'strong leadership', 'capacity building', 'asset

mapping' and 'strong Indigenous governance'. For example:

- the Commonwealth Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs is promoting the stronger families and communities strategy for all families (including Indigenous families).

- The Northern Territory Department of Chief Minister has developed the Strong Family, Strong Community, Strong Futures Project, which has been developed after more than 18 months of talking with people in Aboriginal communities.

- The Western Australian Department for Community Development has catalogued programs and projects that aim to promote and strengthen strong Indigenous families and communities (Western Australia Department for Community Development 2006).

There is not, however, agreement on the meaning of the phrase 'strong Indigenous communities'; there are several definitions of 'community' as well as variation as to what constitutes a 'strong' community.

> *Strong communities are resourced, cohesive and inclusive…*

The three common uses of the term community refer to a geographic location, a network of people, or an administrative category (Hunt and Smith 2006):

i) Community as a geographic location: can take the form of a city, town, neighbourhood, or remote settlement.

ii) Community as a network of people or organisations: can take the form of a

geographically dispersed group who have a common history or shared identity including a language group. The community is '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 interest.' (Hunt and Smith 2005 p6).

iii) Community as an administrative category: can take the form of a statistical division, a local government area or a service area.

Some different definitions of 'strong' communities have also been developed (i) via theoretical models, (ii) by empirical work on positive outcomes, and (iii) by communities themselves.

(i) Theoretical models

Social capital literature has developed a framework for the elements of community strengths. Strong communities are seen to require a mix of resources including:

- natural capital, including renewable and non-renewable resources

- produced economic capital, including infrastructure and financial resources

- human capital, including knowledge and skills

- institutional capital, including private, government and non-government institutional arrangements

- social capital, the ability of community members to participate, cooperate, organise and interact (Cayaye 2001 in Stone and Hughes 2002), being characterised by 'networks of social relations' with 'norms of trust and

reciprocity' leading to mutually beneficial outcomes (Stone and Hughes 2002, p 64).

Strong communities in this model are 'resourced, cohesive and inclusive' (Stone and Hughes 2002, p66).

In keeping with this model, the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision defines functional and resilient Indigenous communities as ones where there is a 'caring, protective and supportive environment; positive health outcomes and cultural awareness' (Steering Committee, 2005 p9.1). These outcomes are measured by the rates of:

- children on care and protection orders

- repeat offending

- access to the nearest health professional

- proportion of Indigenous people with access to their traditional lands

- participation in organised sport, arts or community group activities.

Research literature on social disadvantage is also based on a deductive theoretical model. Vinson's model (2007) defines disadvantaged communities as locations that have poor social networks and material disadvantage, as seen in the rates of:

- child abuse

- low birth weight

- poverty

- child injuries

- imprisonment

- unemployment

- year 12 completion

- early school leaving

- participation in organised recreation and sport

- unskilled workers

- psychiatric admissions.

Strong communities are again seen as communities that are well resourced with low rates of social problems.

(ii) Empirical work on outcomes

An alterative approach to defining strong communities is to investigate the characteristics of communities which have positive social outcomes (such as low rates of child abuse or violent crime). A definition of strong communities within a narrow criminological focus could, for example, define strong Indigenous communities as areas where there are low Indigenous rates of property crime and assault. A strong Indigenous community in this model is a safe community (neighbourhood, town, settlement or a network of Indigenous people) where there are few per capita property crimes or assaults, few Indigenous perpetrators and few Indigenous victims of crime.

(iii) Community-defined

A third approach to the definition of strong communities is for communities themselves to specify what they consider as strengths in their own communities.

Location of Indigenous communities

Examination of the dispersion of Indigenous people in Australia shows that there are marked variations in the states and territories. Although the majority of Indigenous people live in NSW and Queensland, it is in the Northern Territory and Western Australia where there are the

greatest number of discrete Indigenous communities.

If community is defined by geographical location, dispersion of Indigenous people in Australia can be measured according to (i) state boundaries, (ii) indicators of rural and remoteness and (iii) the location of discrete Indigenous communities.

i) State boundaries

In 2001, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was estimated to be 458,500 or 2.4% of the total Australian population. Over half the Indigenous population were concentrated in NSW and Queensland (29% and 27% respectively) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004).

ii) Rural and remoteness

Around one quarter (26.4%) of Indigenous people in Australia live in remote areas. There is marked variation between the states and territories in the geographical distribution of Indigenous people in urban and remote areas: in the Northern Territory 81% of Indigenous people live in remote areas while in Queensland, NSW, Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT less than a quarter of Indigenous people live in remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004).

iii) Discrete Indigenous communities

'Discrete Indigenous communities' refer to geographic locations that are inhabited predominantly by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples with housing managed on a community basis (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002). In the last Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey (CHINS) conducted in 2001 there were found to be 1,216 discrete Indigenous communities in Australia comprising 108,085 people; 80,680 of these people

were living in very remote areas (ABS 2002). Northern Territory and Western Australia have the greatest number of discrete Indigenous communities.

Findings: what do we know about strong Indigenous communities

Although there is an increasing amount of data available on the economic and social conditions of Indigenous people in Australia, much of this research has been problem-focused. A narrow emphasis on the negative aspects of communities has meant that the positive aspects of communities have not been recognised or recorded, and there has been little study of the inter-relationships between different aspects of communities (see Stout and Kipling 1998). Problem oriented literature has included studies on economic and social disadvantage and problem communities, surveys on key indicators of disadvantage, and administrative datasets which are linked to contact with government services due to social problems such as child abuse, overcrowding, unemployment, crime, and mental health problems. Findings from research projects that have utilised existing survey data and administrative data sets reveal what we know about communities and what are the possible directions for further research work.

(1) Community resources

The social capital and social disadvantage frameworks both suggest that strong communities should be well resourced.

- ***Average income***

The level of economic deprivation in Aboriginal communities is well-documented: the mean income of

Indigenous people is around 60 per cent of other households, and Indigenous Australians are twice as likely to appear in the bottom income quintile than other Australians. Communities in remote areas and discrete Indigenous communities also have additional unique features (Hunter 2006).

- *Discrete Indigenous communities*

The 2001 CHINS Survey (ABS 2002) reported on 1,216 discrete Indigenous communities and 85% of these were located in very remote regions of Australia. The report highlights the lack of basic resources in some of these communities: 2% had no organised water supply, 7% had no organised sewerage system and 13% of these communities are located 100 kilometres or more from the nearest primary school (ABS 2002).

(2) Geographical variations in crime rates and social factors

The Crime Research Centre in Western Australia has investigated regional crime rates (including Indigenous crime rates) and selected socio-demographic factors. Some low crime regions were identified (Great Southern, the South West and the Wheatbelt).

- *Local factors*

Variation in community-level differences in crime was seen to be due to structural factors (such as unemployment, poverty, education and inequality) as well as local factors. The study found marked variation in communities across the state; from 'Aboriginal communities, fishing communities, more traditional towns, through to modern 'fly-in' 'fly-out' private mining towns…' (CRC 1999, p21). The study notes that regional variations in crime can only be understood by supplementing official records of

crime and police-offender contacts with local information. For example, in Halls Creek there are influxes of large groups of desert people from time to time (CRC, 1999 p 14). Hogg and Carrington (2006) have also studied geographical variations in crime rates and point to the complex dynamics of rural communities to account for these variations.

> '*Regional variations in crime can only be understood by supplementing official records… with local information*'.

Mobility in remote communities

A defining element of remote communities is the pattern of high Indigenous mobility over short distances. The major force behind these patterns is kinship networks, which include traditions of sharing and reciprocity (Memmott, Long, Bell, Taylor and Brown 2004). Other reasons for Indigenous mobility include accessing services, including employment, education, shops and health care.

- *Crime research*

A telephone survey was undertaken of key states and territory research contacts (Appendix 1) to find out if there is any forthcoming research on defining strong communities. Although interest in the topic was expressed, none of the respondents knew of any forthcoming research directly on this topic.

Respondents noted the regional variation in crime rates but emphasised that spatial analysis of crime rates is complex. They noted that crime rates in rural and regional areas are affected by factors such as: (1) population mobility; (2) police presence in a town and the community's

relationship to the police; and (3) underreporting of crime and solving of crime problems at a local level. The accuracy of crime rates in regional and remote areas is a recognised issue (Clare, Morgan, Ferrante and Blagg 2006). It was suggested that different methodologies should be used to collect information at the local level to supplement official statistics. Local information collection has, for example, been undertaken in the studies of Night Patrols in Aboriginal communities (Blagg and Valuri 2003).

(3) Community factors associated with variations in crime rates

Literature on strong communities and social capital has not been well integrated into the criminological literature. An exception has been the literature on social disorganisation, which includes descriptions of the positive characteristics of communities. The social disorganisation model (Sampson,1997) suggests that the community can play a central role in controlling crime when the community: (1) effectively supervises groups of teenagers; (2) has strong dense high-quality networks; and (3) is actively involved in voluntary organisations.

Research has been undertaken to assess whether these factors are significant in Australian regional areas (Carcach 2001, Carcach and Huntley 2002). This research is not specific to Indigenous crime rates or Indigenous communities. Carcach and Huntley (2002) found that the following factors were significant in regional areas:

- *The level of community participation*

In regional areas the level of community participation has an effect on the level of crime. An increase in the rate of community participation in a community

activity is associated with a decline in the incidence of violence and property crime.

- *Economic change*

Unemployment rates have an effect on regional crime rates, independent of the effects of community participation. An increase in the male unemployment rate was associated with violent offences while the female unemployment rate was associated with property offences.

- *Family disruption*

An increase in families headed by females that have children under 15 years of age is associated with an increase in violent and property offences.

- *Concentration of Indigenous residents*

This factor does not have an effect on local property crime, but in rural local government areas the concentration of Indigenous residents was found to be associated with the incidence of violent crime.

In regional areas the level of community participation, economic change and family disruption has an effect on property and violent crime, while the concentration of Indigenous residents in rural areas has an effect on the incidence of violent crime. As noted, although this research concentrated on regional Australia, the effect of these factors on the rates of Indigenous property crime and Indigenous violence crime was not studied.

(4) Factors associated with Indigenous contact with the justice system

Recent analysis of National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Social Survey data has explored individual and community level factors associated with Indigenous contact with the

justice system (Weatherburn, Snowball and Hunter 2006). The following factors were significant:

- *Substance abuse,* high risk alcohol consumption and illicit substance use have a large effect on the chance of an Indigenous person being charged or imprisoned.

- *Failure to complete year 12* has a significant effect on being charged.

- *Unemployment* has an effect on being charged and imprisoned, and financial stress has a similar effect.

- *Living in a crime-prone area* increases the risk of being charged.

- *Being socially involved* reduces the risk of being charged.

- *Household overcrowding* increases the risk of being imprisoned.

These findings highlight some of the characteristics of communities that have contact with the justice system. Conversely, the study shows that Indigenous communities that have less contact with the justice system are defined by lower rates of substance abuse, adequate employment, social involvement and adequate housing.

(5) Community definitions of 'strong'

Ethnographic or anthropological studies of Indigenous communities have examined community strengths.

In their research project on the small troubled remote community of Wadeye in the Northern Territory, Memmott and Meltzer studied whether social capital existed in the community and the form it took. Community groups were asked to reflect on their community strengths and weaknesses and to devise self-strengthening strategies.   The

study documented cultural differences and Aboriginal cultural networks in contrast to 'whitefella's type organisations' (Memmott and Melzer 2005, p110). A variety of methods developed including 'open-ended small-group workshops, formal interviews with key informants, and interviews while touring the town with these informants' (Memmott and Melzer 2005).

- *Complex forms of social capital*

The study found that there were complex forms of social capital in the Aboriginal community with networks based on kinship, social classes, language groups, land-owning clans and ceremonial groups. Senior family members were regarded as leaders, and respect and reciprocity were key social values. The community reacted to critical social problems by creating a night patrol, starting a camp to rehabilitate petrol sniffers and involving Aboriginal leaders in the school.

- *Indigenous involvement in research*

The views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders on research in their communities has been documented (Penman 2006).

Key issues are that:

- Aboriginal communities are over-researched.

- There is a need for Indigenous involvement in research projects and a sense of ownership of the research, particularly given the lack of trust in government agencies.

- Research on communities needs to acknowledge that kinship networks are complex and diverse, and that families are mobile (Penman 2006).

There have been attempts to develop research models which are respectful to Indigenous

people and place Indigenous communities central in the research process (Penman 2006; Weir and Wuttunee 2004).

The West Australian Aboriginal Child Health survey, which took five years of planning and two years in the field, is an Australian example of a successful Indigenous-focused research approach (Zubrick, et al 2004).

An international example of Indigenous community based research is the Canadian project, *Understanding the Strengths of Indigenous Communities* (USIC). This large scale project, which ran 1999 to 2004, examined two major research questions: the characteristics of relatively strong Indigenous communities, and how communities have developed and maintained their various strengths over time.

The study used varied research methods including mapping community strengths, interviews, creating a community map and time line, case studies and a quantitative survey.   Indigenous people were trained as researchers to conduct focus groups in communities.

For one of the communities, Teslin, community strengths were found to be: living a traditional lifestyle, believing in spirituality, learning to use and take care of natural resources, working towards a healthy lifestyle, reviving cultural practices, practicing self-government, living by the clan system, and promoting education and training (Morgan 2003). Across several communities some areas of strength that were noted were (York University 2005):

- *Empowerment and good mental health*. Respondents felt they had purpose and did not feel helpless.

- *Very strong cultural identity and cultural pride*. A strong

sense of belonging to Aboriginal culture.

- *Open to interacting with other cultures.* An openness to interact with people outside their own culture.

- *Strong ties to family and friends*. Able to get help from families and friends, many close personal friends and large networks.

- *Living off the land and in harmony with the environment*. Often eat traditional foods, involved in protecting the environment.

- *Strong spiritualit*y. Feel free to express their spiritual beliefs in their community and an important part of their life.

Implications

Although there has been much problem-focused research, there has been little study of strong Indigenous communities. The social capital literature has emphasised that communities must be resourced, cohesive and inclusive. However, the literature on resource levels in Indigenous communities still points to economic deprivation in Indigenous communities, and a lack of basic services in discrete Indigenous communities.

Further research on the defining characteristics of well-functioning Indigenous communities could assist policy makers understand the complexities of these communities.

Criminological literature has pointed to variations in crime rates and the accompanying social factors in these areas. Official crime statistics only reveal part of the picture. Further research is needed on local

factors and the particular cultural and social characteristics of Indigenous communities with low crime rates. Attention must be paid, for example, to mobility patterns in rural and remote communities and the reasons for this movement.

Research has also shown the relevance of particular social and economic factors to contact with the justice system: Indigenous communities that have less contact with the justice system are defined by lower rates of substance abuse and by adequate employment, social involvement and housing.

Some literature has attempted to place Indigenous people central to the research process and has drawn attention to the importance of communities defining their own strengths.

Although this literature is beginning to outline community strengths, further work is needed before knowledge of these community and cultural strengths can be translated into policy. Further work on strong Indigenous communities could include:

- an Indigenous focused methodology where communities define their own strengths;

- detailed recording of the characteristics, functioning, and context of these communities;

- analysis of how these defining characteristics align with traditional outcome indicators of well-functioning communities.

Further work along these lines, on the defining characteristics of well-functioning communities, would lead to a more sophisticated understanding of the complexities of how Indigenous communities can be strengthened.

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Appendix 1: Research and policy contacts interviewed

Telephone interviews October 2006

	CONTACT	**AGENCY**
ACT	Tony Hanson	Legislation and Policy Branch, ACT Department of Justice and Community Safety
NSW	Anne Redman	Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre
NSW	Jackie Fitzgerald	Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research
NT	Jo Yick	Research and Statistics Team, Office of Crime Prevention
QLD	Renee Fay	Research and Executive Services, Department of Justice and Attorney General
SA	Bevan Fletcher	Office of Crime Statistics and Research
VICT	Colin McLachlan	Evaluation & Monitoring, Indigenous Issues Unit, Department of Justice
WA	Frank Morgan and Harry Blagg	Crime Research Centre, University of Western Australia

Australian Government
Australian Institute of Criminology

Attorney General's
department of nsw