

# Factors affecting crime rates in Indigenous communities in NSW: a pilot study in Wilcannia and Menindee

## COMMUNITY REPORT JUNE 2009

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It was our privilege to be allowed access to the ideas and expertise in Wilcannia and Menindee that are reflected in this report. We were struck by the generosity of those who participated in our study, both in giving their time to be interviewed but also in their willingness to reflect deeply and honestly on the circumstances of the two communities. Participants took the time to carefully check and amend the quotes we selected from their interviews that we considered as reflective of common views and important elements arising from the research.

We respect the decision of some of the people we spoke with to not be identified in the report. Given the nature of the research with its investigation of community dynamics and dealing with the sensitive issue of crime, anonymity for some people was vital, especially for the performance of their jobs. However, it is important to note that the themes that we have identified emerge from the conversations with all participants. Although not all participants are quoted, all made a significant contribution.

We would like to acknowledge and thank everyone who generously gave up their time and shared their thoughts and expertise with our Research Team.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This report outlines the findings of a pilot study undertaken by a research team from Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology Sydney, with support from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR).

There are notable differences in the Local Court data on crime rates between different Aboriginal communities in NSW. Despite this, there is a lack of qualitative research on the factors affecting crime rates in Aboriginal communities. This pilot study set out to look at two towns with significant Aboriginal communities that are comparable in terms of geography, population and context, but with higher or lower crime rates. Wilcannia and Menindee were suggested as appropriate communities for our pilot study.

The aim of our study was to identify common themes and factors that may be considered to have an impact on crime rates being higher in Wilcannia and lower in Menindee. Given that our focus was on understanding the political, social, cultural and economic dynamics contributing to crime rates, we interviewed a range of community and organisational representatives and others working in relevant criminal justice and service delivery roles, as a way to better understand the dynamics and experiences of the community as a whole.

This report is intended to reflect the views of the people that we spoke to in September and October 2008.

### **Our approach**

We are very aware that all too often, research is something that is 'done to' Indigenous people solely for the researchers' own purposes with little benefit to the community. We are committed to an approach that is focused on issues of concern to Indigenous communities and which should be assessed in terms of accountability and benefit to the people with whom we work.

Indigenous people have a wisdom and insight regarding the dynamics of their own communities that is too often overlooked or disregarded. We are aware of the way that stereotypical media representations and outsiders' perceptions of many Indigenous communities have had a negative impact on the people who live and work there. While Indigenous communities may share similar histories or experiences in certain areas such as the impact of government policies and practices, an understanding that Indigenous communities are not the same is the starting point for our research.

We hope that our research may start to document whether there are particular characteristics or strategies that may have a positive or negative impact on crime rates in certain Aboriginal communities in NSW. We believe that there is much to be learned from people living and working in Aboriginal communities regarding how the needs and aspirations of those communities could be better supported. We hope this study may be part of a longer-term project on these issues, with the aim of better informing policy and practice in this area. However we are not suggesting that programs or approaches that succeed in

one community would necessarily work in the next. It is the point of this study to reflect themes or common factors raised by people working in Wilcannia and Menindee, but also to engage with and have respect for the unique contexts and experiences in both communities.

We are aware of the sensitivities involved in asking people about the dynamics, structures and aspirations of their community. In any community there are conflicting perspectives about why things are the way they are. We respect the fact that people's views are sincerely held, and it is not our place to make a judgment about whose view is correct. It is certainly not our aim to cause division or conflict within or between the communities in this study.

Our interest is in understanding the dynamics of the two communities that may explain the differing crime rates. Again, we must emphasise that we do not claim to have definitive answers but hope to reflect the views expressed by those who live and work in Wilcannia and Menindee.

### **The next step**

We hope that this report may be a useful tool for people living and working in Wilcannia and Menindee in negotiating with government agencies or funding bodies and in contributing to relevant policy development in this area.

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## **WILCANNIA AND MENINDEE**

Wilcannia and Menindee are communities within the Central Darling Shire in western New South Wales. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the Central Darling Shire experiences extreme disadvantage, second in New South Wales only to the Local Government Area of Brewarrina.

According to the 2006 census, the towns of Wilcannia and Menindee have respective populations of 595 and 332. Both communities have significant Indigenous populations: Indigenous people in Wilcannia constitute 67.4% of the total population, while Indigenous people in Menindee constitute 46.7% of the population.

Wilcannia and Menindee are both within the traditional lands of the Barkindji people, which extend along the lower Darling River from Wentworth to beyond Wilcannia. Today, Wilcannia is considered the centre of Barkindji culture, while Menindee is populated by Barkindji and Nyampa people with a significant degree of intermarriage.

Under the Australian Standard Geographical Classification, Wilcannia is classified as very remote. The urban locality of Menindee is classified as remote, while the broader region encompassing Menindee is classified very remote.

The nearest major centre to both communities is Broken Hill, with a population of 18,854 of which 6.4% are Indigenous people. Wilcannia is approximately twice the distance from Broken Hill (approx 200km) that Menindee is (approx 110km).

## Crime statistics

This pilot study did not have the scope to investigate the changes in crime rates or population in the two communities over time. The statistics set out below are taken from Local Court data in the period of April 2007-March 2008. The figures from Broken Hill are included as a reference point.

Offence	Postcode 2836 (includes Wilcannia)		Postcode 2879 (Menindee)		Postcode 2880 (includes Broken Hill)	
	Number	Rate per 1000 population	Number	Rate per 1000 population	Number	Rate per 1000 population
Murder*	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.0
DV related assault	71	93.5	13	20.6	155	7.7
Non DV related assault	36	47.4	8	12.7	204	10.2
Sexual assault	4	5.3	1	1.6	25	1.2
Indecent assault, act of indecency	4	5.3	0	0.0	14	0.7
Other sexual offences	1	1.3	0	0.0	6	0.3
Robbery without a weapon	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	0.2
Robbery with a firearm	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Robbery with a weapon not a firearm	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Break and enter dwelling	19	25.0	4	6.3	326	16.3
Break and enter non-dwelling	6	7.9	3	4.8	150	7.5
Motor vehicle theft	9	11.9	1	1.6	84	4.2
Steal from motor vehicle	6	7.9	3	4.8	194	9.7
Steal from retail store	0	0.0	0	0.0	32	1.6
Steal from dwelling	1	1.3	4	6.3	144	7.2
Steal from person	1	1.3	1	1.6	6	0.3
Fraud	5	6.6	0	0.0	41	2.0
Malicious damage to property	44	58.0	13	20.6	615	30.7

\* Number of victims

^ Rates calculated per 1000 population for each postcode. Caution should be used when comparing rates when incident numbers or populations are small, since large percentage change in rates between periods will result from small changes in incident or population counts. For the rate calculations, population data was obtained from the ABS2006 Census. The population for postcode 2836 was 759; for postcode 2879 was 631; and for postcode 2880 was 20,051.

## **WILCANNIA**

The recorded crime rates are much higher in Wilcannia than they are in other parts of NSW. The high rates of crime in Wilcannia in the period surveyed are predominantly in the areas of assault, in particular domestic violence related assault, break and enter dwelling, and malicious damage to property.

The image of Wilcannia as portrayed by the media and many outsiders is of a lawless 'wild west' town. Yet throughout our interviews, Wilcannia was spoken of very fondly by those who live and/or work there, with people remarking on the friendliness of the people, its physical beauty (especially the river when it is flowing) and cultural significance. Former residents described it as 'home' and many people stated their wish to be buried there. Even some who were otherwise critical of the town observed that there are 'great people in Wilcannia'.

### **Factors affecting crime rates**

When asked to identify factors affecting crime rates in Wilcannia, there were some clear and common themes raised by people we spoke to. In particular, high-risk alcohol use, lack of employment, poverty and inequality, lack of activities for kids and young people, the approach of police, the dryness of the Darling River, funerals as flashpoints and an acceptance of criminal behaviour were raised.

### **Alcohol and mental health**

The high rate of violent crime in particular was attributed by most people we interviewed to regular and extremely high levels of alcohol use amongst many community members.

*It occurs in all towns but the biggest issue that we have to address in our [Local Area Command] is alcohol and domestic violence related crime. In Wilcannia, it's rife.*

NSW Police Officer, Broken Hill

*There is too much violence, way too much violence, from what I can see most of it appears to be alcohol-related, inspired, assisted... Aside from petty crime, theft, etc., I have seen very few incidents of assault where the people haven't been associated with each other, known each other, been in the same family, been in a relationship, an ex-relationship, and that seems to have been the pattern as I have seen it. So to me, the random crime that occurs in the capital cities doesn't seem to be occurring here.*

Business Operator, Wilcannia

After mentioning alcohol as a factor in high crime rates or regarding the nature of the crime, people spoke in detail about why people drank to dangerous levels, particularly in terms of mental health issues and grief:

*Drug and alcohol use is one of the biggest factors. I think there are lots of reasons for that. People drink to forget things, whether it's sexual assault or domestic violence in their home. The only way they are ever*

*going to change drug and alcohol abuse is to have counsellors living in the community, on the ground, for the people. Mental health is a huge issue.*

Community Worker

*Underlying problems which are not being addressed such as mental health and the lack of mental health service providers in remote areas leads inevitably to drinking and other substance abuse as a form of self medication. I think it is a feeling of hopelessness in the community especially for Aboriginal males which leads to much of their offending behaviour.*

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service, Broken Hill

In response to concerns about public order, restrictions on the trading of alcohol and alcohol free zones have had unintended and potentially serious consequences:

*The change in the way that the licensees do business ... has reduced the fear in those communities and the violence in the street. ... The downside is that, all the violence and alcoholism hasn't gone away but has been pushed into the homes.*

NSW Police Officer, Broken Hill

While it seemed to be accepted that restrictions on the trading of alcohol had reduced public violence, their effectiveness in actually reducing alcohol consumption was not apparent. It was reported that some people pool their money and travel into Broken Hill to buy alcohol in bulk. The restrictions were also argued to encourage binge drinking.

*People bust themselves to run to the pub to get their grog before the pub shuts because the shop is going to be open a bit later. But it's too late. They end up buying 3 cartons instead of 2 cartons and forget the food.*

Community Worker

Culturally appropriate, local services dealing with substance abuse were clearly identified as essential services that were lacking. Notably, Wilcannia does not even provide basic services where people suffering from the effects of substance abuse can go to be safe in the short term:

*There's no halfway house. There's no place that you can book them in so they can dry out. After the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody, it's the last resort to put anyone, let alone an Indigenous person, in a cell when they are intoxicated just for the purpose of drying out. We used to do it all the time. Put them in, 8 hours later let them go. You just can't do it. It's not worth the risk. But if there was somewhere else to take them, an appropriate place, [that would be] fantastic. But there's nowhere like that in Wilcannia. Unless they are virtually that drunk that their health is at risk. Then can take them to hospital where they can be treated and monitored.*

Duty Officer, NSW Police, Broken Hill

Nor are there local alcohol rehabilitation services:

*At present, most of our people that have substance abuse issues or the like, they have to go away for rehab, and of course then they come back to the communities... it's not holistic enough, it doesn't involve the families, it's too individualised, and of course they go out of country and then when they come back they're exposed to the same sort of stresses and unfortunately, there's a lot of lapse involved with people that go away and come back.*

Senior Aboriginal Mental Health Worker,  
Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation, Broken Hill

*All of our clients have serious medical and mental health problems. The difficulty for an Aboriginal Legal Service in the bush is in properly identifying that problem, making it clear to a sentencing magistrate and then having that problem addressed through a health service provider that will give our clients some prospect of rehabilitation. This will obviously have a significant impact on their future generally and also the way in which they are dealt with at court. Right now there is no residential rehabilitation program that is close to Broken Hill – our clients can't access a proper rehab service unless they travel hundreds of kilometres away from their families – it makes it a less viable option and is often not pursued. It's easier to go to jail.*

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service, Broken Hill

The lack of appropriate means to address substance abuse combined with the lack of counselling and other services also has a profound effect in light of the intergenerational impact:

*Alcohol and the situation for some families is also really bad. I don't think the kids have a chance when they're in those situations. Until they can get parents well... That's what they have to address; they've got to address that. The statistics, like they say – one alcoholic parent, half the children. Two alcoholic parents, 90%. So the cycle is just going on.*

Principal, St Therese's Community School, Wilcannia

Despite the obvious and serious effects of alcohol in Wilcannia, there are no social outlets or places for people to congregate that do not involve alcohol. Apart from occasional community dinners, the only places for people to gather in the evenings are the pub and the golf club. The only local store closes at 7pm.

Funerals were frequently identified as triggers for alcohol related crime and violence. The NSW Police Crime Manger in Broken Hill described funerals as the events requiring the biggest response from police and frequently requiring additional police resources. Funerals are the flashpoints in a town described as 'drowning in grief' but with insufficient co-ordinated services to respond, particularly when the need is acute:

*[Wilcannia] is drowning in grief. There are so many deaths, early deaths. ... A 25 year old woman from Adelaide hung herself and was brought back here [to be buried]. Older men – liver, kidneys. Young [people], 30s or 40s dying. Sure, you expect the old people to die but the gap is there in the middle. People are dying of heart attacks when they're so young.*

Principal, St Therese's Community School, Wilcannia

*The biggest problem in Wilcannia and Menindee is counselling... A lot of people drink in Wilcannia, Menindee and Broken Hill after a funeral because they want to forget about it. Best to have someone there talking to them.*

Community Worker

*[Counsellors] come out once a week from Broken Hill. Two hours driving out. They arrive at 11, 11:30 and they're leaving by 3 pm. [Wilcannia] needs six full time [counsellors] for grief, for alcohol, for drugs, for mental health. And not just two, they get burnt out. They need to work with families, 'You work with this cluster of families and you work with that cluster of families.' They need that desperately. But they say, 'Where do we get them?' Sometimes they say, 'The money's not there' and sometimes they say, 'We can't get the people'.*

Principal, St Therese's Community School, Wilcannia

*We have a lot of suicidal cases and self harm. People can't get to counsellors because they're only available once a week out here, which is not good enough. So if the problem arises they go the hospital and they're assessed. If it's a major problem, they're flown to Broken Hill. If it's a problem at a level that the community can handle; if it happens on a Saturday, they will be told we'll make you an appointment. You have to come back and see us on Wednesday. In the meantime, God knows what will happen. That's not good enough.*

Community service provider, Wilcannia

There was also caution in the reminder, however, that counselling, whether alcohol counselling, mental health counselling or grief counselling for Aboriginal people tends to deal more with symptoms rather than addressing the underlying issues:

*[In regards to programs to deal with grief] Even if there were, that would still be something that's coming in [with the mindset of] 'Oh, blackfellas are always going to be like this, so we'll just come in and do this quick counselling. It's not saying that what people need is to lead meaningful lives, whatever that means for them. So, how do we help you have a meaningful life? It's certainly a tricky thing.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

## **Employment**

While ABS figures record unemployment levels in Wilcannia of 20.5% of Indigenous people and 11.2% for the town as a whole, a recent study estimates that unemployment levels are much higher.<sup>1</sup> The main employers are the Central Darling Shire Council, Department of Education and Training, NSW TAFE and NSW Police.<sup>2</sup>

The lack of opportunity for meaningful employment or a sense of purposefulness in Wilcannia was raised by numerous people as a contributing factor to its high crime rates.

*People have to have something to do – something meaningful. You wouldn't see too many offenders who are employed, or if they're younger, who go to school regularly or come from a stable family background. They are not our customers.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

Several people referred to a letter that had been written to the Chair of the Wilcannia Community Working Party by the local magistrate at the time of an employment program conducted in Wilcannia:

*A job skills program that was part of the Working Nation package of the Keating Government in its last year. The Central Darling Shire was the broker for it. In Wilcannia, it prompted the local magistrate to write [a letter to the chair of the Community Working Party.] He couldn't believe that court attendances had dropped from 110/month to less than 10/month; ambulance call outs dropped by 50-60%; domestic violence dropped by 40 or 50%; assaults caused by alcohol dropped by so many percent. This is all while the program went on. When it finished, over [about] three months, all the statistics went back again...*

*The letter from the magistrate describes the benefit of having an employment program in the community because there was a lot of pride taken by the community [in the program]. It just shows the impact that employment has on social impacts in the community but also social impacts on individuals and families.*

Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

Many interviewees connected the lack of employment opportunities with living in a regional town with little industry and with a lack of education, training and capacity amongst the community to take up what employment that does exist.

*Wilcannia, there's jobs there, but I don't think there's people who have the ability, the education levels to be able to pick them up.*

Community Service Provider, Broken Hill

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<sup>1</sup> Lee-Anne Drewery, *Remote Control Communities: Final Report*, Central Darling Shire, March 2009, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Lee-Anne Drewery, *Remote Control Communities: Final Report*, Central Darling Shire, March 2009, 7.

*People say if they got jobs they'd get off the grog. Other people say if they got off the grog they'd get a job. It may keep them off it for a while but I think you have to get them well first. There are certainly some jobs in town and people have had lots of chances. Get them well so parents can care for their kids.*

Principal, St Therese's Community School, Wilcannia

The important impact of a pattern of unemployment on community perceptions and the aspirations of young people was also highlighted:

*That feeling of not being able to get meaningful work in the town for adults has a bit of a flow on effect to the kids, so it means you get more kids dropping out of school, more people thinking they're worthless.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

*Kids are now saying, 'Mum and dad went to school and where are they? They don't have jobs. Why should we go?' I know two girls who would be 18 or 19 who would be lucky to have done 2-3 years of school. There are 9 year olds who have never been in the school grounds.*

General Administration Support Officer, NSW Police, Wilcannia

One specific factor related to lack of employment opportunities that was commonly raised is the impact of a criminal record on people's ability to obtain employment, without flexibility to respond to the specific circumstances of a town like Wilcannia. One stark example related to it taking four years to fill a vacant NSW Police Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer ('ACLO') position in Wilcannia:

*It took 4 years to get a second ACLO on board and then he's not from Wilcannia. He came from Menindee. You just can't find people who fit the criteria and don't have a criminal record. A large number of the youth have been in trouble with the law or been in custody by the time they're 12 or 14. They are behind the eight ball before they start.*

General Administration Support Officer, NSW Police, Wilcannia

*We had to knock back one person because they had a speeding ticket in the previous 12 months. That could have been any of us... It made it very difficult because we couldn't fill it. We had to re-advertise. There's been issues with people who have applied - because of their poor literacy skills, their applications that they submit might not meet the criteria and are culled. Our [Local Area Manager] got on to one of the employment services and made it part of the package that if you contact the employment service, they will assist with completing the resume... You have to be prepared to go that extra yard.*

Duty Officer, NSW Police, Broken Hill

*For most things now, you have to have a criminal check. If you have a criminal record that's not five years old, you can't stand for the Board [of the Land Council]. That's criminal itself. If I have paid my dues, that*

*should be the end of it. [Instead, people are] penalised again. I have no problem with criminal checks [for people] working with kids, but it's unnecessary when you are working with a government department.*

Acting CEO, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council;  
Chairperson, Wilcannia Community Working Party

Central Darling Shire was seen to have a pivotal role as a potential employer in Wilcannia. While recognised as a major employer of Indigenous people, particularly outdoors, it was criticised by several people both for not employing more Indigenous people itself and for not creating industry in the town:

*The Council is the biggest employer for Aboriginal staff outdoors. Indoors they are all white and they come from outside of town. An Aboriginal girl turned up for work a couple of weeks ago - give her credit for rocking up. She was given photocopying to do and left standing in the corner. They didn't make her feel welcome. She went home for lunch and didn't go back. Credit to her for giving it a go.*

General Administration Support Officer, NSW Police, Wilcannia

*We haven't got an Aboriginal person working in the Shire offices. How can that be? I'll tell you how. The Shire Social Plan 2006-2009, when it was first put to Council, in Section 9: 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People' which detailed the Shire's plans for Economic Development/Employment, included the proposal 'Provide opportunities for Aboriginal employment such as street cleaning and tree planting/maintenance programs'.*

*That was the mentality that was saying: 'We believe that these people are only suitable for that type of work'. We had that changed in the plan, a couple of us fought for it and we thought we had got it to where: 'The workforce of the Shire should more readily mirror the population distribution of the town'. What was actually included was: 'Provide meaningful employment opportunities for Aboriginal People to include landscaping, civil construction and administration; Provide appropriate skills training for Aboriginal People'.*

*It hasn't progressed any further than that. Part of this is people coming in and saying 'Oh, things are bad: no-one can read, no-one can write, we can't do this, we can't do that, we're not going to make the effort, everybody's tried everything in the past, it's all failed.' And yet it's a town that I believe the only way it's going to survive in the long term – it's a welfare town, it's an Indigenous town, and if you put those two things together - you need to develop a workforce that is capable of running the place.*

Shire Councillor, Central Darling Shire Council

*We are moving to look at a Lifeline rag-cutting proposal to come into town, and with it is ten jobs. I know when you sort of say that 'oh well, ten jobs'; but I think for a place like this it really will show that there is the start of an industry or there is a reason to go through the training*

*because there's a job at the end of it. Knowing that if to have ten full-time jobs you're going to have to have twenty people trained because largely the locals don't work five days a week; they'll work two days and then take off for a day or two, so you don't train ten up, you train twenty up to cover that sort of situation. It'll be interesting to see that happen and then revisit the crime rates and how the community, and what we think of the community, after that project.*

General Manager, Central Darling Shire Council

As with a number of other issues discussed in this report, the impact of shortsighted government policy on employment opportunities was a source of frustration. One example frequently discussed was the negative long-term impact caused by the shutting down of the RTA, a major employer in Wilcannia, when many jobs were lost to the town. The potential impact on changing government policy in relation to Community Development Employment Projects ('CDEP') was also considered:

*Maybe it's too early to think about but the current ruling to take people off CDEP against their will after 12 months and put them back on Centrelink payments and then be case managed by a job network provider, I think is going to have profound impacts on crime rates. It's taking out at least 2-3 days of occupation of people's time. The funny thing for me; what I find illogical in government policy with this particular issue is that they take people off an employment training program; put them on to Centrelink payments and to be case managed by a job network provider for jobs that don't exist. I don't understand. There is no logic to it.*

Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

### **Children and young people**

The lack of purposeful activity for children and young people was often mentioned. Many people described a range of sporting activities that used to be available for young people in Wilcannia that are now a distant memory. While many people mentioned the work of the WINGS drop-in shelter, the general lack of activities for children and young people after school and in the evenings was highlighted.

Similarly, the role of the school and school attendance were frequently identified as potentially a significant deterrent to juvenile crime:

*While these kids are not in school, they end up out on the street and up to no good. They end up as statistic of the law. The crime rate [increases] because these other fellas are not providing the service they're supposed to.*

Community Worker

*Suitable curriculum [is vital], otherwise they just wander and they have nothing to do.*

Education Worker, Wilcannia

*I think we've got around 230 kids that could go to school if they wished to, and the school's only equipped to have 140. You think: wouldn't it be a wonderful conundrum to be in that you had 230 kids at school and you didn't know what to do with them because you didn't have enough space to fit them in? That'd be just such a wonderful message to send out.*

General Manager, Central Darling Shire Council

The Central School and Education Department were criticised for failing in their role to provide meaningful education and ensure school attendance. Certain detrimental past practices at the school were reported:

*[In the past] what was coming back from within the community was that once certain children attained the age of 14 or 15, they'd be sent a letter saying that it is no longer mandatory for you to attend school. It's a way of shifting responsibility for them to someone else. Any child who sees that; the first thing they think is, 'You beauty, I don't have to go', in particular if they don't think there's any chance of them getting a job.*

NSW Police Officer, Broken Hill

*When I was working at the school before, we had this teacher, she was totally serious in her answer to the kid: this kid, it was the first time I'd ever seen him working, ever, so I walked up to him and said 'Oh, that's great, why don't you go and show your teacher?' So he's walked up to his teacher and she goes 'Oh that's fantastic... you'll make a great CDEP worker one day'. And so you've got teachers that don't want to improve Aboriginal people's lives, so it starts as young as pre-school, where you've got people that can't see a future for Aboriginal kids or trying to help Aboriginal people determine what their future is. And you've got kids that get a bit older and hang around older kids that have already left school and they pick up on those things, so that stuff gets reinforced.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

However, there was general recognition that there had been recent improvement in school performance and engagement with the community. A new Acting Principal had recently been appointed, who was described as having great commitment and vision for the school. The fact that he was only appointed as acting in the role was a source of renewed frustration for many people, who felt that a long-term plan for the school was crucial to its success.

Family background, along with school and community expectations and appropriate curriculum, were considered pivotal to young people not becoming involved in crime:

*Forget about Indigenous/non-Indigenous, straight across the board. Not only with the dramas that I've seen here but in 21 years of policing, the problems we have with kids. Generally speaking, kids in trouble don't come from stable family backgrounds and don't regularly attend school. In Menindee, a greater proportion of kids come from stable*

*family backgrounds and they regularly attend school, as opposed to Wilcannia. With juvenile crime leading into later in life crime, adult crime, a huge influencing factor, probably the biggest are the values imposed by parents. In any community. In any community.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

*It would be easy for the school to focus on reading and writing but it is bigger than that. For kids to be ready to read and write and want to learn to read and write, all the other stuff has to be made right. Some of it is bigger than the school but the school is a centre point.*

Acting Principal, Wilcannia Central School

Of particular concern is the lack of safe places for children and young people to go. While some are able to go to another family member when it is not safe for them to return home, others have nowhere to go:

*My biggest concern is the kids. There's nowhere for kids to go any time of the day where they can feel safe. I'm not talking about a drop in centre... Somewhere for the kids to go and I don't mean until just 9 o'clock. If kids are fearful, they only have two places to go – the police and the hospital. Both are problematic.*

Duty Officer, NSW Police, Broken Hill

A night patrol does operate in Wilcannia, which endeavours to take young people and children to their homes or another safe place and provides transport for others in need. While it operates most evenings, concerns were raised that its hours of operation were too short.

The lack of meaningful activities for young people and a safe environment in the evening may contribute to the high percentage of young people who come to the attention of the police, with the associated difficulties of obtaining employment with a criminal record:

*The majority of the kids, by the time they reach 16 or 17 have come to the attention of the police for something, whether as instigators or hangers on who unfortunately just get caught up in it all.*

Duty Officer, NSW Police, Broken Hill

Sadly, once within the criminal justice system, several people described custody as an attractive option for some young offenders as providing meals, a warm bed and safety:

*In one case, an Aboriginal kid aged 12 was refused bail on pretty serious property related offences relating to the theft of firearms. He had no criminal history and seemed as though he had been led on by older kids in relation to this offence. The only problem for the court was that mum's address was not good enough - there was too much alcohol and violence there. The DOCS approved residence was the only option the court would entertain. When I asked the young fella whether he wanted to go there he broke down into tears. He said that he would*

*rather do the two weeks at JJ's [juvenile detention] and be allowed to go back to mum after being sentenced. It was very unlikely that he would have received a control order - but in any event, he was bail refused and quite happy to go back to JJ's as opposed to the DOCS approved residence.*

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service, Broken Hill

### **Acceptance of violence**

Several people described the acceptance of criminal behaviour as a particular characteristic of Wilcannia that was both a result of high levels of violent crime and as a contributor in itself to the high levels of violent crime. One person did describe acceptance of people regardless of what they had done as a positive aspect of the Wilcannia community:

*It doesn't matter what you've done or who you are; those people are so accepting, you can always go back and people will be there for you, and they're friendly people.*

Community Health Worker, Wilcannia

However, this was not the norm and the 'celebrity' status of people returning from jail was identified as an issue that must be addressed:

*[Y]ou're having an increase of kids being exposed to other family members being incarcerated, and when they're released, [they don't] talk about what they did. The way it's spoken about is like a rite of passage, so the kids tend to pick that up, the young males anyway... that's quite a big thing, a lot of the younger men that are still coming out of their teenage years are still caught up in all of that.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

*The acceptance of alcohol and violence in Wilcannia [needs to] be addressed. I've lived and worked in the bush all my life. I had five years in child protection in the western part of the state... It hurts me to say it but Wilcannia would be the worst town I've ever seen for the acceptance of violence. There are some families out there; if you mention their surname, it's synonymous with violence.*

NSW Police Officer, Broken Hill

*In Wilcannia, when someone comes back from jail, it's like a celebrity is in town. When you get out of jail, go to Centrelink and get that money. People following them around like a celebrity... In Wilcannia people forget. Will be drinking up and laughing up alongside the people who have taken other people's lives.*

Community Worker

*If someone commits a crime in a country town, people are divided. Some will side with the victim or the offender or just walk the line. In Wilcannia, I've seen people who have been convicted of serious assaults, stabbings, sexual assaults on family members and murders. They go and do their time, get released and are welcomed back into*

*the community. Welcomed back into the, 'Haven't seen you in ages mate, have a beer' type of culture. No-one addresses the fact that you stabbed that person because you were drunk and out of control. No-one says, 'you've had enough', or 'you're not having any' or 'we're going to keep an eye on you'.*

Duty Officer, NSW Police, Broken Hill

Worryingly, frequent contact by children and young people with such high levels of violence was described as normalising it.

*They're forgetting the children involved in these domestic situations. Floggings are going on and kids are witnessing it. The kids come and sitting at the [Blue Reelers movie sessions run at the police station in Wilcannia]. They're not even watching it. Talking to me, eating a sausage sandwich and talking about what dad did last night and how dad nearly stabbed them when he tried to stab mum. Kids are pushed to the side. The Safehouse staff are counselling mum. Dad's in jail but nothing is being done for those kids involved in the ongoing cycle of domestic violence.*

General Administration Support Officer, NSW Police, Wilcannia

*Kids talk about [domestic violence] so casually, as if it's normal. 'Dad changed the tyre on the car'; 'Dad lifted mum last night.' They just use that domestic violence terminology.*

Community Worker

*Wilcannia's unique in that it has a really high percentage of Aboriginal people within the community, so when you've got the majority of a town being suppressed, the effect of that over a number of generations means that people tend to drift more towards the violence and other socially unacceptable things. If you're feeling resentful or a bit downtrodden and you tend to want to try and resolve that somehow, and if what you're learning at home is a setting of if someone does you wrong you punch them in the face, then that's what you'll go through life doing.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

*If something like [kids sniffing petrol] happened [in Wilcannia] and you approached a kid, next thing you would have the mother at the front door or on the phone abusing you for talking to the kid: 'My kid not yours'. I've been with police when we've gone out and chatted with the parents. We've said, 'What are we going to do? Your kid was involved in a 'break and enter' last night. He was sniffing last week. We need to take him on a camp, get him out of town.' Parent's response was, 'Nothing to do with me. What are you going to do about it?'*

General Administration Support Officer, NSW Police, Wilcannia

### **Poverty and inequality**

The very high cost of living in Wilcannia was consistently raised as a significant problem. There is only one small supermarket and one roadhouse

selling fast food and a small range of grocery items, and the cost of basic food staples is exorbitant. The most affordable food in Wilcannia is chips and gravy. Significant concern was raised about the health implications of a poor diet.

Inequality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people was also talked about as a contributing factor to a sense of injustice and resentment. Poverty and hunger were raised as particular factors impacting upon crime rates.

*I'm sure that if people had the means to buy whatever they wanted that you wouldn't have so many cars stolen, so many break-ins... I'm not saying that money fixes all these problems, but there's certainly links to a healthy diet and a healthy lifestyle.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

*I think if people really knew what an empty stomach was, when you see more meal times than meals – it's not a good feeling. You will do all sorts of things you wouldn't normally do, but we don't provide for that. If the government were providing access to food a lot cheaper than what we have now, you wouldn't have half the crime rate.... They are the sorts of things that while they are neglected will always lead to crime, while communities are in poverty like this one. You need to see for yourself the price of a loaf of bread. How can you live on welfare payments when you have to pay such a high cost of living? I haven't seen any attempt by the authorities or government departments to build a co-op.*

Acting CEO, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council;  
Chairperson, Wilcannia Community Working Party

*Every time they break and enter, they get chips and lollies. What does that say? They're just not getting fed at home because every dollar is being spent on booze.*

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service, Broken Hill

*Quite a lot of people don't have a lot of assets, kids don't have a lot of toys, and then you've got a bit of a contrast within in town where there's a small number of non-Aboriginal families that have quite a lot and are based in the town because of the high Aboriginal population, however the Aboriginal population that's here don't have stuff, so there's like a have and a have not thing happening, and I guess people get a bit envious about that.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

Poor quality housing and overcrowding were consistently identified as issues requiring urgent attention. It was said that if you can't get a good night's sleep, then you can't function properly at school or at work. Inadequate, flawed housing projects that have failed over decades to produce positive outcomes were frequently reported including the most recent Aboriginal Communities Development Project.

### **The river**

The effects of the drought and the long-term lack of water in the Darling River were regularly talked about as a factor in high crime rates.

*When the river is down, the crime rate is high. Most families spend weekends on the river – fishing, swimming and on boats. When there's no water in the river, they're stuck in town, there's nowhere to go.*  
Aboriginal Client Service Specialist, Broken Hill/Wilcannia Local Courts

*What also affects the [Wilcannia] community is the river; it's a really important one here. It takes you back to the cultural side, and how connection to our river and our land is really important... Early 90s, we had a stage there when we were in a drought really bad, people were really down and crime rates right up, by the end of that year when the river had filled, friends of mine appeared, they'd come over for court, here they do a court circuit, rocked up: they only had one case. And the river was absolutely full, kids were swimming in the river, people were fishing, the spirit was just really high. Everything that affects our environment for blackfellas, it really has big impacts on people's spirit.*  
Community Health Worker, Wilcannia

### **Policing**

Any discussion of factors contributing to high or low crime rates must necessarily consider the nature of policing in the community - this is especially true in Wilcannia which has around twelve police stationed in the town with a population of approximately 600 people. This was a topic that provided some of the most varied responses that we received. One issue that was raised was the extent to which such a large police presence in itself contributes to such high crime rates. Opposing views were expressed about on the one hand, incidents that would pass without notice elsewhere being prosecuted, contrasting with a perception that anti-social behaviour was accepted in Wilcannia that would not be acceptable in other rural communities:

*There is over policing in Wilcannia and over charging. They aren't using any discretion. If no one is being hurt, do they have to charge? Verbal altercation, breach of AVO, they've had a problem; they are sorting it out, and are getting on better. Do they have to charge? Why not just let it go?*

Community Service Provider, Wilcannia

Similarly, the extent to which fines are issued in Wilcannia to people who cannot afford to pay them was one issue raised a number of times as potentially impacting on high crime rates:

*The biggest problem there is if you get a fine on the street and you can't pay, even if it's a first offence, a lot of people elect to bring it to court and they'll get a Section 10 without a record. But then the second one, you've got a record.*  
Aboriginal Client Service Specialist, Broken Hill, Wilcannia Local Courts

It was widely recognised that the nature of policing had improved over recent years, in particular from a time where a lot of public clashes between community members and police were common. Nonetheless, the need for relationship building was emphasised:

*We're certainly not policing [Wilcannia] like we used to police it. It's very rare that we would have a brawl or a riot as we would have had 10 years ago. We are probably taking a softly softly approach, more than we used to, for various reasons.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

The approach taken by police posted to Wilcannia and the development of police/community relationships seems largely to depend on individual police, who are often inexperienced and may not be familiar with Indigenous communities. Overall, responses about police tended to be positive, although there were criticisms:

*Some of [the police in Wilcannia] are pretty good. They will sit down and they will talk to the kids. But others antagonise them. They're probably out to get numbers, statistics. There are a couple out there who will sit down and talk with the kids, but as far as getting programs implemented: nothing.*

Aboriginal Client Service Specialist, Broken Hill, Wilcannia Local Courts

*In a place like Wilcannia, it depends on who the cops are; the personalities of the police. If you get someone there who is a little bit more relaxed and laid back and a little bit more experienced, they tend to build a relationship with people - and that's the way to do it with Aboriginal people. You've had instances there where the police would get out and do walking patrols, and just wander around the town, and that's good, because people see them, kids see them, they talk to them: they sort of become less of an ogre or a mystery to people. But it just depends on who's running the local police force.*

Community Service Provider

*[It would be good] to get the police over to the school. Even for 15 minutes, once a month, not every day. Just so the kids can see them in a different light. But you just can't get it... At each turnover, I have said: 'this would be a good starting point to be seen'... A teacher did a profile in the local paper of what she would like to see. She said that at NAIDOC week, she would like to see a police presence there. The police should've been involved in games and letting the kids have a look at their cars but they just weren't there. If more positive things like that were happening before there was a crime; something like that may help.*

Principal, St Therese's Community School, Wilcannia

A number of people commented on the very broad role that the police often adopt due to the absence of other locally based services in Wilcannia; one

example was given of police being contacted by the hospital to pick up elderly people who had missed appointments:

*We find out there a lot of the time that we seem to be the basket holder for lots of services. When it comes to close of business, the police are the only government agency on the ground. We probably tend to find that we're doing a lot of work outside our core business. Core business being safe community, protection of life and property. We certainly end up being welfare workers and pseudo DoCS workers... If you are the only door open, people are going to come to you.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

*I think police are frustrated a bit... One of the cops here, his attitude was that they're not social workers, they're not there to develop communities; their role is to stop crime.*

Community Service Provider, Broken Hill

Appropriate recruiting, experience and training were identified as important factors, especially where it is recognised that what is acceptable in Wilcannia in terms of 'anti-social behaviour' may differ quite markedly to other towns:

*Some [police] pick it up easier than others. I don't expect police to be punching bags for people to lay in to but the reality is that in Wilcannia... they use the 'c' word with a capital 'K'. In Wilcannia, you only need to sit in the car in the main street for 5 minutes with the windows down and you will hear that it's how people speak to each other. Is it offensive language? Most definitely. Should everyone who uses it end up in the dock for it or end up with an infringement notice? I don't believe so.*

Duty Officer, NSW Police, Broken Hill

*As far as the way the police now work – I've been 20 years in the cops now – we've made some significant inroads like with Aboriginal cultural awareness training. Police undertake that training. Our ACLOs are all local from these areas and probably more importantly, from local tribes, and play a role in delivering that training. We try to get that done reasonably early after police are transferred here. You get a lot of police who had no involvement at all with Indigenous people or Kooris.*

Duty Officer, NSW Police, Broken Hill

The high turnover of police officers and lack of experience was identified by many people as a problem in the relationship between the police and community members in Wilcannia. To attract candidates, the police have adopted a model of offering short-term tenure and incentives regarding their next posting:

*A big issue that we may have created for ourselves; to fix one problem we may have created another and that is it's a very short tenure in Wilcannia, the shortest in NSW. Police only there for 2 years. The biggest complaint we get from the community... is that as soon as*

*police are known to community, they move again. Whereas, in Menindee, even though it's only another 18 months longer, they are there for 3 ½ years as opposed to two. Two years can go like that, especially when you take into account leave, courses and courts... It is an issue that we have created for ourselves but the problem that we had before was that we could not recruit. We had vacancies there all the time.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

*Police recruiting, we're lucky. Wilcannia and Menindee are 'Special Remote Locations'. Police only have to go to Wilcannia for 2 years and Menindee for 3 years and at the end of that time they can nominate 3 stations anywhere in the state and they will be given one of them. It's their entitlement. I don't know that other agencies... would have the same approach in their recruitment.*

Duty Officer, NSW Police, Broken Hill

While many people understood the rationale behind the short tenure, it was a source of frustration that impacts on police/community relationships:

*You can meet [a police officer] for the first time and you think they're just new to town and they have been here 18 months and they're just on their way out.*

Principal, St Therese's Community School, Wilcannia

Despite the high numbers of police in Wilcannia, under-reporting of certain crimes was still seen as a problem.

*You have a lot of cases that are unreported [in Wilcannia]. There are a lot of cases where kids are talking to teachers, kids are talking to other adults but it's not being reported.*

General Administration Support Officer, NSW Police, Wilcannia

*There is plenty of opportunity for people to disclose, whether it be sexual assaults, child sexual assaults or historical. We have put measures in place; disclosure can be anonymous. I have even bent the rules so that ACLOs can disclose anonymously but, unfortunately, our reporting rate hasn't increased at all.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

### **Criminal justice processes**

Despite the common experience of contact with the criminal justice system for Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, there was a reported lack of understanding by community members of its workings. The important role played by key figures such as the Aboriginal court liaison officers and the Aboriginal Legal Service solicitors and field officer was widely acknowledged, however there was a general sense of people working in these roles being over-worked and under-resourced. The implications of a lack of understanding of criminal justice processes include the reality of regular examples of missed court

appearances, breaching of bail and other conditions, and a broader sense of alienation from the legal system and government services.

A number of people we spoke to who worked in the criminal justice system identified the lack of available and appropriate options – both in terms of prevention and diversion in sentencing – as a serious shortcoming in Wilcannia. One example regularly referred to was that of Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs). While AVOs play an important role for women in particular in providing police protection against interpersonal violence, in the absence of broader programs or strategies to assist perpetrators and victims of violence they were often seen to exacerbate problems. In Wilcannia, people in relationships – friends, relations or spouses – regularly take out AVOs that are then frequently breached. An example was given of three friends who were drinking together and after getting into an argument, took AVOs out against each other. The next time they met up, they were then in breach of the conditions of the AVOs and potentially subject to criminal proceedings.

*AVOs are not helping at all – the community is becoming more and more dependant on the court system to resolve dysfunctional relationships and their inability to fix relatively minor domestic disputes. I think they should be used much more sparingly and only when really required – certainly where violence is occurring on a regular basis. Condition 10, in particular, which provides that a person is prohibited from approaching another person after having consumed alcohol [is inappropriate] in dysfunctional homes and relationships where alcohol is rife. It doesn't solve any of the social problems leading to alcohol abuse nor does it deter people from committing alcohol related crimes. Instead it simply leads to the criminalisation of behaviour and to the rate of Aboriginal people in custody. We have to get to the root of the problem.*

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service

*[When there are problems in Wilcannia] a lot of the times it's left to the police. And the police solution is to get people out of each other's faces. The courts do the same thing, they put court orders on them that they're not allowed into the town. It doesn't really solve the problem; it just creates problems in [Broken Hill].*

Community Service Provider

Even where alternative sentencing options were available, their existence was described as fragile. Two people we interviewed mentioned a drivers' licence program that included numeracy and literacy programs, and drug and alcohol education to which the magistrate could refer offenders that was strongly supported by the community, but which no longer exists. Driving offences, particularly unlicensed driving, are particularly common in Wilcannia and the program was seen to fulfil a local need and potentially contribute to lowering crime rates in relation to certain offences. People were able to get their drivers' licences, a necessary precondition to employment in a regional area where there is little public transport, and which could also lead to a sense of

pride and achievement. It also provided a program to which the magistrate could refer licensed driving offenders who were otherwise facing disqualification. It bolstered a partnership with the State Debt Recovery Office whereby those who had lost their licences or had sanctions on their licences could apply to have them reinstated while they paid their fines.

Issuing fines was a particular concern in an environment where people frequently couldn't afford to pay them, and which could then have serious consequences. An example was given of non-payment of fines by a young person for riding a bike without a helmet many years earlier, which led to inability to get a licence and then a series of unlicensed driving charges that led to imprisonment as an adult.

As reported in other rural communities, magistrates are limited in their sentencing options as diversionary programs are largely not available and incarceration is a regular outcome. Appropriate bail options were also not available:

*It's hard for a magistrate to look at a kid's record and see so much and give them another go. They breach bail over and over again. Bail addresses often do not work because the kids don't have stable homes to go to. Current bail laws are not adjusted to the ways in which Aboriginal people live – kids often reside with their mothers, grandparents and sometimes uncles and aunts. They are given a bail address by the court but find that they are in breach after a couple of days because someone else is looking after them.*

Solicitor, Aboriginal Legal Service

The only treatment program referred to was the MERIT (Magistrates Early Referral into Treatment) program based in Broken Hill, which gives the opportunity for people charged with minor offences to be referred by police, solicitors, magistrate or by the individuals themselves for drug and alcohol treatment. The program lasts for three months, during which time consideration of the matter is adjourned while the alleged offender attends the program.

### **Government policy and priorities**

Almost every person we spoke to talked about Wilcannia as a community with significant financial resources allocated to it but with little to show for it; about the absence of coordinated, long-term planning or service delivery; and the serious lack of consultation and accountability to the community. Wilcannia was frequently described as a community run by 'remote control',<sup>3</sup> with increasing regionalisation of services and a blanket approach by government agencies, despite the obvious need for locally based, locally targeted solutions to the problems in the town.

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<sup>3</sup> Lee-Anne Drewery, *Remote Control Communities: Final Report*, Central Darling Shire, March 2009.

The levels of frustration with top-down, short-term programs that were not evaluated in terms of their appropriateness or effectiveness were extremely high:

*We spend millions of dollars on the place regularly. We constantly pump \$3-4 million into a program; 18 months later, 2 years later, the program finishes and they never put in place anything to see how it went. Never measure it at the end of it to see if it worked and we just go and find another \$3 million or \$4 million and pump it back in. People are employed in those programs. They only run for 2 years and they've lost their job.*

NSW Police Officer, Broken Hill

*Every few years there'll be some money to throw around, and a few years later, the problems are still there, and it's because Federal and State Governments are only thinking about electoral terms, and so that flows onto the Local Council, and they're not thinking about the people that live in the places.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

*We do everything short term. We never plan for 25 years with milestones along the way and measure what we are doing. We never do that. You never see somebody with their \$3 million sit down ... to see how it's going and what it's doing. It puts a bit of money into the town but there's nothing long term. I have seen all these short-term programs go for a couple of years. In 3 years time, they might rename it, give it a funding injection, and employ different people to do exactly the same thing all over again... It's got no substance. We should be ashamed of ourselves.*

NSW Police Officer, Broken Hill

*A lot of money has been poured into Wilcannia on the surface. That's what it looks like but they don't count all the money that has been taken out by the consultants and the friends of the consultants and friends of the builders etc.*

Community Worker

*The other most important thing, if you are disempowered, what are you? You're there to be controlled by whatever policy, procedure or government rule and you just float along. You will bury your misery in the bottle or drugs or whatever. If you don't provide services properly and sincerely, you are going to have problems. If you continue to disempower people like the systems are, you will continue to have crime rates going up.*

Acting CEO, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council;  
Chairperson, Wilcannia Community Working Party

The lack of accountability of service providers and government departments in a community where individuals, especially parents, are frequently lectured about taking responsibility for their actions was keenly felt:

*The heavy-handed accountability imposed on parents and kids' attendance at school has to be imposed on agencies as well. Being heavy handed on the local people of Wilcannia who are very disempowered is to pick on people who have been picked on enough. I would like to see government agencies and people responsible ... up the line [to be held accountable] – the people who should know better.*  
Acting Principal, Wilcannia Central School

A recent housing project was raised by many people we spoke to as a particular example of lack of government planning and accountability:

*I was surprised that all of the old houses were pulled down: about half, possibly more, were in a condition that could have been renovated. They were concrete block houses, they were built in the 50s, 60s some of them... I think it was a mistake. There are people who are trying to lay the blame in certain areas: I don't think that's really effective or going to get us anywhere. There were mistakes made; decisions made that shouldn't have been made – I believe that the Department of Commerce was as responsible as anyone else, because they allowed it to go that way.*

*When the initial contract was for six and a half million to be completed in a year, when it ended up taking almost five years - when the opposing contract, which most people favoured, was for a local builder to do the job over a period of three to five years, building half a dozen houses at a time and working with more local people, and that was going to cost eight and a half million – Commerce opted for the six and a half and also some people I believe that may have been influenced by money, they went with that and we received a letter in the community just under twelve months ago from the Department saying 'Congratulations, your last house is now completed and the final amount was 13 million dollars'. There's something underlying wrong with that...*

*If you read the website for DAA it will say 'There were 19 locals employed'. What the contractor did was he went to anyone who wanted a job with them and said 'You have to take out an ABN and we'll pay you \$12.50 an hour'; no worker's comp, no tax taken out, no superannuation – people didn't know what an ABN was, so he showed them how to do it. That's all very well in the building industry in a capital city, but it's not right here. Those people were employed short term, digging some ditches, with very little real work done by them.*

Business Operator, Wilcannia

*Overcrowding, shortage of housing and these other things [hunger and poverty] will all come back to impact on crime.*

Acting CEO, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council;  
Chairperson, Wilcannia Community Working Party

At a public meeting called to address a recent 'crime wave', there was a great deal of anger expressed at the tendency to simplistically blame parents for children's behaviour when services and activities for young people were in great need. The Central Darling Shire Council was a specific target, being criticised for failing to provide sporting facilities and, in particular, a skate park that some residents claimed had been in the pipeline for years.

This short term focus results in repetition which residents of Wilcannia find frustrating and exhausting, with the same community ambitions and needs identified but not acted upon:

*We had an education forum with the Working Party a couple of months ago. It's going over and over and over the same things, all the time. They call meetings and you go over it [again and again].*

Principal, St Therese's Community School, Wilcannia

As has been observed, Wilcannia did not become the town that it is overnight and overnight responses will not solve its problems. An environment where government departments are accountable to policy direction from above and don't communicate effectively with each other results in disjointed service provision, lacking in coordination and resulting in duplication of services in some areas with gaps in others. It was said that the left hand often doesn't know what the right hand is doing:

*The Community Working Party was formed to try and bring services together. The local people complain a lot that DoCS [Department of Community Services] comes in, domestic violence will come in, all these different agencies and service providers and no one knows what the other is doing. ... [There is duplication.] The [Women's] Safe House might put something on about domestic violence, then two months later DoCS puts on the same thing. That type of thing. [We need] more co-ordination between the services. That's what I thought the Working Party was meant to be doing but [each service] has its own hierarchy that it's answerable to.*

Principal, St Therese's Community School, Wilcannia

*One of the problems that we have is that we don't know the services that come in [to Wilcannia]. Typically we find that there is a lot of service providers, with wonderful hearts and they really mean the world and there's no doubting their sincerity, but their job is to run a program... it's the latest thing, you beaut, super duper, we've got to drive in from Broken Hill so it takes us two hours to get there, we've got a few hours in the middle of the day, then we drive back. So what we've found lately is that we can have probably three people doing the same service on the same day, and no one knows. So we're trying as a Shire is to get a database, if you provide services to any of our towns,*

*tell us who you are, tell us what you're providing, so we can start to map the things.*

General Manager, Central Darling Shire Council

*If the service providers could network with what is in the town locally, then we might be able to overcome problems... They are forgetting about what is on the ground. They need to work out what is on the ground and network with them... It is common sense. I cry out for it all the time. The norm is that they are on a time limit: 'It's three o'clock, I'd better hit the road'. They can come out by all means, but they should leave with a good aim, which is to educate the community, train the locals and leave people on the ground.*

Community service provider

The Central Darling Shire Council has published the results of a service mapping survey that identified 46 different human services being offered to Menindee, Ivanhoe or Wilcannia.<sup>4</sup> The main findings of the Shire survey accord with our findings in relation to the provision of services, namely that services are uncoordinated, operate from a distance and do little to build community capacity or infrastructure.

The problems that Wilcannia faces were described as larger than any one particular issue, and exacerbated by a disjointed approach:

*What you tend to see is a lot of symptoms of living in poverty and every agency or organisation that's involved in Wilcannia just deals with one aspect of it, so there's never any joint effort to try and change things, because I'm sure that most projects would need other projects to support them if they're going to... If you've got some sort of employment strategy happening, then you probably need something along the lines of a training strategy happening as well, a health strategy happening at the same time, a domestic violence strategy going, but they'll need to actually work together and not be totally isolated because one's with the police and one's with DoCS and one's with the hospital and one's with whoever. Not enough of that happens. That's another thing that the Working Party's meant to deal with, but because of the amount of times that people have been stuffed over, you don't get so many people showing up to that forum, so you don't get so many things happening, so you don't get so many people showing up to that forum, it feeds itself... You couldn't deal with grief if you're not looking at substance abuse and things like that as well at the same time.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

An equal source of frustration was the regionalisation of services. In particular, service delivery based in Broken Hill or Dubbo was said to lead to a distorted perception as to actual resources spent in Wilcannia, when the

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<sup>4</sup> Lee-Anne Drewery, *Remote Control Communities: Final Report*, Central Darling Shire, March 2009, 9.

money supposedly allocated to Wilcannia was in fact being 'driven up and down highway' by government employees and consultants. One person we spoke to labelled this 'dead money'.

*Money is spent to travel up and down the highway. [Someone] gets a great job to coordinate a program in Wilcannia but they're paying you to live in Broken Hill. You travel up the highway five days a week in the big flash car with the roo bar. None of that is considered when people talk about money given to Wilcannia.*

General Administration Support Officer, NSW Police, Wilcannia

*It's the same thing where they regionalised all the CDEPs. That's one thing that has stuffed them up. The CDEP in Wilcannia was going really well years ago. Then they regionalised it. Bring outsiders in. Don't empower the local people to carry on with things. You know, it's just bring outsiders in.*

Community Worker

The perception by people in Wilcannia is of services being removed further and further from the town. This angered people particularly in relation to services where there was a clear need in the town for a locally based service, such as a Violence Against Women (VAW) worker, and the fact that DoCS no longer has a permanent presence in Wilcannia.

*There was a VAW worker based here... She did some sensational programs here. Then the State Government decided to change their focus and how they address things and they got rid of something like 24 VAW workers across the state. We now have a DV Coordinator based at Dubbo, which is 750 km away.*

NSW Police Officer, Broken Hill

*DoCS are trying to increase their profile... They would love to have staff based out there full time but I don't think they can achieve it. At all. They advertise but they can't recruit. You have to look at the remoteness for your staff too. I'd like to see them with [support] like ACLOs [NSW Police Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers]. [DoCS] used to have field officers. Would like to see that sort of process in place. Trusted people from within the community. If someone needed nappies or formula, or someone had a health issue; if needed to, could run someone to the hospital - someone dealing with the day to day welfare of families, and in particular kids. DoCS staff from [Broken Hill] could do weekly visits. If they had to do removal, the field workers wouldn't become involved - more a support and monitoring role. If there is any issue, other staff come from outside and move in.*

Community Service Provider, Broken Hill

The only permanent full time services in Wilcannia are the police, the health service and the Women's Safe House. While the work done by the Safe House was highly commended, there was a repeated concern expressed that there was no equivalent service for men.

The strong preference expressed was for locally based services employing local people:

*Knowing the people is the real key. Everybody you talk to locally will say that they resent the fly in fly out model... Having people with a positive attitude is important to the town – [that you] value Wilcannia and its culture. It is better that people become part of the place, rather than come and go.*

Acting Principal, Wilcannia Central School

*The dollars were just band-aid solutions. They never really got down and talked on the ground to the Aboriginal people and asked, 'What do you want?'*

Community Worker

Inflexible funding guidelines were identified as a further cause of programs not being responsive enough to community aspirations. Even where money was available for a community project, people criticised the need to put together a submission that fulfils the guidelines dictated by the bureaucracy. The final product had to be tailored to suit inflexible government requirements or red tape and didn't necessarily suit the community or fulfil local aspirations.

While there was acceptance that it was difficult to recruit suitably qualified people to work in Wilcannia, there was a strong sense that government policy and processes were not flexible enough and did not provide sufficient incentives to make Wilcannia a realistic option for employment:

*A lot of people think that coming to Wilcannia is a sentence that's got to be served. That applies to all of the government agencies but it shouldn't be like that. The local people know that it shouldn't be like that because it's their home. They're not here because it is a sentence; they're here because they're home.*

Acting Principal, Wilcannia Central School

Almost every person we spoke to raised the inadequacy of mental health services as an area of urgent, largely neglected need:

*[The police] a great model for other agencies to think about... If I have a year 8 student in school who needs to access an adolescent mental health worker, that student has got to get on a bus and go to Broken Hill. I think there's something to be learnt in those two differences. Why is the police service valued so highly by government leaders that they should have such a strong and dominant presence in the town when they adopt that model of operation, which I really agree with because it's very integrated; why are mental health services not valued that they're given just a cursory point of contact which is in Broken Hill, 190kms away?*

Acting Principal, Wilcannia Central School

A major criticism of government policy and priorities is that there tends to be a short-term band-aid approach without focus on sustainability and without dedication to building the capacity of the community to determine and implement its own solutions:

*Constantly, we're talking about making sure it's sustainable within the community; that we're going there as a service, and that we're not permanent – that we go up there to skill up the community; that we go up there making sure the community are aware that until we're told any different – June 30 2009, that's where our service may end, so let's get moving: this is what we can do, and this is what we can't promise. Just making sure that language is always there, because it's always in the back of our minds, 'well I've got to make it sustainable'. How do you do that when you've only got a guarantee of funding until then?*

Community Service Provider, Broken Hill

Importantly, there was also criticism of government programs and priorities that failed to embody Aboriginal culture as central to their operation. While health, housing, education, cost of living and combating poverty were identified as essential responsibilities of government, there was an identified need to foster the spiritual and cultural elements in the community.

*Over the years, while the intent may have been to benefit us, [the focus] has been on the physical [or] the material side, but never the spiritual side. [That is] certainly out of balance as far as Aboriginal people are concerned. You only have to look at policies like assimilation. They destroyed the spirit of Aboriginal people. It goes right back to denying those rights to practice their own spirituality.*

Acting CEO, Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council;  
Chairperson, Wilcannia Community Working Party

The Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly conducted a regional planning process to identify community priorities. The realisation of community aspirations was identified as the top priority:

*Coming out of the COAG trial was a planning process for determining priorities and it's different from one community to another in terms of what they placed the emphasis on. When we did the regional matrix for the 16 communities' plans, 'community' came out as the number one priority; not health or housing. It was about engaging with each other and getting those things sorted out in the community; protocols, cultural protocols and cultural authority, all that sort of stuff, before they were prepared to [identify] other impacting issues that they wanted to address. ... The relationship with each other in the community was the fundamental thing. They were saying that there is no good engaging with government about these specific things unless we get our own house in order. ... Just the relationship or lack of relationship that existed between community organisations for example. Just the division and the factionalism ... getting to overcome that stuff to make the community a better place.*

While governments may not be responsible for reinvigorating 'community' in this sense, policy that is top down, non-consultative and provides short term fixes will do little to facilitate these aspirations.

### **Community dynamics**

As described above, there is a common narrative of substance abuse and domestic violence as dominating crime rates in Wilcannia, but also the suggestion that the perception of Wilcannia as a frightening place and dangerous to strangers is overstated:

*There is a problem with how Wilcannia is perceived. People think of riots and violence. The place is suffering from a huge PR problem. Some people are working to change the image. Some people don't want to change the image. They like the bad boy image and get off on the hardcore reputation. The game would be over if everyone knew that Wilcannia was a quiet town. What would you have to talk about at a dinner party then?*

Acting Principal, Wilcannia Central School

*I'd heard the reputation of the town before I came here in terms of crime rates. ... One of the things I did when I was here [considering buying a business in Wilcannia] was actually visit the courthouse, which had a court day in session. I'd heard this massive thing about crime, and went down and there were a number of people out the front; I went into the court and the magistrate was sitting there and there was a defendant at the desk, there was a prosecutor and WALs (Western Aboriginal Legal Service) solicitor there, a court recorder, and the magistrate was reading the brief and said: 'Are these people still living together?' The response was yes. 'Well do you realise that in this AVO you've got a declaration that they have to be no closer than 50 metres: that's a little bit impossible given the circumstances. Would you like to review that?' So that was my first experience, so I thought 'Well if that's the sort of crime that's going on, obviously it's a lot different in reality to what the statistics show'.*

Business Operator, Wilcannia

There was widespread frustration and dissatisfaction with the lack of community control but, equally, recognition that there is little capacity in the community to make significant changes; to engage in long term strategic planning and effectively implement decisions:

*It's a really tricky issue, but I think the biggest thing is that people need the power to look after their own lives. Here in Wilcannia there are no active projects or programs in place on a community level that are trying to change the behaviour, so the less focus there is on whether or not behaviour is good or bad, or socially unacceptable or socially unacceptable, means that people just keep doing what they're doing; nobody's being told, you shouldn't do that or you shouldn't do this.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

*It applies to all government agencies. They pour money into Wilcannia like there's no tomorrow. But there's nobody out there that wants to take any programs, who is [willing to say], 'This is my program, I'm going to run it', sitting on the ground doing it. It's always somebody who comes into the community and says, 'This will be a really great program, let's run it'. While they are in Wilcannia running it, it will work. The moment they leave town, things may continue for a short time then they fall apart. There's nobody you can trust to pick up the reins and continue on with it.*

General Administration Support Officer, NSW Police, Wilcannia.

Some people referred to the need for 'leadership' in general terms but there was no clear vision of what that leadership would look like or what it would achieve. Indeed, there was some cynicism about the concept of leadership generally and about the tendency by outsiders, for example government agencies, to latch on to individuals who may not have legitimacy with the broader community. The suggestion seemed to be that a focus on 'leaders' by outsiders with the hope that a strong leader may solve some of Wilcannia's problems did little to improve well-being:

*There's this focus on 'creating good leaders', and when you focus on creating good leaders, it means you're picking 1 in 50 people, and who gives a shit about the other 49.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

Key individuals providing needed services for the community were identified but there was the observation that they were often not supported and there was a tendency for them to burn out. One such example, which was repeatedly referred to, was a film night run by one individual, which does not run when she is unable to co-ordinate it:

*[The General Administration Officer, Wilcannia Police] has been running 'Blue Reelers' for 10 years. If [she] hadn't taken it over, it would have folded. And if [she] left tomorrow, we would obviously try to keep it running. It's a voluntary exercise but this year has been able to get some police dedicated funding. If [she] had to go tomorrow, it would probably fold. But it's a great program. Gets kids off the street on pension night and we are talking young kids. Gives them free movies. Kids get a good feed. [Apart from Blue Reelers], there would be nothing else running in that community that has actually run and stayed running.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

The Community Working Party (CWP) was frequently identified as a potential vehicle for identifying community aspirations but there were different views as to what the CWP has achieved or is able to achieve. Some people felt that the CWP was hampered in the planning process by government priorities and policies; that, in effect, government would indicate what it would do for the

community, rather than the community determining its own preferences. The proper relationship between the CWP and Central Darling Shire was also questioned, where it was felt that the Shire did not appreciate the representative role of the CWP. Perceptions of a divided accountability of the community facilitator were also commented upon. While on the one hand, the community facilitator was meant to enact CWP decisions, external funding and auspising resulted in some confusion in the community as to which organisation directed that role:

*[T]he Local Council having one or two Indigenous faces in their office: they're a part of the problem that don't want to accept that they need to change what they're doing. So the forum's there [the CWP] but because of the structure it means that organisations have less voice than someone in the Mallee with a busted sewerage pipe...*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

Wilcannia is described as a segregated town with little interaction between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community.

*If you get to know Aboriginal people in the town, then you seem to not to get to know white people in the town. ... It is not a very integrated town and doesn't have any common events. They don't mingle. No common show or rodeo or dance or anything that everyone goes to and mixes at. This lack of mixing results in division and communication breakdown and problems.*

Acting Principal, Wilcannia Central School

This segregation is most evident in economic disparity and was identified as a fundamental, underlying problem in the operation of the town. While the majority of the population is Indigenous, many of the non-Indigenous residents' livelihoods are seen to depend on the Indigenous residents:

*Wilcannia – its schools, hospital, council - exist because of the number of Aboriginal people who live in the town: All of these organisations are all basically here to support blackfellas, but they're supporting the symptoms of poverty, they're not addressing the other end of it.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

Competing descriptions as to the significance of traditional culture and spirituality were given. On the one hand, Wilcannia was described as having a rich Barkindji culture and high degree of adherence to tradition, and argued by some to have succeeded in resisting assimilationist policies. Commonly, there was reference to the maintenance of spiritual and cultural connections but concern that high levels of substance abuse in the community were undermining respect for and practice of culture.

A number of people mentioned the history and role of the Christian church in the town. St Therese's Community School, referred to as the 'mission school', has had a long presence in the town and is viewed with a great deal of affection by many in the town. There were more conflicting views about the

more recent presence of the River of Life church. While some people felt strongly that it provided an important moral framework for families in Wilcannia, others felt that it drained money and focus from the town and created division.

People referred to respected people in the community who with the right support could play a crucial leadership role. A number of people expressed frustration that the respect for elders that had been ingrained when they were young was no longer common. With the undermining of the role of elders, people described a loss of peacemakers – instead it was said that contemporary honour and pride are often linked with maintaining feuds. A number of people we spoke to talked about the pressure from many in Wilcannia to continue unhealthy lifestyles, and the need to leave the town in order to make positive changes in their lives.

However there were examples given of positive, pro-active choices that were made at a community level. A strong stance is reportedly taken on 'hard drugs' such as amphetamines in Wilcannia, described as the town drawing the line at 'anything injectable', with one person we spoke to saying that 'the boys go round and have a word, and empty it out on the ground'.

People talked about a pervasive sadness and depression in Wilcannia where people live very hard lives. Attempts to take control of their own lives were repeatedly thwarted leading people to consider active engagement a pointless exercise. The provision of housing in Wilcannia is an example where consultation with local people, if it took place at all, was ignored leading to further demoralisation:

*Because people have been oppressed for so long, they just take that oppressed role. So they say 'Oh there's no point me looking for anything better', and it's been happening for so long that it takes so much bloody resilience and courage to first of all stand up to it.*

Aboriginal Language and Culture Teacher, Wilcannia

One image of Wilcannia that some people talked about was that of a dying, rural town, suffering from the advances in technology and transportation. People described Wilcannia as experiencing the constant decline of population and services:

*It's a sad thing but Wilcannia is probably one of many country towns in NSW and maybe the rest of Australia that maybe have hit their use by date. It was once a bustling community, a river town, it had rural industry and the RTA. All those things have gone as people become more mobile – Broken Hill is only 190 km away, it's not a long distance. People can go out and back in a day; government services. I guess it is technology. When it was back with horse and dray, you needed a big community, maybe even when the roads weren't so good but things change.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

*A lot of Wilcannia people have probably relocated to Broken Hill anyway. Purely because the services are here and the town out there is slowly dwindling away.*

Duty Officer, NSW Police, Broken Hill

However, what was readily apparent from our interviews is that, despite very difficult circumstances, the residents of Wilcannia on the whole remain very loyal and committed to the community.

## **MENINDEE**

The lower recorded crime rates for Menindee in all areas were supported by descriptions from people we spoke to of the community as generally law-abiding, cohesive and as able to solve problems locally. People referred to Menindee as a town with an active involvement in crime prevention, with employment and other opportunities, and one where community members are likely to take care of problems themselves:

*The community [in Menindee] is stronger – they take care of their own. There is more employment. There is more self-respect and self esteem.*

Aboriginal Client Service Specialist, Local Court, Broken Hill

### **Factors affecting crime rates**

Conversations with people raised some common themes ranging from the availability of employment opportunities and proximity to Broken Hill, to the central role of the school and expectations of success, to the role of a particular group of women and the extent to which the community takes control of its own destiny in the light of few government services. However, one important factor frequently raised was the possibility of the low crime rate in Menindee being due to crime being under-reported.

### ***Menindee as law abiding***

People we spoke to described Menindee as a law abiding town, with the general view that 'people here don't want trouble'. Menindee was described as a community that had a good working relationship with the police and government agencies in relation to crime prevention. An important factor identified by those working in the area was that of the Police ACLO who is also a key community figure.

*Menindee seems to be a community that has more participation in the crime prevention stuff. They have also have a better engagement process with the Attorney-General's Department. Also, the Menindee Community Working Party chairperson is the Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, which may have some impact on how people see [the police], and developing a respect for the legal system, rather than just not having any regard for it whatsoever.*

Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

*The community structure itself seems to be maybe a lot more positive in Menindee. From my experience, our involvement with the Working Party and LACAC [NSW Police Local Area Community Aboriginal Committee], we seem to get a lot more interest from the Menindee Indigenous community than we do from the Wilcannia community. What I mean by that is, [people are] prepared to be involved in projects and look towards goals with us. Probably a good example is the LACAC meeting the other day. The Northern LACAC services Broken Hill, Wilcannia and Menindee. To be fair, we took the meeting to Wilcannia. Next to no locals turned up. They knew about it. The ACLOs [Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers] reminded them about it and*

*offered lifts and yet we still got good representation from Menindee and Broken Hill, 200 km away.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

One of the strongest themes emerging from interviewees regarding Menindee was the importance of informal social controls on lower crime rates.

*We have some [people who have been convicted of crimes] here and they're just not treated as well as others... In Menindee, the stigma stays with you. In Wilcannia people forget. Will be drinking up and laughing up alongside the people who have taken other people's lives. In Menindee, they're not treated the same if you do something like that. You're looked at quite differently but you're not cast aside either.*

Community Worker

*Forget about Indigenous/non-Indigenous, straight across the board. Not only with the dramas that I've seen here but in 21 years of policing, the problems we have with kids. Generally speaking, kids in trouble don't come from stable family backgrounds and don't regularly attend school. In Menindee, a greater proportion of kids come from stable family backgrounds and they regularly attend school, as opposed to Wilcannia. With juvenile crime leading into later in life crime, adult crime, a huge influencing factor, probably the biggest are the values imposed by parents. In any community.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

Examples were given of community mobilisation to deal with local problems as they arise. In one example that a few people referred to, community members, parents, the school, the health service and the local store acted together to deal with a problem of aerosol sniffing by some young people.

*Couple of outsiders come into town caused a lot of the rot. Parents are quick to jump on it... One mother heard about it through the group of women I'm involved with. We rang the police, rang the health service and the school. Some parents had a meeting there and then. Someone went to the shop and told them not to sell fly spray to kids. Had another incident at about the same time with kids burning one another with deodorant. Next morning the school banned deodorant at school. Parents were notified – notices were put up saying that police were going to check bags. Police didn't need to because the parents put a stop to it. Parents will get together at the drop of a hat and say, we're going to do this. That needs to be done. Couldn't wait for DoCS to come out or Mission Australia because it won't happen.*

Community Worker

### **Employment**

Greater employment prospects in Menindee were one of the first factors that people identified as influencing a lower crime rate. Employment opportunities related to the local horticulture, pastoral and tourism industries as well as to closer proximity to Broken Hill.

*There appears to be a lot more employment in Menindee and a lot more scope for employment, even if you have to travel to Broken Hill. Broken Hill is a travelling distance, whereas Wilcannia is a bit too far ... You have the horticultural industry that is alive and well in Menindee.*  
Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

*Economic opportunity is probably one of the contributing factors to the difference in crime rates... There is that reflection in the two communities where Menindee has that difference of employment opportunities all the time, rather than Wilcannia only having [employment] part of the time.*  
Chairperson, Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly

However, some interviewees still raised challenges faced by Aboriginal people in Menindee in terms of accessing employment.

*A lot of people will employ Aboriginal people when there are the traineeship dollars but when it comes to the actual jobs... A lot of people are happy when the blackfella is below them but don't like it when the blackfella is level to them. That's a different kettle of fish.*  
Community Worker, Menindee

Other people observed that it was too simplistic to attribute the differences between Menindee and Wilcannia to employment opportunities, highlighting many of the problems facing Aboriginal people living in bigger towns and cities where employment is more readily available.

### ***Children and young people***

Any discussion of children and young people in Menindee led to a focus on the role of the school, and an overwhelmingly positive response. The strong relationship between the school and the Aboriginal community was identified as a key characteristic of Menindee. In particular, having an active, experienced principal committed to working in partnership with the community was regularly referred to.

There was an important sense of community input into the school direction and approach, and respect for Indigenous staff and content. Traineeships with local businesses and agencies for students in later years of school were seen as an important bridging step to employment. While many people we spoke to identified ongoing challenges facing the school, there was a sense of commitment to having a functioning, nurturing school that helped to provide a future for Aboriginal students.

*If your school is functioning really well in the community, it can help overcome some of the dysfunction and neutralise disadvantage.*  
Community Service Provider

*Menindee just seems to be a very functional school and it's very important to everyone that kids get an education.*

Input from the Indigenous community is integral to the operation of the school. Through the Schools in Partnership program, an advisory committee comprising the Principal, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Menindee Community Working Party, Parents and Citizens and the Teachers Federation has substantial input into allocation of funds and in setting direction for the school.

Innovative measures taken by the school are the creation of the role of an Aboriginal male educator and the involvement of an Aboriginal mentor for the school.

*[The Aboriginal male educator] is an important bridge for keeping kids at school. When they are at school, they have a better chance but we need the employment to back up...*

*He is changing the perception of Aboriginals as subservient.*

Principal, Menindee Central School

*An Aboriginal mentor is working with the school. He has written a couple of reports and the school is implementing them. We are keeping the direction steady and starting to achieve.*

Principal, Menindee Central School

The traineeship scheme was one school program that was repeatedly referred to as an excellent initiative for young people. The Principal explained that it was important that students see that the school is giving them opportunities. Traineeships commence in Year 11 where students undertake a TAFE course over seven terms while working one day a week and, at the same time, completing their HSC. The school provides resources and close support of its students undertaking the program. While a challenge for students to undertake, the traineeships have a high degree of support from within the community and more broadly.

An example of the ambitious vision of the school lies in its proposal to develop hospitality traineeships on site through the development of a restaurant, and ultimately accommodation, to cater for tourists.

Despite the accolades given to Menindee Central School, the Principal gave a cautious reminder that success requires constant vigilance:

*So much more still to be done. The message is that while the school may be doing well, it is fragile...*

*Most difficult job I have is keeping things balanced and keeping things moving forward. It's a tightrope. You need people who are prepared to take chances and walk on the tightrope.*

Principal, Menindee Central School

Parental and community expectation seem to be important factors in encouraging ambition and a sense of purpose for young people:

*We get our kids to school: that's another big thing.*

Community Service Worker, Menindee

*Just about every kid goes to Year 12 in Menindee – it's the done thing. They'll chase you and chase you until you go back.*

Community Service Provider, Menindee

*In Menindee, we're always pushing the kids; about getting their licence, doing courses, doing training.*

Community Worker

*That's what we say to these kids now all the time. Be careful what you do from now on in. If you get that [criminal] record, you're gone. You can't work anywhere.*

Community Worker

A picture was painted of a community supportive of young people, eager to ensure that they have every available opportunity. For example, when the Community Facilitator organised governance training for members of the Community Working Party, she 'roped in' business students from the school to do the courses.

An awareness of the need to mentor young people and provide active succession planning was described. The need to 'get the young ones involved' in the Community Working Party was expressed, so that they know how things work and ultimately can take over its running. Young people are encouraged to become involved and to participate in meetings. There was a strong sense of continuity and sustainability fostered by one generation in handing over to the next:

*We want to train everyone behind us. So if we all walk away, it's going to keep running.*

Community Worker

However, many people also raised the lack of organised activities and venues for children and young people outside of school hours as a problem for the town. The need for a drop-in centre was mentioned, although community members were clear that they wanted a centre that was designed by and tailored for them.

The fraught question of how to deal with juvenile offenders was raised by people we spoke to in Menindee. Concern was raised about intervention to prevent juvenile offenders from taking a path to adult offending. In particular, there was tension between the acknowledgment of custody as rightfully a sanction of last resort but an expressed need to halt a progression to adult offending with its very serious consequences:

*They need to be hard on, say a 17 year old kid. I know that cautioning thing is a good idea but, say a 17 year old kid goes and does something. You'll find they start from about 14. Mum sticks up for them. [There is a] difference between supporting your kid and sticking up for them. If they've stuffed up, they've stuffed up. ... Problem is that starts when you're 14, you get a smack on the wrist, a smack on the wrist, a smack on the wrist. You turn 18 and bang, you're inside. That's the biggest problem. They need to be really drilling those kids and giving it to them. For some kids in Menindee, conferencing has worked. Put the wind up them. But there are others who just go there and their parents tell them, 'Go along and make out you care.' ... You need to be hard on them.*

Community Worker

### ***Under reporting***

Despite a prevailing sense that the situation was better in Menindee than Wilcannia in a variety of ways, it was claimed by some people that there was significant under-reporting of crime in Menindee, particularly in relation to domestic violence and sexual assault.

*Menindee has just as many distresses in their community as Wilcannia has in terms of child sexual assault, adult sexual assault, domestic violence, substance abuse - it's just not as open, or not as visual as Wilcannia's.*

Senior Aboriginal Mental Health Worker,  
Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation, Broken Hill

The police are aware of the issue of under-reporting and have made attempts to encourage disclosure. The reasons given for under-reporting seemed to fall into two distinct categories. First, there was under-reporting because local police were unavailable or non-responsive:

*There's a big problem with police not coming out. A lot of people ring 000 [and their call goes through to Broken Hill] and are told that the police are on their way. Police don't turn up. A lot of times our police here don't even know.*

Community Worker

*Even though we've got three police, they're never here. When you need the police, they're never around. Sometimes they go to Wilcannia, or are relieving in Ivanhoe, Broken Hill for court and stuff like that.*

Community Service Worker

*The crime rate [in Menindee] is lower because the domestic violence isn't reported. And the police station is only open 2 or 3 days a week.*

Aboriginal Client Service Specialist, Local Court, Broken Hill

Second, there was a broad description of Menindee as a strong community that takes care of its own problems. This was particularly resonant as it

related to dealing with juvenile offenders and community attempts to avoid contact with the criminal justice system. A description was given of people undertaking their own investigations in relation to break-ins and approaching parents of young people suspected of being involved. Given the implications of contact with the criminal justice system, there was not a perceived need to approach the police over such incidents.

*[The community] controls a lot of things before they need to go further. With the police, it's more like community policing in Menindee. They want the police more for positive things rather than having to call the police in.*

Community Worker, Menindee

However, attempts to resolve issues internally were also described as a negative thing:

*Because of the history [in Menindee], everyone attempts to resolve the issues within families, within that set up, and sometimes that's a good thing, but on the other hand, they tend to close things up. Some of the things that we're finding out with the [Maari Ma] research project now is that particular DVs and things like that are hidden, and everyone has that blanket approach where it gets hidden, whereas in Wilcannia it's just out there in the open: what you see you'll see there on the streets, you'll see in the homes.*

Aboriginal Health Co-ordinator, Broken Hill

Others mentioned the lack of police involvement in petty crimes committed by young people leading to the perception that police weren't interested in such matters and then to people taking matters into their own hands in a negative sense. It was argued that where there is no reporting, no pattern is then discerned to inform crime prevention strategies.

### **Menindee women**

The important role played by a prominent group of women in Menindee, most of them related, was regularly identified as a key factor in the dynamics and functioning of the community. Most interviewees were very positive about the role played by this group of women and described many of the positive things happening in the community as the result of their commitment and hard work. Others who were not aligned with their vision for the community described their leadership role in less positive terms.

*[The prominent group of women in Menindee have a] vision for what they want for the community. They want a good school, a good community, the same as anyone in any community would want. They have big fight to get it because governments don't support little communities like this.*

Principal, Menindee Central School

*Menindee just seems to be a place that works better as a community. The women out there, in particular, are very driven, whether in the*

*CWP or the local rugby league club. They are really focused on trying to get the best for the town.*

Community Service Provider, Broken Hill

*[The women] may be seen to be greedy. They may be seen to be unpopular but without them, this would be a much lesser town. They are a formidable group.*

Principal, Menindee Central School

*Menindee women will put themselves out and do a lot for other people because [Menindee] just doesn't have the services here. No one else will do it. That's just what you do.*

Community Worker

An example is the determination of those women to do whatever it takes for appropriate training courses to be conducted in Menindee through the CDEP:

*There's that many people in jobs in Menindee that came from that CDEP. It wasn't a matter of, 'We're going to keep you on CDEP'. It was, 'What are you interested in?', and then we would get the training for you. We all have so many different tickets because if there wasn't enough to do a course; they would only do the course if there was so many. Extra couple of women would jump in so they would run the course. Chainsaw courses, earthmoving, horticulture etc. Because we needed it to run for those boys. Unbelievable some of the tickets we've got. But you've got to do it.*

Community Worker

### **Local solutions to local problems**

The aim of the Community Working Party in Menindee was regularly stated as developing local solutions to local problems, based on what local people know will work. The CWP was described as having a clear vision and view of how to achieve its aims. Community control is absolutely central to the operation of the CWP, which resists intervention from outsiders in terms of its method of operation and identifying priorities:

*When we first started, they wanted it top heavy with the Shire; everyone else but the grassroots blackfella. We said, 'If that's the way you want it, you can have it that way. We're not having ours like that.' They tried to stand over us. We said, 'You go and set up a working party like you want. We're going to set one that's coming from the community and what they want.'*

Community Worker

*People come to work with us, we want references from them. We want references from the communities; the black people. We want contact numbers from some of the tenants. We want contact numbers from people on the ground. We don't want people up top telling us that this is all pretty.*

Community Worker

Members of the CWP described themselves as resistant to a blanket approach by funders and service providers; one person explained the rejection of the one size fits all approach, because 'we're all out of shape' and need something designed for Menindee specifically:

*That's why we've never got a lot because we've refused to bow down to what they wanted to do. They wanted to control the community. ... We said, "You want us to do that. We're not."; the way they wanted the Community Working Party set up. We're unique to the rest of them. Our working party here, only about 8 regulars turn up but 2 reps from each facet of the Aboriginal community: housing, education, health, old ones, young ones, employment. Only [Aboriginal people] have voting rights, white fellas don't. It is predominantly women through no fault of our own. With the reps that are there, it's a good cross section; each family group in Menindee is represented.'*

Community Worker

*We're behind the eight ball [in Menindee] as far as getting any funding and the likes but we will not be dictated to by people who don't know what the community is like.*

Community Worker

The focus on locally crafted solutions is exemplified by the Community Working Party's refusal to accept funding for proposals that do not fit within its plan and vision. There is a reluctance to compromise:

*We have said no. ... This is where the others are failing because they have signed their lives away to a handful of men who have driven the bus so many times before and crashed it and nothing has worked.*

Community Worker

*We want to build on resources that we have here. If we are going to have a drop in centre, we want the best. They are talking about putting a shed up. Why would we want a shed? There are plenty of sheds around town that we could jump in. If we are going to do something, it needs to be multi purpose. We want the best value for our dollar. It wont be open until after school. Not even open until 4.30. There are activities at the school, the kids can stay at the school. They say to us, up in [another town this is happening] – but we're not [that town].*

Community Worker

## **Policing**

There could not be a more stark contrast between Menindee and Wilcannia than in the role and the level of policing in the two communities.

*From our perspective, we have a lot more policing dramas in Wilcannia than in Menindee, hands down. ... [In terms of] our policing resources,*

*there are dramatic differences, you have 3 police in Menindee and, at the moment, 11 ½ in Wilcannia.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

*In Menindee, we hardly ever have to supply additional resources, [whereas] in Wilcannia we quite often have to supply additional resources, especially for funerals.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

As described above, police are a very significant presence in Wilcannia, contrasting with a limited presence in Menindee. The tenure of police in Menindee is 18 months longer than in Wilcannia. The additional time was seen to be sufficient for better community-police relationships to develop, which was considered important in a community such as Menindee where there was an emphasis on police support for community initiatives. However, as noted above, the lack of police presence was also described in negative terms, leading to under-reporting and the potential for ineffective crime prevention approaches.

In Menindee, similar concerns about a lack of engagement with the criminal justice system by people charged with an offence were raised – lack of understanding of processes and inability to effectively advocate for themselves. For example, unlike Wilcannia, there is no specific court sitting in Menindee, so people charged with offences must travel to Broken Hill to have their matters heard. This raised particular problems, such as the only public transport to Broken Hill being the daily bus that leaves Broken Hill for Menindee before 3pm. If the alleged offender's matter has not been dealt with by that time, they are faced with the dilemma of having to stay overnight in Broken Hill or not appearing in court. People, feeling unable to explain their situation to the court, often opt to return home, failing to appreciate the importance of appearing.

### **Government policy and priorities**

Interviewees regularly referred to the lack of government services and programs in Menindee. This was described in both negative and positive terms. Many referred to the lack of services and programs to address many issues faced by the community, and described the way that not being seen as a 'problem community' like Wilcannia meant that there was not sufficient focus on the needs of people living there. Others felt that the reason Menindee continued to function better was, ironically, in part due to a lack of government interference in or control over the way things functioned in the community. This was described as being due to the problematic way that funding was provided and services and programs delivered to Aboriginal people in small regional communities.

The prevailing sentiment about the lack of government services or resources in Menindee may be summed up in the following comments:

*We don't get nearly as much as what Wilcannia does. There's been lots of talk around town like maybe our crime rate should go up so we can get some of the funding.*

Health Worker, Menindee

*If Menindee doesn't do it for itself, no one else is going to because Menindee gets no services.*

Community Worker

*That's why the community goes so well. We get limited resources but what we do get, we share and make the most of it.*

Community Worker

While similar themes emerged in relation to Menindee as had arisen in Wilcannia – problems with regionalisation, remote service delivery and the adoption of a blanket approach – there appeared to be less anger about it. Not because there was a view that service delivery was better than in Wilcannia, but that it was pretty much non-existent in Menindee, which seemed to promote a certain resigned frustration.

Nonetheless, examples were given of the impact of regionalisation and the adoption of a blanket approach on some of the few services available, particularly in relation to the role of Community Facilitator and impact on CDEP. The role of Community Facilitator in the Murdi Pakki region arose from the Murdi Paaki Partnership Project, designed to strengthen operation of Community Working Parties. Community Facilitators have now been superseded by a new role funded by the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, who will have the role of part time community engagement officers but will not be based in the communities.

There was frustration at yet another accessible community-based resource or service being removed from the community and based elsewhere. The removal of community facilitators from the community was viewed as particularly ineffective, given the acknowledged lack of support for Community Working Parties in general and an urgent need in the community for co-ordinated responses. It was argued that what was actually needed was a full time facilitator:

*Keep the [Community] Facilitator! ... They're talking about having part time facilitators elsewhere and they're finishing ours next week. Why would you? Why pour money into another project? Why put someone else on when you have stuff that is operating? ... She's only part time. A full time facilitator could get a lot more done. What's she's done part time but she does do a lot in her own time... As usual, it's a pilot. ... Before the Community Facilitator, the members of the Community Working Party were run off their feet. At least now you have the one port of call. She'll ring up and nag and say, are you coming to this, are you going to that? Someone to co-ordinate the community. We need the Community Facilitator because there are no other services here. We need that grass roots person sitting there who is accessible by the*

*community. ... Solutions to our problems are coming up because she is there.*

Community Worker

A similar theme was described in relation to the CDEP:

*They've regionalised Menindee's CDEP. They took our CDEP. It was one of the last to go over. We said, "Just take it." They hold funding back and hold funding back and hold funding back until you can't go on any more. When it was held in Menindee here, it was run by a local and there were that many people trained. There's that many people in jobs in Menindee that came from that CDEP.*

Community Worker

As in Wilcannia, the preference is for community specific programs tailored for the identified needs of that community. However, in an environment of distinct need, there is pressure to roll out services that have been successful in one community more broadly. The danger is, of course, that programs may have succeeded because of the particular nature of the community and may not succeed in others without similar characteristics. The concern is that the communities themselves, ultimately, carry for the blame for the lack of success:

*[In relation to successful programs], whatever has worked has been run in both communities. It's not a case that police are doing something different in Menindee as opposed to Wilcannia at all. Anything we have tried that has worked goes everywhere. ... If anything, we have probably poured tenfold the amount of resources in Wilcannia compared to Menindee. It's simply back on the community itself. Anything we've got that works goes to everywhere that's appropriate. Wilcannia has had no less opportunity than Menindee. If anything, it has had much much more.*

Crime Manager, NSW Police, Broken Hill

### **Community dynamics**

The description of Menindee as wanting to find its own solutions to problems in the community was a prominent one backed up by many examples given. The need to organise training and opportunities for people in the community, particularly young people, was emphasised.

Divisions within the community were acknowledged, some of them along the lines of people identifying as Nyampa or Barkindji, particularly arising from land rights and native title processes that recognised Barkindji as the traditional owners of the area. It was repeatedly emphasised that Menindee is not a segregated community and that there is a high degree of integration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the town. This was not always viewed in positive terms, with a small number of people describing Aboriginal people in Menindee as 'assimilated', contrasting them to the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia. But Menindee was generally described as an integrated, cohesive community.

*We wouldn't want to go and build a separate [health service]. We need to be working together. Menindee's not a black and white town. What we would want to do is expand on what we already have and put an Aboriginal perspective into it.*

Community Worker

*We're not taking our kids out of the system. If we've got a problem with the school, we get blackfellas into the school. Our kids are going to stay there whether they like it or lump it. If we need to change things to make our kids more comfortable and create a better learning environment, then we'll get down there and do it.*

Community Worker

*People do come to town and cause a bit of black and white shit but they soon get knocked down. They do try to cause waves but we don't want to hear it.*

Community Worker

*[Menindee] has its factions. Every town has its factions. It's not Indigenous communities. Every town has its factions but they are at a point where they are prepared to say, how about we agree to disagree and move on in the best interests of the town.*

Duty Officer, NSW Police

Overall there was a sense that there was a contemporary, cohesive culture in Menindee, with people seeking to work together for the town to have a positive future.

## **IDEAS FOR REDUCING CRIME**

Everybody that we spoke to had ideas about particular community characteristics or strategies that may have a positive impact on crime rates. There were important lessons from both Wilcannia and Menindee for this study. These are the main recommendations from people that our research team spoke to:

### **Alcohol and mental health**

- Local, culturally appropriate mental health and alcohol rehabilitation services
- Accessible trauma and grief counselling, including longer term support to help people to lead meaningful lives
- Holistic approach to rehabilitation, involving families
- Men's services
- Drying out shelter
- Enhanced services during funerals
- Programs that the magistrate can refer offenders to
- Social outlets that are not focused on alcohol

### **Government policy and priorities**

- Co-ordinated, long term planning and service delivery approach
- Genuine consultation with Aboriginal people regarding that they want for their communities
- Community role in determining policies, funding and programs
- Longer term, flexible funding approach with a reduction in red tape
- Sustainability of programs and services being a priority
- Comprehensive and ongoing evaluation of programs and services
- Accountability by government and other agencies regarding funding and program priorities
- Greater scrutiny of role of consultants and contractors
- Consideration of the false economy and impact of regionalisation
- Locally based, locally targeted solutions to problems
- Documenting of and learning from experiences of people who live and work in the town to avoid the frustrations of continually having to identify the same problems to different audiences
- Better communication between government agencies to avoid duplication of services and wasting of resources
- Increased role for local government in training, employment of local Indigenous people and better co-ordination and oversight of services in town
- Locally based staff that are sufficiently resourced, like police role in Wilcannia, with flexibility and incentives to make community-based roles a realistic option for employment
- Department of Community Services (DoCS) field officer based locally, taking a support and mentoring role who is not directly involved in child removal, ideally a trusted member of the community
- More thorough consideration of the role and management of CDEP
- Reflection on merits of Violence Against Women worker model
- Issues of mental health, grief and trauma a priority for all agencies
- Support for community-run store with fresh, affordable produce

- Respect for community aspirations and processes and support for community structures and development of locally specific cultural protocols

### **Policing**

- Better proactive community police presence in Indigenous communities, for example at school activities, NAIDOC events
- Support for and advice taken from Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers (ACLOs)
- Reduction of issuing of fines and infringement notices, or alternative means of addressing minor offending, given the long-term detrimental impacts
- Reflection of impact of over-use of Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs)
- Support for locally developed cultural awareness training for police new to communities, especially those who are inexperienced
- Funding specifically for police community-based crime prevention programs, for example to work with young people
- Sufficient police resourcing and responsiveness to crimes that may be under-reported, in particular regarding domestic violence or child sexual assault, working in partnership with relevant agencies

### **Criminal justice approaches**

- Alternative sentencing options for magistrate, for example diversion to a driver's licence program, to numeracy/literacy programs, drug and alcohol programs
- Serious consideration and co-ordinated response to long term impacts of issuing of fines and infringement notices, including as a pathway to incarceration

### **Employment**

- Locally based job skills and training programs
- School traineeships, run with support of local organisations and businesses
- Priority of government funding to recruit, train and employ local Aboriginal people for local program and service delivery roles
- Flexibility in recruitment regarding people having a criminal record for long-ago or minor offences
- Support in applying for and staying in jobs
- Local government taking a more active role in employing Aboriginal people and supporting other employment opportunities and programs

### **Children and young people**

- Safe and productive activities for kids and young people after school and in the evening
- Specific activities for young women
- Alternative appropriate safe residences and support networks to juvenile detention
- Alternative role models, for example, Aboriginal education workers

**School**

- Support for good partnership between the local central school and community
- Schools engaging with the local Indigenous community; giving input and control over aspects of its approach and curricula; engendering a sense of community ownership of and investment in the school
- Support for good school attendance through shared vision and encouragement rather than punitive approaches
- Recruitment of and support for experienced staff committed to Aboriginal students having opportunities and succeeding
- Traineeships linked to pathways to employment and further education

**Community dynamics**

- Effective and legitimate community representative bodies
- Community control of agenda setting, resources, services
- Support for different groups to work collaboratively for best interests of the community
- Mentoring and support for young people in the community
- Local solutions to local problems