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Abstract | Low levels of literacy and education are often associated with negative interactions with and experiences of the criminal justice system. Low literacy also contributes to the over-representation of Indigenous Australians in the justice system.

This paper examines service provider and criminal justice practitioner perspectives of the 'Yes, I Can!' adult literacy campaign. Interviews with 22 workers in regional New South Wales suggest that the majority believe the 'Yes, I Can!' program can potentially improve the type and frequency of interactions between Indigenous Australians and the criminal justice system.

Overwhelmingly, participants viewed increasing literacy levels as key in empowering Indigenous Australians and enhancing encounters with criminal justice service providers. Further study and evaluation, including interviewing participants of the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign and community Elders, is of utmost importance.

Impact of the 'Yes, I Can!' adult literacy campaign on interactions with the criminal justice system

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As discussed in the literature review section, previous studies have found an indirect link between low adult literacy levels and high rates of negative interactions with police and the court system (see, for example AIHW 2013; Community Development and Justice Standing Committee (CDJSC) 2010; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCATSIA) 2011; Putniņš 1999). Additionally, low literacy and education levels have been associated with the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the criminal justice system.

The 'Yes, I Can!' campaign uses an internationally developed model for raising adult literacy rates in a population. It was first piloted in Australia in 2012, in Wilcannia, a predominantly Aboriginal community in the Murdi Paaki region of north-western New South Wales (Boughton et al. 2013) in an effort to reduce low literacy rates in Aboriginal communities. The campaign is led by a national Aboriginal organisation—the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF)—which works in the target communities, in partnership with local Aboriginal organisations.



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In 2013 ‘Yes, I Can!’ was introduced in Bourke and Enngonia, two towns in regional New South Wales. At that time, 202 of the 505 Aboriginal adults living in Bourke (approximately 40 percent) had low or very low literacy. In Enngonia, 21 of the 52 adult Aboriginal residents (approximately 40 percent) had low or very low literacy (Boughton et al. 2014; LFLF 2015a). Between 2013 and 2015, four groups of participants took part in the campaign in Bourke, with a total of 51 graduates. In Enngonia only one group took part in the campaign, which included all those who had expressed an interest, with 15 graduates (LFLF 2018).

This study examined service provider and criminal justice practitioner views of the ‘Yes, I Can!’ campaign. Through 22 semi-structured, open-ended interviews with practitioners and service providers in Bourke and Enngonia, researchers sought to examine the impacts of the ‘Yes, I Can!’ literacy campaign on Aboriginal community members’ encounters with the criminal justice system.

This paper presents the results of the interview component of a 16-month project funded by a Criminology Research Grant. The results indicate that adult literacy programs (specifically, the ‘Yes, I Can!’ adult literacy campaign), can improve the type and frequency of interactions between Indigenous Australians and the criminal justice system. In the interests of addressing over-representation and increasing access to justice, this is a field which warrants further attention for policymakers.

Current knowledge

The ‘Yes, I Can!’ campaign

In 2000, the Latin American and Caribbean Pedagogical Institute developed the ‘Yo! Sí Puedo’ campaign and by 2016 various models of the program had been adopted in 30 countries, including Australia. Estimates suggest that it has provided 10 million people with a basic ability to read and write (Valdés Abreu 2016). The ‘Yes, I Can!’ adult literacy campaign uses this internationally developed model for raising adult literacy rates in Australia (Boughton & Durnan 2014). After the 2012 pilot, ‘Yes, I Can!’ was extended to Bourke and Enngonia—the sites for this study. It has since also been introduced in the communities of Brewarrina, Walgett, Toomelah and Boggabilla.

The ‘Yes, I Can!’ campaign operates in three stages. The first stage involves mobilising the community; local organisations are asked to support and encourage individuals and families to enrol in the campaign. Local staff conduct a household survey to ascertain interest and the level of need, and to raise awareness of the importance of increasing adult literacy levels in the community (Boughton et al. 2013; Boughton & Durnan 2014). During the second stage, which lasts two to three months, participants watch 64 one-hour long lessons on DVD and complete written and oral exercises with in-class facilitators. In the third ‘post-literacy’ stage (with a span of two to three months), participants apply their literacy skills to real-life scenarios such as by reading to children, working with computers, preparing resumes, undertaking work experience and attending workshops on community issues (Cullen 2014). On completion of the classes, students are eligible for a scholarship payment of \$300 (Williamson & Boughton 2017).

According to LFLF, the campaign focuses on 'building a community culture that values and supports learning' which is said to be a unique feature of 'Yes, I Can!' as compared to other literacy programs (LFLF 2015b: 4). LFLF regards community cooperation and collaboration as essential, as is access to the campaign (LFLF 2015b: 4). Under the LFLF framework, a maximum of 15 people can enrol in each class, and classes are run sequentially until all those who want to attend have done so, or until the funding is exhausted. In the case of Enngonia, all those who expressed interest in the campaign did enrol, whereas in Bourke funding ceased after four intakes, even though greater numbers had expressed an interest in participating than were able to attend. The 'Yes, I Can!' campaign marked the first time a mass campaign model had been adopted to address low literacy rates in specific regions and populations in Australia.

Literacy levels in Australia

There are stark differences in adult literacy levels throughout Australian communities, and rates among Indigenous Australians are significantly lower than among non-Indigenous populations. The 2016 Australian Census highlighted that the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 20 to 24 years who had completed Year 12 or its equivalent was 47 percent (ABS 2017a). Despite the fact that Year 12 completion rates have increased by more than a third since 2011, rates among non-Indigenous adults were substantially higher, at 79 percent (ABS 2017a). Additionally, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) states:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25 to 64 years were more likely than non-Indigenous people of the same age to have left school at Year 9 or below (19% compared with 6.7%). (ABS 2017a: np)

There is scant recent data, but a 2011–12 assessment found that 14 percent of adult Australians (2.3 million people) were at or below the lowest level of literacy competence (ABS 2013). The proportion was higher for people who were unemployed or out of the labour force, at 22 percent (ABS 2013). While the ABS did not publish Indigenous literacy data, community studies suggest that at least 35 percent of Aboriginal people have minimal English skills, and this figure is higher in rural and remote communities (Boughton 2009; Kral & Schwab 2003).

Higher levels of illiteracy are evident in the criminal justice system, and in particular the prison system. For example, the NSW Department of Corrective Services found that in 2001 there was a 60 percent rate of functional illiteracy among inmates (Grunseit, Forell & McCarron 2008: 26). Indigenous people are over-represented in Australian prisons, with 27 percent of the total Australian prison population identifying as Indigenous (ABS 2017b). Further, Indigenous people entering or leaving prison have lower levels of educational attainment compared to non-Indigenous Australians (AIHW 2013: 21). Indig et al. (2010) assert that 73 percent of Indigenous male prisoners and 60 percent of Indigenous female prisoners left school before Year 10. This is in comparison to 43 percent of non-Indigenous male prisoners and 39 percent of non-Indigenous female prisoners (Indig et al. 2010: 15).

Low literacy and low school retention rates among Aboriginal people have previously been identified as an explanation for Aboriginal over-representation throughout the criminal justice system (for instance, see AIHW 2013; CDJSC 2010; HRSCATSIA 2011; Putniņš 1999). This corresponds with international research on literacy and incarceration which has investigated the role of poor school performance—coupled with regular absences from school—in creating a ‘school-to-prison pipeline’. Individuals most likely to be affected by this are ‘minority students in the poorest and most under-resourced communities’ (Schiff 2013: 2). Applying this finding to the Australian context, it is reasonable to hypothesise that significant proportions of Indigenous juveniles are likely to be at risk of having low literacy levels and therefore an increased likelihood of travelling down the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’.

Links between literacy and Aboriginal over-representation in the criminal justice system

National, state and regional statistics indicate that Indigenous people experience very high rates of contact with the criminal justice system as alleged offenders, victims and witnesses, and as people on bail or probation (ABS 2016; Brown et al. 2016; Cunneen 2001). Indigenous Australians face a series of disadvantages which increase their level of interaction with the criminal justice system, and low literacy levels are just one. International and Australian research demonstrates that low literacy levels can have a detrimental impact on encounters with the criminal justice system, particularly with police, courts and corrections agencies. Siegel (2002: 287) asserts that literacy is a significant tool for empowerment and can enhance such interactions.

Engagement with the criminal justice system operates by way of interaction with police, because of their role as ‘gatekeepers’. Accordingly, Randles and Lauchs (2012: 7) note that ‘the system is reliant upon the skills and knowledge of the police in its interactions with the Indigenous community’. Low literacy levels can contribute to a breakdown in communication with officers, who may not recognise the problem, particularly if they have minimal experience, skill and awareness of the issue (Randles & Lauchs 2012: 7). These communication barriers have implications for the level and frequency of contact Indigenous Australians have with the criminal justice system.

Advocates, academics and state bodies have acknowledged that Indigenous witnesses and defendants face specific challenges comprehending and engaging in court proceedings because of, or exacerbated by, low literacy levels (Judicial Commission of NSW 2017; see also Eades 2008; Ehrlich, Eades & Ainsworth 2016). Illiteracy is still a prevailing factor of judicial consideration when sentencing Indigenous Australians, as magistrates and judges recognise it as an issue which disproportionately disadvantages Aboriginal defendants (Eades 2016: 472). Moreover, differences between languages can prevent effective communication between defendants, their legal representatives and others involved in the court process. Beqiraj and McNamara (2015: 19) contend that low literacy rates and language skills affect the awareness of legal rights of both the accused and the victim. Having a limited understanding of judicial proceedings and an inability to effectively communicate with lawyers and the court (either orally or in written form) affects experiences of and outcomes for defendants.

Case studies from the Kimberley region highlight how stark problems can be for Indigenous people who have minimal English language skills. Crawford (2010: 470) recounts one case in which an inmate was brought into the court to translate proceedings into the defendant's language as he did not understand English and there was no court appointed translator. Despite the defendant's clear lack of understanding of English, he was asked to sign a form outlining his obligations, which, if contravened, would result in further criminal sanctions. This example illustrates how people whose first language is not English and who have low literacy skills are disadvantaged in criminal justice processes and how this can result in defendants breaching bail conditions (Sanderson, Mazerolle & Anderson-Bond 2011: 53).

Unfortunately, it is often assumed that proceedings conducted and documents written in English are universally understood. In these circumstances, Indigenous Australians with low literacy levels may inadvertently increase their levels of contact with the criminal justice system when conditions issued by criminal justice agencies are not met. Indeed 'language and literacy concerns' have also been identified as barriers to Aboriginal engagement with rehabilitation programs (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services 2013: 19).

In the Australian context, there are many ways in which increased literacy rates in Indigenous communities can result in a reduction in criminal activity and reduced contact with the justice system. For example, illiteracy can lead to criminal activity relating to driving offences (Thompson, McGregor & Davies 2016), breaches of bail or compliance orders, and offences relating to welfare fraud and other penalty evasions. An inability to read a penalty notice can result in a fine default and subsequently a custodial sentence (HRSCATSIA 2011; see also CDJSC 2010). In fact, in 2013, 1,358 people were imprisoned in Western Australia solely on the basis of fine defaults, and 16 percent of them were Indigenous Australians (Law Council of Australia 2015: 18). The penalties for unpaid fines continue to escalate, compounded by surplus enforcement fees.

Cullen (2014: np) argues that illiteracy is a critical factor in the over-representation of Indigenous people in Australian prisons because illiteracy prevents people from being able to 'legally perform everyday tasks such as obtaining drivers licences'. Thompson, McGregor and Davies (2016: np) maintain that 'Aboriginal people make up almost a third of all the people jailed in Australia for driving offences'. Driving offences are associated with a complex interaction of social and environmental factors. Specifically, these factors include the need for private transport in remote areas, and high levels of poverty and unemployment which limit car maintenance (CDJSC 2010; Cunneen 2001; Pilkington 2009).

It is evident that literacy impacts on individual and community encounters with the criminal justice system. Low literacy has been linked to problematic justice system encounters, higher rates of incarceration, and reduced opportunities for rehabilitation. Effective campaigns that raise literacy levels should therefore play an important role in improving encounters with the criminal justice system.

Methodology

The research team includes persons who identify as Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons. Non-Indigenous members had completed cultural sensitivity courses run by Indigenous staff at the University of New England or degrees in Indigenous studies, or had longstanding histories of working with Indigenous researchers and communities. Thus all were well aware of the need to ensure that the research design was developed, and executed, in responsible ways that recognised and respected the potential impacts of the research on Aboriginal communities. The researchers also understood that, for Indigenous people, research frequently has negative connotations. As Tuhiwai Smith (2012) has observed, in Indigenous people's experience, research has often been exploitative and self-serving, with negative implications for its subjects. The researchers consulted with Aboriginal communities prior to conducting the research, worked with local Aboriginal researchers and reported back to Aboriginal communities in open forums.

As a pilot study, the researchers decided to collect data from low-risk participants (service providers and criminal justice workers) to determine whether the 'Yes, I Can!' project was reducing Aboriginal people's contact with the criminal justice system. However, the researchers appreciate that a significant limitation of this study is the absence of the views and experiences of the Aboriginal people who participated as students in the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign, and these views should be included and prioritised in future research.

While interviews were not conducted with the Aboriginal community members who participated in the literacy program, the research was intended to be responsive to the needs and desires of Bourke's Aboriginal community. As such, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted to elicit views and experiences of how the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign affected Aboriginal interactions with the criminal justice system. At the conception of the project, a list was compiled of organisations in Bourke and Enngonia that might yield potential participants. A number of these organisations, such as Maranguka and the Murrawarri Local Aboriginal Land Council, provided letters of support for the research during the design of the study and highlighted the importance of the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign to the local communities. Key informants included individuals in community representative roles, as well as their service provider roles. Consequently, this research involved collaborating with key informants who were also members of the community.

Two rounds of field work were conducted in 2016. Twenty-two participants were interviewed for the study; three were interviewed twice. Although this number is modest, which restricts the generalisability of findings, it is important to recognise the import of the location and the communities examined in this research. Staff from a broad cross-section of organisations that fit within the remit of this study participated in interviews. Moreover, most organisations that could be identified as performing work relevant to this study were represented.

One of the most significant ethical issues related to participant identity. Participants in interviews and students who took part in the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign may have been identifiable in stories recounted in interviews. Study participants were asked if they consented to being identifiable in research outputs. While interviewees were given the option to remain de-identified, given the size of Bourke and Enngonia it is likely that even those interview participants who wished to remain de-identified will be identifiable to one another and to the wider community. This was outlined and explained in a Participant Information Sheet. Information that could identify students of the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign has been omitted from the research findings.

One of the challenges of conducting qualitative research is ensuring the research 'fully and correctly captures the true meanings and interpretations of the respondents' (Sarantakos 2005: 46). To minimise problems of interpreting the data, participants were offered copies of their transcripts to ensure that their meaning was fully conveyed throughout the interview. During the coding of the interview phase, three of the researchers coded the interviews separately and then discussed their scores. A research assistant was then hired to code the data. To ensure inter-rater reliability, four people were involved in the coding process—one independent from the research—thus reducing the problem of researcher bias. Throughout this process, there were variances in the terms used for specific codes (for example, 'empowerment' compared to 'increased confidence'). However, as Armstrong et al. (1997) found, there was close agreement around the fundamental themes that were documented and these overarching terms were then grouped together for analysis.

Results

While many interviewees felt the impact of 'Yes, I Can!' was difficult to measure, in the main they believed the campaign had a positive impact on participants and their interactions with the justice system. The majority of those interviewed were able to cite anecdotal qualitative evidence of a particular campaign participant being positively impacted by their experience. However, in some of these cases, it was also recognised that the 'Yes, I Can!' participant had relapsed into criminal behaviour once the campaign had finished.

The LFLF National Campaign Manager stated that many of the students and all of the staff involved in the campaign had previously been involved in the criminal justice system, or knew of family members who had been. In these interactions they could have been victims, offenders (those arrested, processed through the court system, incarcerated, or placed on probation or parole) or family members of victims or offenders. Throughout some interviews, themes of over-policing and negative police–community relationships were raised.

The majority of interview participants acknowledged that low levels of literacy are problematic for many reasons. Unemployment, general levels of disengagement within the community, and an inability to understand official communication or documents were all cited as problems associated with low rates of literacy.

Criminal justice system outcomes associated with 'Yes, I Can!'

Interviewees identified a range of areas where illiteracy was impacting on engagement with the criminal justice system. In particular, the issue of illiterate persons coming into increased contact with the criminal justice system because of driving without a licence was cited by 10 of the participants.

For example, one interviewee said:

...people want to learn to drive a car in Bourke, a lot of people don't have their licence because they can't do the Ls [learners licence] test. So, this literacy thing would let them be able to get a drivers [licence]. (Mission Australia participant)

As documented in the literature, driving without a licence is a significant problem in rural and remote areas due to the lack of public transport and the long distances to services. The LFLF National Campaign Manager noted the lack of public transport in both communities (but particularly in Enngonia) and the problems associated with travelling to access services:

...people get a lift into town or drive illegally into town. Because...there is no community bus service that takes people into Bourke or Brewarrina, which are the two closest places...There is no community bus service for shopping, or for medical services or for hospital.

Driving offences were perceived to be a large problem in both the Bourke and Enngonia areas, with many participants noting how the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign reduced contact with the criminal justice system in relation to driving without a licence. For instance, one interviewee noted:

A lot of young fellows drive while unlicensed and [are] getting big fines and then ending up not being able to get their licence later on because they've got these massive fines, and I think it's helped...they're not embarrassed to actually go and sit down and actually do their exams... people are actually wanting to get their licence so that drops the rate of people driving without a licence. (Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer)

'Yes, I Can!' staff worked with students during classes to practise the licence tests and then with Birrang (an Aboriginal organisation which runs a driving school) to enrol several students in driver education and licensing sessions.

The Darling River Commander of the NSW Police Force perceived a benefit of the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign in reducing a specific individual's offending and interaction with the criminal justice system:

Clearly a person that was disengaged with society, had no purpose in life. This was a fellow that probably, in part thanks to a lot of the older people that had a lot of courage to go and engage in this system and be trailblazers, he [sic] signed up for the program and attended very regularly; gave him a purpose in life. To my knowledge, he did not come to the attention of the police or the other authorities in his time on the program.

Another interviewee said that the campaign helped to keep students 'out of trouble' with the police because they had a place to go every day (Interviewee 16). There was also a suggestion that, because the students had a greater sense of pride and empowerment as a result of being able to read, crime levels would be reduced (Interviewee 9). However, there were also cases reported of students enrolled in the campaign reoffending or breaching parole.

Enhanced literacy can facilitate compliance with orders, conditions and contracts. In this vein, some participants maintained that Aboriginal community members had high levels of contact with the criminal justice system because they were unable to understand communication regarding tenancy, debts and other issues.

Because a lot of our people get the letter and then throw it away, the officials say, 'They're ignoring us; we're going to breach them,' and all this. But it comes down to the fact they couldn't read it. (Aboriginal Affairs NSW participant)

We put a paper down and we'll say 'here, sign this', we'll sign it and that's what a lot of our people do out there, that's why a lot of them end up back in the prison. They don't even know what they're signing, a lot of them consent to whatever you say they did and they don't even realise they just done that. (Interviewee 9)

As such, low literacy appears to affect how Aboriginal people interact with and respond to criminal justice processes. On this issue, participants perceived the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign to be assisting students in a positive manner.

For the LFLF National Campaign Manager, 'Yes, I Can!' gave students more awareness and confidence to 'manage the system' and seek help from service providers such as legal aid.

In regard to the court system, there was evidence that the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign had been used by some magistrates in the local area as a condition of bond. A previous local magistrate reported that he had in fact quashed a habitual offender declaration for one of the students enrolled in 'Yes, I Can!', which permitted that student to apply for a drivers licence.

Some interviewees reported that the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign facilitated better relationships between Aboriginal communities and criminal justice organisations such as the police. One participant said:

It's building that rapport and building a relationship with police...for instance when there's a class of 'Yes, I Can!' students the police are coming in on a regular basis and introducing themselves. They're making that sort of contact, as opposed to the next time you see them they're dragging you off in handcuffs. (Maranguka Executive Director)

However, one participant (the LFLF National Campaign Manager) raised concerns that negative encounters between the police and Aboriginal students in 'Yes, I Can!' were still occurring in Enngonia. Moreover, there were, interviewees maintained, areas where police needed to take more proactive steps to identify and address illiteracy problems:

One of the things they could establish, when he's being charged and he has to sign his name or whatever, it's a great opportunity to pick up, 'Oh, this guy can't write his name'. Or, 'Do you understand what I'm saying?' Because they just nod. Straightaway, as a pathway, the police can create the relationships with the ALS [Aboriginal Legal Service] or with Maranguka and say, 'Look, when this guy—when he's charged and released back in the community, we need to link him up. Be that advocacy'. (Aboriginal Affairs NSW participant)

Some of the participants discussed how the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign was transforming some students' quality of life and, subsequently, deterring them from further crime. For example, one interviewee said:

...what I believe around the 'Yes, I Can!' program, it's something that can help us...break the cycle of repeat offending...if someone's down there who can't read and write, well it's not their problem, it's ours. It's up to us to find a way to help them overcome that problem. By doing 'Yes, I Can!' program, it says a lot. It speaks for itself. (Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation and Bourke LFLF Campaign Coordinator)

However, two interview participants stated that they had not really observed an effect of 'Yes, I Can!' on crime. For example, Interviewee 2 did not believe they had seen any difference between 'Yes, I Can!' students and those who had not enrolled in the campaign in the way they understood court proceedings. Some noted that it was hard to separate out the impacts of different programs such as 'Yes, I Can!', the bail clinic, changes to the *Bail Act 2013* (NSW) and the driving school.

Overall, the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign was credited with great achievements within the Bourke and Enngonia communities. Interviewees believed the campaign had increased access to legal and health services, increased employment, improved community connections and relationships, assisted different service providers to work together, and fostered a sense of personal empowerment and achievement. Support from the community for the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign is ongoing, with many of the interviewees expressing a desire to know when the next campaign would commence.

Discussion

Ultimately, the information emerging from interviews in this study suggests that the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign can enhance community members' lives in myriad ways. However, the focus of this study was initially whether the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign impacted Aboriginal community members' encounters with the criminal justice system in Bourke and Enngonia. This question was difficult to address. Complicating the assessment is the fact that there are many programs operating in Bourke and, to a lesser extent, Enngonia. Regardless, the data provide some preliminary findings which indicate the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign can not only reduce the number of negative encounters with the criminal justice system but also improve the overall experience Aboriginal people have when coming into contact with the criminal justice system, whether as victims, offenders or community members.

This study found that, while concerns exist in Bourke about detrimental relationships with the police, there was a feeling that these bonds were bolstered as a result of the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign and the engagement of the Darling River Commander of the NSW Police Force. Programs such as 'Yes, I Can!', where the police are actively involved in them, have the power to increase public trust in the police. In Bourke, in particular, the police made a commitment to the campaign that, as the interviews indicate, has already started to improve relationships between the police and the wider community.

There was some indication that enrolment in the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign altered individual encounters with the court system. For example, a magistrate said he favourably considered enrolment in the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign when deciding to quash a habitual offender declaration.

The 'Yes, I Can!' campaign can give Indigenous Australian participants the basic literacy skills required to understand and navigate court processes and adhere to the directions of the court. The LFLF National Campaign Manager asserted that the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign enabled students to understand more about the criminal justice system, including their rights and how they should operate within the system.

The interview data from this research identified a number of ways in which the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign enhanced the way community members enrolled in the campaign were able to access legal resources and advocacy. As the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign involved a number of local services, the students were exposed to a number of different agencies operating in the area. This is a real strength of the campaign and it was observed by many interviewees, although some wanted to see more links forged with services, especially once the campaign ended. Furthermore, interview participants commented on how the language of students enrolled in 'Yes, I Can!' had evolved and redefined the way they were accessing services, and also their overall confidence in those services. Their capabilities and confidence in literacy enabled services to respond to, and perhaps better address, the needs of the students.

Some of the participants in this study also saw a shift in the way students responded to official documentation. In the past such documents may have been unacknowledged, leading to further criminal charges. Indeed, Interviewee 8 discussed how Aboriginal people would frequently have further criminal charges laid against them because they did not understand fines or court summonses sent to them and therefore did not respond to them. The 'Yes, I Can!' campaign, many participants believe, empowered individuals to follow up on this official correspondence, even if it was by asking for assistance in translating and understanding the documents. This may result in long-term reductions in individual engagement with the criminal justice system.

Conclusion

Indigenous Australians continue to be over-represented in all facets of the criminal justice system. Existing literature and research data show that illiteracy or limited literacy can contribute to engagement with the criminal justice system. As such, programs that can improve literacy and consequently minimise this over-representation are of paramount policy concern.

Several policy considerations emerged in the course of data analysis. First, increased empowerment and education were frequently attributed to 'Yes, I Can!' participation by service providers and criminal justice practitioners in the communities, and increased empowerment may result in greater confidence in approaching service providers for assistance, as either victims or alleged offenders. However, as there are a number of justice reinvestment programs in Bourke and Enngonia, further longitudinal studies and studies involving campaign participants are required to assess the connection between increased empowerment and education and the 'Yes, I Can!' campaign.

There is some evidence that increased literacy can assist participants in areas such as obtaining their drivers licence, complying with court orders and paying fines. In the long term this may offer a crime reduction strategy for governments in relation to driving offences and breach offences.

Second, the campaign seemed to improve Aboriginal–police relationships. In the interests of extending this progress, the Darling River Commander of the NSW Police Force expressed interest in developing educational programs that promote cross-cultural awareness for new police officers coming into Bourke and being involved in future campaigns.

The participants in this study recognised that, although there may not yet be conclusive evidence that ‘Yes, I Can!’ reduced contact with the criminal justice system, it seeks to disrupt Aboriginal engagement in the criminal justice system. As literacy levels within communities improve, correspondingly, problems contributing to criminal behaviour can lessen.

The ‘Yes, I Can!’ campaign gives offenders (and potential offenders) an opportunity to engage in a community based project that offers support and builds skills. The campaign and the partnerships with other agencies have the potential to begin and build on a process of transformation, allowing people to gain more control over their lives and their relationships with the justice system.

Lastly, the campaign has the potential to help offenders and victims through the criminal justice process by giving them the capabilities in literacy necessary to understand and navigate these processes.

Future research could be informed by a more complex model of the pathways and outcomes linked to the activities of the adult literacy campaign. To determine whether the campaign affects the local communities’ interactions with the criminal justice system, future studies should evaluate the following:

- any reductions in offences committed by community members, including unlicensed driving;
- any reductions in custodial sentences imposed on community members;
- any reduced fine burdens on community members;
- improved community–police relations;
- improved understanding among citizens of their rights and responsibilities;
- improved access to and use of legal advice and support;
- any increase in community safety;
- any reduction in antisocial behaviour;
- any change in inter-community conflict or social cohesion;
- development and further evolution of locally controlled organisations; and
- the nature of relationships and (culturally appropriate) communications with professionals and service providers in the criminal justice system.

As a next step, the ‘Yes, I Can!’ campaign should be further evaluated within a longitudinal framework, with data collected before and after the campaign. Ideally, future projects should be of a larger scale, across multiple communities. The studies should seek consent from other community members, including Elders and especially the participants of the ‘Yes, I Can!’ campaign, for their de-identified data to be linked to publicly available datasets such as police and court records.

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Conflict of interest

The team acknowledge that conflicts of interest arose in the course of this project. First, two of the researchers in this study (Adjunct Professor Jack Beetson and Associate Professor Bob Boughton) are closely connected to the 'Yes, I Can!' literacy campaign. Their presence on the research team provided a richer and more nuanced understanding of the context and was ultimately essential to the success of the research. Second, one of the interviewees in this study (the LFLF National Campaign Manager) is married to Dr Boughton.

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