

NDLERF Monograph No. 33.

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE INFLUX OF INDIGENOUS 'VISITORS' TO DARWIN'S LONG GRASS FROM REMOTE NT COMMUNITIES – PHASE 2: *BEING UNDESIRABLE: LAW, HEALTH AND LIFE IN DARWIN'S LONG GRASS.*

Holmes and McRae-Williams (2009).

Plain English summary and implications for police prepared by Roger Nicholas.

Aims and Methodology

The primary aim of the research was to ascertain what Darwin's Aboriginal Long Grass¹ dwellers require to attain an acceptable level of health and quality of life and to be law-abiding citizens.

The study sought: to monitor changes to the population influx of remote Aboriginal visitors into Darwin; to explore the reasons why individuals/groups left their home communities and chose to move to Darwin in particular; to explore the perceived impacts of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) on the Long Grass dwellers; to explore the problems, stressors and drinking patterns of people in the Long Grass and determine if barriers exist to reducing these; to develop strategies with Long Grass groups, government and non-government agencies to overcome these issues; and to explore the perceptions of non-Aboriginal residents who live in close proximity to Long Grass camps.

The study involved: a literature search; 122 informal semi-structured face-to-face interviews with (individuals and small groups of) Long Grass dwellers; the application of the Australian Aboriginal Version of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire to 60 Long Grass dwellers to assess the prevalence of symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; and the administration of a face-to-face semi-structured survey to 368 non-Aboriginal individuals.

Key findings

- The Northern Territory in general, and Darwin in particular, has a massively higher rate of primary homelessness when compared with the rest of Australia.
- The study findings were suggestive of an increase in the level of Aboriginal primary homelessness in Darwin which followed the announcement of the NTER in June, 2007. Study participants did not, however, generally attribute their move to Darwin to the NTER. The Aboriginal study participants predominantly believed that the primary aim of the NTER was to manage their income, rather the NTER being a child welfare initiative.

¹ 'Staying in the Long Grass' is a term used in the Northern Territory to refer to those experiencing primary or absolute homelessness. It refers to people without conventional accommodation and living on the streets, in deserted buildings, improvised dwellings, or in parks, etc.

- Many of the Long Grass dwelling population were found to have aged prematurely. The most common reason they had left their home communities was to escape family problems which generally involved violence. These problems were exacerbated by a lack of housing in their home communities. These issues, plus the ability to more readily access alcohol in Darwin, were the important factors that led them to leave their homes for the Long Grass.
- Half of the study participants staying in the Long Grass had been living rough for a period of up to two months and a large proportion had been doing so for more than six months. The authors suggested that this indicated a high transition rate of individuals into chronic homelessness as a way of life. Many of this group are likely to require life-long support.
- While in the Long Grass, the main stressors experienced by individuals were violence, their perceived lack of rights and autonomy and the concerns they felt for family left in home communities.
- Many of the Aboriginal Long Grass dwellers had significant lifetime exposure to traumatic events. A large proportion reported being affected by symptoms commonly associated with post traumatic stress disorder. The authors suggested that this could be an important contributing factor to the high levels of alcohol consumption among many of the dwellers.
- Non-Indigenous study participants tended to regard those living in the Long Grass as overwhelmingly problematic in relation to: their drinking and drunkenness; their fighting and arguing; their adverse effect on amenity; them being a source of contagion; and the problems they caused for themselves. Living in the Long Grass was generally regarded as a lifestyle or cultural choice and very little empathy was shown in relation to the life circumstances of Aboriginal people in the Long Grass.
- The study concluded that it is impossible to live in Darwin's Long Grass and maintain health, a satisfactory quality of life and to be a law abiding citizen.

Implications for policing

The authors recommended that law enforcement agencies:

- Consider the implications of the growing Aboriginal homeless population and ensure that adequate strategies are developed, and resources are allocated, to provide effective policing services to them and to ensure their safety;
- support ongoing research with homeless populations which: assists in the development of effective (pro-active) policing strategies with them; and (with a view to reducing elder abuse) examines the provision of aged care facilities to Aboriginal people;
- Implement ongoing professional development for police, recruits and general staff which promotes an awareness of: the impacts of mainstream values, beliefs and attitudes on the functioning of mainstream institutions (such as policing); and the impact of stigma, trauma and trauma-related illness on the health, wellbeing and behaviour of homeless populations;
- Implement diversion programs and other initiatives that create opportunities for more positive police engagement with youth and improve the level of trust between homeless/ marginalised populations and the police; and
- Initiate mechanisms to develop and support partnerships with organisations providing health, welfare, respite, rehabilitation and detoxification services to homeless populations.

A full copy of this report is available on the NDLERF website at www.ndlerf.gov.au

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