

Challenges for local crime prevention in rural and remote communities

This Tip Sheet brings together research into crime in regional, rural and remote areas. It identifies general patterns in offending, some of the underlying causes and some of the challenges and advantages of delivering crime prevention programs in regional, rural and remote Australia. It concludes by outlining key issues to consider with crime prevention in regional, rural and remote communities.

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Understanding the regional, rural and remote context

Regional, rural and remote areas all have their own unique characteristics; for example:

- large regional/urban centres
- small towns
- rural/farming communities
- mining communities, or
- remote outback communities.

Communities outside capital cities have a wide range of demographic, social and economic dimensions (Carcach 2000a). These areas are generally associated with characteristics such as:

- geographic isolation
- smaller population size
- low population density
- limited access to government and other services
- a concentration of primary industries, or
- a specific type of lifestyle (Carcach 2000b).

Approximately one third of Australia's population lives outside major cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2003). Crime rates are higher in major cities because this is where most people live. However, rates of some kinds of crime can be comparable with or even higher in rural and remote communities. Crime prevention and community safety are just as important for areas outside the major cities.

Developing a crime prevention project in a regional, rural or remote community

A useful starting point when developing a crime prevention project for a local area is to identify relevant strengths and challenges the community may have. It is important to do this early in the development of the project (ANCD 2002; Carcach 2001).

The following page outlines some common issues confronting rural and remote communities:

STRENGTHS

Greater sense of community's geographical boundaries (Shipway & Homel 1999)

- Defined boundaries can make problems appear more manageable, and can also assist to target interventions to a specific area.
- Limited population mobility can help to facilitate the ongoing involvement of individuals in long term programs.

Respect for police within community, and willingness of police to work with the community

- In many rural areas there is often a high level of respect for police within the community (Barclay et al. 2001).
- Police have also demonstrated a willingness to become more actively involved in community crime prevention in regional areas (Delahunty and Putt 2006).

Strong and defined sense of community identity (Shipway & Homel 1999)

- Small communities often have established community networks between members. People share a certain sense of pride in their community and may even hold a shared vision as to how the community should work.

Increased knowledge of and cooperation between local service organisations

- In many smaller localities there can be established networks between the local service organisations. These relationships provide opportunities for collaboration.
- Whilst the number of available services may be limited, the capacity of local service providers to respond to community needs may be enhanced (Shipway & Homel 1999).

Some communities have high levels of participation in community-oriented activities

- Projects that rely on community participation and collaboration can benefit from high levels of participation in community oriented activities. Such participation is associated with lower rates of both property and violent crime, as it increases the level of social interaction between community members (Carcach & Huntley 2002).

CHALLENGES

Limited access to services

- Limited availability of services and high staff turnover can make it difficult for many people in regional areas to access important services.

Increased cost of service provision

- Travelling to provide outreach services incurs significant costs in staff time and practical costs associated with transport (Bull 2007a).

Lack of specialist services

- Some workers, such as family and domestic violence support workers, may have a general focus that requires the ability to deal with a number of community issues, performing multiple tasks and responding to competing agendas (Bull 2007a).

Limited local expertise

- Difficulties associated with attracting skilled professional staff to regional areas have been well documented.
- Training and professional development for local staff can be difficult, with additional costs incurred if travel to regional or city locations is required (ANCD 2002; Bull 2007a).

Local politics

- There is evidence of higher levels of social and political conservatism in some rural communities. This can translate into resistance or opposition to crime prevention initiatives that are perceived as soft options.
- There may be significant social divisions within the community and suspicion of outsiders.

Issues relating to confidentiality

- In small communities there is a risk that people will not disclose that they have a problem because of the risk of being identified within the community.

Lack of culturally appropriate services

- There are growing numbers of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds residing in regional areas of Australia, and high proportions of Indigenous people.
- Some communities may lack culturally relevant or appropriate services.

Crime in regional, rural and remote communities

Many of the criminal and anti-social behaviour issues experienced in Australia's major cities are shared by regional, rural and remote communities. The pattern of crime, however, such as the frequency of specific offences, differs between major cities and regional, rural and remote areas.

- Violent offences recorded by police occur at higher rates in regional, rural and remote communities than in major cities. However, property crime (such as burglary and motor vehicle theft) is more common in major cities (Carrington 2007).
- There is considerable variation across individual communities in the level and type of crime recorded by police. Not all regional, rural and remote communities have high levels of violence and low levels of property crime (Carrington 2007).
- The incidence of violence is disproportionately high in some Indigenous communities. This often is attributed to young males. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people view this as a major problem in these communities (Memmott et al. 2001).
- Women in rural and remote communities can experience higher rates of domestic violence (Neame & Heenan 2004). Rates of family violence and violence against women are disproportionately high within regional, rural and remote Indigenous communities.
- The rate at which crimes are reported to police is lower outside major cities, particularly in communities where there are more informal social controls (Hogg & Carrington, 2006).
- Farmers may experience a wide range of crimes, including livestock and property theft. A 2003 survey of farm crime in Australia found that almost one in five farms experienced at least one crime related to their farming operations during the previous 12 months (Anderson & McCall 2005).

Factors associated with higher levels of crime in regional, rural and

remote areas

The characteristics of regional, rural and remote communities are distinct from major city areas, and also differ between communities. Understanding why crime or anti social behaviour might be occurring in a local community is an important first step in developing an appropriate strategy.

The following factors affect the level of crime in regional, rural and remote areas, and help to explain variations between individual communities:

- residential mobility
- family instability
- levels of unemployment
- economic structures and vulnerability to short-term fluctuations
- education levels
- limited opportunities for young people
- level of remoteness, which is associated with limited access to important human services
- levels of interaction among community members
- boredom, particularly among young people
- lack of transport, which makes services more difficult to access and can lead to higher rates of driving related offences
- higher consumption of alcohol in regional, rural and remote communities than in major cities, and its cultural importance in social and sporting activities
- illicit drug use, which typically occurs at lower rates than in major cities. However, in many areas the use of certain substances, such as inhalants and cannabis and the growing use of amphetamines contributes to community problems.

(ANCD 2002; Bull 2007b; Carcach 2000b; Carcach 2001; Delahunty and Putt 2006; Shipway & Maloney 1999; Williams 2001)

The effects of many of these factors may be more pronounced in communities close to or accessible from major cities. In particular, these communities are more sensitive to the effects of changing social and economic conditions, and the diffusion of crime from the city area (Carcach, 2001).

Developing a crime prevention project for a regional, rural or remote community

Describe the problem and its underlying causes

Describe the problem and underlying causes by collecting relevant local information:

- Most policing jurisdictions publish recorded crime statistics at a local government area level or equivalent. Seek recent police statistics for your local area if possible, but don't rely on them as the only indication of crime.
- Survey the community to identify common issues or perceived problems, and assess whether some crimes are not being reported or whether there is a fear of victimisation.
- Undertake consultations with local community members and service providers to identify perceived problems and underlying causes.
- Seek to identify information on victim, offender and offence characteristics so that you can target your

project at the right people or places.

- Try to identify and understand the reasons underlying criminal or anti-social behaviour.
- Examine who is using existing services provided in the local area. Are their needs being met? Who is not using these services that should be?
- Reports by local media might provide an indication as to common or high profile issues.
- The ABS produces a range of demographic, education, economic and employment statistics for small areas that might help to identify issues within the community: <http://www.abs.gov.au>

Encourage community involvement

Working with the community is crucial to the effectiveness of locally based crime prevention. Strong community support will facilitate the implementation of local crime prevention initiatives that rely on community participation and collaboration. The following strategies can be used to overcome potential resistance:

- Know relevant statistics and information about the community.
- Establish and maintain local contacts with a variety of organisations and services, particularly if you are from outside the community.
- Anticipate conflict.
- Encourage discussion and debate.
- Work with local media.
- Do not promote the project as crime prevention per se – instead promote the community benefits including a reduction in crime.
- Focus on results (Shipway & Maloney 1999).

Establishing and then maintaining local crime prevention committees in regional, rural and remote communities can prove difficult (Barclay et al. 2001). It may be more effective to identify and utilise organisations or groups that already meet regularly and add crime prevention issues to the agenda.

Address staffing issues

Begin by looking within the community to assess whether there are already people who might be appropriate for a position. Providing the training necessary to ensure this person has the right skills might be a more cost effective and sustainable solution than looking outside the community.

To attract staff from outside the local community it may be necessary to offer attractive remuneration packages, including assistance with accommodation and access to a vehicle. Consider how long the project is likely to run – this may effect whether skilled personnel will be attracted to the position. Identify a network of support people for staff. Ensure staff supervision is provided and there are clear lines of accountability.

It is crucial that staff, particularly those working with young people or those in drug and alcohol, family violence and victim services, maintain appropriate standards of confidentiality. These standards should also be adequately conveyed to potential clientele. Your organisation should establish appropriate policies and procedures for communicating to staff about confidentiality issues. This is particularly sensitive in small communities where community members sometimes perceive that it is difficult to maintain their personal privacy. This is because many people in small towns know each other outside of their professional relationships. If it is perceived that people's privacy is being breached, both staff and clients may be placed at risk in situations where there is a perceived or real threat of violence involved in the situation.

Benefit from established networks

Draw on existing service networks where possible. Work with existing services and adopt a collaborative approach to crime prevention. Ensure there is a recognised and agreed means of referral to other services in the local area or more broadly, within the regional context.

Look elsewhere for inspiration, but adapt to the local context

Recognise context as an important factor and ensure that the conditions within your community are taken into consideration in the development of crime prevention projects. Look elsewhere for effective strategies to deal with crime and anti-social behaviour, particularly in communities that share common characteristics. Consider how these strategies could be adapted to work in the local context.

Monitor your progress and evaluate your project

Monitor and review progress with your project. This is important in demonstrating the value of the project to the community. An evaluation of the project's effectiveness will contribute to the body of evidence on effective interventions in regional Australia.

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