

**PRESENTATION TO THE EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING
COMMITTEE.**

**INQUIRY INTO THE INADEQUACY AND APPROPRIATENESS OF
PREVENTION AND TREATMENT SERVICES FOR ALCOHOL AND ILLICIT
DRUG PROBLEMS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

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I am a Sergeant stationed at Balgo Multi Functional Police Facility (MFPF).

I have been employed in the Kimberley District for nearly five years and for the past seventeen months I have been working within the Kutjungka Communities.

Policing in the Kutjungka area is primarily about reducing the instances of child abuse and domestic violence. Alcohol abuse is a primary factor in most instances of this behaviour.

Drug use though still an issue is of a minor nature in the Kutjungka area and rarely can offending be directly linked to it. This issue is often linked with Mental Illness which is where problems with effective treatment and services often lead to police becoming involved with the individual as their behaviour deteriorates.

Balgo has had major issues in the past attempting to deal with deleterious substance abuse (sniffing). These issues have eased recently with several of the main persons involved leaving the community.

**THE IMPACT OF ALCOHOL IN BALGO AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
LIQUOR RESTRICTIONS**

I have been working in the Balgo Community through both pre and post restrictions in Halls Creek as well as self imposed restrictions being implemented at the Rabbit Flat Roadhouse in the Northern Territory.

Since the restriction of full strength alcohol in Halls Creek on the 18th of May 2009, Balgo has seen many of its long term Halls Creek residents that still identified as being from Balgo return to the community.

This has been a positive result for the community with families that were separated for no other reason than the availability of full strength alcohol now coming back together.

With the Halls Creek restrictions in place the closest available full strength alcohol is at the Rabbit Flat Roadhouse in the Northern Territory.

This is approximately a five hundred kilometre round trip from Balgo on unsealed roads.

Initially after the Halls Creek restrictions were in place there was a significant increase in the number of persons making the trip between Balgo and Rabbit Flat to purchase full strength alcohol.

This alcohol was consumed by persons within the vehicle, including the driver. This trip was often in poor quality vehicles and made at night to avoid police detection. Most vehicles stopped also had children on board. The alcohol not consumed during the trip was brought into the By-law restricted area and consumed by members of the community.

By-laws are in effect within the Balgo and Billiluna communities which prohibit the possession and consumption of alcohol within the community. Mulan Community does not have By-laws in place and there are no alcohol restrictions within that community.

Instances of domestic violence, serious assaults, anti-social behaviour, dangerous driving initially increased with the introduction of the Halls Creek liquor restrictions.

Almost all of the serious incidents listed above that required police attendance since the Halls Creek Restrictions were enacted could be contributed in part to alcohol purchased at the Rabbit Flat Roadhouse.

Police observed an increase in the number of young children walking the streets at night waiting for parents to return from Rabbit Flat. During the subsequent daylight hours juveniles were spoken to and claimed to be too tired to go to school due to a late night enduring their parents drinking and arguing.

Police conducted a "blitz" over four days, stopping vehicles returning from Rabbit Flat and despite preventing thirty cartons of full strength beer from entering the community still dealt with alcohol related offences from those community members that managed to get through.

The constant alcohol and intoxication of persons within the community and the arrest rate increase became unmanageable for local police who were required to call for extra police to assist in restoring order to the community. This assistance was over four hours away.

Police often found themselves in alcohol fuelled situations including being threatened with injury by crowds of up to fifty intoxicated persons armed with sticks and metal bars. Police also were required to deal with crowds of up to one hundred and fifty people who were mostly intoxicated, fighting and feuding as a result of alcohol related assaults.

A lack of effective preventative and post care services within the community to help tackle the issues at a base level ensured that the behaviour continued until the alcohol was removed.

As a result of several alcohol related incidents in the community that received media attention Rabbit Flat self imposed a six can per person limit on the 27th of August, 2009 which assisted in restoring order to the Balgo Community.

Since the inception of that limit police observed a dramatic decrease in all offences and in the three weeks that followed dealt with no new alcohol related incidents.

Police observed a noticeable quiet and peace in the community. There were more people seen during the day within the community and less walking around at night. After hours calls decreased and working hours at the time dropped by approximately ten hours per week.

Further negotiations with Rabbit Flat saw a compromise of a twelve can per person per day limit with photograph identification being implemented which still remains today.

With responsible adults sober and at home police noticed a decrease in juveniles walking the streets at night, which is reflected in a decrease in juvenile offences since the Rabbit Flat restrictions have been in place.

Police noted community members cleaning areas around their homes and stating they are able to sleep at night now that "noise from drunks" has stopped.

CHARGES AND JJT REFERRALS 2008-2010

In 2008 police preferred **654** charges in the Kutjungka Communities.

- 516 were for adults (344 were alcohol related)
- 138 were for juveniles (24 were alcohol related)
- 4 were adult related sniffing
- 21 were juvenile related sniffing
- 15 JJT referrals were completed by police

66% of all adult charges were alcohol related

In 2009 police preferred 336 charges in the Kutjungka Communities.

- 292 were for adults (204 were alcohol related)
- 44 were for juveniles (5 were alcohol related)
- 8 were adult related sniffing
- 20 were juvenile related sniffing
- 7 JJT referrals were completed by police

***70%** of all adult charges were alcohol related

In 2010 thus far, police have preferred 105 charges in the Kutjungka Communities.

- 69 are for adults (18 are alcohol related)
- 36 are for juveniles (0 are alcohol related)
- 0 are for adult related sniffing
- 5 are juvenile related sniffing
- 6 JJT referrals have been completed by police

***26%** of all adult charges have been alcohol related

***Halls Creek liquor restrictions were implemented in May of 2009.
Rabbit Flat liquor restrictions were implemented in late August of 2009.**

VOLATILE SUBSTANCE ABUSE

In 2008 police reported 64 instances of petrol sniffing to the Palyalatju Marnpa Health Committee, Youth Services within the community.

In 2009 police reported 43 instances of petrol sniffing to the Kimberley Community Drug Service based in Derby.

In 2010 police reported 5 (1 offender) instances of petrol sniffing to the Community Volatile Substance Engagement Worker who was employed by the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation.

Persons sniffing have committed offences for the purpose of obtaining deleterious substances but this is not frequent.

The issue of "sniffing" in Balgo comes and goes with the presence or absence of a few key persons known to police and other agencies. Sniffing is seen as a social activity for most who are opportunistic and can be dealt with via the avenues available. There are several habitual sniffers who when in the community obtain products to inhale passing them onto other infrequent users.

Within the community itself there is a real lack of willingness to tackle the issue by community members. Various agencies including police have attempted to get community support in this area with no result.

The greatest issue identified by police in this area is that there is no agency with any real power to intervene and break the cycle of serious volatile substance abuse.

Without legislation enabling agencies to effectively tackle the problem, in the case of a serious sniffer we are resigned to observers watching the person slowly die.

This was highlighted recently in a case where the sniffer has become brain damaged through the continued inhalation of volatile substances and refused to cease the activity or participate in treatment. This individual was referred to every agency available within the Kimberley and even spent time in a mental health facility in Perth. Whilst in that same secure facility he stole and inhaled several aerosols. Despite this and being assessed as brain damaged he was discharged and sent back into the same situation and circumstances that created the problem as a substance abuser and not a mental health issue. Assistance was eventually found in the Northern Territory where legislation exists to better tackle this issue. Even with that assistance available no persons including the courts had the power to force him into help and when he refused nothing could be done. He is continuing to abuse the substances to this day and appears to be getting worse.

I have attached a fact sheet issued by the Northern Territory Governments Department of Health and Families outlining the basics of their Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act. I believe the power that this legislation gives the relevant authorities to effectively tackle the issue is desperately needed in Western Australia. Also of note is that it does not criminalise volatile substance abuse instead only provides the tools to break the cycle and assist families involved.

MENTAL HEALTH

In 2009 Balgo saw two young males suicide in a three month period both with histories of Mental Health Issues. Often Mental Health problems in these communities are tied in with alcohol abuse and illicit drug use.

Mental health services within the Katjungka area are primarily provided by the Kimberley Mental Health and Drug Service (KMHDS) based in Derby and Kununurra. Only recently visits to the community have become more frequent with them attending in April, May and June of 2010. Each visit is for a period of no more than three days and often some of the persons requiring the service are not in the communities in that small window of time.

Police are aware of persons in the communities with serious mental health issues and it is often left to them and clinic staff to monitor the behaviour of these people. When a change in their behaviour does come to the attention of police they are usually encouraged to attend the Community Clinic for assessment.

The community is often without any mental health coverage for months at a time with the wet season, sorry time and other cultural sensitivities all being used as excuses to not provide a service. Sorry time does not affect the service delivery of agencies within the communities.

INTERAGENCY COMMITTEES/MANAGERS MEETINGS & POLICE INTERACTION WITH OTHER AGENCIES

Balgo Police play an instrumental role in several interagency committees.

The Balgo Community holds regular "Kids at Risk" meetings in which Police, Balgo Medical Services, Department for Child Protection (DCP) and School Principle all attend. These meetings cover issues such as juvenile health, truancy, juvenile offenders, victims and any identified unusual behaviours displayed. This allows for a joint agency response to better tackle any issues as they arise which in turn minimises the impact on the child.

Balgo's capacity as an MFPF gives it direct daily contact with DCP staff who often deal with any issues at the time, by their own initiation.

Police attend community meetings and joint agency meetings both chaired by the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation which covers current issues within the community and each agencies role with respect to that issue.

In partnership with the youth workers at the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation Police Ranger's has been run in Balgo along with Blue Light events.

CONCLUSION

A large percentage of policing within the Kutjungka communities is attributed to alcohol abuse.

Liquor restrictions implemented at Halls Creek and subsequently at the Rabbit Flat Roadhouse have had a major impact on decreasing alcohol related offences, police working hours and the general well being of the communities.

Alcohol and other volatile substance abuse within the Katjungka is still an issue and police continue to work in partnership with other agencies to reduce the impact it is having on the communities.