Australian
National
University

Executive summary

'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

Healing – new growth, new life

"This painting shows the healing journey of families affected by domestic violence and trauma. In the middle we see three aunties nurturing their children surrounded by community, healing as one together. The Banksia pods symbolise fire and birth to mirror the experience our mob go through during fiery and tough times. After these times new beginnings and new times can flourish as we spread the seeds of life of prosperity to nurture our land, our families and ourselves. The blue dots and circles represent water and our mobs journey towards healing. We all have an inner spring within each other and within ourselves. Water nurtures us, water sustains us, and water heals us. The yellow represents sand and light. Our Nations and our people are bounded by sand across this continent, we all are connected. We all are given life and protection by the woman sun spirit." –*Krystal Hurst, artist*

Family and Community Safety (FaCtS)

for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Study

Find out more about the FaCtS study and download a copy of the report:
bit.ly/FaCtS_ANU

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017, the Department of Social Services (DSS) commissioned The Australian National University to undertake the Family and Community Safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (FaCtS) 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?*

We sought to answer this question by gathering both qualitative and quantitative data from community members and service providers. Our findings are augmented by a literature review.

From the outset, the study team recognised that research leadership by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was fundamental to generating meaningful data. We believed that this would lead to findings valuable for informing actions by communities, service providers and the government that will be effective in reducing the incidence and impacts of violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. To that end, the FaCtS Study is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and governed study which privileges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, cultures and knowledge. It makes a significant contribution to the currently limited evidence available to inform communities, policymakers and service providers about effectively supporting those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families and communities who experience and are exposed to family and community violence.

We present implications for action and solutions that emerged through interviews, focus groups and surveys with community members and service providers.

Methodology

Eighteen communities from various urban, rural and remote locations participated in the research. Through a research approach that incorporated community partnerships, the study provides evidence from community members and service providers. They all shared their understandings of violence and its causes and impacts, offering their thoughts about how prevention and responses can be improved. Within the 18 study communities, we held 56 focus groups, 49 qualitative in-depth interviews with community members and 41 in-depth interviews with service providers. Background and community-specific information also came from a large-scale quantitative survey of 1,584 community members, a quantitative survey of 98 service provider staff and identification (mapping) of services relevant to family and community violence. A cadre of local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander researchers, trained to coordinate and administer surveys and conduct focus groups/interviews, undertook most of the data collection from community members.

Building on previous reports

The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022, developed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), includes 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. The National Plan was implemented via four action plans, released in late 2019, comprising 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.' More detail is provided in Chapter 1.

In June 2020, the Australian Productivity Commission released its draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy Report; it is prescient in that it reflects the findings and analysis of this study, noting the need for evaluation, policy reform and the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in governance and leadership positions. More discussion of the review and the draft report is provided in Chapter 11.

We also commend the work of Wiradjuri researcher Dr Megan Williams, who developed the Ngaa-bi-nya Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program Evaluation Framework. Ngaa-bi-nya is designed by, and for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people *in their contexts* and includes a comprehensive range of critical success factors often not considered in other evaluations. More discussion of Ngaa-bi-nya is provided in Chapter 11.

Key findings

Sources, catalysts and consequences of violence

Community members overwhelmingly described family and community violence in relation to its historical context. They viewed contemporary violence as stemming from colonisation and the related violence enacted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, perpetuated by intergenerational trauma and the undermining of traditional gender structures. Individuals and communities have experienced severe and widespread trauma across generations, with limited capacity to address it. Key forms of trauma include forced removal from Country, disconnection from culture, separation of families (including through the Stolen Generations, incarceration and child removals), exposure to racism, and witnessing and experiencing violence. In some instances, unresolved trauma results in damaged family structures, making it difficult to establish and maintain healthy relationships; this, in turn, continues the perpetration and experience of violence.

Participants described a set of interrelated factors as the catalysts of violence – housing problems, racism, financial stress, alcohol and other drug use, poor physical health and loss of social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) – including mental health difficulties, unemployment, contact with the justice system and incarceration. Trauma and the negative impacts of ongoing colonisation were identified as the common underlying causes of these catalysts.

Analysis of quantitative data from the Community Member Survey supports these qualitative findings. The prevalence of experiencing and using violence was significantly lower among those who had less exposure to trauma, discrimination, and violence; stable income, employment, and housing; no exposure to the justice system or incarceration; no problems with alcohol and other drug use at the individual, family or community level; and better individual, family and community health and wellbeing.

Extent and types of violence

Although it was not designed to produce population representative data, the FaCtS study provides important findings on the experience of violence. The quantitative estimates are broadly consistent with Australian Bureau of Statistics data. Key findings in relation to the extent of violence are:

> Overall, 80% of participants in the Community Member Survey had not experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence in the previous year. However, most participants (62%) had experienced some type of violence in their lifetime. These levels of reported violence are broadly consistent with other data sources.

> A similar prevalence of recent experience (within the last year) of family and community violence was found across major cities, regional and remote settings, with no excess in remote settings. This contrasts with common conceptions and representations, including in the media, that violence disproportionately affects remote communities.

> Violence was experienced across all age groups, and all age groups were affected by recent violence.

> Family and community violence affects both men and women; however, its impact on women appears more severe, with women being more likely than men to experience frequent violence and to experience violence from a partner or family member.

> Around 75% of participants reported never having felt violent, and the vast majority had never been arrested or convicted in relation to violence. Having ever been arrested or convicted in relation to violence was less common in remote areas than in regional areas and major cities and was around three times more common in men (24%) than women (9%). Markers of use of violence were more commonly reported by men than women.

Data were also collected on participants' perceptions of how common violence is in their community and on what behaviours constitute violence. Most community members and service providers who participated in interviews and focus groups perceived family violence to be both a common and a serious issue. While concern about violence against women was raised more frequently, many participants were also concerned about violence against men. There is room for improvement in recognition of a range of behaviours as violence, with about 40% of participants having a high understanding of violence, about 33% having a moderate understanding, and about 25% having a low understanding.

Services

At the heart of the expressed need from communities was the desire to strengthen community and culture to prevent violence. Participants spoke of the need to heal families, through redressing the breakdown in kinship and family structures. Those experiencing violence wanted the violence to stop and family disruption to be minimised.

Community members and service providers noted great variation in the accessibility and appropriateness of services for people experiencing and using violence. Barriers included: a general lack of services; a lack of accessible services (including transport-related issues); a lack of awareness of available services; and a fear of further violence. There were also fears that engagement with services would lead to losing children or to a partner being taken away, when people wanted support to stay together. Other barriers related to stigma, racism, lack of trust, a lack of cultural appropriateness in many services and fear of reprisals and coming to the attention of government services. For these reasons, many community members were reluctant to report violence.

Among those experiencing violence, around 40% told someone about the violence. People affected by violence were more likely to tell trusted community members, including Elders, rather than formally reporting it to service providers or police. Youth were less likely to seek and receive help than other age groups. Around 25% received physical or mental health care, and around 33% slept or stayed somewhere other than their usual place of residence. Responses to violence by services could be hampered by how individuals choose to identify violence.

Participants stressed the need for holistic, culturally safe services that are integrated and present appropriate pathways of care for those affected. Concerns were raised about the ability of services in remote communities to meet the needs of those experiencing and using violence.

Service providers spoke of the tension between balancing the legal system – which was largely viewed as punitive – against their need to care for families in distress. There is a clear need for trauma-informed services. Service providers also identified the following factors as necessary for improving the appropriateness and effectiveness of services:

> incorporating culture into the practice of services, including the role of traditional law/lore

> employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff at all levels of organisations, and incorporating their leadership in design and decision-making in programs addressing family and community violence

> incorporating the leadership of Elders at all levels

> ensuring that service provision is integrated, through all services liaising with and working respectfully with each other.

Community members and service providers identified shortfalls in the capacity of services to work with women, men and children, as well as with people *experiencing* violence and people *using* violence. Specific gaps were:

> flexible services for families, to allow them to stay together in their homes, where appropriate

> services for men, including in the context of services for families

> services for youth

> trauma-informed services and practices.

Implications for action and solutions

This report acknowledges that progress towards reducing family and community violence can only be achieved where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities lead change. It is also critical to take account of the role of the broader context and system in generating violence and to expect that system to take responsibility for reducing violence. Solutions will be most effective if, within a context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and involvement, they incorporate the various elements of the system, as well as the system as a whole, and seek to break cycles of violence.

The general lack of rigorous evidence on what works to reduce and support those affected by family and community violence is problematic. Many current and past programs have not undergone appropriate, rigorous evaluation. The implications of our findings are wide ranging and should be placed within the broader context of the current understanding of the evidence of what works in addressing family and community violence, acknowledging that there is much that is unknown.

Key required actions

An ecosystem that listens and learns

A key required action is macro-level cultural change, leading to an overarching operating ecosystem that listens and learns and generates ongoing solutions for addressing family and community violence. It would be characterised by programs that are designed, implemented and led by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, that are based on community needs and priorities and that integrate the best current evidence. They would be rigorously evaluated, using appropriate methodologies, in order to inform future programs. Key actions at the ecosystem level include:

> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities lead change.

> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff hold leadership and decision-making (governance) roles.

> Communities develop and implement local programs that meet their own needs.

> Programs and policies are evaluated, to improve understanding about what works.

> Programs and policies are adequately and sustainably funded.

Systems level

System responsiveness to family and community violence, such as service delivery, public housing, public health and social security, needs to be increased in order to reduce the impact of family and community violence. Key actions at the systems level are at three sub-levels – policy, program and service provider.

At the policy sub-level, they include:

> employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in leadership and decision-making (governance) roles

> involving Elders in all decision-making, and ensuring that they are appropriately remunerated

> shifting away from a 'one size fits all' approach to one that incorporates locally designed policies with locally based decision-making

> addressing uncertainties surrounding program funding and externally enforced compliance requirements

> addressing language barriers in all settings

> employing Indigenous liaison officers, including in the police service

> ensuring the cultural competence of non-Indigenous staff within all services, including in the police service

> formal accreditation, such as Certificate III or IV, for training undertaken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community researchers

> flexible services for families to allow them to stay together in their homes, where appropriate.

At the program sub-level, they include:

> shifting away from a 'one size fits all' approach to one that incorporates locally designed programs with locally based decision-making

> ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander designed and led programs and activities that are trauma informed, focusing on rebuilding kinship and cultural concepts and healthy relationships.

At the service provider sub-level, they include:

> cultural awareness programs for non-Indigenous service providers

> education for non-Indigenous service providers about the context of family violence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

> accredited training for service providers

> formal support services for service providers dealing with family and community violence

> ensuring that service provision is integrated, through all services liaising with and working respectfully with each other

> services for men, including in the context of services for families

> services for youth, including in the context of services for families

> training in mandatory reporting, according to requirements and categories in respective jurisdictions.

Primary prevention level

Some participants recognised that unhealthy relationships are viewed as normal in some cases and that this was starting from an early age. Although participants identified recent improvements in awareness and understanding of family and community violence within the community, the data indicate a need for more understanding of what constitutes family and community violence. Key actions at the primary prevention level include:

> education programs, starting at a young age, at individual, community and population levels that enhance understanding of family and community violence

> education programs that are culturally informed on the roles and responsibilities for women and men

> education and training about what constitutes healthy relationships

> culture strengthening activities and programs.

Early intervention level

Any program or approach to reducing family and community violence needs to be underpinned by addressing intergenerational trauma. This requires being able to assess and provide appropriate supports for those affected by trauma. Key actions at the early intervention level include:

> services and safe places for men, women and young people, including in the context of services for families

> services, including counselling, that are trauma informed and address intergenerational trauma

> programs that are focused on building and assessing executive function.

Acute services support level

There is a clear, ongoing need for existing acute services to assist with service and treatment for both victims and perpetrators of violence. Key actions at the acute services support level include:

> services that they are trauma informed and address intergenerational trauma

> increased high-quality, accessible mental health services and alcohol and other drugs services

> development and implementation of tools for routine screening for experiences of, and use of, violence

> access to information, transport, free child care and translators,

> appropriate opening hours and emergency access

> refuges to allow multiple children, older children and male children to be with victims

> increased housing for homeless people and those exiting prison

> family centred services, sensitive to the unique needs of men, women and young people

> advocacy-based counselling for those currently experiencing family violence

> greater engagement with community

> respectful collaboration between services, in order to provide holistic care and appropriate pathways.

Conclusions

This Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and governed report voices the experiences and wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and service providers across Australia on family and community violence. The report references relevant literature and highlights the need for an overarching system that *listens and learns*. The central role of intergenerational trauma and the importance of community-led initiatives are critical to breaking the cycle of violence and generating ongoing, evidence-based and appropriately evaluated solutions.

The report speaks to the strength, cultural richness and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the obligation of all stakeholders to build on these strengths to improve outcomes for current and future generations.