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Working with Indigenous communities to reduce crime

Indigenous people are over-represented at all stages of the criminal justice system in Australia. There are many suggested explanations for this, ranging from enduring institutionalised racism and differential treatment across the criminal justice system, to the effects of significant socio-economic disadvantage and actual higher levels of offending behaviour. This CRM summarises a number of the most important contemporary suggestions for helping to reduce offending in Indigenous communities.

It is suggested that any program designed for Indigenous communities must be culturally appropriate. This means it must reflect the traditions and values of the local community. A program that is very successful for non-Indigenous communities is not necessarily appropriate for Indigenous communities. Furthermore, Indigenous communities are not all the same. Whilst it is important to learn about what works in other communities, programs must be carefully adapted to suit the needs of individual communities.

Community involvement and ownership of programs is essential for ensuring their success. The local community should also be involved in running the programs. This can be done through careful consultation with and involvement of the local community at all stages. This requires the early establishment of cooperative partnerships between community members and government or other agencies intending to implement such programs. Community members should be encouraged to identify problems and come up with strategies.

One example of how this is currently happening is the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) trials. The COAG trials aim to improve the way that governments and individual departments work with each other and with Indigenous communities. The central theme of the COAG trials is 'shared responsibility'. This means that communities and governments must work in partnership to achieve outcomes and build capacity in the communities.

A number of innovative initiatives are now being developed and implemented in consultation with Indigenous communities across Australia. Some of these include alternative sentencing trials, Indigenous justice plans and night patrols. AI Crime reduction matters no. 26 looks in more detail at night patrols.

Further reading:

Crime Prevention Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet and Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy 2001. *Yaldida (Standing Strong): Preventing crime in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*. http://www.premiers.qld.gov.au/About_the_department/publications/crime/yaldida/

Cunneen C 2001. *The impact of crime prevention on Aboriginal communities*. <http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/ajac.nsf/pages/reports>

More information on the COAG trials is available at www.icc.gov.au