

**Aboriginal Community Patrols
in
Western Australia and New South Wales**

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Background

Over the past decade a variety of community-based initiatives have been established across Northern Ireland to assist in the maintenance of public order and the reduction of inter-communal conflict and violence (Jarman 2006). These include networks of interface intervention monitors, human rights and violence observers and several hundred people who have been trained to act as marshals and stewards at parades, protests and other public events. These initiatives began as a response to violence in interface areas and disputes over parades and were largely presented as forms of conflict intervention or conflict management work and an element of a range of peacebuilding activities. However, as peace has become more embedded and the community-based activities have developed they have become more obviously a form of 'policing' rather than an element of peacebuilding.

Since the early 1990s there has been increasing recognition of the difference between the police as an organisation and policing as an activity, and this has been demonstrated in a practical way both by the growing diversity of forms of policing activity on the ground that exists beyond that undertaken by formal police institutions. These changes were both noted and encouraged in relation to policing in Northern Ireland in both the Patten Report (1999) and the Criminal Justice Review (2000). Patten for example advocated that the reformed policing body should adopt a model of 'policing with the community', which would include 'the community participating in its own policing' (Patten Report 1999 para 7.2), however both reports were vague about what this more active community involvement might actually entail. And while there has been some considerable debate about how the related work of community based restorative justice projects might become formalised and incorporated within the wider criminal justice system (NIO 2006), there has been less consideration of whether the community-based policing activities could or should have a future, and what any future formalisation of such activities look like.

There have been a small number of studies that have considered the work of informal community-based patrolling and policing initiatives (Baker 2002; Sagar 2005; see also Pratten and Sen forthcoming) but also suggestions that they are most successful in responding to a specific crisis, after which they tend to decline and lose their impetus (Marx and Archer 1976). However, in Australia forms of community patrols appear to have become an established mechanism in the work of controlling low level disorder and reducing contact between the Aboriginal community and the criminal justice system (Blagg 2003; Blagg and Valuri 2004a, 2004b). The study trip to Australia was designed to explore the work of various 'night patrols' or 'community patrols' which have been set up to reduce conflicts between members of the Aboriginal community and the police.

The study project involved numerous meetings with people working for patrols in the Perth and Sydney areas, short periods of fieldwork accompanying the patrols in their work in both cities, as well as a range of meetings and discussions with a variety of other individuals associated with the work of the patrols. A full list of all the individuals and groups that I met are included as Appendix A. During the fieldtrip I

also gave a seminar on developments in community-based policing work in Northern Ireland to an audience at the Crime Research Centre at the University of Western Australia and was also interviewed on the same issue by a local radio station in Perth.

Community Patrols

Community patrols have been established in many parts of Australia, in both urban and rural areas, over the past decade. They have been described as a form of 'community based policing' which is designed to 'provide non-coercive community intervention, or order maintenance, services designed to prevent or stop harm, and maintain community peace, security and safety' (Blagg 2003: 5). A survey of night patrols carried out for the Attorney General's Department by Harry Blagg of the University of Western Australia identified 110 patrols across the country, although it was unclear whether all these patrols were fully functioning (Blagg 2003: 26).

Various forms of community or night patrols were established by rural Aboriginal communities from at least the 1940s. They were used to intervene in and help resolve disputes that emerged as a result of tensions within Aboriginal communities at a time when they were having to adapt to government relocation policies (Ryan 2005). The current form of night patrols were developed in the 1990s as a response to the increasing awareness of the disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal people being processed through the criminal justice system.

Blagg notes that 'indigenous people in Australia are among the most imprisoned in the world' (Blagg 2005: 5) and while the Aboriginal community are just 2% of the Australian population they account for 29% of the prison population, with one in seven of the total Aboriginal population and one in four Aboriginal men in jail (Behrendt 2003: 22). Many of the Indigenous population have been imprisoned for relatively minor offences associated with drunkenness and antipathy between the police and the Aboriginal community, where the interaction readily lead to an escalation of offences and charges. An unsympathetic police intervention can lead to an initial charge of 'offensive language' escalating to 'resisting arrest' and finally 'assaulting a police officer'. This trio of charges has become so well defined that it is known as 'the trifecta' (Cowlshaw 2004: 146) and has served as the basis for the imprisonment of many Aboriginal people.

The patrols were developed initially as volunteer bodies with the aim of reducing levels of disorder and conflict within Aboriginal communities, which was largely associated with the excessive consumption of alcohol and with petrol or solvent sniffing. The patrols also aimed to create a mechanism for early intervention that would act as a buffer with the police and thus help to reduce the levels of contact between the disorderly people and the criminal justice system, but rather they would help to channel them towards appropriate welfare services instead.

The patrols that I visited in Perth and Sydney have slightly different aims and objectives, partly linked to the differing problems in the two cities and partly a result of the differing funding regimes. The patrols in Perth are funded by a variety of

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Western Australia government departments and local authorities and are primarily social welfare projects that are tasked with responding to problems of homelessness, drunkenness and disorderly behaviour among the Aboriginal community through working in partnership with a range of welfare agencies and organisations. The three patrols visited in New South Wales in contrast have a primary aim of crime prevention. They are funded by the Attorney General's Department of NSW with a remit to reduce anti-social behaviour and low-level crime among young people. In practice the patrols in both areas respond to issues associated with the presence of Aboriginal people in public spaces, they both help to reduce crime and disorder and both provide some form of interface between marginalised Aboriginal people and the social welfare system.

The Nyoongar Patrol

The Nyoongar Patrol Outreach Service is based in Perth, Western Australia. The patrol takes its name from the Nyoongar people who were the original inhabitants of the Perth region and Nyoongar people still represent the largest Aboriginal community in the area. The project currently has nine outreach staff and two office based workers. All outreach staff are members of the Aboriginal community and have close links with the population and areas in which they work. The work of the patrol is overseen by a management committee, all of whom are members of the Aboriginal community and who can in turn promote the work of the patrol within the wider local Aboriginal population.

The patrol has been operating in various forms since the late 1990s, it has recently undergone restructuring, largely due to changes in the funding regime. Until last year it was predominantly based on the work of volunteers and had a much larger pool of workers. At its peak it could draw upon a pool of 49 staff, all of whom worked part-time. This staff base enabled the Nyoongar patrol to undertake a wide range of activities and ensured that they could have a significant presence on the streets at times, but it also appears to have created problems of accountability and professionalism and in the organisation's capacity to deliver reliable services.

The Nyoongar Patrol currently employs fewer staff, but with a greater emphasis on reliability and professionalism, however the smaller staff pool also means that there are fewer foot patrols and more reliance on vehicle patrols. The core group of full time staff have all worked for Nyoongar for several years, all staff have received a range of training in areas such as conflict management, mediation, communication skills, health and safety and first aid. Nyoongar staff are also working with a lecturer at the Fremantle TAFE (Training and Further Education College) in developing and piloting a training resource for community patrols that will serve as a national standard and be promoted for patrols across the country.

The Nyoongar organisation has agreed memoranda of understanding with the local police and the local councils with which they work, staff have weekly meetings with key agencies to identify issues that need to be addressed, and they provide quarterly

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reports to funders with detailed statistics of the number of people that they have worked with and assisted in each area they work.

On the ground the patrols liaise closely with a small number of key agencies, on occasions they will patrol areas together. They do not work particularly closely with the police but on occasion the police will request the Nyoongar Patrol to assist or respond to a situation and sometimes the patrols are also required to call on police intervention. Information about the work of the patrol and contact telephone numbers are circulated widely among local traders and the business community and Nyoongar staff also try to respond to the needs and concerns of individual members of the local business community.

The Nyoongar Patrol currently operates four main patrols: these are daytime patrols in Midland and the Perth / Vincent areas and night patrols in the Northbridge area of Perth and in Fremantle. The day patrols are focused on dealing with problems associated with alcohol abuse, low-level public disorder and homelessness primarily associated with the adult Aboriginal population. Members of the Nyoongar patrol monitor the relevant areas by vehicle from late morning until late afternoon. The night patrols are most focused on the presence of young Aboriginal people in areas associated with the night-time economy. They focus on problems that might arise both due to the over-consumption of alcohol, on young people at risk and on problems that might emerge due to hostility or racism towards Aboriginal people. All the patrols have a minimum of two people. This is partly for personal health and safety reasons, partly for child welfare issues and partly for gender reasons as wherever possible the patrols include a male and a female worker.

Perth Area Day Patrols

The patrol in Midland covers the public spaces in and around town centre of this suburb of north eastern Perth, the Perth / Vincent patrol does a circuit of 10-12 parks and open spaces on the edge of central Perth. The Nyoongar staff monitor the number of Aboriginal people in each area, many of whom they know personally, and assess any potential problems that might arise. They will intervene and speak to people if there appears to be a need. I witnessed one incident where the Nyoongar patrol team watched from a distance as the local police questioned some Aboriginal men drinking on some waste land, once the police had moved on, the Nyoongar people spoke to the drinkers and agreed to transport two of the men, one of whom was extremely drunk, to their home. This ensured that the men were no longer in a public space and liable to further interest from the police.

Although the focus of the work is with the adult population, the Nyoongar Patrol is primarily orientated towards the social welfare of the marginalised and vulnerable members of the community and they thus respond to a variety of needs. Earlier in the afternoon the patrol had been flagged down by an individual who asked them to transport two children, aged 14 and 16, to their home, which was some distance outside of town. In cases where they transport young people the patrols are required to

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verify that an adult is present in the home and if this is not the case then they will transport the child to the home of a relative.

From late afternoon the work of the patrol is focused on responding to requests for transport from people who need lifts to their home in more remote or outlying areas. Many of the people will have been drinking for much of the day.

The Perth-Vincent park patrols perform a similar function in monitoring the presence and activities of Aboriginal people in the main parks on the edge of the central commercial area of Perth. The parks are used by Aboriginal people as gathering and meeting places during the daytime. There appears to be well established network of parks, which are used not only by people living in the vicinity but also by people travelling into the city from more remote areas to meet relatives or to access various services. The patrol workers monitors behaviour and assesses needs, they will also provide transport home in the late afternoon or if appropriate will take people to hospital, to a 'de-tox' centre, or to a homeless shelter.

Perth Area Night Patrols

The work of the night patrols in Fremantle and Northbridge is somewhat different from the work of the day patrols in so far as they are more focused on the presence of young people in public spaces and within the night-time economy. The Northbridge area of Perth is dominated by bars, restaurants, clubs and sex shops, it is a hive of activity particularly at weekends, attracting thousands of young people and adults. The centre of Fremantle is a comparable mix of bars, clubs and restaurants. Young Aboriginal people are attracted to both areas from all of the Perth suburbs, both areas are close to train services, which at present can be accessed for free relatively easily, thus encouraging people to the urban centres even if they have little money.

The presence of young people can lead to a variety of problems, some of the local businesses do not like them hanging around, some of the clubs and bars may refuse access, some of the young people get drunk before arriving and can then make a nuisance of themselves, some experience racism from white people. Many of these activities can lead to more aggressive verbal and physical interactions which in turn attract the attention of the police. There are also some more straightforward welfare issues that emerge - some of the Aboriginal kids arrive in extended groups with some very young children (8-10 years old) amongst them, and the younger ones can in turn be left to fend for themselves while older siblings go partying. Such cases raise child safety concerns and require the intervention of social services rather than the police.

In both areas the Nyoongar outreach workers operate both foot and vehicle patrols, the vehicle patrols allow them to cover a wider area, while the foot patrols allow them to observe who is in town and to monitor different forms of behaviour and interactions more closely. The Nyoongar staff also liase closely with other agencies – in Perth they work with the a range of different youth welfare and counselling services and with the Street Doctor project, contact with the police tends to be indirect and through the various statutory agencies, they also liase with other key contacts

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working in the area who can provide information on who is coming and going, previous incidents and general background information. The aim of the work is to maintain a contact and dialogue with the young people, to try to intervene to prevent trouble or disorder and to provide assistance if forms of trouble have occurred. The street patrollers appear to know most of the young people and to have a good repartee with them, they provide something of a safety net in dealing with problems and ensuring the young people either get home safely, or where appropriate get to a health professional or other welfare services

New South Wales Patrols

The Crime Prevention Division of the Attorney General's Department of the New South Wales Government currently funds and supports Aboriginal community patrols in sixteen areas across the state¹. A factsheet produced by the department states that the overall aim of the patrols are 'to reduce the risk of people becoming involved in crime and anti-social behaviour, either as potential victims of offenders'. The department encourages communities in different areas to establish new patrols, it provides ongoing support for existing patrols and has also produced a guide for patrols outlining the key principles for operating effective patrols and basic standards of practice (NSW Attorney General's Department 2003²). Staff in the department assisted in making contacts with three patrols: the Street Beat in Redfern, South Sydney; the Boomerang Bus operating in La Perouse and the East Sydney suburbs; and the Awabakal Community Patrol in Newcastle, NSW.

The three patrols all operate in a similar manner and with a somewhat narrower remit than the Nyoongar Patrol in Perth. Each of the NSW patrols focuses on working with young people and primarily provides a free transport service to ensure that they can get home late at night. The patrols primarily respond to telephone requests for assistance, having circulated their contact numbers widely within the Aboriginal community in their working areas. Each of the patrols provide a service for between 40 and 100 young people a night, with the higher demand being at weekends. By getting people off the streets and providing safe transport home they aim to reduce outbreaks of disorder, criminal damage and car theft. Each of the patrols and the Attorney General's Department claim there has been a significant reduction in crime in those areas where the patrols have been operating.

The Boomerang Bus and Awabakal patrols also work closely with the police and local businesses and will respond to emerging or potential problems. In one area, for example, the Boomerang Bus patrol liaises with the private security staff at a shopping centre which is a popular hang out on late night shopping nights and responds to problems or groups of disruptive young people and provides them with lifts home. Crime in the shopping centre has reduced significantly since the partnership between the patrol and the security guards.

¹ See http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/cpd/ll_cpd.nsf/pages/CPD_projects#patrols for details

² http://www.agd.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/cpd/ll_cpd.nsf/vwPreviewActivePages/CPD_cpd_patrols

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In each case the patrols are one element of a wider range of services or activities delivered by an umbrella body. The Street Beat is organised through the South Sydney Youth Services project and the Aboriginal Resource Centre and as such can offer counselling, training and access to a range of welfare services. The Boomerang Bus is run by the Police Community Youth Centre (PCYC), which until recently was a police controlled and funded youth outreach project but is now an independent body. The PCYC provides a range of structured sports and other activities for young people as well as counselling services and access to the wider welfare system. The Awabakal patrol is run through the Awabakal Aboriginal Co-operative, which also provides a wide range of educational, child welfare, health and other services for the Aboriginal community.

Thus although crime reduction is stated as the primary objective of each patrol, this is approached in a relatively holistic manner. The patrols aim to respond to youth generated crime and disorder in a way that will begin to address the wider problems that can be experienced by often marginalised young people, such as alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, lack of engagement with education or training and limited opportunities for personal development. Each of the projects aims to build and develop relationships with the young people such that they can identify their problems and help signpost or provide appropriate forms of support.

Summary

The Aboriginal community patrols are a distinctive and innovative response to problems of marginalisation, crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour among the Aboriginal community in Australia. They have developed in a diverse range of locations and in response to a wide range of issues over the past decade and have become accepted as an effective means of responding to a social problem.

Some of the key features of those patrols that were visited as part of the Concordia funded study programme are:

- The patrols are community-based projects. They were initially predominately voluntary projects set up from within the Aboriginal community to respond to a specific and pressing need, but over time they have become more structured and professionalised. However, they still employ mostly Aboriginal staff and their effectiveness is largely a result of the network of relationships between patrol staff and the local Aboriginal communities.
- Although the patrols remain community-based projects, their value has been acknowledged by the government and statutory sectors. They have become relatively well integrated as part of the crime prevention and social welfare programmes of urban areas and they are able to work in partnership with a range of welfare and criminal justice agencies.
- The patrols provide a valuable and well-received service among the Aboriginal community. The capacity of the patrols has been developed from the local

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knowledge, status and authority of their staff and has been built up over a period of years. The services they offer are extensively used and many of the patrols have requested further vehicles due to the demand on their services.

- The patrols act as a useful intermediary between marginalised members of the Aboriginal community and the state sector. They provide a sympathetic and responsive service to members of the community who are often suspicious and wary of the statutory sector. The patrols have the trust to be able to connect people with a range of appropriate professional service providers and can often mediate between the needs of individuals and the formal structures of the state sector.
- The patrols have had a significant impact on youth crime levels, particularly within the New South Wales region, and have thus played a role in reducing contact between Aboriginal youths and the criminal justice system.

Although the patrols appear to be generally well regarded and are considered effective in meeting their objectives, there are also some limitations on the patrols as well:

- The patrols are stretched and limited in their resources and cannot always provide the range of services that they aspire to. While their work has been partially mainstreamed, their funding remains short term and uncertain. This is not necessarily a problem that is specific to the Aboriginal patrols, but it does at times create an degree of over-expectation that cannot then be met.
- The work of the patrols seems to be well respected among senior police officers, but there appears to be limited engagement between the community patrols and street level police officers. This appears to reflect the ongoing mutual suspicion between the Aboriginal community and the police.
- Some of the welfare service providers seem to look on the patrols as primarily a transport service and do not recognise their mediative role in street level disputes and conflicts nor the role that the patrols play in encouraging Aboriginal people to access the welfare services.
- The patrols in Perth have also lost some support among the business community and one of the local authorities and this seems to be due to a mixture of differing expectations – with the business community wanting more focus on crime prevention, while the Nyoongar patrol emphasised their focus on linking with welfare services. Nevertheless it has had an impact on funding and local relationships.

Learning for Northern Ireland

Although the Aboriginal community patrols have emerged in an entirely different context from Northern Ireland they are some similarities with developments in community-based policing activities that have taken place here over recent years.

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- The patrols have developed in a context of a history of suspicion and hostility among the Aboriginal community towards the police and one of discrimination, intolerance and hostility from the police towards the Aboriginal community.
- The patrols are community-based initiatives that have been developed to respond to problems of violence, disorder and anti-social behaviour, they have been adapted and refined to work in a variety of urban and rural environments, to respond to a range of social problems and to function in partnership with a wide range of statutory agencies.
- Over the past decade the community patrols have become accepted as a valuable element of the ecology of disorder management of urban areas and they have created a distinctive niche in responding to the needs of the most marginalised members of the community.

Both the Patten Report (1999) and the Review of the Criminal Justice System (2000) advocated the possibility of the development and funding of additional projects and activities that might lead towards improved policing and increased community safety in local authority areas. These ideas have yet to be taken forward in any meaningful way, except in regards to the development of a draft protocol for community-based restorative justice projects. The evidence of the developments of community patrols in Australia suggests that there is considerable scope for other forms of community-based initiatives to have a positive impact on crime, disorder and community safety.

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Appendix A
Individuals and Organisations Interviewed

Harry Blagg, Crime Research Centre, University of Western Australia
Marie McAteckney, Director, Nyoongar Patrol, Perth
Barbara, Outreach Worker, Nyoongar Patrol, Perth
Jennifer, Outreach Worker, Nyoongar Patrol, Perth
Chokky, Outreach Worker, Nyoongar Patrol, Perth
Danny, Outreach Worker, Nyoongar Patrol, Perth
Beverley, Outreach Worker, Nyoongar Patrol, Perth
Ivan, Youth Worker, Nyoongar Patrol, Perth
Doug Thompson, Lecturer, Fremantle TAFE
Jan Williams, Department for Community Development, Government of Western
Australia
Michael Wood, Safer Vincent Co-ordinator, Town of Vincent
Lawrence Panaia, Western Australia Police
Mission Australia Youth Project Team, Perth
Department of Community Development Youth Outreach Team, Perth
Street Doctor Project, Perth
Patrick Shepherdson, Crime Prevention Programme, Attorney General's Department,
New South Wales
George Blacklaws, Crime Prevention Advisor, Attorney General's Department, New
South Wales
Shane Brown, Director, South Sydney Youth Services, Redfern, Sydney
Sarah Halliday, Co-ordinator, Boomerang Bus Project, Sydney
Olly, Project Worker, Boomerang Bus Project, Sydney
Brad, Project Worker, Boomerang Bus Project, Sydney
Blake Champion, Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer, NSW Police, Maroubra,
Sydney
Richard McGuinness, Director, Awabakal Aboriginal Co-op, Newcastle, NSW
Eddie, Project Worker, Awabakal Aboriginal Co-op, Newcastle, NSW