



Australian
National
University

Chapter 1: Introduction and background

'The answers were there before white man come in'

Stories of strength and resilience for responding to violence In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2017, the Department of Social Services (DSS) commissioned The Australian National University (ANU) to undertake the Family and Community Safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (FaCtS) study. This report summarises the major findings of the study.

The study was designed to answer the overarching question:

What would it take to effectively address family and community violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?

Its aims were to examine:

- > the extent of exposure to violence against women and their children
- > social impacts, including on relationships, health, wellbeing, education and workforce participation
- > availability, appropriateness and effectiveness of services or other supports
- > what else is needed to reduce exposure to, and the effects of, violence in communities.

Exposure to violence among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is understood to be high, but evidence demonstrating how violence manifests and what can be done to reduce it is limited. The main sources of data have been the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), which provides findings from data on the prevalence of physical or threatened violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and the National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS), which provides information on attitudes to violence against women specifically. Neither provides a comprehensive exploration of the nature of the violence experienced. Further, there is very limited (if any) large-scale, detailed data on the use of existing individual, family and community-level supports (including services) by those experiencing violence.^(1,2) Lovett and Olsen identified a range of reasons why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women do not report violence: fear and stigma about reporting violence; low awareness of service availability; accessibility of services (limited transport, language barriers, service eligibility requirements, restricted opening hours); competing justice systems; lack of services for men and for perpetrators; lack of services for families; poor liaison between services; lack of trust; racism and lack of cultural safety; lack of holistic approaches; inadequate service capacity; and funding.⁽³⁾

Information about the availability, access and effectiveness of community services to address outcomes of family violence is required to inform approaches to reduce the burden of family violence among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.^(2,3)

The past 15 years have seen an increasing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led responses to family violence, however, these tend to be isolated to the community level, without long-term funding, and to lack comprehensive documentation or evaluation. This shortage of evidence and strategic, national approaches has led Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander commentators and researchers to advocate strongly for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise in shaping program and service responses.⁽⁴⁻⁶⁾ This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research and the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community expertise. These calls are echoed in strategy and policy documents more generally.

The study makes a significant contribution to the currently limited evidence available to inform policymakers and service providers about effective support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families and communities who experience and are exposed to family violence. It is a ground-breaking, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and governed study that privileges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and knowledge.

This study provides evidence, drawn from partnerships with communities across the country, on the impacts of violence. It offers strategies that communities consider most likely to be effective in reducing the incidence of violence and in addressing the consequences when it does occur.

A decolonising stance

A decolonising stance was an overarching lens through which to view the fundamental purpose of the project, that is, to begin to develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific database regarding exposure to, and experience of, family violence in communities, and to obtain community and agency feedback on the availability and efficacy of local programs, services and cultural responses (e.g. on-Country programs). This drove the study team to respect and value the views, perspectives and involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and to question mainstream theories of family violence, which have their roots in western feminist ideology and the dominant discourse on gender inequality. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples called for a different approach,^(7,8) which has at its foundations the profound and far-reaching impacts of colonial patriarchal violence and resultant intergenerational trauma on individuals, families, communities and cultures.⁽⁹⁾ The decolonising stance made it possible for this study to reframe, and take greater control over, the ways in which the issue of family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is described and handled. Smith^(10 p.2) described it eloquently:

[T]he framing of an issue is about making decisions about its parameters, about what is in the foreground, what is in the background, and what shadings or complexities exist within the frame. The project of reframing is related to defining the problem or issue and determining how best to solve that problem.

The contemporary situation

This section provides a brief overview of the size and cost of the problem and of the policy context. It then addresses the methods used in this project.

Family violence has been the preferred concept to describe what is often referred to as domestic violence and/or intimate partner violence. However, family and community violence is another term that captures what often occurs. Family and community violence incorporates concepts of intimate partners, immediate family and broader familial kinship systems. Therefore, we use the term ‘family and community violence’, throughout, to include these separate but often linked concepts. COAG highlights this, defining family and community violence as:

a broader term that refers to violence between family members, as well as violence between intimate partners ... the term family violence is the most widely used term to identify the experiences of Indigenous people, because it includes the broad range of marital and kinship relationships in which violence may occur.^(7 p.2)

Family and community violence is an issue of great concern to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Community members and organisations have been working for decades to address it.^(3,11) Violence can have severe and wide reaching impacts on those who experience, use, and witness violence and on their families and communities.

Violence occurs within the non-Indigenous Australian community as well as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However, family and community violence is recognised as a significant cause of morbidity and mortality within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is reported to contribute to an estimated 11% of the burden of disease among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women aged 18 to 44 years – more than any other single factor.⁽¹²⁾ According to the 2014–15 NATSISS, 22% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women had experienced or been threatened with physical violence in the last 12 months; for the majority of these women (72%), an intimate partner or other family member was the perpetrator of the most recent experience of physical violence. For males, 23% had experienced or been threatened with physical violence in the last 12 months; for about one-third of these men, an intimate partner or other family member was the perpetrator of the most recent experience of physical violence.⁽¹³⁾

Existing knowledge

The following material in this chapter refers to Olsen and Lovett’s 2016 review²¹ of research published over the period 2000 to 2015 about family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities,⁽³⁾ augmented by an updated literature review conducted in 2019 (see Appendix 2). It provides a review of existing knowledge about family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including how family violence is understood, experienced and responded to. It presents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewpoints on what works and what is needed to address family violence.

21. Olsen and Lovett’s review (2016) incorporated 147 articles, located through a series of online database searches. An additional 63 relevant publications for the period 2016 to 2019 have been identified as being relevant to this report.

Several key findings emerge from the literature. Research has consistently found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience violence at higher rates, and of greater severity, than non-Indigenous women; this violence is most often perpetrated by someone known to the victim.²² The literature points to several interrelated factors contributing to family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including:

- > the impacts of colonisation
- > the continuing effects of government policies on culture, families and communities
- > the normalisation of violence in some contexts
- > stressors, including those related to housing, employment and health
- > alcohol and other drug use.

The literature also highlights the resilience and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and communities and their hope in the strengths of community, culture and organisations for addressing violence.

A wide range of programs and services respond to family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; they include preventative programs, crisis support and programs addressing the consequences of violence. Most programs (22 of 24) in the 2016 review reported a positive impact in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, observed through changes in behaviour, attitudes, wellbeing and/or skills related to family violence. The review found, however, that only two of the 24 program evaluations offered robust evidence of effectiveness, indicating that evaluation design and conduct is a critical area for improvement in the planning and funding of programs.

The literature outlines several barriers to accessing services in relation to family violence. These included: lack of trust; lack of culturally appropriate care; fear of negative consequences from the perpetrator or community; shame; family responsibilities; and lack of awareness of services available. Further complicating effective responses is the fact that understandings of family violence differ between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and services that primarily target non-Indigenous populations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings place the family and community at the centre of understanding and addressing violence; for mainstream services, the dominant concept of domestic violence focuses on couples and individuals. This tension leads to different approaches to supporting people who have experienced or perpetrated family violence.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewpoint that places community and family at the centre and aims to remove barriers to service suggests some key solutions, including: taking a holistic approach with a focus on community healing and restoring family cohesion; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander roles in shaping programs; the rebuilding of family and kinship ties; building cultural sensitivity into programs; the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in sentencing; and ongoing and consistent funding.

More recent research focused on the collaborative development of principles and frameworks on how to address family violence, both for policy and practice. These principles foreground Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewpoints on what works and have a strong focus on cultural safety.

More detailed findings of Olsen and Lovett's 2016 review, along with the updated literature review undertaken for this report, are integrated throughout, to contextualise and help to interpret the qualitative and quantitative data.

National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children

In 2010, in response to increasing concern about violence and its adverse impacts on families and communities, COAG supported the development of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (the National Plan). The National Plan received bilateral support, indicating the seriousness with which both major sides of politics viewed this issue. Recognising the widespread concern about violence within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the National Plan included a specific outcome (National Outcome Three) aimed at strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' ability to tackle family violence, acknowledging underlying complexities such as disadvantage. (7, 14, p.15)

The National Plan was implemented via four action plans. The Fourth Action Plan, released in late 2019, contains four Principles. Principle 3 states: 'The voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must inform responses to the family and sexual violence experienced in their communities.' Underpinning those

22. Several factors complicate the determination of the full extent of family violence, including under-reporting, multiple definitions of family violence, incomplete identification of gender and Indigenous status in many datasets and the absence of nationally representative data.

Principles, the Plan comprises 20 National Priorities. They should be understood to also apply for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; however, four (Priorities 6, 7, 8 and 9) are explicitly in support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children:

(6) Value and engage the expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and men, communities, and organisations to lead in the creation and implementation of community-led solutions to build and manage change.

(7) Build the workforce capability to ensure delivery of high quality, holistic, trauma-informed and culturally safe supports that respond to the complex needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children.

(8) Develop innovative and alternative models for victim and perpetrator support that contribute to safe healing and sustainable behaviour change.

(9) Address both the immediate impacts and deep underlying drivers of family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through collective action with governments, service providers and communities. (14, p.5)

Until now, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices have been granted limited space in which to tell their stories about their realities and, therefore, to influence policy and action plans. The implications for actions arising from this research project align directly with these four Priorities.

Report structure

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- > Chapter 2 presents an overview of the study approach and methodology.
- > Chapter 3 presents a summary of the characteristics of the study participants.
- > Chapter 4 presents an overview of the historical context of family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and references evidence showing that lifetime experience of trauma can have negative impacts on executive functioning.
- > Chapter 5 explores catalysts and consequences of contemporary violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.
- > Chapter 6 describes cultural, family and community resources that are protective against violence.
- > Chapter 7 presents participants' perceptions of how common violence is and their understandings of what behaviours constitute violence.
- > Chapter 8 presents the extent and types of violence experienced by participants in the study.
- > Chapter 9 presents community member and service provider perceptions of service provision.
- > Chapter 10 presents participants' perspectives on how service provision and supports can be improved.
- > Chapter 11 draws together the findings of the study, offers examples of best practice found in the literature and provides guidance for action and solutions.

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