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Abstract | This article reports on research undertaken in Western Australia and the Northern Territory to develop effective throughcare strategies for Indigenous people leaving prison. The findings are based on interviews with Indigenous men and women in communities, with and without lived experience of prison, and local service providers. The interviews demonstrate that a thorough exit plan from prison is essential. However, for throughcare strategies to be effective, they should acknowledge the context of Indigenous involvement in the criminal justice system and the ongoing consequences of colonisation.

The paper discusses the main areas that need to be addressed during imprisonment and after release, which form the basis of recommendations. Effective throughcare strategies must involve Indigenous people and the broader community, to break the cycle of offending and reoffending and address the over-representation of Indigenous people in prison.

Throughcare needs of Indigenous people leaving prison in Western Australia and the Northern Territory

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Indigenous over-representation in prison

Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system is a longstanding and well documented characteristic of the Australian penal landscape. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, approximately two percent of the Australian adult population in 2018 identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. In sharp contrast, the proportion of the national prison population that identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is 28 percent (ABS 2018).

The current research was conducted in Western Australia (WA) and the Northern Territory (NT), the jurisdictions with the highest over-representation of Indigenous people in the prison population. As of June 2018, 39 percent of the prison population in WA and 84 percent in the NT were Indigenous. In WA, Indigenous people are 16 times more likely than non-Indigenous people to be imprisoned, while those in the NT are 12 times more likely to be in prison. The picture is even more perilous for Indigenous women. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women make up 47 percent of the adult female prison population in WA, and 83 percent in the NT (ABS 2018).



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Indigenous people often do not apply for parole at the end of their non-parole period. The Council of Australian Governments (2016) reported that in WA 80 percent of the Indigenous people released in 2014–15 had completed their sentences without parole. According to the most recent statistics available on the NT (2016–17), 45 percent of Indigenous people served their full sentences in prison, while for non-Indigenous people the figure was 21 percent (Northern Territory Government 2018). Further, high rates of recidivism have been identified as one of the main drivers of Indigenous over-representation in prison. In 2018, 80 percent of all sentenced Indigenous people in WA prisons had a known prior imprisonment, compared to 50 percent of non-Indigenous prisoners; the figures are 81 percent and 29 percent in the NT (ABS 2018). To address the high recidivism rate of Indigenous people, effective throughcare strategies after release are crucial.

Aim and methodology

The aim of this research was to identify the needs of Indigenous men and women after release from prison, so that effective community-based throughcare strategies can be developed. For the purpose of our research, throughcare is defined as ‘comprehensive case management for a prisoner in the lead up to their release from prison and throughout their transition to life outside’ (Council of Australian Governments 2016: 62).

Research on Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system has demonstrated the enduring impact of Australia’s colonial history, resulting in Indigenous people experiencing multiple forms of deprivation which are linked to their offending (Blagg 2016). To prevent a further colonising penal approach, research in this area should be grounded in Indigenous people’s cultural values, beliefs and realities, using grassroots movements to bring about change. For now, evidence on the factors Aboriginal people deem important is limited (Baldry & McCausland 2009; Carlton & Segrave 2013). Our study sought to contribute to this scholarship. Therefore, the starting point of this research is that, for the transition from custody to community to be effective, throughcare strategies should be based on the knowledge and expertise of local Indigenous people and services. Consequently, the research design used a community-led approach, seeking the perspectives of Indigenous men and women in communities, with and without lived experience of imprisonment, and local service providers.

Further, as a number of scholars have noted, mainstream research approaches often fail to consider Indigenous people’s ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies (Anthony 2013; Blagg 2016; Leeson, Smith & Rynne 2016; Martin 2008; Rynne & Cassematis 2015). To ensure non-Indigenous researchers contribute to self-determination and cultural safety, research methods must be open to identifying and understanding Indigenous people’s life experience in context. One such method is the ‘yarning’ approach (Bessarab & Ng’andu 2010). For Indigenous people, yarning is a formal narrative process of storytelling that shares knowledge through relationships (Bessarab & Ng’andu 2010; Dean 2010). Therefore, the research sites were selected because of the familiarity of the researchers with the local Indigenous communities and service providers and yarning as the data collection approach.

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Western Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee, in respect of both the National Health and Medical Research Council's *Ethical guidelines for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' *Guidelines for ethical research in Australian Indigenous studies*.

The researchers contacted Elders and other respected people in several communities near Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing and the Dampier Peninsula in WA and near Darwin and Alice Springs and on Melville Island (one of the Tiwi Islands) in the NT. These contacts were based on personal relationships or suggested by local service providers. They in turn recommended other potential participants. We talked to as many people as possible while visiting the communities, as representative sampling was not appropriate or possible. Potential participants were informed about the aim of the research, the use of the results and the nature of their involvement. Their consent was witnessed and/or recorded. In total, 38 interviews were conducted with individuals and focus groups. Fifty-nine people were involved, 20 being women. We interviewed 18 Indigenous community members and 20 service providers who work with Indigenous communities. The duration of the interviews varied greatly, from half an hour to two hours. The interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Analysis of the interviews was conducted via a grounded theoretical approach of open, axial and reflective coding using NVivo (Strauss & Corbin 1990).

After the interviews were analysed, a consultation paper was developed, summarising our understanding of what we had been told in the interviews. This consultation paper was emailed to all the participants with available contact details. Participants had the opportunity to give feedback over email or were contacted to discuss the findings in a follow-up visit or over Skype. Their comments were then integrated in the results.

Results

The results are presented according to the main themes that emerged from analysis of the interviews. As the aim of the research was to gather community perspectives on the strengths and needs of Indigenous people and communities, the results section summarises what was shared with us in the interviews. It includes as many quotes as the limited word count would allow, giving Indigenous people and their service providers a voice. To ensure anonymity, the quotes are attributed in general terms.

Culture and lifestyle factors

In the regional and remote communities where we conducted our fieldwork, Aboriginal culture remains a central component of community life. Throughout the interviews, participants talked about Indigenous people's daily struggle to live in two worlds/cultures and how this struggle impacts on their interaction with the criminal justice system. It was clear from the interviews that offending (or reoffending) has to be understood against the background of colonisation, intergenerational trauma and loss, and ongoing deprivation, as will be discussed below.

Clash of cultures

A theme expressed through several interviews was that Indigenous people daily experience the challenges of being torn between two worlds, in which their traditional culture clashes with the expectations of the Western world, particularly when confronted with the penal system. Imprisonment in itself often means that people are taken away from their country, which adds an extra dimension of punishment, given Indigenous people's strong connection to their ancestral homelands. Imprisonment, as well as release, was described as a very stressful and anxious experience. While in prison, Indigenous people frequently have limited connection with what is happening in their communities, and the 'tyranny of distance' makes regular contact through visits difficult. Indigenous prisoners also have uncertainty about being allowed or having the means to return to their community after release. Further, Indigenous people have many cultural obligations which are often not understood in the non-Indigenous world. Even while being held in prison, their inability to participate in cultural activities, such as customary lore and funerals, has far-reaching consequences for Indigenous people, resulting in feelings of guilt, anger and fear of possible payback, which increase the risk of recidivism.

Some of them, when they go into prison...they lose out on coming into families' funerals and then when they come back out, they feel anger 'cause they missed their family's funeral or they're angry about family not visiting and because they're well away from family and they have that bit of closure inside of them. And when they come out, they drink so they can...let out all their anger or their emotional feeling, what they feel inside. (Community member, Derby)

Concerns about the survival of Aboriginal culture

Many people shared with us their concern about the future of Aboriginal languages, culture and traditions. Colonisation has interfered with or eradicated many traditional practices, with far-reaching and enduring consequences. It has displaced people from their traditional country, causing disengagement and conflict about belonging, ownership and entitlements. It has also impacted on the traditional structure of communities and the influence Elders and other respected people had over the community. Western people, lacking insight into the traditional structures, focused their attention on those most accessible to them—English-speaking Indigenous people. However, those people were not necessarily recognised by Aboriginal culture as being authorised to speak on behalf of communities, clans or skin groups. This focus dismantled the hierarchical control traditionally held by the Elders. With the enforcement of the Western criminal justice system, Elders lost the capacity to resolve problems in a traditional way—that is, negotiating and administering punishment through a system known as payback.

People expressed a particular concern that the younger generation are not being exposed to the influence of Elders who can teach them about respect for culture and tradition. This may be because a community has too few strong Elders available, because the Elders themselves are entangled in the criminal justice system, or because the young people are spending long periods of time in prison or away from the community and the influence of Elders.

Yeah, because of that jail system. They can't speak to the old people. They took the respect and dignity away from them, you see. It's about the old people putting that respect and dignity back to the young people. In other words, let them old people go there and visit them in the jail. I guarantee you won't see them going back in. (Community member, Darwin)

The breakdown of traditional culture has been reinforced by the introduction of modern technology, such as social media and mobile devices. Social media exacerbates jealousy and interferes with traditional conflict resolution.

Somewhere a young girl will text some bloke and he will tell his girlfriend, and it's just all out of proportion. And again, because you're not physically there, you can say anything you want on a text. (Service provider, Alice Springs)

One participant described a split between two groups of Indigenous people—the more traditional people and the more contemporary people—with the latter having less awareness of traditional language and culture, which creates mutual tension and misunderstanding. At the same time, the more traditional people, who have not mastered English to the extent required to access services or claim their rights, have to rely on the more contemporary Indigenous people, who adhere less to traditional values. This increases the risk of losing cultural awareness.

Community versus individualistic lifestyles

In the experience of interview participants, the Western individualistic lifestyle often does not accord with the Indigenous community lifestyle. The obligation to share and to care for extended family members clashes with Western expectations and regulations. For example, the limitations on how many people can live in government supported housing mean that Indigenous people who adhere to cultural obligations risk losing access to that accommodation, and family related issues can interfere with work obligations. In this respect, the extended family structure, which used to be the strength of Aboriginal culture, now becomes a hindrance.

I mean we're all kind of firm with our family that we've got to work and do all of that stuff as well and you can do the same, but then there's also that cultural aspect in it and if we don't help anyone, we could get the blame as to, "Well, how come you didn't help?" because they came there looking for help and you didn't help. So then there's also that that we take into consideration that we get blamed for as well. So we're all caught up in everything like that. I mean it's difficult. (Service provider, Alice Springs)

The extended family structure also causes substantial peer pressure for Indigenous people. The cultural obligation to share leads to 'humbugging' (asking or pressuring family members for money, food and belongings), which is untenable if much of the community is without income. Poverty is a reality for many Indigenous people, particularly in isolated communities where life is very expensive. When incomes are spread too thin, this can cause Indigenous people to give up on their attempts to earn an income or care for belongings, as these are consumed by others.

Accommodation and returning to communities

On a more practical level, myriad comments throughout our interviews related to accommodation and the difficulty of returning to the community.

Lack of housing and overcrowding

The lack of available accommodation for Indigenous people, especially after a period of imprisonment, was a major problem at all sites visited. For various reasons, Indigenous people often cannot access the private rental market and therefore rely on government housing. Waiting lists for public housing are substantial, and people drop off the list if they are in prison for a certain amount of time. Further, if they had managed to obtain accommodation, they might lose it while in prison. A reality for many released Indigenous people is that they do not have their own place to go back to and are forced to rely on family for their housing. This leads to considerable problems of overcrowding, with flow-on effects such as family conflict and living with people who abuse legal and/or illicit substances.

...if one prisoner is coming out...they don't have their own accommodation, so they stay with families. And if a family is having conflict or having overcrowding and this person stays with them and they feel uncomfortable...or they have an argument or just things that doesn't balance right in the household, so this person who just came out of prison will go and drink, smoke...
(Community member, Derby)

Barriers to returning to the community

There are many reasons why released Indigenous people do not go back to their communities. It can be their own choice to not return to their community for fear of payback or other family related issues. Alternatively, not returning to their home community could be a strategy to prevent them from committing further crime and returning to prison.

If someone is released early, the usual practice is that corrections departments will contact community leaders to ask if the person is allowed back. This gives the community a certain responsibility for the supervised person, but also for the safety of their community, which they often feel they cannot maintain. This concern comes partly from the lack of information about the released person, and partly from the lack of support for the community in the event the transition does not go well. Therefore, the community leaders we spoke to felt a certain reluctance to accept people on early release, particularly from other communities, as doing so could overburden the community receiving them.

Well, our board is quite split on whether we want people here on parole or whether we want them here once they're clean and finished and everything. There's people who go, "If they come back while they're on parole, we've got a little bit of—not power, but we've got something to hold over them a little bit while we get them readjusted into the community," and there are people who say, "Well, that's actually too much responsibility 'cause if anything goes wrong, it's gonna fall back on us and we would rather them come back once there's no parole left anymore."
(Community member, Beagle Bay)

The situation is even more problematic if community leaders are not contacted, or if people serve their full sentence and return to the community unannounced, as the community then does not know what risks will require managing. The communities located close to a prison are particularly exposed to this.

And I said, “Well, do you know that you have to come through us first ‘cause we wouldn’t know what type of thing that he’s been doing and breaking the law. And see, he could go cross the road to the roadhouse and do something there and then we have to answer to it as directors of this community and the executive”. (Community member, Derby)

Sometimes people cannot go back to their community because of a lack of transport or money to pay for it.

...they’re standing there—they’re scratching their head then wondering what I’m gonna do and then walk down the road and a lot of them always have that intention, like you find a car there that nobody’s in and that you’ve got to grab...by not getting them home, you’ve got them here in town...into doing crimes, either stealing cars or something like that. (Community member, Darwin)

Not being allowed back into the community, or the practical impossibility of returning to the community, has a significant impact on Indigenous people’s lives. Feelings of rejection, insecurity, displacement and the discomfort of being on other people’s land can all lead people back into substance abuse and offending behaviour.

...and they get sort of frustrated themselves because they go, “That’s my home. That’s where I come from, and I haven’t done anything back there. My offence or my crime that I committed wasn’t on the community.” And that’s why they find a bit frustrating. (Community member, One Arm Point)

Employment and money

Another topic that was frequently mentioned during the interviews was employment and the lack thereof.

Lack of employment opportunities

Employment opportunities for Indigenous people returning from prison are lacking, particularly in remote communities. While all people with a criminal record are disadvantaged in a competitive labour market, many Indigenous people felt that they faced even greater challenges and had to try harder than non-Indigenous people to get a second chance.

And so, a lot of Aboriginal people—they go into workplaces, there’s just a second set of rules...it’s just nothing but stress and the only way to get out of it is just not bloody engage in it. The only way to get out of it is go and get bloody drunk, go bloody get on the drugs, and it’s the only way to forget the bloody issues, pretty much... (Service provider, Darwin)

The lack of employment is often associated with boredom, poverty and feelings of loss—all strong risk factors for substance abuse and reoffending. Further, living in poverty has further lifestyle consequences such as poor eating habits, which affect people’s health.

Disconnection between prison training and employment opportunities

It was often mentioned that prison services focus on employment training at the cost of other rehabilitation programs. There was the perception that the prison system sees employment as the solution to everything, which is not the case if the underlying issues are not addressed. Participants commented that some people leave the prison with ‘a shoebox full of certificates’ and expectations, but this does not necessarily improve their employment opportunities as the training they get in prison is often not relevant for the communities they return to.

...once they got back to the community, that’s where the breakdown was. There was nothing there for them to continue on in the community...They have these Aboriginal prisoners—this is an example—working down on the fish docks down here. When he gets done, where does he go? Back to Lajamanu, which is centre of the NT, no fish out there—there’s no fish docks out there. So he’s got all these skills that he’s developed working at the fish docks and he’s going back to his community with nothing. He can’t use those skills. (Service provider, Darwin)

Lack of incentives

Participants also shared concerns about the lack of incentives for Indigenous people, particularly younger people who had become reliant on government support.

So a lot of the boys will say to me, “Well, what’s the point of working when my mate, or my brother, or my sister—they don’t have to work, and they get the same money that I get?”
(Service provider, Derby)

As mentioned before, another factor discouraging people from working is the sharing responsibilities of the community lifestyle. Working people see little personal benefit in earning an income, as it does not improve their own lifestyle. Again, the stress of having to deal with these different cultural expectations can result in people not seeking or retaining employment.

Flexible work arrangements

If employment is obtained, it can interfere with family and cultural obligations. Therefore, participants talked about the need for more flexible employment arrangements, like casual or part-time work or hiring two part-time people to cover one job. Such options would allow Indigenous people to be absent from work when needed for cultural purposes without losing their employment.

Financial stress

Participants talked about budgeting, particularly the fact that the available money tends to be spent very quickly and is not invested in longer term benefits. They also mentioned that domestic violence and violence between relatives is frequently related to money, such as when direct payments made to women after giving birth are then claimed by the men.

Prison programs

Participants mentioned the need for more or different prison programs, such as education about family violence, practical support, alcohol and drugs counselling and life coaching. Several people talked about programs that were popular, such as arts and music programs, which had been terminated. Further, they noted that people were not interested in programs that did not result in better opportunities after release.

...if you ask someone to do a training program, and the first question they always ask is “What do I get at the end of it? Will I get employment? Do I get anything that’s gonna help me in a sense?” And nine times out of ten, the answer’s no. “Have I got a job to go with it? Where would the wife fit into all the scheme of things?” (Community member, Broome)

Participants also mentioned that the way programs are delivered may reflect mainstream cultural practices, unintelligible to Aboriginal participants. The problem is more than language differences. Programs may be based on concepts that are alien to an Indigenous audience while ignoring important cultural points of reference, such as obligations to family, and collective rather than individual decision making. People also felt that family and community members should be involved in or have access to treatment programs. Finally, it was often mentioned that prison programs do not provide sufficient hands-on support and are limited to making phone calls or giving referrals. While services are available, people felt they were hardly helpful.

Service delivery

Participants noted a lack of coordination and collaboration in service delivery. External service providers who were not in charge of a formal throughcare program stated that they were not aware of the programs available in the prisons. Also, external service providers did not know which agency was delivering what program or service and when. Many service providers go to remote communities, so the lack of coordination among them can lead to overlap and confusion.

For example, up the Peninsula here, Dampier Peninsula, there is 52 service providers. So that’s one service provider for every week of the year. You tell me that people up in the communities that walk around ‘cause people wanna run their training on the same day, there’s another organisation will miss out on all the training because of these. (Service provider, Broome)

Another major issue was the lack of ongoing funding. A lot of service providers, but also community members, complained about the lack of stable funding: initiatives are started, and work well, but then run out of funding and are discontinued.

Service delivery is also hampered by bureaucratic practices that do not match the Indigenous lifestyle. The paperwork is too complicated and confusing, leaving Indigenous people feeling unsupported and disheartened. It is particularly difficult for people who do not have good English reading and writing skills.

I can tell they’re just numbers. At Centrelink, they’re just numbers. When they go into Centrelink, “What’s your CRN number, blah, blah, blah, blah.” Where does that go? A lot of them do want help. When they’re in prison they’re actually “I’d like to do this and I’d like to—” but there is nothing there to facilitate. (Service provider, Alice Springs)

Women and throughcare

A most concerning finding was that there were few throughcare programs or services specifically for Indigenous women. This is particularly alarming given the significant increase in the number of Indigenous women entering prison and the fact that they are often primary caregivers, which impacts on their children and could lead to intergenerational offending. Services that are available often relate to domestic violence, but they only provide temporary shelter. Longer term supported accommodation and access to work programs are required.

The Western criminal justice system

Police

Participants frequently referred to over-policing and said that greater police presence seems to equate to more police interventions, resulting in increased numbers of Indigenous people having contact with the criminal justice system. Further, Indigenous offending often occurs in public places, making it highly visible and therefore susceptible to police intervention, with one interviewee describing it as ‘shooting fish in a barrel’.

Legal representation

Commonly, Aboriginal Legal Service solicitors have extensive caseloads. High caseloads mean they have very little time to engage with their clients, to get the information required to defend them properly, and to prepare them for their court appearances.

Legitimacy of the Western criminal justice system

The Western criminal justice system is often a rather alien place for Indigenous people. People from isolated communities in particular simply do not accept its legitimacy or sovereignty, as they rely on their own traditional justice system, which is more meaningful to them. Payback is still an important practice in the communities researched. Often misunderstood by non-Indigenous people as a cruel and barbaric practice, it is the overarching justice system in many Aboriginal communities. Traditional justice is perceived as hard but fair and democratic, regulated by traditional safeguards, allowing communities to regain peace and redemption for the offender. It is a way for the offender to reconnect with culture and tradition, with the support of Elders and other respected people, and to reclaim the trust and respect of the community.

Yeah that’s the way it is—that’s our system. We run our system in our own way. White men way just came in. Our system was working very well. We got payback. When that happens you got payback and you’re not gonna be dead but they’ll pay you back though. (Community member, Darwin)

For this and other reasons, many Indigenous people just do not engage with the Western criminal justice system.

Conclusion

While our research focused on the needs of Indigenous people on release from prison, the most effective throughcare strategy would be to prevent Indigenous incarceration and to address the matrix of issues leading to Indigenous over-representation in prison in the first place. Further, the limited use of early release measures for Indigenous people and the high rates of Indigenous recidivism are strongly related to the need for effective throughcare.

The most important lesson from this research is that Indigenous experiences with the criminal justice system in general, and with imprisonment in particular, are different and require a different approach. Understanding the context of Indigenous involvement in the criminal justice system and the ongoing consequences of colonisation is essential to addressing the over-representation of Indigenous people in prison. Reversing this trend requires political engagement and operational structures that support and strengthen traditional systems and allow them to co-exist alongside the non-Indigenous world. To achieve this level of cohabitation requires, in the first place, the involvement of Indigenous Elders, respected people and the wider Indigenous community in all matters of incarceration and post-release support.

For throughcare strategies to be effective for Indigenous people from isolated or more traditional communities, a community-based approach that invests in local initiatives and draws on the authority of Elders and respected people is required. Unlike the Western approach, which addresses crime and punishment as an individual problem, this approach should involve extended families and community members, include the issues underlying offending behaviour (such as poverty, substance abuse and domestic violence), and acknowledge the importance of healing in a traditional sense. This requires a holistic approach and the involvement of many agencies.

Listed below is a set of recommendations that can help policymakers to develop more effective throughcare strategies for Indigenous people. As circumstances vary between communities, it is not possible to develop a 'one size fits all' approach. However, the findings of this research might have broader validity and be a starting point for developing effective throughcare services and initiatives elsewhere.

Throughcare as a process

It was clear from the conversations we had that thorough exit plans were essential to successfully transitioning from prison back to the community. Therefore, effective throughcare strategies start from the prison entry, continue throughout the period of imprisonment, and are crucial at the moment of release and in dealing with the problems confronted afterwards. The process should be as seamlessly integrated as possible and engage with a variety of agencies, including Indigenous organisations.

Prison programs and services

Importantly, mainstream prison programs cannot simply be 'translated' to suit the cultural and lifestyle needs of Indigenous people. Programs for Indigenous people should be culturally valid and appropriate to the target clan or skin group. If they are to be effective for Indigenous people, prison programs should operate from an Indigenous perspective, being developed and delivered with Indigenous involvement. Where possible and practical, prison programs should be integrated with community-based programs so that skill enhancement or behavioural change can continue after release from prison. A greater involvement of Indigenous people in prison programs might also improve Indigenous prisoners' chances of and belief in early release under parole supervision.

The moment of release

The moment of transition from prison to freedom is crucial and challenging. Release from prison opens the doors to accessing alcohol and drugs and possibly being exposed to family peer pressure, which is particularly problematic for people who manage to build some financial reserves while in prison. Therefore, successful throughcare needs to be established before the person walks out through the prison gate. It is critical that prison services and throughcare services have arranged for the person to be transported safely to the place where they will live after release. Where that place is needs to be negotiated before release, in consultation with the preferred community and the Indigenous community leaders there. The receiving community also needs information and support.

Housing and social support

Supported housing is essential when people are released from prison. The current lack of government housing leaves Indigenous people homeless, on the outskirts of larger towns 'in the long grass', or having to live in criminogenic housing situations. More accommodation needs to be provided, but for the transition out of prison to be successful other support is also needed. People need support to build self-confidence and deal with peer pressure. These forms of assistance would create a safe environment, supporting people in their journey after release and reducing their chance of recidivism.

Employment

Employment strategies that are holistic and appropriate for those returning to communities are another major area of need. Finding employment after imprisonment is particularly challenging for Indigenous people. This needs to be acknowledged in prison employment programs. Employment programs need to be realistic and pay attention to Indigenous lifestyles. Given the limitations of the labour market, this requires 'out of the box' thinking, and programs that might appeal more to Indigenous people's interests, such as art, music and caring for country. The programs should not be limited to skill training but include advice about how to deal with cultural obligations and work, steps to take if they cannot fulfil work commitments, how to manage budgets and repay fines and debts, but also how to deal with humbugging. Further, local employers should be contacted to negotiate flexibility when needed for cultural matters. More broadly, remote communities need greater employment opportunities. However, having an occupation will not prevent recidivism if the underlying causes of (re)offending such as grief and trauma, substance abuse and health problems are not addressed.

Coordinated service delivery

The main problem with service delivery is not the lack of services available, but the fact that they are fragmented, uncoordinated, and funded only for short periods. The short-term funding creates instability and uncertainty and leads to inefficiency because the service providers must spend considerable time seeking further funding. From an Indigenous perspective, the personal relationships with service providers, and their knowledge of and familiarity with country and skin group, is crucial. Therefore, the diverse range of local, small-scale services and approaches works well. What is hampering this model is the lack of coordination and the instability associated with short-term funding. Effective throughcare requires that the released person is aware of which service providers do what, where and when. This entails a joined-up, well publicised throughcare model of post-release services available. Further, effective throughcare requires longer term planning and investment, which relies on stable funding and networking between service providers. Throughcare services should provide hands-on support from caseworkers who discuss the client's needs, complete the paperwork and support them through the myriad issues that need to be dealt with after release. This necessitates investment in a considerable and flexible workforce, particularly given the 'tyranny of the distance' affecting remote communities.

Empowering Indigenous people

This research has reinforced the importance of Aboriginal culture in managing the aftermath of colonisation and improving the future of Indigenous people. If throughcare is to be effective, Indigenous people need to be empowered to drive reform of prison programs designed to prepare individuals for release into the community. Given the community lifestyle described above, an individualistic approach is not appropriate; strategies should involve families and other community members. It is important that services are delivered by and in collaboration with Indigenous people and their communities. Effective throughcare trajectories as described above are essential to break the cycle of offending and reoffending. In the absence of these support services, a return to prison is almost inevitable—sometimes it can be the lesser of evils.

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