

# ANROWS

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*to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children*

# Compass

Research to policy and practice

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Existing knowledge, practice and responses to violence against women in Australian Indigenous communities: *Key findings and future directions*

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**ANROWS Compass (Research to policy and practice papers)** are concise papers that summarise key findings of research on violence against women and their children, including research produced under ANROWS's research program, and provide advice on the implications for policy and practice.

This report addresses work covered in ANROWS research project 3.2 "Existing knowledge, practice and responses to violence against women in Australian Indigenous communities". Please consult the ANROWS website for more information on this project. In addition to this paper, an ANROWS Landscapes is available as part of this project.

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#### **Acknowledgement of Country**

ANROWS acknowledges the traditional owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders past, present and future; and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and knowledge.

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# Introduction

Violence against Indigenous women is an issue of national importance, acknowledged in government policies as well as in community programs and initiatives. While it is difficult to assess the full extent of violence against Indigenous women due to under-reporting and inconsistent recording at the local, state and national levels, evidence suggests that Indigenous women experience violence at higher rates and at greater severity than non-Indigenous women.

This paper presents a brief summary of published literature currently available on Indigenous women and violence. This summary is based on the state of knowledge paper *Existing knowledge, practice and responses to violence against women in Australian Indigenous communities* in which journal articles, evaluation reports and community reports were assessed and synthesised for information across four main areas of research:

1. What is known about violence against Indigenous women?
2. How do Indigenous women and communities see and experience the issue of violence against women (including definitions of family violence)?
3. What are the current responses (programs or approaches) to violence against women in Indigenous communities?
4. What are the Indigenous viewpoints on what works and what is needed?

## Family or domestic violence?

In general, the term family violence, rather than domestic violence, is preferred by Indigenous communities, as violence against women is conceptualised within extended families and the wider community. Family violence is understood to be the result of, and perpetuated by, a range of community and family factors, rather than one individual's problematic behaviour within an intimate partnership.

## Messages for policy

There are limited evaluation data on the effectiveness of policies and programs targeted at preventing and reducing violence against Indigenous women.

- Funding for services and programs should include resources for Indigenous community input and, where possible, community delivery.
- Multi-component programs are likely to be most effective as are programs that address the broader wellbeing of Indigenous families and communities, including the ongoing impacts of colonisation.
- Funding for services and programs for Indigenous communities should include resources to implement quality evaluation including both qualitative and quantitative research.

## Messages for practice

- Opinions and viewpoints from Indigenous people on “what works” to prevent violence against women should be included in programs and initiatives.
- There are important historical and cultural reasons for the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to family violence.
- Family and community cohesion are central to Indigenous viewpoints on how to address family violence.
- The cumulative nature of intergenerational trauma and socio-demographic disadvantage such as personal, economic and family related stressors suggests that reducing violence against Indigenous women requires a multifaceted and holistic approach.

## Background to violence against women in Indigenous communities

The full extent of violence against Indigenous women is difficult to determine due to under-reporting by victims, lack of screening by service providers, incomplete identification of gender and Indigenous status in many datasets, and the lack of nationally comparable data on family violence available from police, courts, health or welfare sources.

Despite under-reporting, surveys show that Indigenous women report higher levels of violence and suffer higher levels of injury and death as a result of family violence than non-Indigenous women.

No one causal factor can explain violence against Indigenous women. Instead, a number of interrelated factors have been identified, highlighting the complex and cumulative nature of violence and victimisation including colonisation and the breakdown of culture, intergenerational patterns of violence, alcohol and other drugs, and socio-economic stressors.

It is important to respect and understand that, despite the disproportionate burden of violence against Indigenous women, violence is not normal or customary in Indigenous communities. Indigenous Australians are diverse peoples who, while having a number of areas of commonality, differ in their languages, culture and history. Not all Indigenous women are subjected to violence and not all Indigenous communities have high rates of violence.

## Responses to violence against women in Indigenous communities

There is currently a patchwork of responses to family violence in Indigenous communities provided by federal, state and territory governments as well as local initiatives in services and community groups. As the following overview demonstrates, few programs are comprehensively documented and evaluated.

## Evaluation of the evidence

The literature search identified a number of programs and approaches aimed at addressing family violence in Indigenous communities. The programs were classified according to the approach defined by Memmott et al. (2001). The list of nine original program categories was modified to include an additional type of situational crime prevention.



**Table 2 Summary of strength of evidence of programs and approaches**

Level of evidence	Number of programs and approaches	Corresponding literature
<b>Strong</b>	2	Kinnane et al. (2010); Research and Analysis Branch, Department of the Attorney General (2014)
<b>Moderate</b>	10	Arney & Westby (2012); Australian Institute of Criminology et al. (2011); D'Abbs & Shaw (2011); Gibbons & Paterson (2000); Hennessy & Willie (2006); Kowanko & Power (2008); Laming et al. (2011); Lauw et al. (2013); Rawsthorne et al. (2010); Rees et al. (2004); Schineanu et al. (2010)
<b>Sufficient</b>	4	McCalman et al. (2006); McCalman et al. (2010); O'Connor & Fisher (2005); Wendt & Baker (2013)
<b>Insufficient</b>	8	Allan & Dawson (2004); Carnarvon Family Support Service Inc (2003); Karahasan (2014); Laing & Toivonen (2012); Nickson et al. (2011); Office of Evaluation and Audit (Indigenous Programs) (2007); Poelina & Perdrisat (2004); Pugh (2006)

Note: Several programs are evaluated in more than one resource.

## Effectiveness of programs

Most of the programs assessed demonstrated a positive impact on various aspects of behaviour, wellbeing, attitudes and skills related to addressing family violence in Indigenous communities.

Although individual programs have shown benefits to address family violence in Indigenous communities, it is not possible to generalise the effectiveness of these initiatives to the broader Indigenous population, given the diversity of methods, study populations and outcome measures used.

## The need for quality evidence

Determining the impact of family violence programs and approaches should include quantitative metrics including reductions in negative beliefs and behaviours, reduced service seeking and treatment, reduced hospitalisations from family violence related admissions and procedures and reduced arrests or recidivism. Larger programs with adequate resourcing may be able to achieve and demonstrate these outcomes, but it is particularly hard for small scale programs and approaches to demonstrate effectiveness. Randomised control trials (RCTs) are often inappropriate for family violence programs and other pragmatic designs such as longitudinal and pre-post designs should be used instead. From the programs reviewed here, there remains a considerable gap in the quality of evidence available.

Qualitative data should be used to contextualise and complement quantitative metrics. Qualitative research can uncover unintended consequences or outcomes of programs that help to reduce or prevent violence in Indigenous communities. Where qualitative methods have been incorporated, for example, other positive outcomes such as the building of trust and confidence of Indigenous communities in the legal and justice process were identified.

Finally, information sharing about the positive progress being made in Indigenous communities should be encouraged through the appropriate resourcing of program evaluation.

## Indigenous viewpoints on what works

The issue of violence within Indigenous communities has been highlighted through political and media attention, but less is known about Indigenous experiences and viewpoints on the issue. In the review of Indigenous viewpoints on “what works” to prevent violence against women we found that:

- Solutions to violence developed by Indigenous people are likely to focus on community healing, restoration of family cohesion and processes that aim to let both the victim and perpetrator deal with their pain and suffering.
- Indigenous communities want to play a more significant role in shaping program and service responses.
- Because Indigenous family violence is, in part, attributed to the breakdown of traditional culture and kinship practices, the rebuilding of these family and kinship ties is often seen as central to developing any type of response to Indigenous family violence.
- Generalised services and programs can be considered effective if they are operated in a culturally sensitive way and/or run in partnership with Indigenous organisations.
- The criminal justice system is not considered the most appropriate means for dealing with family violence in Indigenous communities. Instead, communities prefer Indigenous sentencing courts which allow for Indigenous Elders and community representatives to be part of the law and order process aimed at healing relationships and rehabilitating offenders.
- Ongoing planned and consistent funding for service provision is considered a major issue.

## The need for holistic approaches

Mainstream responses to family violence are focused on removing women from the domestic situation and legal repercussions for perpetrators. While these components of a response to family violence can help to provide options for Indigenous people, they are not regarded as the most effective way of responding to Indigenous family violence.

Family violence is a multi-dimensional problem connected to other health and social problems such as drug and alcohol use, unemployment and the continued impacts of colonisation and dispossession. Approaches to violence valued by Indigenous communities include community-based leadership and governance and programs focused on preventing the transfer of intergenerational trauma. In addition to family violence focused services, a much larger effort is required to improve the wider social, economic and health status of Indigenous communities.



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