



criminal justice bulletin

criminal justice bulletin series 6 – March 2010

Policing cannabis and other illicit substances in remote Indigenous Australian communities

Amanda McAtamney & Katie Willis

Key Points

- There are significantly higher rates of cannabis use in remote Indigenous communities than in the general Australian population
- Indigenous people who have used illicit substances and consumed alcohol at moderate to high levels are more likely to have police contact than Indigenous people who have not used these substances
- Police face a range of challenges in policing cannabis and other illicit drugs in remote Indigenous communities. For example, long distances between remote police stations and communities often make it difficult for police to respond in a timely manner to drug-related problems
- Police interventions need to include a combination of supply reduction and demand reduction strategies, in tandem with other initiatives that address underlying causes of illicit drug use
- Effective police strategies and initiatives will have the close co-operation and support of community leaders, high quality intelligence and logistical support from local and regional police organisations
- In some instances, restrictions on alcohol sales and the introduction of non-sniffable petrol have been found to increase cannabis use within Indigenous communities
- Research that explains the effects of cannabis on regular users (such as mental health problems) needs to be disseminated to remote Indigenous communities



Introduction

Indigenous people (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians) comprise around three percent of the total Australian population. In 2008, just over two-thirds (68%) of Indigenous people lived outside major cities, with 44 percent living in regional areas and 24 percent living in remote (or very remote) areas. More than half of the Indigenous population lived in New South Wales and Queensland (30% and 28%, respectively) with a further 13 percent living in Western Australia and 12 percent residing in the Northern Territory (ABS 2009).

Available research indicates that illicit drug use among Indigenous people in urban locations is generally higher than for non-Indigenous people in these settings (Delahunty & Putt 2006a). This trend is also apparent in many rural and remote Indigenous communities, with cannabis use in particular increasing over time. While urban Indigenous illicit drug use patterns are often similar to those found in remote communities, policing illicit drug use in remote communities often requires different policing strategies to those used in urban areas (Willis 2009). This bulletin focuses on the policing of illicit substances in more rural and remote Indigenous communities.

While data are scarce, it appears that drug use among the Indigenous population generally begins at a much younger age than the non-Indigenous population (Joudo 2008); with some Indigenous children as young as 10 and 11 years old identified as commonly smoking cannabis (Delahunty & Putt 2006a). Figures also indicate that for the 14 to 19 year age group the use of cannabis among Indigenous people is double the general Australian population (Senior & Chenhall 2008). Cessation of cannabis use among Indigenous people (men in particular) in remote communities, has also been found to occur much later than among the non-Indigenous population — non-Indigenous people typically cease cannabis use in their late 20s; however Clough et al (2004) found the average age of heavy cannabis use for Indigenous males in remote communities was 30 years of age.

Overall, there is limited reliable and detailed information on illicit substance use in rural and remote Indigenous communities in Australia. Any data available are usually from targeted and site-specific research in remote areas, which reduces the comparability of data and results (Delahunty & Putt 2006a), and does not represent the full scope of substance use in Indigenous communities. This makes the task of policing illicit substances in these areas, and implementing effective harm reduction strategies to address the underlying causes of illicit substance use, very difficult.

Extent of cannabis use in Indigenous communities

It is generally the case that the Indigenous populations of many developed countries have higher levels of cannabis use than non-Indigenous people in the same countries. This has been found to be the case among Canada's First Nation population (27% compared to 14% for non-Indigenous); North America's Native American population (14% compared to 11% for other Americans), New Zealand's Maori population (21% compared to 14% for non-Maori) and Australia's Indigenous population (23% compared to 9% for non-Indigenous) (Lee et al. 2009). Further, Australian figures show that among non-Indigenous police detainees tested as part of the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) program, around 50 percent tested positive to cannabis between 1999 and 2008, while for Indigenous detainees the figure was around 67 percent (Figure 1).

Cannabis use in rural and remote Indigenous communities in Australia (particularly in Central Australia and the Northern Territory's 'Top End') was first detected in the 1990s, with uptake considered to be rapid and widespread (Clough et al. 2004). Cannabis use is now thought to be entrenched in many of these communities, with research reporting persistently high rates of cannabis use in a number of communities (Lee et al. 2007). For instance, data from 2001

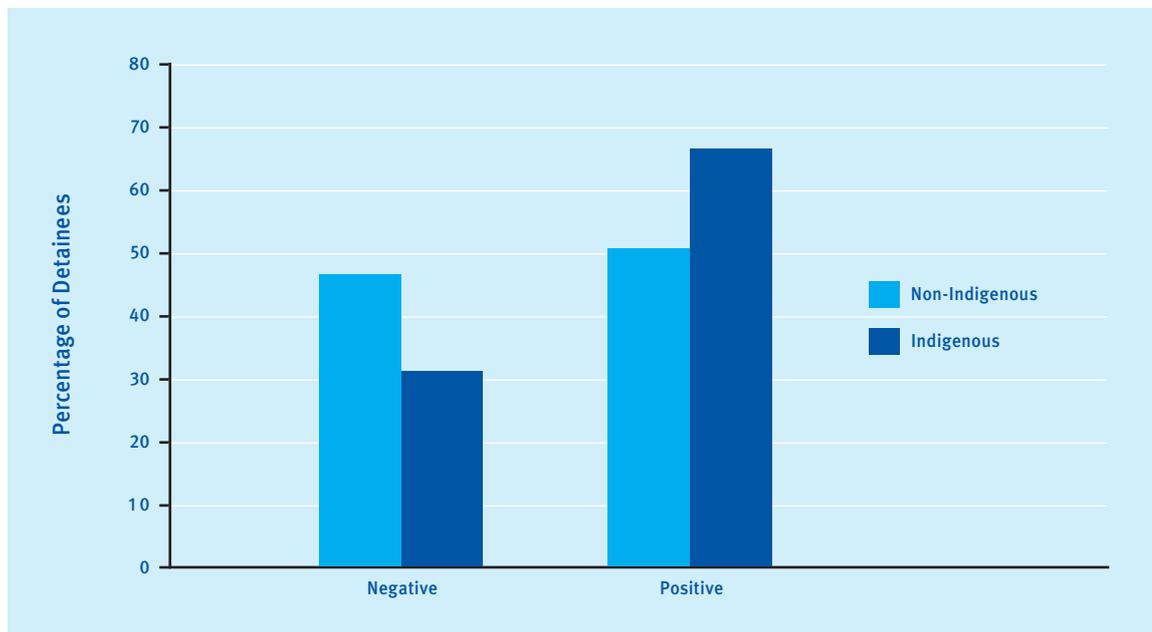


indicated that 50 percent of Indigenous people reported lifetime cannabis use, and 27 percent reported past year use of cannabis (McLaren, Mattick & DOHA 2007). However, in the mid-2000s Clough et al. (2004 & 2006) found that 72 percent of Indigenous males and 23 percent of Indigenous females aged 13 to 36 years in the Northern Territory were frequent heavy cannabis users. In comparison, only 12 percent of males and seven percent of females aged 14 years and over in the general Australian population reported recent (past 12 months) cannabis use (AIHW 2008).

A similar picture emerges from South Australia with a police report in 2004 stating the supply of cannabis to remote Aboriginal Communities had become a large commercial enterprise (Anangu Lands Paper Tracker 2009). Furthermore, the Mulligan Inquiry in 2008 also highlighted that the use of cannabis had significantly increased in recent years and was increasingly seen as a major concern to elders in these Indigenous communities (Anangu Lands Paper Tracker 2009).

Figure 1

DUMA police detainees tested for cannabis by Indigenous status 1999-2008



Source: AIC DUMA collection 1999-2008 [computer file].

Extent of other illicit substance use in Indigenous communities

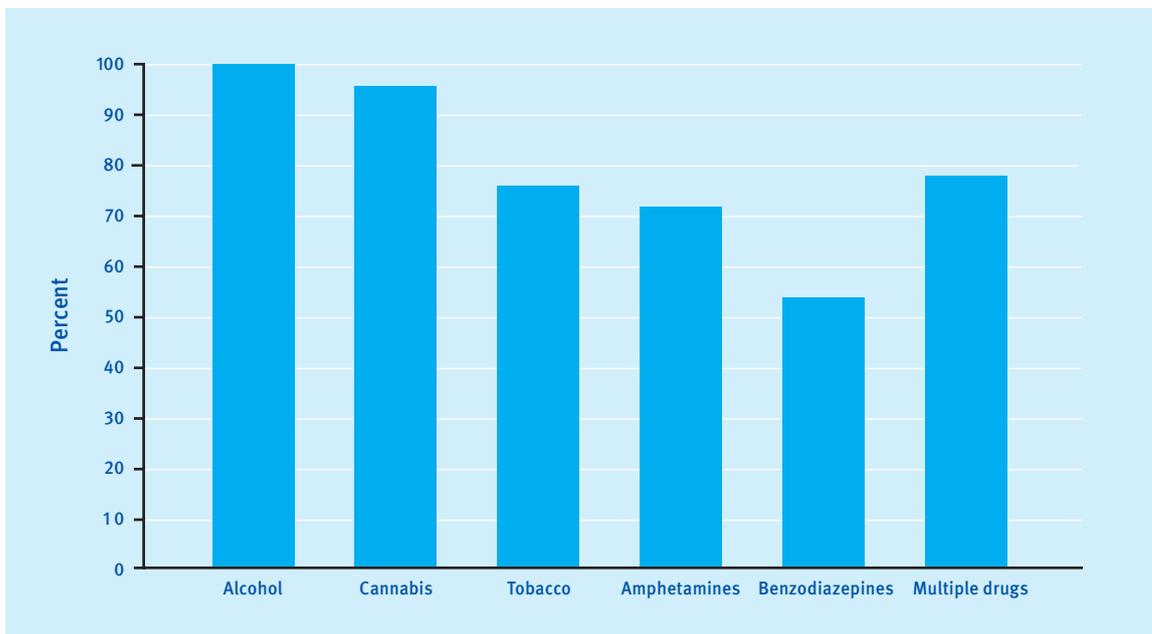
There is also evidence indicating that other illicit drugs, apart from cannabis, are commonly used in Indigenous communities; in particular, injecting drug use and amphetamines seem to be an emerging problem. Nicholas (2007) argues that due to the long-lasting euphoric effect of amphetamines, and their relative low cost, there is considerable potential for further uptake of amphetamines among Indigenous people in remote areas. Differences between drug of choice to inject between urban Indigenous people and remote Indigenous people have also been found; with urban Indigenous people more likely to inject illicit drugs such as heroin. It has also been suggested that overall, Indigenous people are more likely to inject amphetamines than non-Indigenous people (Putt, Payne & Milner 2005).

Polydrug use is also a recurring theme among Indigenous communities, with heroin, prescription drugs, amphetamines, volatile substances, cannabis and alcohol all commonly available and used in conjunction with each other (Department of State Aboriginal Affairs 2002).



Figure 2 presents findings from the 2007-2008 national Drug and Alcohol Service Reporting data collection (DOHA 2009). It indicates that most health treatment services for Indigenous people related to the treatment of alcohol (treated by all services), cannabis (96% of services), multiple drug use (78%), tobacco (76%), amphetamines (72%), and benzodiazepines (54%). Half of the services reported abstinence as the preferred treatment approach, while 35 percent reported harm reduction as the preferred approach. These data provide an indication of the range of illicit substances being used at high levels by Indigenous people, as well as the high prevalence of polydrug use. These data also indicate that the largest number of alcohol and other drug services for Indigenous people (28%) were located in remote Australia, with 11 percent of services located in very remote Australian communities.

Figure 2
2007-08 DASR data collection. Percent of substances treated by services



Source: DOHA 2009.

Factors underlying Indigenous illicit substance use

Early uptake of illicit substances is detrimental to short and long-term outcomes for Indigenous people as there are not only well-established links between high levels of substance use and poor health, but also criminal offending (Joudo 2008). Further, large numbers of Indigenous offenders have reported to be under the influence of drugs (mainly cannabis) at the time of their arrest (Putt, Payne & Milner 2005).

Effective police strategies and interventions that address Indigenous drug use need to account for broader, underlying issues that affect many Indigenous communities. Typically, these include poor health and educational outcomes, high levels of unemployment, reduced recreational opportunities, inadequate housing, dislocation from traditional lands, and family instability (Department of State Aboriginal Affairs 2002; Delahunty & Putt 2006a).

Indigenous communities that were settled by non-Indigenous authorities, such as for mission stations or for settlements linked with pastoral and farming stations, have also been identified as contributing towards factors which impact on a community’s propensity towards, or resilience against, high substance use levels (Legislative Assembly of the NT 2007). Research has found that when comparing these two types of Indigenous communities and more traditional



communities, differences in factors such as employment, sense of a united community, sense of empowerment and conflict levels are quite apparent. In the Northern Territory, those communities which were founded as mission stations appear to have greater substance use issues and a lack of social cohesion than those communities where Indigenous members were involved in farming and the pastoral industry (Legislative Assembly of the NT 2007).

Impact of illicit drug use on Indigenous communities

Cannabis and other illicit substance use among rural and remote Indigenous communities produce a number of detrimental effects. These include harms to:

- the individual, such as adverse physical and psychological effects (Nicholas 2007); and
- harms to the community, including major financial losses (with money being used for drugs and exiting the community) and increased social dissolution (Legislative Assembly of the NT 2007).

The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's council argues that the large quantities of cannabis arriving in Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY Lands) in South Australia contribute to domestic and family violence. This violence can occur when the cannabis supply runs out in these communities and users become violent as a result of severe withdrawal from the drug. Violence can also occur where users attempt to obtain money from their family and friends for more cannabis (Anangu Lands Paper Tracker 2009). Moreover, cannabis use is considered to contribute to poverty within these remote communities, with money often being spent on cannabis rather than food or necessities for families. Of further concern, in March 2005 a coronial inquiry on APY Lands found significant increases in suicidal and self-harming behaviour and noted that substance use was a potential factor in contributing to this (Anangu Lands Paper Tracker 2009).

Policing illicit substances in Indigenous communities

Good police practice at a local, regional and whole organisational level is critical to maximise the success of strategies which are implemented to address illicit drug supply, use and offending (Delahunty & Putt 2006b). Effective strategies and initiatives are those that have the close co-operation and support of community leaders, high quality intelligence and logistical support from local and regional police organisations (Delahunty & Putt 2006a). Community partnerships with police and other agencies are essential, particularly in addressing the underlying issues of substance use. Law enforcement strategies that only focus on supply reduction will not create long-term successful reductions in illicit drug use and offending. Conventional drug policing such as surveillance, infiltration, and operations targeting small-time users have not been found to work effectively in remote and rural Indigenous communities (Delahunty & Putt 2006a). This can partially be attributed to the high visibility of police officers when they are present in smaller communities, which makes infiltration and surveillance operations quite difficult. Further, in targeting small-time users within the community, police are not addressing the trafficking of drugs into these communities, nor the underlying reasons behind substance use.

Strategies used by police should not only aim to disrupt the supply of cannabis, but should also aim to influence community attitudes about drug use. This assists in preventing early offenders from starting more problematic cannabis use behaviours (MCDS 2006). Police strategies should be based on harm minimisation principles, which encompass a wide range of strategies aimed at improving individual and community health, as well as social and economic outcomes. Harm minimisation is a combination of reducing the availability of drugs and drug use itself and is based on the following three National Drug Strategy principles:

- supply reduction (disrupting the production and supply of illicit drugs, as well as the control and regulation of licit substances);

- 
- demand reduction (preventing the uptake of harmful drug use); and
 - harm reduction (reducing drug-related harms to individuals and communities) (Delahunty & Putt 2006b).

A number of good practice policing approaches are described by Delahunty and Putt (2006b), based on work in Indigenous communities. In particular, three strategic measures are outlined which require close collaboration between police, health and other community stakeholders to provide a co-ordinated approach to illicit substance use in remote communities. Again, it is these collaborative approaches that offer the potential for effectively addressing entrenched drug use problems. This is because they not only address the immediate drug problem, but also underlying causes (such as poverty and unemployment) to minimise substance use problems. The three approaches are:

- **Police work in rural and remote locations** – The underpinning aim is to improve police effectiveness in working in rural and remote locations. This can be achieved by identifying and rewarding skill sets specific to these positions; by providing proper training and induction for staff in these locations; recruitment of Indigenous staff; increasing inter-government agency partnerships; continually engaging with the community to address local concerns and ensuring police management understand the different nature and requirements of the policing of remote and rural locations.
- **Aboriginal-police relations** – Police and government agencies should be able to demonstrate a strong commitment to working with Aboriginal Communities. Indigenous initiatives need to be incorporated into main policy planning for long-term effective policing. Strong links and communication need to be forged between police and local Aboriginal communities to improve future outcomes for these remote communities.
- **Drug law enforcement** – Positive working relationships between police and local communities and having the right policing staff in these locations are requirements needed for effective drug law enforcement. Once these are in place, police agencies can coordinate and implement strategic initiatives such as the development of drug desks, intelligence sharing and partnerships between multiple stakeholders with police. Using intelligence gathered from local level policing on drugs can assist in creating broader understandings of drug issues across Australian remote and rural locations. Examples of good practice drug law enforcement initiatives are outlined in more detail below, but include the Northern Territory's Remote Communities Drug Desk, the Substance Abuse Intelligence Desk and the use of drug Sniffer dogs.

Specific examples of good police practice which strongly reflect the three main approaches outlined above include:

- Remote Community Drug Desk (NT). The role of the drug desk is to coordinate, implement and take leadership of strategic and tactical operations aimed at reducing distribution of drugs to remote communities in the NT, e.g., through techniques such as tactical deployments, covert investigations, seasonal strategies, and developing community partnerships. Since its inception, and with assistance from Operations Command members and the Drug Detector Dog Unit, the RCDD has been highly successful in targeting, investigating and prosecuting those involved in the distribution of drugs to remote communities (MCDS 2006; Delahunty & Putt 2006a).
- Substance Abuse Intelligence Desk (SAID). This is a tri-state intelligence desk which collects intelligence and aims to reduce supply of drugs to the cross-border region of Central Australia (NT, SA & WA). SAID coordinates joint police operations focusing on identifying and apprehending people who supply illicit substances. SAID is supported by education campaigns, problem-solving techniques and inter-agency collaboration. It has been notably



successful in limiting the trafficking of illicit substances, has seized sizeable quantities of drugs, guns, and money, and led to significant arrests (Delahunty & Putt 2006a).

- Drug Driving Initiatives which can prevent and reduce concurrent cannabis intoxication and driving, as well as allowing police to undertake vehicle checks for drugs (Delahunty & Putt 2006a).
- Drug/Sniffer Dogs have proven extremely effective at detecting drug shipments coming into remote communities via the air, water and roads. Police often struggle with detecting importations of cannabis due to these various routes that can be used to bring drugs into remote areas (Legislative Assembly of the NT 2007).
- In a number of jurisdictions partnerships between the police and housing rental authorities or organisations have been established to help police become aware of, and stop the use of, rental properties as sites for hydroponic cannabis production (MCDS 2006).
- Police using combinations of community policing practices with enforcement strategies which identify, target and remove local drug dealers in remote communities. Further support for this finding is in the work of Robertson and Dowie (2008) in Queensland, where Indigenous elders believed that ‘naming and shaming’ local dealers would assist in reducing their status within the community.

The challenges of policing illicit drugs

There are a number of potential challenges in the policing of illicit drugs, particularly in rural and remote areas of Australia. These include:

- Legislative differences on possession and supply of cannabis between Australian states that can cause confusion in the general community (MCDS 2006).
- Police have identified that penalties given to those who are caught with cannabis are not sufficient to deter further attempts, particularly for minor possession (Legislative Assembly of the NT 2007).
- The various routes that drugs can be brought into the country and into remote communities (for example, air, sea, land) make it difficult for police to effectively detect illicit drugs and to ensure adequate coverage of each route (Legislative Assembly of the NT 2007). Further, traffickers have been noted by police to be adept at changing their drug smuggling methods in order to avoid detection (Delahunty & Putt 2006a).
- Insufficient resources, including inadequate staffing, inadequate education and training and a lack of operational skills for policing in remote communities (Nicholas 2007).
- Long distances between remote police stations and communities often make it difficult for police to respond in a timely manner to drug-related problems. A rural police survey highlighted distance as a significant issue which had an impact on effective policing (Jobes 2002).
- The combination of home-grown, hydroponic and local sources of cannabis within Australia means there is generally a relatively short distribution chain between cannabis growers and consumers. This poses a major challenge to police supply reduction strategies (Room et al. 2008).
- During their consultation with police Delahunty & Putt (2006a) identified a number of other major factors that impact on police effectiveness in rural and remote areas, such as long-distance custody transfers, outdated or unsafe police facilities, a lack of sobering-up shelters and other facilities.
- Lack of awareness within communities of the harms of cannabis, particularly around mental health. Consultations in Northern Queensland (Robertson & Dowie 2008) with local Indigenous communities identified a lack of knowledge and awareness as a significant concern. This often results in communities not focusing on cannabis as a major concern of harm, and can hinder police in their efforts to reduce cannabis use.

- The potential for drug substitution. For example, introduction of non-sniffable fuels which leads to increased uptake of cannabis and other drug use (Senior and Chenhall 2008, Weatherburn et al 2003).

The role of policy

Effective drug law enforcement cannot focus on only one strategy (such as supply reduction) to reduce substance use problems in Indigenous communities. Collaborative solutions that engage police, the local community and other key stakeholders (such as health and welfare agencies), provide a strong basis for addressing these issues. Strategies need to address the underlying causes of substance use, such as poverty and unemployment, to minimise substance use problems. Furthermore, it is critical that eligible drug users are able to access quality drug diversion and rehabilitation programs that focus on individual needs.

National policy initiatives, such as the National Drug Strategy and National Cannabis Strategy, provide context for policing illicit substance use problems from which police at a state level can draw upon to inform their own interventions. However, while a national and co-ordinated approach to policing illicit substance use is important, it must also be recognised that each Indigenous community has individual concerns and local conditions that need to be assessed before specific interventions are implemented.

Finally, there appears to be a gap between the level of concern and risk among Indigenous communities around adolescent cannabis use. Remote communities are far less aware of the types of harms related to regular cannabis use, particularly mental illness. As such, effective dissemination of research findings via police and other agencies will play an essential role in helping to change Indigenous communities' knowledge and attitudes about cannabis.

References

- Anangu Lands Paper Tracker.** (2009). *APY Lands: Monitoring the use of marijuana*. Available online: http://www.papertracker.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=217&Itemid=1
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).** (2008). *2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) first results*. Catalogue No. PHE 98. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).** (2009). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) 2008*. ABS Catalogue No. 4714.0. Canberra: ABS.
- Clough, A., d'Abbs, P., Cairney, S., Gray, D., Maruff, P., Parker, R., & O'Reilly, B.** (2004). Emerging patterns of cannabis, and other substance use in Aboriginal communities in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory: A study of two communities. *Drug and Alcohol Review* 23, 381-390.
- Clough, A., Lee, K.K.S., Cairney, S., Maruff, P., O'Reilly, B., d'Abbs, P., & Conigrave, K.** (2006). Changes in cannabis use and its consequences over 3 years in a remote Indigenous population in northern Australia. *Addiction* 101, 696-705.
- Delahunty, B. & Putt, J.** (2006a). *The policing implications of cannabis, amphetamine and other illicit drug use in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*. Adelaide: NDLERF.
- Delahunty, B. & Putt, J.** (2006b). *Good practice framework: Policing illicit drugs in rural and remote local communities*. Adelaide: NDLERF.
- Department of Health and Ageing (DOHA).** (2009). *Drug and Alcohol Reporting 2007-2008 Key Results. A national profile of Australian Government funded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Substance Use Specific Services*. Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health. Available online: [http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/Publishing.nsf/Content/8F6750B1D4A8FFD3CA2576850077049B/\\$File/20072008dasrkeyresultsreport.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/Publishing.nsf/Content/8F6750B1D4A8FFD3CA2576850077049B/$File/20072008dasrkeyresultsreport.pdf)
- Department of State Aboriginal Affairs.** (2002). *Aboriginal people and drug use*. A background paper prepared for the South Australian Drugs Summit 2002. Adelaide: Department of State Aboriginal Affairs. Available online: http://www.socialinclusion.sa.gov.au/files/aboriginal_people_and_drug_use.pdf
- Jobs, P.** (2002). Effective officer and good neighbour: Problems and perceptions among police in rural Australia. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management* 25, 256-273.

