



Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd.

Head Office:
6 Alexandra Parade,
P.O. Box 218
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Phone: (03) 9419 3888 (24 Hrs)
Fax: (03) 9419 6024
Toll Free: 1800 064 865

MEDIA RELEASE

Sexual Assault in Aboriginal Communities: Some Research Findings

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Recent Age reports have given the impression that that newspaper has discovered the "problem of indigenous violence". The Age editorial headline on June 22nd was titled "Ending the Secrecy on Black Violence".

The Australian Bureau of Statistics last national survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people occurred in 1994. On an Australia wide basis 45% of indigenous people aged over 13 perceived Family Violence to be a common problem in their local area. There were slightly more females than males (48% compared to 42%) who thought Family Violence was a common problem. These figures from 1994 indicate that there was a wide spread recognition of "black violence" some considerable time ago.

The Age has also given the impression, via cartoonists such as Spooner 19/6 that indigenous people are denying that sexual assault is a problem. A report released by the Commonwealth Government recently, "Violence in Indigenous Communities"(2001) says, "...violence is perceived by many people, both indigenous and non indigenous, as a major problem in indigenous communities." This report states that the majority of literature highlights the complexity of the issues and the lack of any ready quick fix solutions.

The "Violence in Indigenous Communities"(VIC) report highlights the problem of underreporting of assaults but argues that the priority should be on anti violence programs rather than further quantitative research. The report identifies three categories of causes: underlying factors eg historical loss of land and erosion of social bonds, situational factors eg family problems alcohol and unemployment and precipitating factors. The level of violence in communities varies considerably.

Rape and Sexual Abuse

A literature review in the VIC report indicates:
Incidents of rape and violence are occurring in association with other situational factors

Under reporting of rape and difficulties faced by rape victims giving evidence in court are emphasised in the literature.

Giving evidence in court may be difficult due to feelings of being intimidated by authority figures, being shy of white people and coming from a cultural background where sexual matters are not discussed in mixed company let alone a court.

Factors which influence underreporting may include small communities where everyone knows everyone and fear that reporting will lead to the imprisonment of the offender.

Strategies for Combating Indigenous Violence

The VIC report says "The wholistic approach to tackling the violence problem involves providing land housing, health services, education employment, substance abuse services as well as violence programs.....We maintain that to solve violence in indigenous communities, it is necessary to work from the premise that an indigenous community is as intelligent and capable of solving it's own problems as any other community...The question that should be asked is what is disempowering indigenous people from solving their own problems.

On top of this idea of the need for community driven programs is an emphasis on composite programs that combine proactive and reactive strategies.

Rethinking Legal Approaches

In a number of areas in Australia there are projects which increase the input of indigenous people to the justice system. In some cases this means diversion from a court in other cases it means more informal court processes and advice from indigenous elders about cultural and community issues. This is one of many areas where better approaches are being developed.

In some Indigenous communities in Canada there has been a move to block the gaoling of sexual assault offenders and incest offenders by the local community as there is a belief that gaol will not heal the person and will often harden them.(Green, 1998) There is also a concern that if reporting a crime leads to the person being gaoled then the proportion of people who are prepared to report crimes like incest and sexual assault will be very low. Such approaches may not be appropriate in Australia and even in Canada there are questions about how transferable models developed in one community are to another community. At a range of levels there are attempts being made to improve community safety, community health and community empowerment.

Conclusion

Indigenous Communities receive some assistance from Office of Status of Women projects, ATSIC projects, and State government's initiatives(eg dispute resolution , community justice initiatives etc) which are attempting to deal with various aspects of violence. It is not an easy issue and resources are relatively scarce but there is no basis for believing that indigenous communities are unaware or unconcerned about these issues. There is also no basis for ignoring the need to make progress on the broader causes of the problems which are so clearly linked to the ongoing effect of past occupation and social disruption.