

Overcoming the abuse of Aboriginal children in NSW

Briefing Note

Breaking the Silence

Breaking the Silence is a 300 page report on child abuse in Aboriginal communities, commissioned by NSW Attorney General, Bob Debus.

Written by a taskforce headed by Aboriginal leader, Marcia Ella-Duncan, *Breaking the Silence* found that child abuse in Aboriginal communities has reached “epidemic proportions,” with child sexual assault up to four times the rate of the general population. According to Ms Ella-Duncan, the report paints a “stark picture of intergenerational abuse and social disadvantage.”

The taskforce found that child sexual assault in Aboriginal communities is intergenerational, not well understood and seldom reported.

Who are the victims and perpetrators?

Victims of child sexual assault are both girls and boys of all ages.

The perpetrators of child sexual assault in Aboriginal communities were most often described as Aboriginal men who were grandfathers, fathers, stepfathers, uncles, cousins or brothers of the child.

Some communities also reported instances where non-Aboriginal men were perpetrators, coming into the community to trade drugs and/or pornography for sex with children.

However, it is wrong to stereotype all Aboriginal men as perpetrators or to suggest that child sexual assault is not also a problem in non-Indigenous communities.

What are the causes?

The Report was adamant that there was no excuse for the behaviour of offenders, but it did offer a number of factors influencing the incidence of child sexual assault.

These include: substance abuse; social and economic disadvantage; exposure to pornography and a sexualised society; the ‘normalisation’ of violence; the presence of family violence; unresolved trauma and grief; a breakdown of family and community structures; lack of community engagement with the issue; lack of support for community driven solutions; and inadequate responses from service providers.

What has been the Government approach?

The taskforce found there is currently no state-wide policy framework that specifically addresses child sexual assault in Aboriginal communities. In addition, the issue of child sexual assault is not explicit in the current *Two Ways Together – Aboriginal Affairs Plan (2003-2012)* framework. In addition, service responses to child sexual assault were not being provided in a unified and properly co-ordinated way across government agencies.

What was the Government's response?

Announced over the Christmas break, the Government's response to *Breaking the Silence* is a five year plan containing 88 recommendations, but no additional funding to assist their implementation.

The initiatives in the plan have generally been well received by the taskforce and broader community. However, the lack of funding to accompany these has been strongly criticized.

Initiatives in the plan include:

- Increased police surveillance and evidence gathering;
- More resources for witness assistance programs and forensic examinations;
- More victim support and counseling;
- Expanded sexual assault medical services for children;
- Enhanced drug and alcohol programs; and
- A State-wide Advisory Panel to monitor the recommendations.

The need for funding

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that three Ministers including Attorney General Debus argued for between \$20 and \$40 million per year to fund the package. However, they were blocked by Treasurer Michael Costa, who at around the same time found \$25 million to compensate the operators of the Lane Cove Tunnel for delaying potentially unpopular road closures until after the state election.

According to a senior bureaucrat who contacted the Indigenous newspaper, *Koori Mail*, agencies are already stretched beyond capacity and will be unlikely to achieve the necessary changes with no additional resources.

Taskforce Chair, Marcia Ella-Duncan has said the failure to allocate proper resources would just place more pressure on already ill-equipped departments, despite the undoubted good intentions of many within the government.

According to Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR), the Government's refusal to adequately fund the package will undoubtedly cost some Aboriginal children their lives and destroy many more over the coming years.

Actions

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) is seeking the following:

1. Your support for proper funding of the Government response to *Breaking the Silence*.
2. Your commitment to help lobby the Premier and/or Opposition Leader to commit to this funding in the next NSW Budget.