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**Risk and Resilience:
Crime and Violence Prevention in Aboriginal Communities**

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Risk and Resilience:
Crime and Violence Prevention in Aboriginal Communities¹

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Abstract

Developmental prevention involves the manipulation of multiple risk and protective factors early in developmental pathways that lead to offending, often at transition points between life phases. The emphasis is not just on individuals but also their social contexts. Risk and protective factors for crime and violence in Aboriginal communities include such standard factors as child abuse, school failure and supportive family environments, but additional factors arise from unique aspects of Aboriginal history, culture and social structure. This paper draws on existing literature, interviews with urban Aboriginal community workers, and data from the Sibling Study to delineate those interrelated risk factors (forced removals, dependence, institutionalised racism, cultural features and substance use) and the equally interrelated protective factors (cultural resilience, personal controls and family control measures). These are ‘meta factors’ that provide a lens through which the standard lists can be interpreted, and are a starting point for the understanding of indigenous developmental pathways.

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Risk and Resilience:
Crime and Violence Prevention in Aboriginal Communities

Much is now known about the developmental pathways leading to crime, violence, substance abuse and related social problems, and how these pathways might be altered. In the words of the Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium (1999a: 10)¹:

Developmental prevention involves intervention early in developmental pathways that lead to crime and substance abuse, emphasising investment in 'child friendly' institutions and communities and the manipulation of multiple risk and protective factors at crucial transition points, such as around birth, the preschool years, the transition from primary to high school, and the transition from high school to higher education or the workforce.

A basic tenet of developmental theory is that acts of crime stem both from the characteristics of people (perhaps impulsivity or poor social skills) *and* from the social context (such as the availability of support for taking alternate paths). The social context is multi-layered, incorporating not just the immediate family - vital as this is - but also the informal supports available for the family (kin, neighbours, friends); the local community; the developmentally relevant institutions in the area (such as preschools, playgroups, churches, and child care centres); and elements of the larger society that affect what happens to children and families.

A developmental approach to prevention should therefore never be focused solely on the potential offender or even on his or her immediate family, but also on

critical elements of his or her relationships and social environment that interact with individual qualities in ways that produce negative outcomes. The question we address in this paper is how specific features of Aboriginal history, culture and position in the social structure shape the social environments of indigenous people and influence their relationships, interactions and developmental pathways.

As the Consortium members observe in their full report (1999b), the value of adopting an explicitly developmental perspective is that policy makers and practitioners can reap the benefits of access to a rich set of concepts and research studies, and can be encouraged to pose a range of new questions at each stage of the prevention planning process. However, current thinking in this area is somewhat restricted by almost exclusive reliance on two streams of quantitative enquiry: *longitudinal studies* that involve repeated measurements on large samples over extended periods of time; and *intervention studies*, often randomised controlled trials, that assess the impact on small samples with specific characteristics of ‘early interventions’ such as home visiting by nurses, enriched preschool education, or parent training. These approaches have been enormously valuable in extending our understanding of the developmental processes involved in crime and related behaviours, and of what works in prevention, but they do have several limitations.

One immediate limitation is that almost none of the research is Australian, although a few relevant longitudinal studies are in progress (e.g., the Mater-University of Queensland Study of Pregnancy and its Outcomes: Najman et al. 1997; the Queensland Sibling Study: Lincoln et al.

1998). Happily a few high quality longitudinal studies have also been conducted in New Zealand (e.g., Fergusson 1993; Silva & Stanton 1996), but on the whole we are compelled to rely (particularly for knowledge about successful interventions) on conclusions from samples in the United States that may or may not generalise to other populations.

Even within the overseas literature, most studies pay little attention to individual or group differences in pathways or to how relevant risk and protective factors may vary from group to group and across life phases. This oversight is a matter of particular concern for at least two groups: *females*, for whom the developmental course of behaviours such as aggression appears to be different from males; and *indigenous or minority ethnic groups*, for whom the nature, meaning and impact over the lifecourse of risk and protective factors may be quite different from the mainstream (Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium 1999b).

For indigenous young people, specific risk factors may include racism, group powerlessness and the conflicting demands of different cultures. However, the exploration of these factors, as well as of features unique to indigenous culture that may promote resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity, requires that investigators go beyond traditional longitudinal or intervention studies and draw on ethnographic and other qualitative research that explores the major differences in history, local conditions, social structures and culture between indigenous communities and the rest of the Australian population (Langton 1991). This literature suggests that even such basic concepts as the nature and meaning of crime and violence

may be different in Aboriginal communities. For example, a much wider group of people can be involved in violent incidents than is usual in non-Aboriginal communities because of inter-clan rivalries and the extended nature of many families (Atkinson 1994, 1996).

Our aim in this paper is to construct a culturally specific set of risk and protective factors that can be added to the standard lists (Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium 1999a), or that can, perhaps better, provide a 'lens' through which the standard lists can be viewed and reinterpreted. We have no wish to deny the importance of any of the traditional risk factors (such as prematurity, prenatal brain damage, substance abuse, family violence and long-term unemployment) or protective factors (such as social competence, supportive caring parents and a positive school climate). However, it is our contention that we cannot understand what these kinds of factors actually 'mean', nor the relevant developmental pathways in indigenous communities, unless we also appreciate the impact on indigenous people of such experiences as forced removals and institutionalised racism, as well as the ongoing protection provided by such features as strong social bonds to family.

A basic assumption underlying our review is that Aboriginal law-breaking is not exclusively an Aboriginal 'problem' but the product of circumstances created by history, social policies and structures, local conditions, and criminal justice practices (Lincoln & Wilson 1994). We also acknowledge that a study of risk and protective factors is only the first step in arriving at a more sophisticated understanding of the developmental and

other processes leading to crime and violence in indigenous communities.

The developmental approach draws attention much more strongly to aspects of time and timing, to points of transition and change, and to the ongoing interactions between individuals and their environment, than it does to static measures of risk or protection. Even when focusing on risk and protective factors it is the cumulative total and the timing of adverse factors, their interactions (over time) with each other and with positive features of the environment, and the life phases involved that are more important than the compilation of lists.

Nevertheless, the enumeration of factors that reflect relevant features of indigenous culture and social environment may provide important insights into underlying processes. For example, alcohol abuse is a huge problem in Aboriginal communities, but cannot be understood or even given a meaning except in relation to the dependent situation of Aboriginal people within the Australian state. Dependence can therefore be viewed as a 'meta' risk factor that both produces and gives meaning to specific risk factors like alcohol abuse or family violence.

We have also attempted to keep in mind the enormous variations in Aboriginal ways of life across Australia. Urban communities are reasonably similar in key characteristics, yet there is little systematic research on these groups. Rural and remote communities, on the other hand, vary considerably and in contrast to urban groups have attracted the attention of many researchers over the years. While there are similarities, each community responds differently to the apparatus of the Australian state,

and is affected differently by crime and violence (Bimrose & Adams 1995). We acknowledge these differences, but also argue that there are many similarities which make a generalised discussion of Aboriginal crime and violence possible. This is important not just as a cautionary note but because crime prevention programs should be developed at the local level (Bright 1997) and because local factors are critical in the balance between risk and protective factors in Aboriginal communities (Cowlshaw 1994).

We present in the next section an overview of risk factors (here categorised as forced removals, dependence, institutionalised racism, cultural features and substance use) and protective factors (placed here in a typology of cultural resilience, personal controls and family control measures). Our discussion draws on the extant literature, presents data from the Sibling Study, and utilises material from a small number of interviews with key informants in Brisbane (to help redress the imbalance between research on urban and rural communities). While some of this material is subjective or preliminary, it supports and extends the published literature. We conclude with some brief reflections on how an understanding of these risk and protective factors can assist in planning crime prevention research in Aboriginal communities (Homel, Herd, Gross & Burrows, in preparation)².

Risk Factors

Forced Removals

This practice has at least three enduring consequences. The first is the shepherding together of discordant language groups; the second is the physical, social and psychological devastation that flows from the 'stolen generations' aspect of dislocation; and the third is the centralisation and bureaucratic controls particularly evident in the lives of urban Aborigines (Wilson 1997).

With respect to different language groups being placed together, it has been well-documented that Aboriginal people who experienced bad relations with neighbouring groups found that frequently they were forced to live with these groups. Much of this ill feeling has carried over into contemporary feuding (Corporal 1997; Wilson 1982). Some of the dislocation was caused by external circumstance that left few options for some groups to remain on their land. In other instances, such as Queensland government reserves like that on Palm Island, the dislocation was to sites that were no more than places of incarceration for entire families or clans.

It is estimated that between 30,000 and 100,000 people are affected by being part of the stolen generations (Wilson 1997). While this issue is not explored in depth here, it is important to note that the experience of children who were taken forcibly from their parents has proven extremely traumatic for those involved and contributes to present expressions of violence. This is entirely unsurprising given what is now known about the impact on children of the disruption of family and community supports (Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium, 1999b). It is also significant that this is not simply a past phenomenon as the practice continues in some

areas where children are removed, for a range of reasons, for custody or care (O'Connor 1994). Moreover, there are many people who are currently unable to trace their fathers or other family members because of the general ectopic nature of Aboriginal settlements (Corporal 1997). The consequent loss of identity contributes to social isolation and a sense of psychological defeat, as well as to the erosion of the authority of men who are not able to be initiated as 'adults' in their homelands.

The third consequence of forced removals is the increased bureaucratic control that has occurred across the country. While more Aboriginal Australians live in rural and remote communities than is the case for non-Aboriginal Australians, a significant proportion of Aboriginal people now live in urbanised locations as a result of the past policies of dislocation. Such centralised living arrangements mean that many Aboriginal communities are highly bureaucratised because of the layers of white administration that have been imposed upon them in non-Aboriginal terms and without local control (Edmunds 1990). Urban Aborigines complain, for example, that state agencies are reactive, superficial and 'quota driven' in dealing with clients, and that the understanding present in indigenous communities on how problems could be addressed in a more holistic fashion is simply ignored.

Dependence

Much of the literature on violence identifies as a primary issue the dependent state of Aboriginal people in contemporary Australia (of which

bureaucratic control is one aspect) (Hunter 1990; Upton 1992). Because of historical and ongoing political, social and economic conditions (of which forced removals are a part), Aboriginal people are unable, generally, to control their own lives. This is in spite of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC 1992) that called for the empowerment of Aboriginal people and despite the policies of self-determination that have been espoused since the 1970s (Rowse 1992).

Corporal (1997) highlighted the almost total reliance on the state for any form of employment. Most Aboriginal working people are employed by government departments in some capacity concerned with Aboriginal welfare. ATSIC (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission) is constrained by its position as a government department and is mistrusted by many Aboriginal people. Even where Aboriginal people are granted a loan to start a business this occurs through ATSIC and is liable to constraints laid down by government. Those unable to find work are of course reduced to relying on unemployment benefits or pensions. According to our informants, while communities remain in this dependent situation – often exemplified by resentment of police attention and a resort to alcohol – then the degree of violence against self or others will continue unabated.

Institutionalised Racism

Related to the risk factors of forced removals and dependence is the evidence of institutionalised racism which is apparent in levels of both under- and over-policing and unrepresentative numbers of Aboriginal people in custody (Cunneen 1994; Cowlshaw

1994). Aboriginal numbers in custody continue to rise (McDonald 1997), despite the recommendations of the RCIADIC. As Cunneen (1992) observes, Aboriginal people remain as a group to be controlled according to non-Aboriginal definitions of what is correct behaviour.

Over-policing is posited to take four forms. It occurs because of the sheer numbers of police in rural towns with large Aboriginal populations; it is shown in the ratio of charges focused on police as victims, like 'resist arrest' and 'hinder police'; it involves the use of hitherto unused legislation reserved for Aboriginal people only; and it is shown in the manner in which fights and disturbances are handled by the police, which can create further opposition and confrontation (Behrendt 1990). Under-policing is particularly apparent with respect to violence against women. Aboriginal women assert that police generally do not regard matters of domestic violence as important because they retain a non-Aboriginal constructed image of Aboriginal women as being susceptible to forms of violence that are not police business (Atkinson 1990a). Police deployment reflects this view, since street offences (such as public drunkenness) still carry greater weight than do matters of domestic violence (Liska 1992), despite some improvements in recent years (Atkinson 1996).

Likewise Cowlshaw (1994) argues that institutionalised racism is responsible for many actions by Aboriginal people being defined as criminal, leading to over-policing and Aboriginal over-representation in custodial centres. Regardless of any association with criminal activities, the mere fact of birth brings Aboriginal people into constant, unwanted and often unwarranted police attention (Corporal 1997). Other analysts, too, describe how Aboriginal people revert to violence and acts defined as criminal by non-Aboriginal law as a means of resistance to what they regard as racist treatment (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1991; Morris 1995; Sackett 1988). While

some commentators suggest that racism is more indirect than institutionalised (Gale et al 1990), it is undeniable that whatever the label placed on policing and criminal justice practices of this type they exacerbate underlying tensions that can manifest in various forms of violence.

Cultural factors

Many authors report the manner in which prior to 1788 conflict was resolved quickly within the constraints of Aboriginal law and within the local domain (eg, Lucashenko & Best 1995). While clearly there were problems and inequities under pre-invasion Aboriginal law, the methods, while radically different from modern notions of dispute resolution, were usually aimed at involving the community and restoring general harmony as soon as possible. Although this capacity for conflict resolution and the maintenance of equilibrium in close-knit communities has been obstructed by the layers of colonisation and dependence (Reynolds 1995), cultural resilience and adaptation remain as strong features of contemporary Aboriginal life. Unfortunately some of these practices will bring Aboriginal people to criminal justice attention, or indeed lead to higher violence levels.

Examples of cultural practices that are likely to bring Aboriginal people to the attention of the police are the structured use of fighting and swearing behaviours (Langton 1991), and congregating in public spaces (White 1993). A further example is the propensity to engage in activities with large numbers of friends and families, which can again lead to greater police attention, as well as violence. Public drinking sessions exemplify some of these practices, providing the situational ingredients for violent events and also the rationale for heightened police attention (Sackett 1988).

Both reported and unreported domestic violence is a significant problem for Aboriginal people, for whom the rates can be up to 45 times those for non-Aboriginal Australia (Ferrante et al 1996). However, in contrast to non-Aboriginal domestic violence, domestic violence in Aboriginal communities is more varied and usually involves a greater number of victims because of the extended nature of Aboriginal families. For example, young Aboriginal males sometimes attack elderly relatives to obtain their welfare cheques to buy alcohol (Herd 1996). Consequently, Aboriginal people prefer the term 'family fighting' to 'domestic violence' (Bolger 1991). The legal problems resulting from intra-family violence have been documented elsewhere (Atkinson 1990b) but there are strong family and clan loyalties that can take precedence in these matters (Corporal 1997) so that the violence may continue despite criminal justice intervention

Violence can also be increased by a lack of understanding of cultural practices by criminal justice agencies. Often the most inappropriate police officers are assigned to Aboriginal communities, exacerbating problems and reinforcing the general ignorance of Aboriginal cultures (Crawford 1992). A specific example of the importance of cultural factors is provided by a recent study that has found that Aboriginal children distinguish between the authority of parents and the authority of police (Rigby & Black 1993). It is not that they have a general 'disregard for authority,' contrary to the impression a police officer may gain. They simply make an even stronger separation than most children do between the two areas of authority, making it possible to have a clear regard for one but not for the other (Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium 1999b). This separation may have unfortunate consequences.

Alcohol

Alcohol features prominently in violence in Aboriginal communities. For example Langton (1992), reporting to the RCIADIC, found that, while there were no female Aboriginal deaths in custody in the Northern Territory during 1989-90, alcohol-related murders during this period accounted for more female deaths than total deaths in custody. However, consistent with many recent explanations of Aboriginal alcohol-related violence (d'Abbs et al. 1994), we argue that it is not helpful to identify alcohol *the substance* as the prime or only cause of violence, even in alcohol-related incidents, whether or not they occur in Aboriginal communities (Hommel, Tomsen & Thommeny 1992). We prefer a theoretical stance that draws on structuralist and (to some extent) socio-cultural paradigms, in opposition to a biomedical paradigm in which the pharmacological effects of alcohol are of primary importance. This draws attention to risk factors in the culture and the social environment.

Alcohol is used in a structured manner in Aboriginal communities. Collmann (1988) demonstrates how Aboriginal people in Alice Springs have rejected housing and other 'comforts' provided by the state in preference for the relative independence they are able to achieve by living in their fringe camp. Within this community, alcohol has become an important means of exchange with a basis in traditional Aboriginal practices of reciprocity. Sansom (1980) describes a similar situation in a fringe camp in Darwin that is constructed specifically so that its occupants can operate relatively free from controls imposed by the state. Sackett (1988) likewise reveals the way that Aboriginal people in Wiluna, Western Australia, accept sentences handed out by the courts without stopping their drinking that then leads to violence because the alcohol 'empowers' them. Filled with the power of alcohol, they resort to violence as a means of protest against the state for the dependent situations in which they find themselves.

Of course most observers would conclude that the ‘protest’ is misplaced and destructive in its effects. Nevertheless, Collmann (1988) and Sansom (1980) downplay the deleterious results of using large amounts of alcohol, and suggest that it is wrong to regard a community with a high alcohol consumption as unstructured and dysfunctional. All authors show how alcohol is used in a structured manner irrespective of the destructive results of people’s actions. These reports suggest that, when designing programs to address high alcohol consumption, the cultural and social factors related to the practice should be taken into account before, for example, assuming that people are individually pathological and developing treatment programs based on such assumptions (Wooten 1991). Indeed Bolger (1991) found that often men remained violent after treatment for alcoholism because the underlying ‘cause’ of the violence – their dependent state - had not been addressed.

However, all this does not mean that Aboriginal people are not cognisant of the seriousness of alcohol as an exacerbating and facilitating agent in violent actions within their communities. Langton et al (1990) list some of the direct actions taken by Aboriginal people to attack alcohol in conjunction with actions to limit violence. An important aspect of these initiatives is that women are playing a growing role in mobilising opposition to alcohol misuse (suggesting a ‘handle’ for further preventive work in Aboriginal communities) (d’Abbs et al. 1994). Furthermore, it is important to note that fewer Aboriginal people than the general non-Aboriginal Australian population use alcohol (Australian Council on Alcohol and Other Drugs 1990). However, those Aboriginal people who use alcohol do so, generally, at rates far in excess of the rates used by non-Aboriginal Australians.

Protective Factors

Cultural Resilience

Cultural differences should be examined for their positives instead of just focusing on negative outcomes (Hendricks & Byers 1994). As Altman (1996) observes, while there is significant ‘cultural, economic, locational and structural heterogeneity’ this “diversity represents important cultural resilience, revival and distinctiveness” (p. 11). It is true that many communities like Palm Island have been described as “ordered anarchy” where no one is in control (Sullivan 1996), yet there has been enormous accommodation by Aboriginal people where cultural elements have been adopted. However, this incorporation is achieved in very particular Aboriginal ways, serving to demonstrate the resilience of Aboriginal culture. The dislocation discussed earlier for centres like Palm Island has nevertheless forged new communities with legitimate social structures despite their assimilationist origins (Woenne Green 1995).

In a similar vein, it is true that land claims can be disruptive for contemporary communities but they can also play a protective role. Land claims strengthen Aboriginal communities by giving them a voice, coalescing individuals and groups, and giving rise to strong Aboriginal organisations which in turn provide sites of resistance and stronger definitions of community (Edmunds 1995).

Cultural resilience is evident in commonalities of exchange (a system of social relations where the emphasis of ownership is on social, not material, goods); negotiability (social life is fluid and open to change or renegotiation); factionalism (communities are not homogeneous); and

mobility combined with a sense of place. Edmunds (1990) lists forms of Aboriginal social control: avoidance and mobility; fighting and swearing as rule-governed behaviours; witnessing or having guardians as supervisors; ritualised expressions of anger or distress; and the distinction between public and private wrongs. These are acknowledged as ‘traditional’ mechanisms but they operate today in ways that have been adapted to the changed circumstances.

Personal Controls

Biernoff (1982) has commented on the resilience and remarkable coping skills of Aboriginal people in adjustment to the world in which they live. In similar vein, Malin et al (1996) and others have noted that Aboriginal child rearing practices, in comparison with those of Anglo parents, tend to produce children who are nurturant, self-sufficient and resourceful. These views are broadly consistent with data from the Sibling Study (Lincoln et al. 1998)³.

Indigenous youth (n=119) exhibited higher scores on sensation-seeking, self-esteem and related dimensions than the two comparison groups, which were a school cohort (n=666) and a ‘disadvantaged’ cohort (n=124). A high proportion of Aboriginal youth (83%) had confidence that they were able to change most or some things in their lives, and they were the most satisfied with their current position, indicating that they never wish they were someone else (37%). Likewise they expressed considerable confidence in being sure of their lives, with 72% responding that things

were not confusing. Overall they exhibited a strong sense of self-worth (77%).

This elevated self-esteem and confidence is also consistent with a US study that revealed that after controlling for age, socio-economic backgrounds and criminal careers, incarcerated African-Americans had higher self-esteem when engaged in crime than did whites (Wilson & Herrnstein 1985). These findings not only raise questions about the developmental pathways and family contexts that give rise to such robust views of the self, but also provide food for thought for those planning prevention initiatives.

Family Controls

A significant part of the criminological literature deals with the protective factor of 'attachment' under various guises (Sampson & Laub 1993). Such attachment is apparent in the strong social bonds to family in Aboriginal communities, with Aboriginal families being best described as serial extended families. Tripp (1993) in her case study describes how she raised her brothers and sisters and her six grandchildren, and observes that this is not uncommon for Aboriginal women. Aboriginal families tend to be multi-generational and to recompose themselves frequently so that the boundaries are porous (Daly & Smith 1996). Caring and child-reading is often done by older children, aunts and grandmothers (Birdsall 1991). And, while the position of Aboriginal women has been greatly affected by colonisation and dispossession, it is also true that there has been a

concomitant increase in economic independence as well as continuity with the past in their roles as care-givers (Atkinson 1990a).

There are important cultural continuities for Aboriginal families with “continuing significance of kinship ties and the prominent ethic of demand sharing, common socialisation practices, the continuing use by some of Aboriginal languages and by others of distinctive forms of Aboriginal English, and by patterns of mobility within extended social networks, ... land-based identity grounded within a religious framework and common residential histories” (Daly & Smith 1996, p.357). Despite the fact that Aboriginal family life has been pathologised, state interventions (such as the removal of children) has in some cases served to reinforce the “extended system of kin” (Daly & Smith 1996, p.359) which in turn provides the attachment and parental controls that protect against violence. In addition, extended indigenous family networks tend to have greater invisible resources at their disposal even when under stress (due to such trauma as relocation or unemployment) than do non-Aboriginal families. These resources include the sharing of goods and of services like child-minding, house cleaning and sources for cash.

Affective indicators of intra-familial protective factors were examined in the Sibling Study (Lincoln et al. 1998). There was persuasive evidence that precursors to offending are quite different for indigenous young people compared to the other two groups. In terms of the quality of interactions with their parents or primary care-givers, Aboriginal youth believed that their parents took an interest in what they did (85%), that they received

moderate to high emotional support from their parents (79%), and they generally agreed that young people should look up to their parents (62%). These figures are not as high as for the school cohort but they are generally significantly higher than for the disadvantaged group. However, a key intra-familial affective factor is the response to questions about parental support if in trouble with the law. Here the indigenous cohort demonstrated the highest degree of confidence in parent support (60%), believing that their parents would always stick by them if they were caught doing something against the law.

Conclusion

The nature of crime and violence within Aboriginal communities, and the developmental pathways involved, cannot be understood apart from the inglorious history of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in this country, and the way European domination has affected Aboriginal culture, social structures and local communities. No doubt the generally accepted risk and protective factors related to such things as child health, family processes and school performance are as important in Aboriginal as in non-Aboriginal populations. However, the reasons why indigenous peoples are so vulnerable to a multitude of such problems, and how they manage to protect their young people from even worse harm against often overwhelming odds, require a broader analysis than has been attempted thus far.

The kind of analysis we envisage goes beyond the enumeration of the meta-risk and protective factors described in this paper - essential as this first step is. What is required now is a program of detailed empirical research that makes explicit the many

connections between such phenomena as forced removals or institutionalised racism on the one hand, and specific community characteristics, family processes or oppositional behaviours on the other. It is not hard to speculate on the connections. The dependent state of Aboriginal people, for example, seems directly related to the way alcohol is used as a form of protest or empowerment, and alcohol abuse in turn facilitates violence and theft. It follows that the best point of intervention may not be the alcohol use, but the aspects of dependence (such as a lack of meaningful employment) that are most salient for a given individual.

This kind of example may well, however, be over-simple. We will not be in a position to judge until the possible pathways are explored in more depth and we understand more about the diversity of Aboriginal communities and family life. Protective factors in particular need to be better understood, as they do across the whole field of developmental prevention (Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium 1999b). This research can best be done by the growing cadre of highly qualified Aboriginal researchers, and it should be done in the context of specific prevention programs that are designed and controlled by local indigenous people, with input (where requested) from the scientific community.

A starting point must be the different ways crime is understood by Aboriginal Australians. The very concept of 'crime' is problematic for Aboriginal people because it has social and historical associations with police racism and violence, deaths in custody, dispossession, and colonisation. In terms of specific problems, family violence, affecting the whole extended family, is a key issue for Aborigines, while property crimes tend to be the preoccupation of white society. The overall focus is on causes (rather than symptoms) and on the whole culture and community (rather than on individual offenders).

The data and research we have cited suggest that if developmental pathways were thought about from an indigenous perspective, promising modes of intervention that are unique to Aboriginal communities might become apparent (for example, building on the strengths of Aboriginal child rearing practices). Moreover, our evaluation of indigenous prevention programs (Homel et al. in preparation) strongly suggests that many Aboriginal communities are confronting crime and violence with a high degree of success, and that community empowerment is a key factor. As demonstrated by the community justice programs that operate in rural and remote communities in Queensland, Aboriginal people when given the opportunity can work in conjunction with criminal justice agencies to plan successful programs that go well beyond the criminal justice system (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, 1998). As Dodson (1996) noted, these initiatives should logically be adapted to urban environments, where the need is at least as great.

Thus prevention programs cannot be developed in isolation from their community context. Consultation should be bottom-up rather than top-down, trust should be established, and extensive timeframes allocated. This is entirely consistent with the major recommendation (No. 16) of the Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium (1999b). This recommendation, which was for a demonstration project in selected communities over a period of at least four years, built on the definition of developmental prevention presented at the beginning of this paper. A whole-of-community approach was proposed, with local involvement and ownership, incorporating a range of interventions rather than a single program, and aiming to create an inclusive, child-friendly or family supportive environment that promotes the prosocial development of children.

A demonstration project can, however, only take us part of the way toward the identification and creation of meaningful social pathways for indigenous people. The literature suggests that until the broader recommendations of the RCIADIC regarding Aboriginal empowerment are implemented, Aboriginal communities will continue to experience much higher rates of crime and violence than the rest of the nation. More generally, until Aboriginal peoples' dependent situations within the Australian state are addressed, no programs will be permanently effective. This is because new generations will reproduce and intensify Aboriginal resistance to the state, manifestations of which are disorder, substance abuse, crime and violence.

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Notes

1. The Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium is an interdisciplinary research team with members from three Australian states. It is convened by Professor Ross Homel, and was formed in 1997 to undertake research on developmental prevention on behalf of National Crime Prevention (Federal Attorney-General's Department). Its members are: Dr Judy Cashmore, Ms Linda Gilmore, Emeritus Professor Jacqueline Goodnow, Professor Alan Hayes, Associate Professor Jeanette Lawrence, Dr Marie Leech, Professor Jake Najman, Professor Ian O'Connor, Emeritus Professor Tony Vinson, and Emeritus Professor John Western.
2. The detailed review of the indigenous prevention literature on which our reflections are based is available from the Crime Prevention Division, NSW Department of the Attorney General and Justice.
3. In collecting the data from about two thirds of the indigenous respondents, of necessity non-random sampling procedures were used, and the interview schedule was not rigorously adhered to. This added 'subjectivity' may affect future analyses and interpretations of the data, especially in comparisons with other groups in the study sample.

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