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Night patrols

Night patrols, in their various forms, are a common feature of Indigenous communities throughout Australia. They take on various names, roles and functions depending on the needs of the communities from which they operate. They may be known as street patrols, community patrols, foot or bare-foot patrols, mobile assistance patrols or street beat programs. They may provide a safe means of transport home or to refuges and safe houses for people at risk of offending or victimisation. Typically this includes young people or intoxicated adults.

One of the first night patrols began operating in Julalikari (an Aboriginal town camp in Tennant Creek, NT) in the 1980s. Its objective was to resolve problems in town camps, settle disputes and support and assist local police in their dealings with the community. Approved unpaid volunteers staffed the patrol.

The basic concept of night patrols has now spread across Australia and patrols are routine in many communities, particularly in the Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia and New South Wales. As the concept of patrols has been adapted to individual communities as required, there is no single definition of what a patrol is or what it does. A common element of night patrols is the aim of preventing or stopping harm and maintaining community peace, security and safety.

Night patrol members may patrol the community on foot or in vehicles. They may simply provide a watchful eye over what is happening or they may be called to respond to incidents such as an argument or dispute. Some patrols, particularly in urban areas, may target particular groups within the community, such as young people, women, sex workers or the homeless. For example, some patrols are staffed by women working in conjunction with refuges and others target juvenile offenders in the inner city. Patrols generally have the support of the local police, who may use them to assist in their dealings with the community. In addition, Indigenous patrollers have a strong relationship with the community with whom they deal. This may include family, tribal or clan affiliations, without which patrols may not have the cultural authority to operate successfully.

Funding for patrols varies between jurisdictions. Generally a broad range of government agencies, Indigenous people and representative agencies and Aboriginal community organisations provide financial support for night patrols.

Few, if any, night patrols have been formally evaluated, although many patrols are evaluated in-house or by their funding agency. On the whole, however, community members and the police believe that patrols have improved community safety and reduced the incidence of crime, fear and violence in communities.

Further reading:

Blagg H 2003. An Overview of Night Patrol Services in Australia, Attorney-General's Department, Canberra. <http://www.crimeprevention.gov.au/www/ncpHome.nsf/Web+Pages/C650BC24F3BFB4F5CA256E6F00062112?OpenDocument>

Curtis D 1992. Julalikari Council's Community Night Patrol, in Aboriginal justice issues: proceedings of a conference held 23-25 June 1992, AIC, Canberra. <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/proceedings/21/Curtis.html>