Young Aboriginal Females Reported Missing to Police: Which Way for Prevention & Service

The loss of a child no matter the circumstance is devastating to say the least. The loss of a child, who is missing, is worse than the loss of a life itself, as you spend your life never knowing, always hoping and always wondering just how you could have prevented it from occurring in the first place. Losing a child is far worse than anyone can ever explain.

Personal communication with an Aboriginal Elder, NSW, 2004.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to say to the girls, families, friends and communities across NSW that participated in the project, your insight and courage in sharing with us your experiences allowed us to develop a composite overview of the many issues that contribute to girls missing in our communities. Your stories made possible this report. Thank you so very much.

Boni Robertson   Catherine Demosthenous   Hellene Demosthenous

Project Convenor   Senior Research Officer   Research Consultant

REFERENCE GROUPS

- Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre, Marrickville, NSW, particularly Winsome Mathews;

- National Network of Indigenous Women's Legal Services Inc., particularly Melissa Stubbings and the Richmond Team, Denese Griffin and Diane Grey, NSW;

- Teressa Reid, Manager, Ashmont Community Resource Centre, Wagga, NSW;

- Albury Council, NSW, particularly, Liz Heta, Aboriginal Liaison Officer; and Andrea Nichol, Social Planner;

- Griffith City Council, NSW, particular Anne Garzoli, Cultural Services Manager;

- Goulburn Mulwaree Council, NSW, particularly Franki Thistleton; and

- Elders and communities of Albury; Cootamundra; Deniliquin; Far South Coast; Goulburn; Griffith; Lake Illawarra; Monaro; Shoalhaven; Wagga Wagga; and Wollongong, comprising the Southern Region in NSW.

SUMMARY

This report has been prepared for the NSW Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council (AJAC) and the Families & Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) out of the NSW Attorney General's Department. Driving this report is a commitment by the NSW Government to understand why there is such a high incidence of young Aboriginal females[1] reported missing to Police. Its key tasks were to provide a comprehensive analysis of the over-representation of young Aboriginal females, aged 12-15[2], reported missing to Police to make recommendations (a) that identify preventative strategies to reduce that over-representation, and (b) to identify gaps in service delivery.

Examining all missing Aboriginal females by age revealed that one age group, the 12 to 15 year olds, comprised the majority of missing cases. Once the age group with the highest frequency of reported missing cases became the focus of the analysis, the Southern region was identified as the location most relevant for further investigation, which comprised the following local areas Albury; Cootamundra; Deniliquin; Far South Coast; Goulburn; Griffith; Lake Illawarra; Monaro; Shoalhaven; Wagga Wagga; and Wollongong.

A regional-specific profile was provided. We found a range and variety of services catering to the general population of those in the Southern Region. However, we noted that some of these areas did not offer services catering

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[1] Note, the researchers have replaced the term 'women' with the term 'females'. The researchers have some concerns regarding the use of the terminology 'women' to refer to 12-15 year olds, as the term connotes a level of maturity, experience and responsibility that is not necessarily associated with 12-15 year olds. We feel that the terms 'adolescent', 'teenager' and 'young person' are more appropriate for 12-15 years old, and have elected to use these terms, together with 'females' to in this research.

[2] Given that the project aims to investigate the age group with the highest percentage of young Aboriginal females officially reported missing, and since the results indicated that the largest group of Aboriginal females reported missing were aged between 12 years to 15 years, this report will now focus upon this particular group of young Aboriginal females. See Section 3 of this report, All Missing Aboriginal Females by Age, for explanation.

specifically to Aboriginal peoples, while others did not specifically cater to the needs of Aboriginal girls in the 12 to 15 year age bracket. Further, we did identify some service provision to the age group under investigation, we found that a number of those programs were unsuccessful in securing on-going funding.

In terms of our qualitative research, we found that in most cases the girls were voluntarily missing. Perceptions documented across the interviews with girls as to reasons for separation found an equally significant number of problems at home and at school, and that these were interrelated. Perceptions documents across each of the five focus groups with family, friends and communities also identified problems at home and at school as reasons for separation. Further, it was found that many Aboriginal families, friends and communities perceive the girls to be runaways but not necessarily missing. Although it was found that many of the girls ran to family and friends, there was an expectation that these girls might become homeless at some time during their separation.

We also identified a number of reasons why 12 to 15 year olds make up such a high proportion of Aboriginal females reported missing to Police. We found that separating from the family may result from difficulty in coping with home and school life, a desire to own one's body and protect siblings, and an understanding that one is able to care for oneself in the broader, general community.

The research also identified a number of common themes and factors in the circumstances in which young Aboriginal females were reported missing. We identified a pathway that families, friends and communities usually followed in filing an official report to Police regarding the disappearance of a loved one. Although we were working from Police data, consultations with families, friends and communities identified Police were not the main agency used to locate a missing person, and that there is a dark figure of missing persons; referring to those figures not

reported to Police. Further, we identified a number of reasons why a missing girl might not be reported missing to Police.

A number of recommendations for preventative strategies and service delivery were made. These include:

- Designing, developing and delivering programs that target risk factors in the home;
- Developing and strengthening partnerships with Aboriginal community representatives and the education sector, particularly local schools, to impact the organisational culture of schools;
- Developing and implementing school-based programs that target risk factors at school;
- Undertaking further research;
- Enhancing Police response to Aboriginal missing persons;
- Providing ongoing, long-term funding to non-government organisations to provide support services to facilitate a coordinated approach to addressing the impacts of missing persons;
- Establishing and strengthening inter-agency consultations and engagement across government and non-government agencies;
- Evaluating and reviewing legislative and other reforms; and
- Developing and distributing quality, culturally specific services and products to assist Aboriginal families and communities of missing persons.

PREFACE

The research presented in this report is the product of much community engagement and consultation over a six-month period. The research was guided by protocols set down by Griffith University's Ethics Committee, The National Health and Medical Research Council's 2003 Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research and The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2000. As articulated in those guidelines, an essential ingredient in research dealing with Aboriginal peoples is to engage the input of the Aboriginal community.

Initially, the researchers met with Elders, community stakeholders and Indigenous individuals to discuss the project. There, the researchers obtained invitations to meet with families, friends and communities and young females reported missing to Police.* In keeping with protocols for culturally sensitive and respectful dealings with Aboriginal peoples, the researchers returned to brief communities and individuals on the interpretation of findings, prior to making recommendations.

The report itself was finalised in December 2004.

Note: Each of the tasks underpinning the research were found to be extremely difficult to address given the limited amount of research on these issues, and the emotional impact that they had on individuals and communities. Collectively, they presented for the researchers that were emotionally challenging, to say the least.

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* The researchers' heritage and good reputations were critical in obtaining these invitations.

The Research Team

Associate Professor Boni Robertson, Project Convenor and Director of the GUMURRII Centre, Griffith University, Queensland is of Scottish-Australian background and is a descendant of the Kabbi Kabbi and Gooreng people of Central Queensland. Boni is known for her commitment to juvenile justice and law and justice issues, social health and education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. She has co-authored numerous state, national and international reviews and reports that emphasise proactive, solution-oriented interventions that enhance life cirucmstances for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Catherine Demosthenous, Senior Research Officer and Linguist, GUMURRII Centre, Griffith University, Queensland is of Gamilaroi and Irish Greek Cypriot background. Catherine's research interests relate to language and communication, issues of social justice and equity, and Indigenous research.

Hellene Demosthenous, Research Consultant, GUMURRII Centre, Griffith University, Queensland is of Gamilaroi and Irish Greek Cypriot background. Hellene's research interests are in conscious and unconscious communication, the justice system and Indigenous research.

Bronwyn Dillon, Lecturer, GUMURRII Centre, Griffith University, Queensland, is of Quandamookada descent. She has worked extensively with Aboriginal organisations in South-East Queensland. Bronwyn's research interests are in the development, implementation and evaluation of financial models and consultancy for Aboriginal organisations.

The report could not have been completed without the statistical expertise of Susan Barrett (Griffith University), sourcing of information by Hyeong Jin Kim (Griffith University), the transcription services of Kim Cannon

(private provider), and staff of the GUMURRII Centre, especially Cheryl Cannon, who provided community consultancy and support.

To all of these people, we feel honoured to have worked together on such an important project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AJAC	Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council
CESCR	Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
DATSIPD	Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy & Development
DOCs	Department of Community Services
FFMPU	Families & Friends of Missing Persons Unit
HACC	Home And Community Care
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
LAC	Local Area Command
MPU	Missing Person Unit
NACMP	National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons
NNIWLS	National Network of Indigenous Women's Legal Services
NMPU	National Missing Persons Unit
NSW	New South Wales
PLEaS	Prevention, Location, Education, Support
QLD	Queensland
RCIADIC	Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths In Custody
SCRGSP	Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision

GLOSSARY

Colonialism	The establishment of control over the original inhabitants of an area by taking possession of their land, introducing colonists and a colonial administration.
Communities	Groups of Aboriginal peoples bound culturally, spiritually and, sometimes, linguistically to specific regions and one another through historical and biological kinship, and embodying a store of regionally specific knowledge and common practices.
Elders	Senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples held in esteem for their vision, wisdom and guidance on matters relating to Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. Elders act on behalf of, and in the best interests of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and provide advice and mediate on a range of issues to the general community, industry and government.
Koori	KOORI's / GOORI's are Aboriginal words meaning Aboriginal person/s. Koori is the term used in the South East, including the Illawarra tribe and Sydney areas. Goori's are from North East NSW and include the Bundjalung and Gamilaroi (Kamilaroi), and Gumbangirr people.
Indigenous Australians	The term is often used to refer to people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, the first peoples of Australia. However, there is concern that the term diminishes the distinctiveness of these unique groups. In respect of those differences, the researchers have elected not to use the term, unless quoted. Note: this report refers only to Aboriginal Australians.
Sorry Business	A term culturally referred to be Aboriginal peoples to encapsulate experiences of grief, loss and suffering.

INTRODUCTION

This section of the report provides an overview of the project; definitions of 'missing persons' as defined in available literature; and the overall structure of the report.

An Overview

Available research indicates that approximately 30,000 people across Australia are listed as missing each year, with an estimated 8,500 expected to be reported missing in NSW in 2004.[3] These figures are alarming, to say the least. Yet, what is perhaps even more alarming is the finding that for each person that goes missing a further 12 people are affected. In other words, it is estimated that approximately 360,000 people experience the effects of the disappearance of a loved one and may suffer health consequences, experience trauma and sorry business, economic loss, relationship problems and a diminished quality of life.

This report has been prepared for the NSW Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council and the Families & Friends of Missing Persons Unit out of the NSW Attorney General's Department. Driving this research is a commitment by the NSW Government to understand why there is such a high incidence of young Aboriginal females reported missing to Police.

Specifically, the project's key tasks are to:*

- Produce a state profile of young Aboriginal females reported missing to Police.

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[3] See, http://www.police.nsw.gov.au/community_issues/missing_persons, accessed 10.11.04
* Note: The wording here differs slightly from that of the Agreement with the Attorney General's Department NSW. See, Definitions, for explanation.

- In consultation with the AJAC and FFMPU identify a relevant region and develop a regional-specific profile from which the highest percentage of young Aboriginal females is reported missing.

- Document perceptions from both family and young females reported missing as to the reasons for separation.

- Identify the reasons why young Aboriginal females, aged 12-15, make up the highest proportion of Aboriginal people reported missing to Police.[4]

- Identify common themes and factors in the circumstances in which young Aboriginal females are reported missing.

- Provide recommendations from the research findings that:
  - Identify preventative strategies to reduce the incidence; and
  - Identify service delivery gaps.

Definitions

The Australian Police define missing persons as '… anyone who is reported missing to Police, whose whereabouts are unknown, and where there are fears for the safety or concerns for the welfare of that person' (Henderson & Henderson 1997, p.2). A consumer-friendly definition of missing persons explains, 'missing is when you are concerned because you can't find someone' (National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons, 2002). The term can refer to involuntary and voluntary cases of missing persons. Further, the term missing persons also includes children abducted by their parents.

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[4] Since the results indicated that the largest group of Aboriginal females officially reported missing were aged between 12 years to 15 years, this report will now focus upon this particular group of young Aboriginal females. See Section 3 of this report, All Missing Aboriginal Females by Age, for explanation.

Note: The researchers have substituted the Agreement term 'women' with the term 'females'. The researchers believe the term 'female' to be more appropriate when referring to 12-15 year olds, as the former connotes a level of maturity, experience and responsibility that is not necessarily associated with 12-15 year olds. Further, the terms 'girl/s', 'adolescent/s' and 'teenagers' are used interchangeable in the report.

Structure of the Report

The report is divided into eight sections.

Section 1 of the report provides an overview of the project; definitions of 'missing persons' as defined in available literature; and the overall structure of the report.

Section 2 of the report provides background information on (1) missing persons and (2) Aboriginal peoples' historic and current circumstances in the Australian context.

Section 3 of the report provides a profile of missing Aboriginal females across NSW and produces a state profile of young Aboriginal females reported missing to Police.[5]

Section 4 of the report provides a regional-specific profile from which the highest percentage of young Aboriginal females is reported missing.

Section 5 of the report documents perceptions from young Aboriginal females who have been reported missing to Police, and their families, friends and communities as to the reasons for separation.

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[5] The report is confined to those officially reported missing to Police.

Section 6 of the report identifies the reasons why young Aboriginal females aged 12 years to 15 years make up the highest proportion of Aboriginal people reported missing to Police.

Section 7 of the report identifies common themes and factors in the circumstances in which young Aboriginal females are reported missing.

Section 8 of the report provides a short summary of findings.

Section 9 of the report provides recommendations from the research findings that (a) identify preventative strategies to reduce the incidence and (b) identify service delivery gaps.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This section of the report provides background information on (1) missing persons and (2) Aboriginal peoples' historic and current circumstances in the Australian context.

Missing Persons

According to a landmark study commissioned by the National Missing Persons Unit (NMPU), *Missing People: Issues for the Australian Community* (1997)*,* approximately 30,000 people across Australia are listed as missing each year.[6] On average someone is reported missing to Police every eighteen (18) minutes, with half of those reported under the age of 18 (55%) (Henderson, Kiernan & Henderson, 1999). Potentially more alarming is the finding that these figures do not accurately represent the real rates of missing persons, as some choose not to report the incidence to Police. That stated, based on the numbers reported missing to Police, Henderson and Henderson (1997) have estimated that over a third of a million people across Australia are affected as a direct result of the loss of a loved one. Further, it has been estimated that 8,500 people are expected to be reported missing in NSW alone in 2004.[7]

In terms of health and wellness, those experiencing the loss of a family member or friend may experience stress, anxiety, hopelessness, fear, guilt, a depleted immune system, and so on. In their study of the families and friends of 270 people reported missing and over 90 organisations involved

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[6] See for example, Henderson, M. & and Henderson, P. (1997), *Missing persons: Issues for the Australian Community,* Canberra, ACT, National Missing Persons Unit and the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence.

[7] See, http://www.police.nsw.gov.au/community_issues/missing_persons, accessed 10.11.04

in missing persons across Australia, Henderson and Henderson (1997, p.17) found that 37% of those surveyed reported physical and/or mental health problems resulting from the missing persons incident, 23% of persons reported seeking medical attention as a direct result of the missing persons incident and 22% of those surveyed reported suffering a major health impact associated with the missing persons incident.

Further, Henderson and Henderson (1997) have estimated the economic costs of locating missing people. They have estimated that the health and employment costs per person for people reported missing to Police is at $2360, while the health and employment costs per person for people reported missing to non-Police tracing agencies such as Salvation Army, Australian Red Cross and International Social Services is at $1851. Henderson and Henderson (1997, p.1) explain that it is not possible to put a price on emotional suffering and relationship impacts, which means 'that many cost components cannot be accurately estimated'.

In regards to the findings of the Henderson and Henderson (1997) study, 18 priority areas for action were identified. These related to support services, Police practice, access to government information, public awareness, and other areas. For instance, a significant number of survey respondents identified the need for improved services in terms of 'assistance and advice with searching, and emotional support and counselling' (cited in, Henderson, Kiernan & Henderson, 1999, p.9).

Responding to that need is the recent report, *Best Practice in Counselling Models Relevant to Family and Friends of Missing Persons* (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001). The resource outlines various counselling models and their suitability for use with missing-related support services. Eight recommendations are made for the provision of more appropriate training for those providing support services, and for suitably trained counsellors to be clearly accessible to their client base. Recently, the Attorney General's Department of NSW funded a Mental Health Association NSW initiative, namely; the development of a

consumer-friendly resource, *Someone is Missing*: *An Emotional Resource for the Families and Friends of Missing Persons* (2003).

Further, consultations with the National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons and the Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons has resulted in the NMPUs endorsement of a national, coordinated response to missing persons - PLEaS. PLEaS is underpinned by four key principles, prevention, location, education and support.[8]

- Prevention - reduces the incidence of missing persons and therefore the emotional and financial costs, promoting and enhancing a safer society for all Australians.
- Location - recognises the critical need to find the missing people as quickly as possible through a coordinated, national approach to reduce the impact on families and friends and the missing people themselves.
- Education - increases the awareness in relation to missing persons to minimise the incidence, enhance the response and encourage a whole-of-government approach in cooperation with the community.
- Support - minimises the trauma suffered by the missing people, family, friends and the impact on the community.

Further, Henderson and Henderson (1997) survey respondents identified Police as the main agencies used, with only 4.4% of cases involving outside investigation and search agencies. 83% of respondents reported satisfaction with Police action at the initial stage of the investigation, 73% reporting satisfaction during the investigation and 71% reporting satisfaction when advised of the outcome of the investigation (Henderson & Henderson, 1997, p.36). However, 48% of survey respondents reported a need for improvements in timely action, while 35.9% of survey respondents reported a need for improvements to the maintenance of

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[8] The information on PLEaS was taken from Kiernan & Henderson (2002, p.3), 'Missing Persons: Extending Traditional Policing Boundaries to Address a Social Issue, *Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence,* Canberra.

contact with the family of the missing person (Henderson & Henderson, 1997, p.37).

In an international research, Jacques (2002, p.9) acknowledges that 'the reasons people go missing are diverse; war, natural disaster, acts of terrorism, conflicts within significant relationships, abuse and maltreatment within significant relationships, diminished mental capacity, abduction and foul play'. Existing research on, what has been termed, the 'missing persons phenomena' has identified that missing persons come from all walks of life in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, educational levels and race. What little research exists makes clear that the reasons people *go missing* are complex and, to a large extent, unknown. While we recognise the importance of these issues for families, friends and the young girls who separate, the research indicates that children and young people are reported missing more often than adults.[9] Yet, we are reminded that 'the circumstances surrounding each disappearance are as varied as the population who actually go missing'.[10]

Further, Henderson and Henderson (1997) acknowledge that 'little is known about effective preventative strategies and, given the diversity of reasons for and circumstances under which people go missing, there is clearly no single solution' (Henderson & Henderson, 1997, p.48). In their recommendations, they reiterate the need for further research 'to identify effective prevention strategies and for ongoing evaluation of existing services'.

Although research has, and is, being conducted into issues relating to missing persons, there is no research of which we are aware that explores

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[9] *Someone is Missing: An Emotional Resource for the Families and Friends of Missing Persons*, Families and Friends of Missing Person's Unit, Attorney General's Department of NSW & Mental Health Association NSW Inc, p. 15; 'Best Practice Counselling Models Relevant to Families & Friends of Missing Persons - It's the Hope that Hurts' Report (2001)

[10] Jacques, L. (2000), *To study the international social policy response and provision of services for the families, friends and significant others of people who are missing,* Sydney, NSW: The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia.

the complexities of the missing persons phenomena as it applies to young Aboriginal females, aged 12-15 years reported missing to Police.

Aboriginal Peoples in the Australian Context

Traditionally, Aboriginal peoples' lives were governed by principles and values that articulated cultural and social responsibilities for the land, the sea and one other (Gibbs, 1993). Lore, which was based on sex and age, governed social activities and interactions between people. In terms of the family, parenting responsibilities were functional and defined (Berndt, & Berndt, 1992). Roles and responsibilities were assigned to the mother and father, to the extended family of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and the broader community (Edwards, 1987). Brothers and sisters of Aboriginal mothers and fathers assumed any number of the primary duties and responsibilities for the care and nurture of children, and the guiding and directing of youth. Training for cultural ceremonies and initiation for achieving adulthood and 'moral' education through story telling and performance were seen as primary responsibilities of parents, families and communities.

However, the years following the British invasion in the late 1770s impacted greatly on Aboriginal families and communities, and dramatically altered traditional ways of living and being. Aboriginal peoples were massacred, while others were forcibly removed from their lands. Later, children and youth were removed from their families and placed in institutions (Baker, 1983). British governmentality, which was founded on, and grounded in, imperialism, inhumanly eroded the kinship of Aboriginal families and communities. While British-Australians flourished, Aboriginal peoples perished (Evans, Saunders, & Cronin, 1975). In a personal communication, an Aboriginal Elder reminisced:

> The history: our people pay the price, even today; no jobs, no money, no education, alcohol and violence, and our children continue to suffer.[11]

Despite the many recent efforts of government, Aboriginal peoples continue to remain at a comparative disadvantage when compared to other Australians. Current research acknowledges the inequity and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal peoples across all areas (e.g., DATSIPD, 1999; HREOC, 1997; SCRGSP, 2003). For instance, when compared with non-Indigenous peoples:

- Aboriginal peoples are under-represented across the education system;
- Aboriginal peoples have higher levels of unemployment, and occupy predominately lower-level positions;
- Aboriginal peoples live in poorer conditions and experience overcrowding, have significantly higher rates of renting as opposed to purchasing or owning one's home, and comprise a disproportionally higher rate of sole-parent families;
- Aboriginal peoples are more susceptible to health problems in the early stages of life and experience greater rates of diseases in their adult years; and
- Aboriginal peoples are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Further, there has been no improvement in the number of Aboriginal deaths in custody.

In terms of Aboriginal children, the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force Report on Violence* (DATSIPD, 1999) has reported:

> In some communities, children have had multiple traumatic experiences having witnessed violence and abuse on an all too frequent basis, with little if any support from key figures within the community or the family having had their roles eroded by colonisation and historical impacts. These same children may not be able to acknowledge the hurt, because of a

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[11] Personal communication at a Brisbane Community Meeting, March 2004.

number of factors. Perhaps they cannot share what they have seen, heard and felt, because family/community members are in crisis themselves. Parents who are in crisis cannot easily hear the story the child needs to tell, for often the child reflects the unbearable pain of the adult. Parents may not be able to protect their children because they cannot protect or care for themselves.

In fact, the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2003* (SCRGSP, 2003, p.27) report found that Aboriginal children and youth were much more likely to be 'at risk' of long-term disadvantage than their non-Indigenous counterparts'. For instance, the suicide rate for Aboriginal youth is significantly higher than that of non-Indigenous youth (under 25 years), with 70 per 100 000 Indigenous population compared to approximately 18.5 per 100 000 non-Indigenous population (SCRGSP, 2003). 'Indigenous children are significantly overrepresented in most statutory child protection systems' (Stanley, Tomison, & Pocock, 2003, p.4) and that the rate of substantiation for Aboriginal children and youth was 'on average 4.3 times higher' than that of non-Indigenous children and youth, as the 3,254 notifications for the period 2001-2002 indicates (AIWH, 2003).

Further, the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2003* report found that Aboriginal children and youth are under-represented in the education system, with reduced participation, retention and success rates across education sectors.[12] Further, Aboriginal youth were over-represented in the criminal justice system, and were '19 times more likely to be detained than non-Indigenous juveniles' (Bareja, & Charlton, 2003). Additionally, a review of the literature identified that the abuse and misuse of substances such as inhalants, marijuana and other illicit drugs has passed the critical stage.

It is fair to state that coping with such a multitude of social problems is beyond the powers of many Aboriginal families. Indeed, it is with deep regret and despair that many Aboriginal peoples acknowledge that the

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[12] This was not the case in the Technical And Further Education (TAFE) sector.

legacy that their children often inherit is the sorry business, trauma and shame of historic, continued and systemic injustice; in all of its insidious forms.

ABORIGINAL MISSING PERSONS: NSW

This section of the report provides a profile of missing Aboriginal females across NSW and produces a state profile of young Aboriginal females reported missing to Police.

State Profile of Aboriginal Females Reported Missing to Police

The database provided by the New South Wales Missing Persons Unit contained 133 files of Aboriginal females who had been reported missing to Police in New South Wales during 2002.[13] First, a state profile of these cases by age, suburb and region within New South Wales is presented. Then, a state profile of *young* Aboriginal females who comprised the greatest age group of missing cases is explicated. Last, based on this greatest age group, one region is identified as being most relevant to this issue. It must be noted that due to small cell sizes no inferential analyses could be performed.

All Missing Aboriginal Females by Age

Of the 133 missing Aboriginal females in New South Wales during 2002, almost half were aged between 12 to 15 years (48.9%; Figure 1). The majority of these missing females were 14 years of age (21.1%), with 15 year olds comprising a further 10.5%, 13 year olds 9.0% and 12 year olds 8.3%. Since these results indicated that the largest group of Aboriginal females officially reported missing were aged between 12 years to 15

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[13] A special thank you to Sergeant Mark Samways , MPU for this information.

years, and not 13 years to 14 years as reported to the researchers, this report will now focus upon the 12 – 15 years age bracket of young Aboriginal females.

All Missing Aboriginal Females by Suburb

There were 38 suburbs within the data set. Of the 133 Aboriginal females in New South Wales reported missing to the Police during 2002, almost half (46.0%) were in just eight of these suburbs (Figure 2). These eight suburbs were: Lake Illawarra (8.3%), Penrith (6.8%), Leichhardt (6.0%), Wagga Wagga (5.3%), Mt. Druitt (5.3%), Canobolas (5.3%), Shoalhaven (4.5%) and Richmond (4.5%).

All Missing Aboriginal Females by Region

In contrast to the analysis of all missing females by suburbs, which revealed an uneven spread of missing cases across the 38 suburbs, re-categorising these suburbs into five regions (Greater Metropolitan, Inner Metropolitan, Northern, Southern and Western) showed an almost even distribution (Figure 3). This meant that each of the five regions reported approximately one-fifth of the missing cases.
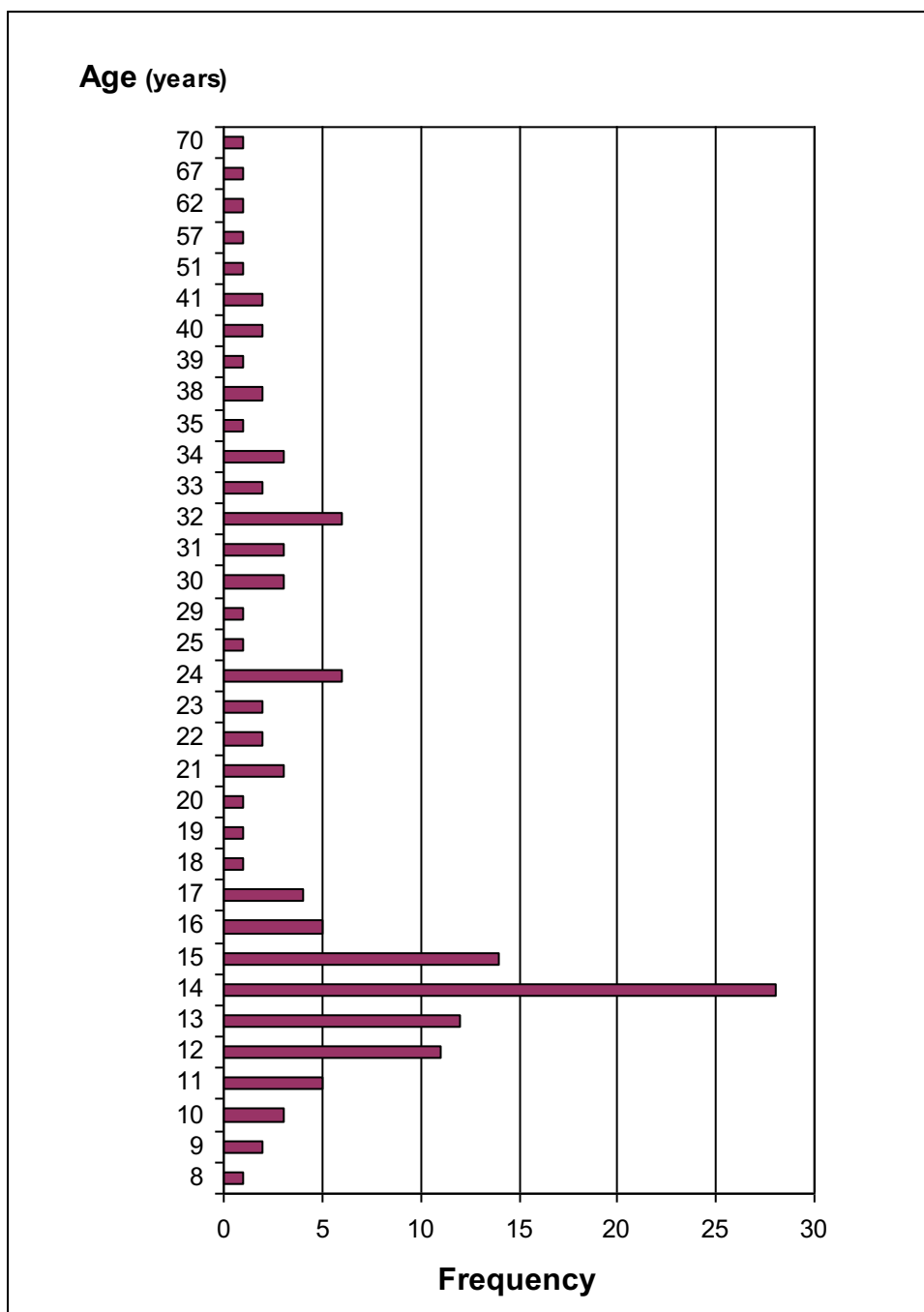
Figure 1. Frequency of all missing Aboriginal females (N=133) by age reported to Police in New South Wales in 2002.
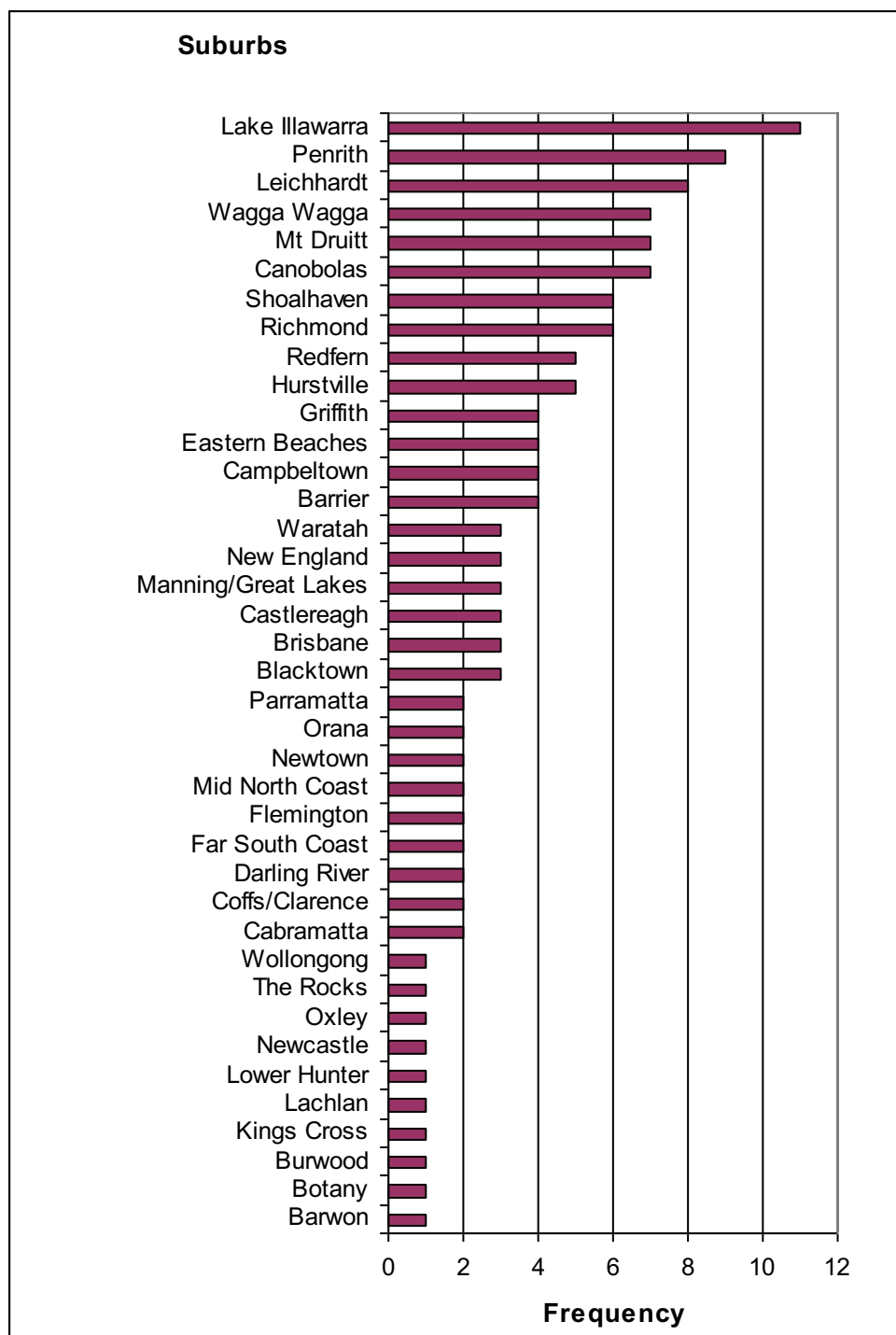
Figure 2. Frequency of all missing Aboriginal females (N=133) by suburb (N=38) reported to Police in New South Wales in 2002.
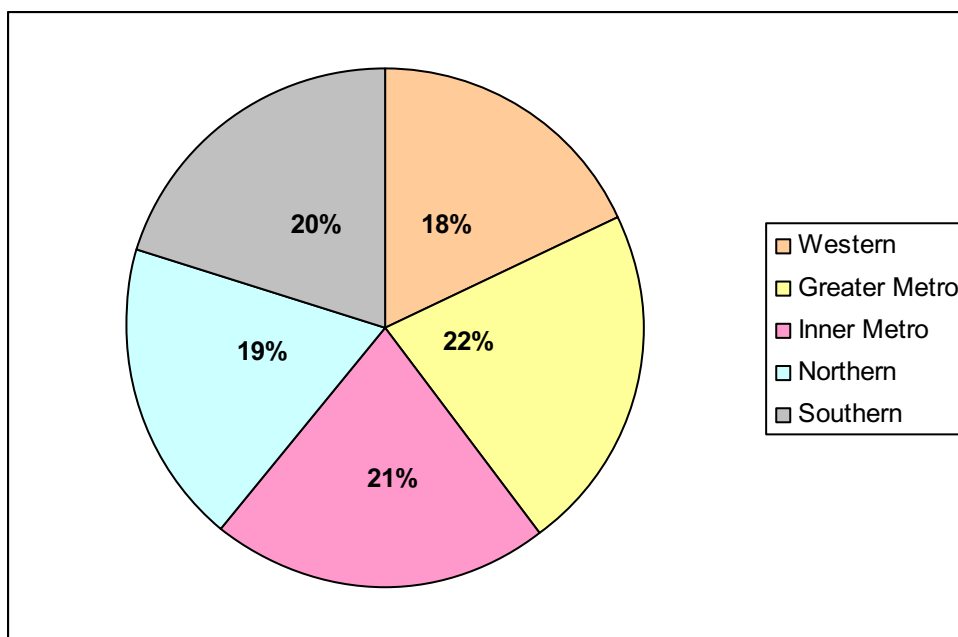
Figure 3. Frequency of all missing Aboriginal females (N=133) by region reported to Police in New South Wales in 2002.

In summary, examining all missing Aboriginal females by age revealed that one age group, the 12 to 15 year olds, comprised the majority of these missing cases. Also, the distribution of these missing cases across suburbs identified eight suburbs that accounted for nearly 50% of the cases. However when the 38 suburbs were re-categorised into five regions the distribution of missing cases was far less informative. Thus, the next section presents a state profile of the young 12 to 15 year old Aboriginal female cases reported missing to Police in New South Wales during 2002.

Young Missing Aboriginal Females (12 to 15 years)

Within this age group, seven of the 38 suburbs accounted for 49.4% of the missing cases (Figure 4). Of these seven suburbs, Wagga Wagga, Lake Illawarra and Shoalhaven were in the Southern region (23.1%), Richmond and Lake Macquarie were in the Northern region (12.4%), Mt. Druitt was in the Greater Metropolitan region (7.7%) and Barrier was in the Western region (6.2%).
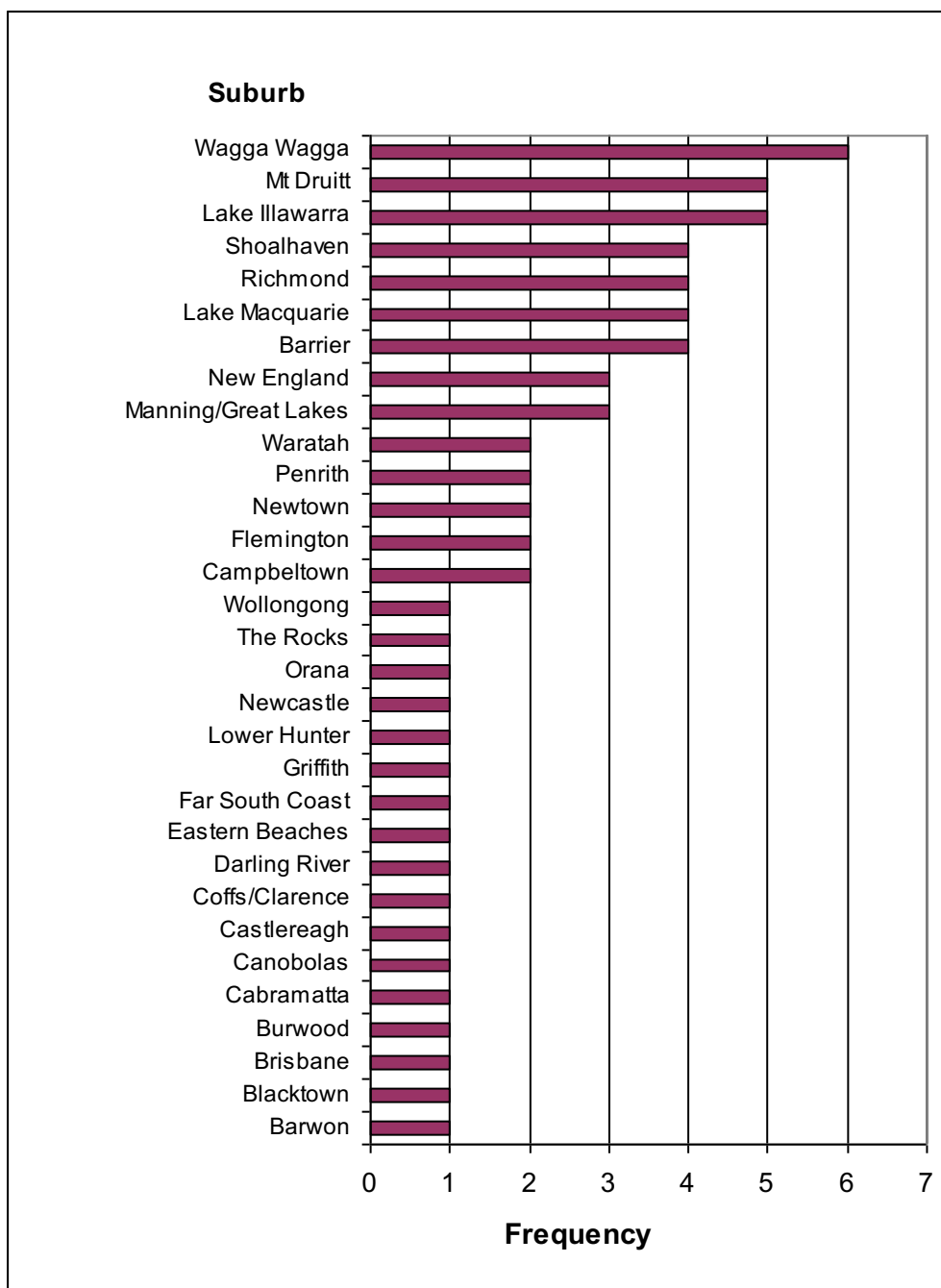
Figure 4. Frequency of young missing Aboriginal females, 12-15 years of age (N=65) by suburb reported to Police in New South Wales in 2002.

Thus, examining the missing cases of all Aboriginal females by region identified no clear geographical region for further investigation. Once the age group with the highest frequency of reported missing cases became the focus of the analysis, the Southern region was identified as the location most relevant for further investigation. However having said this, it must be noted that this recommendation concerning the Southern region was

based on only 15 out of 65 cases in this age group. Given the small number of cases in this age group, and the culturally sensitive norms for conducting research on, and for, Aboriginal peoples, it is pertinent (where possible) to consider the stories of the people behind the figures in the Police data.

SOUTHERN REGION: NSW

This section of the report provides a regional-specific profile from which the highest percentage of young Aboriginal females is reported missing.

The Region

According to statistical analysis of raw data provided by the New South Wales Missing Persons Unit, the highest proportion of young female Aboriginal missing cases in NSW is the 12 years to 15 years age bracket from the Southern Region.

The traditional first owners of the major proportion of land making up the Southern Region are identified as the Wiradjuri people. The Wiradjuri are one of the largest Aboriginal groups in Australia, both in population and area of country. However, it is important to note that due to a number of contributing factors, it is likely that diverse Aboriginal groups populate the area referred to as the Southern Region.[14]

Source: NSW Regional Land Council 1

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[14] Refer to the Aboriginal Land Council for more information.

Information provided on the NSW Police Maps shows that the Southern Region is made up of eleven local area commands (LACs). These include: Albury; Cootamundra; Deniliquin; Far South Coast; Goulburn; Griffith; Lake Illawarra; Monaro; Shoalhaven; Wagga Wagga; and Wollongong.
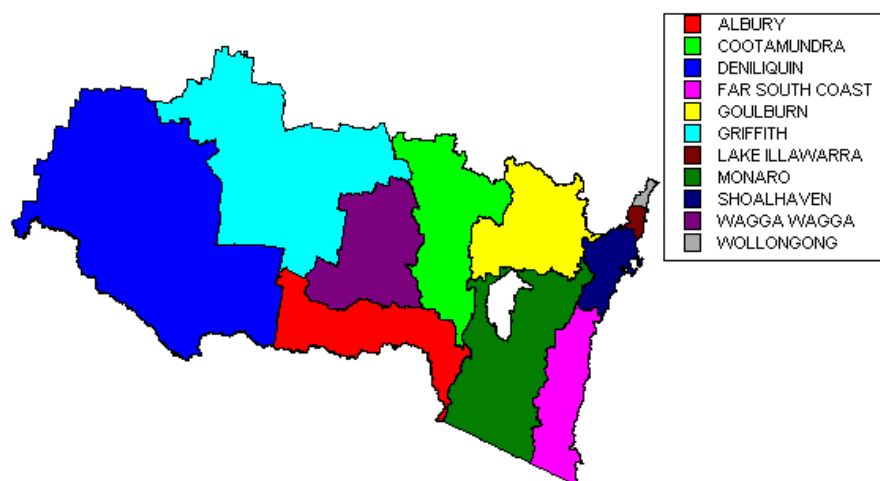
Source: 2004 NSW Missing Persons Unit, NSW Police, NSW

Local Area Commands in the Southern Region

Albury …

Population is estimated at 42,458 (including 361 Indigenous males and 371 Indigenous females).[15] Municipal Services appear adequate in numbers, in terms of servicing residential and community needs. Indigenous services (approximately 6) include Home Care, Transport, and Health and Housing. The Albury Aboriginal Land Council represents traditional owners.

Legislation (The Local Government General Regulation 1998) requires all councils in NSW to report on equity activities and develop social and community plans. The legislation clearly identifies seven target groups,

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[15] Note: Population data in this section of the report were based on the 2001 Census conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, retrieved from www.abs.com.au, 13/12/04. Further, the information contained here uses the term Indigenous, which includes both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It was not always possible to separate the population numbers for these two groups.

which includes youth and Aboriginal and Islander peoples. The Albury City Council's social plan was not detected on their website; however the site contained an extensive online community directory.

Cootamundra …

The Indigenous Population is estimated between 3% and 4% of the total population of Cootamundra (7,132 including 108 Indigenous males & 140 Indigenous females). The Indigenous community are under serviced with one organisation (education facility), which had previously attempted youth intervention programs but now concentrates on adult education. These intervention programs were unsuccessful in securing on-going funding.

The Cootamundra Council's website provides an extensive downloadable community directory and notice board; however there are no links to Indigenous services. Additionally, no social plan is available for viewing to determine the shire's reportable activities in terms of equity and the seven identified target groups.

Deniliquin …

Deniliquin has an estimated population of 7786, which includes 112 Indigenous males, 87 Indigenous females. Indigenous representation accounts for 2.5% of the total population of Deniliquin. The community is serviced by a range of essential services and volunteer support groups for the wider community. There are no Indigenous organisations, and no referral services. Additionally, the Council site has limited information on identification of key issues for target groups. Social Plan was inaccessible.

Far South Coast …

Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain numbers for the Indigenous population in the Far South Coast region at the time of printing. However,

we did find that the region (Eurobodalla) is serviced by a range of community organisations, including three Indigenous organisations (Health, Legal and Batemans Bay Land Council). The Eurobodalla Local Council's mandatory social and equity policies are not accessible through their website, nor are there any links to community directories or services.

Goulburn …

Indigenous representation in the population falls between 1% and 2% (20884 – 211 Indigenous males, 154 Indigenous females). A range of providers in terms of health, housing, youth and support groups services the community. Indigenous services are limited to land matters (Traditional Owners Land Council) and health. The Local Council has limited information on Social and Equity Plans; therefore no identification of key issues has come to community awareness.

Griffith …

Griffith has an estimated population of 23,805 of which 3.5% people identified as Aboriginal (includes 395 Indigenous Men & 441 Indigenous Women).

Range of Services available to Indigenous people includes support services such as HACC, Community transport, schooling, community health, housing and Land Issues (Land Council). Aboriginal Liaison Officers are available at Centrelink, Griffith Public and High Schools and the Police Service.

The Shire Council has recently established an Indigenous Advisory Council as part of their Social and Community Plan (2004-2007). The plan is a proactive approach focusing on seven mandatory target groups identified by the Department of Local Government. The dominant theme of this plan is to improve links between Indigenous and non-Indigenous

peoples. The Plan also recommends strategies to meet the identified needs for each target group.

Lake Illawarra/Warilla …

The estimated population of the area is 57071 (includes 510 Indigenous Males, 600 Indigenous females). Aboriginal peoples account for 1.9% of the total population of Lake Illawarra. The city has a range of community services for youth, 3 hospitals, community health centres, various church and volunteer groups. Services for Indigenous people are limited. Two land councils have claim to their traditional estates in the region.

The Council website provides access to an extensive online directory with links to other services. Their social plan recognises three key action areas and, in particular, concerns were voiced for the needs of suspended school students and safe places for youth.

Monaro (Cooma) …

The population of Monaro/Cooma is 9494. Indigenous people account for less than 1% (35 Indigenous males, 46 Indigenous females).

The shire has limited community services and none specifically for the Indigenous population. Equity and Social plans are not accessible on the Council's website.

Shoalhaven …

Aboriginal peoples represent 3.3% of the population of Shoalhaven (total population approximately 84,000).

Local Council have reviewed (Shoalhaven Community Plan Review) services to Indigenous people and identified issues and needs not currently being met. Services currently available include health care clinics, drug

and alcohol services, children's services, homework centres and young offenders program. The key areas of concern include developing appropriate networks and protocols, increasing access to employment, housing, and medical services, in particular addressing needs of youth and elders. Traditional owners and a Land Council represent the area.

Wagga Wagga …

According to 2001 Census information, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples represent 3% of the total population of Wagga Wagga (55,056 – 831 Indigenous males, 862 Indigenous females).

Indigenous services are limited to health, dental, education (Indigenous Education Unit) and land matters (Land Council). The wider community is serviced by a range of facilities and volunteer providers. Local Council has initiated 'Connecting Families – early intervention program'. In terms of equity and social policy, limited information is available from local council.

Wollongong …

In the 2001 Census, 2466 people identified as either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander from a total population of 81,612 (includes 1236 Indigenous men, 1230 Indigenous women). Wollongong City Council has extensively identified nine key areas of needs for Indigenous People, which includes health, youth at risk and education retention rates. This process was conducted through community forums and consultation process with identified key stakeholders.

Services to the Indigenous communities include housing, CDEP, Indigenous Education unit, Medical Centres, Illawarra Local Aboriginal Land Council. The wider community is serviced by several community youth groups and church volunteer associations.

DOCUMENTING PERCEPTIONS

This section of the report documents perceptions from young Aboriginal females who have been reported as missing to Police, and their families, friends and communities as to the reasons for separation.

Qualitative Framework

The framework used to collect and record data was guided by protocols set down by Griffith University's Ethics Committee, The National Health and Medical Research Council's 2003 Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research and The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2000. The researchers acknowledge the sentiment of other research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which states,

> It was important that everyone who took part in the research, both the people sharing their stories and the people listening and recording, were linked in a reciprocal process in which knowledge could be shared, explored, extended and documented (DATSIP, 1999, xxvii).

Based on that need, a qualitative framework was employed to document perceptions from young Aboriginal females, aged 12-15, and their families, friends and communities as to the reasons for separation.

Nine (9) young Aboriginal females, aged 12-15,[16] and more than fifty (50) family, friends and community members willingly volunteered to participate in the project. While family, friends and community members

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[16] Across NSW, 15 out of 65 cases in this age group were reported missing to Police. See Section 3, All Missing Aboriginal Females by Age.

were made up of males and females, most of the stories shared were collected from women. One-on-one interviews (with the young Aboriginal females) and five focus groups (with families, friends and community members) were conducted in community halls and the homes of participants.

The following presents the content shared in interviews and focus group meetings.

Perceptions as to the Reasons for Separation

Young Aboriginal Females, Aged 12-15

Problems in the family home …

Many of young Aboriginal females[17] consulted explained their reasons for separating as a way of coping with problems within the family home. At any time, the family might include all, or some, of the following individuals: biological parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and friends. Problems within the family home were named as violence, sexual abuse, alcohol abuse and safety.

The following statements were made by the girls in one-on-one interviews, and responded to the general question 'can you tell us about why you separated from your family'.

Seven of the girls revealed that they had witnessed violence within their families. For the girls, violence within the family included any or all of the following: threats and intimidation, verbal abuse, mental and physical

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[17] The term 'girl/s' will be used interchangeably with the phrase 'young Aboriginal female/s'.

abuse, and intra-family[18] violence, as the snapshot of comments below indicates.

> He'd always been saying stuff like 'you're an idiot you're full of shit' and my mum would be like crying. When he was angry, he'd be telling mum, 'you're gonna be sorry if you don't shut your mouth. Where the fuck is the money'? I just remember mum crying.

> They [father and mother] were always screaming and fighting, it always end up in a flogging. I just couldn't handle him [the father] no more, the way he bashed her [mother]. He was angry, and he always took it out on mum, or my brothers.

Five of the girls reported the violence that they had witnessed was inter-family violence, or violence between the immediate with the extended family.[19] To borrow from some of the girls:

> Yeah, it was usually me dad and uncle, my mum's brother. Uncle'll step in, and then they're punching up.

> My mum and my aunties, they be full on into it.

While many of the girls interviewed reported *witnessing* violence in the family home, two girls reported *experiencing* violence as a reason for separation. One girl explained:

> I left cause of the way he [father] used to treat me. I got the marks to prove it. I was sick of him flogging into me. He was always going off about something. If someone looked at him, he'd be crazy and he'd take it out on mum, and me and my brothers.

Two of the girls revealed that their experiences in the family home also included sexual abuse. One girl explained:

> If he [the father] is pissed, he come looking for me, he come into my room; and my little sis[ter] is sleeping in the bed with

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[18] The term intra-family is used to refer to members of the immediate or nuclear family, which includes, mother (and or step-mother / mother's partner), father (and or step-father / step-father) and children.

[19] The term inter-family is used to refer to members of the immediate family with the extend family.

me. Mum never done nothing. I put up with it for too long. So,
I took care of myself.

Another girl disclosed particularly traumatic information, which she requested remain 'secret' because of her 'shame'. In terms of reasons for separation, she added:

I didn't think I had to put up with that shit, so I took off.

Many of the girls participating in the interviews identified alcohol abuse within the family home as a reason for separation. Most girls reported that alcohol was a problem for males in their families (fathers, fathers' mates and uncles). To quote some of the girls:

He'd always be drinking. Mum use to tell us [the children], 'your dad spends all of it [money] on grog' – don't tell him where my purse is or we'll have nothing left.

He [the father] used to have his poxy friends around, they'd be charged [drunk] all night.

The worse one was uncle 'cause he was always wanting to drink with dad. If he [the uncle] was down home, my dad would start to. Sometimes the neighbours will get into it with them.

Further, two of the girls stated that alcohol was not only a problem for males in the family, but also for females in the family (mothers, aunties).

She [the mother] was always drinking.

One girl revealed disillusionment with 'the way it's supposed to be' when she stated:

It's different for my dad, I accepted that, but I wanted mum to give it up [alcohol] 'cause she's me mum, mums aren't like that, they're ya mum.

In terms of problems within the family home, two girls identified safety as reasons for separation. One girl explained:

I had to go. I hated that way. I didn't feel safe.

Another girl revealed her concern for her siblings when she said she 'made the decision' to separate to 'look out' for 'young ones [sisters]'. She stated:

> If their situation was going to be like mine, well you have to get away. They can't stay in that house where they are not going to feel love and safe.

However, a number of the girls expressed some regret in separating from their families. One girl explained:

> I didn't have anyone to talk to about what was going on. I wanted to go home but I was worried about what mum and dad would say to me.

Problems at school …

An equally high number of girls explained their reasons for separation as relating to problems at school. Seven girls identified problems with people in authority (school principal), general teaching staff and classmates. Problems at school were named as difficulties with learning, racism and bullying.[20]

In terms of learning, four of the girls identified problems at the hand of their teachers. One girl reported:

> He [a teacher] knew it was too hard for me. No way could I do it [mathematics] and he was acting like I was so dumb. If someone was scraping the desk or the chair, he'd stare at me and be like 'I wanna talk to you after class' or he'd scream 'get out'. And these white bitches all laughing behind their hands. But he never growled [got angry] them, only me; oh and this one other guy. I remember this one time he [the teacher] told

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[20] The term bullying here refers to hitting, scaring, teasing, name calling, telling nasty rumours and or not allowing someone to join a group, as defined by Demosthenous, Bouhours and Demosthenous (2002).

me, 'no one cares about you, not even your own family'. He was the biggest bastard ever.

Another girl explained:

> She [a teacher] gave everyone 20 sums and me 10. That's 'cause I'm black. She never tried me with 20. She never even give me a chance.

The samples of poor learning experiences above, also suggest that racism played a part in the difficulties the girls experienced. One of those interviewed reported experiencing problems with the school principal. She explained:

> When I be up the office [of the school principal], he [school principal] never ask me what's doing. He never even asked me or let me talk. I be there with my head down lookin' at the ground. I couldn't stand lookin' at him 'cause of the way he's stare me out; like I was nothin' and he's always saying, 'ya never gonna amount to nothin'. He end up suspending me, an' last time I never went back.

While the stories above inidcated that the girls experienced racism and bullying concurrently, six of those interviewed revealed that they had been involved in physical fights at school. One girl reported:

> I told the guidance officer [about a problem with classmates] and she said she'd talk to them [classmates]. They was always saying stuff like Abo dog and black bitch. She [guidance officer] said something to them and it ended up in a fight [with classmates] with my cus [cousin] backing me. I ended up in the office [meeting with school authorities] with my cus. We got in trouble by the dickhead [headmaster], he is a real racist. He hates Kooris.

Another girl reported on an incident in which she required medical treatment. She said:

> She [a student] ripped off that bar from the trolley; you know, a shopping trolley, like the ones from Woolies [Woolworths], she had that bar and she was swinging at me. Everyone's round us and someone screaming 'teacher, teacher' but the bitch

[student attacker] cracked my ribs before the teacher got there. She [the student] reckoned 'black bitch fuck off from here', and she's Samoan. They don't have no respect for us.

While it was not always clear to identify whether the girls were *bullied* or *bullies,* we found that problems at school were exacerbated by problems within the family home, and vice versa. To borrow from one of the girls:

The school matters just keep piling and I try to deal with them one at a time. But I couldn't 'cause I had the family stuff as well. I had no one to talk to. So I took off to the bush.

Families, Friends and Communities

Across each of the five focus groups, the families and friends and communities reported that the reasons for the young girls' separation resulted from family problems. Problems within the family home were named as violence, alcohol abuse, sexual abuse and safety.

As was the case with the findings in interviews with the girls, most of those in attendance across the groups acknowledged violence as a key reason for separation. Discussions found that each member of the family may *witness* or *experience* violence, as stated by a family member [identified as an aunt of a missing girl]:

Yeah the white ones usually got it [violence] with the husband, but it's different for us [Aboriginal peoples] everyone gets in on it: husband, wife, kids, uncles, aunties, friends, mates.

In terms of intra-family violence, a snapshot of reports from members of the focus groups put it this way:

He [the father] was violent. I [wife] told him he either knocks the violence off or I'll do something about it.

> A friend of mine told me when she found out she was pregnant for the sixth time, her husband kicked her in the guts, and her kids would've seen it.

While many of those providing information in the focus groups reported a high occurrence and reoccurrence of intra-family violence and inter-family violence, alcohol abuse was also identified as a reason for the girls' separation. A recent community meeting reported,

> Some kids don't want to go home. Their parents are drunk all the time, or they've got relationships or something and the kids don't like the step-father or something like that and they don't want to go home period.[21]

Some of those at the focus groups expressed concern regarding alcohol abuse.

> He's alright when he's not drinking, but once he starts you gotta get out. It put a strain on all the family. Not just my family, everyone's family. Everyone here knows what I'm talking about.

> These fellas try to drown the pain in grog and they ended up killing each other and the kids take off.

One of those making comment in the focus group maintained that alcohol abuse may consequence sexual abuse. Some of those comments are reported below.

> Once they're drinking you gotta watch out for your kids.

> Her father used to get her into the bathroom to scrub his back. It's good she took off 'cause no girl should be used for a piece of meat.

Another group member revealed how sexual abuse might not be contained within the family but extend to friends and acquaintances. She said:

> She probably went cause of his drinking and his mates; to do things especially to his daughter. He's a dirty rotten dog.

Across each of the five focus groups, the families and friends and communities reported that the reasons for the girls' separation could have arisen out of concerns for their safety. A mother of a girl reported missing explained:

> The kids can't stay about with all that trouble, 'eh.

Another woman identified neglect as a reason for the separation of girls from their families. She explained:

> Parents have been away for long periods of time. There's no one to take care of them so they get going.

While family, friends and communities perceived family problems to be a key reason for separation, there was a community held perception that being missing and filing official reports to Police were not necessarily the practice within Aboriginal families and communities. In fact, many people reported that they considered Aboriginal children to be 'homeless'. A community meeting reported:

> There were no reports of missing Aboriginal youth in Albury, we count these youth as being homeless not run aways.

Further, the perception amongst focus group members agreed that the many children who were unexplainably absent from the family home usually 'ran to a family or relative'.

> Some go from place to place staying with friends… you hear stories all the time … yeah they just move around.

> If they can't stay at one place they just move on. When they get their money they just move.

However, there were numerous stories of girls who were homeless and living on the streets.

> I know someone who is homeless, a 13 year old Aboriginal kid who's staying in drains and in the bins.

As the mother of girl who was absent from home, but not officially reported missing Police, explained:

> She was a very mixed up kid. I think she needed to find her way, she was lost.

Some focus groups reported that the reasons for the young girls' separation were involuntary, as these were suspected cases of abduction. Those commenting on this reported suspecting the involvement of the father in these instances.

> We were up on the computer, we are on a domestic violence call. We were on the run from him around the state and I don't think it matters how different you look, he still knows who you are. If there was him there and the kids gone, I just call Police and my name comes up. I knew it was him [father].

One woman spoke about how she needed to continually reassure her children that they were safe. Another reported that 'she had all three [of her children] missing at a time'.

> My daughter was always scared her father was gonna take her and the young ones.

As well as problems within the family home, some families, friends and communities acknowledged that the girls had experienced problems with school life, which was agreed was a reason for separation. One community member spoke of an experience when accompanying a friend to the school headmaster to discuss problems that the friend's daughter was experiencing.

> I wouldn't blame her [the friend's daughter] for what she did [engage in a fight]. The one at the desk [administration] made us wait and wait, never even said 'sit down'. We waited and waited. She tended everyone in the room, only us waited, and we had an appointment. And when she said we could go in [to the office], I got asked to wait outside [by the principal]. He

wanted to 'meet private', 'it being confidential'. My friend never said nothing and he sent me out. It reminded me of the mission time when I used to get in trouble. I felt so shamed. Too much sorry business. How is he gonna help her [the girl] when he didn't even have respect for us. He don't understand what it's like for us.

Another person in attendance at the focus group meeting echoed similar sentiment, when she explained:

No, we don't go to meetings with the teachers and stuff. That's mostly white fella way. They don't really want us Kooris to go 'cause they're seeing us as a waste of time.

A number of those in attendance across all five focus group meetings acknowledged the problems of truancy for their children. One woman explained:

They [the girls] get into trouble with the teachers and students and get suspended. They [the girls] cannot handle it and do a runner. What can we do to help them? School don't listen to us, only if you get a good talker to go up and have a yarn [talk] to them.

12-15 YEAR OLDS: WHY SO HIGH?

This section of the report identifies the reasons why young Aboriginal females aged 12-15 make up the highest proportion of Aboriginal people reported missing to Police.

Given that this section of the report is interested in identifying the reasons why young Aboriginal females aged 12-15 make up the highest proportion of Aboriginal people reported missing to Police, the information contained below is based on the one-on-one interviews conducted with the girls.[22]

Significance of Life Phase

This report is interested in the cases of missing persons in the age bracket 12 years to 15 years. As has been the case with this report, individuals can be described in terms of chronological age. This was certainly the case in this research, which asked girls, 'how old are you'. While that information was essential to the requirements of the research, one's chronological age can have a significant impact: on the roles and responsibilities of the person; the social activities engaged in; the types of emotions and feelings experienced; understandings of self; the perceptions and expectations of society; and so on. Given that this section of the report aims to identify the reasons why Aboriginal females aged 12 years to 15 years make up the highest proportion of missing Aboriginal females, it is necessary that we consider the significance of the life phase.

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[22] Note: Almost half of the 133 missing Aboriginal females in New South Wales were aged between 12 to 15 years. The majority of these missing females were 14 years of age (21.1%), with 15 year olds comprising a further 10.5%, 13 year olds 9.0% and 12 year olds 8.3% (see Section 3, All Missing Aboriginal Females by Age).

Difficulty of Coping with Home and School Life

In terms of identifying the reasons why Aboriginal females aged 12 years to 15 years make up the highest proportion of missing Aboriginal females, the girls reported difficulty in coping with home and school life. In terms of family problems, the girls revealed experiencing witnessing and or experiencing violence, sexual abuse, alcohol abuse, safety (within the family). In terms of school problems, the girls revealed experiencing problems with learning, racism and or bullying with either the school principal, teaching staff and or classmates. Further, the girls reveal that they had little, if any, power in rectifying those circumstances, which is understandable given their status in those environments (that is, child, in the family environment, and student, in the school environment).

Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that the girls separated in order to cope with life in general. To reiterate one of the girl's:

> The family matters just keep piling and I try to deal with them
> one at a time. But I couldn't 'cause I had the school stuff as
> well. So I took off to the bush. What else could I do?

Owning One's Body

Interviews with the girls also revealed that some had experienced sexual abuse within their family homes. One of the themes echoing across the one-on-one interviews was a sense of not having anyone to look to for guidance or protection; neither in the family home nor school. There also appeared to be some disillusionment with the role of the mother in the home, who was perceived to have the role of nurturing and care but not able to provide this. In some instances, the girls reported taking this responsibility on, particularly in protection of their younger sisters. However, there was an overwhelming sense of shame and secrecy surrounding sexual abuse within the family, which indicated that sexual

abuse was not previously disclosed. However, it is clear from the consultations with families, friends and community members that sexual abuse is known to occur in some Aboriginal families. Note that the researchers were not able to identify whether the perpetrators of sexual abuse were of Aboriginal or non-Indigenous descent.

An Ability to Care for Oneself

Voluntary separation from the family suggests that the girls had some confidence in their abilities to care for themselves outside of the home environment. Granted many of the girls 'ran to friends and relations'. However, there were times when those girls reported that those families and friends had sorry business of their own, which caused the girls to 'move on'. This often resulted in those girls becoming homeless; 'sleeping in parks, under bridges, in abandoned buildings'; and so on. One girl revealed:

> I stayed with my friends for a couple of weeks. But there was too many of us, too many problems. If I've got nowhere to sleep I'll just sleep in the park.

Further, it was interesting to note that two of the girls reporting *going bush.* In addition, one of those girls reported *going bush* in the company of three younger siblings.

It is possible that the age bracket 12 – 15 years is proportionally high in terms of female missing cases because this age brings with it a sense of being streetwise or confidence in risk taking. Being streetwise meant that some girls resorted to begging for survival. One girl reported:

> I'd just go straight up to them [people] and ask for money. The ones with kids would give you something, but I never ask fellas [males]; too dangerous.

However, being streetwise also saw at least one girl resort to opportunistic crime. She reported:

> I'd just roll 'em [overpower someone to steal]. They'd usually be drunk or something, so they couldn't fight back or do anything bad to ya'. I had to do it 'cause I was so hungry.

Further, for one of the girls, being streetwise included committing crime to cope with problems. One girl reported:

> Just get locked up in juvi [juvenile justice] so I don't need to worry for a while.

This indicates that there was some type of understanding, perhaps out of necessity, that the girls separated because they felt able to care for themselves. However, given the potential dangers of 'sleeping on the streets' and the fact that some girls resorted to illegal acts to survive, the ability to *care* for oneself remains questionable.

Further, it is important to note that some girls indicated a desire to 'go home' but were reluctant to do so for fear of 'getting into trouble for taking off'. On that note, all of those who were located and returned home reported that they would 'never go again' and advised others 'against it'.

Attempts to Understand

It is beyond the scope of this report to refer to all of the research to understand why this age bracket makes up the highest proportion of missing Aboriginal cases across NSW. It goes without saying that such a task would require investigation across a variety of research fields (for example, psychology, sociology, education, history, criminology). However, the following provides some attempts to understand the reasons why this age bracket might make up the highest proportion of Aboriginal missing cases.

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force Report on Violence* (DATSIPD, 1999), found:

> In some communities, children have had multiple traumatic experiences having witnessed violence and abuse on an all too frequent basis, with little if any support from key figures within the community or the family …

The *Bringing Them Home Report* (HREOC, 1997) sheds some light on the (in)ability of some parents to provide support. The report (HREOC, 1997, p.1) explains:

> …their removal as children and the abuse they experienced at the hands of the authorities…have permanently scarred their lives. The harm continues in later generations, affecting their children and grandchildren.

In other words, many Aboriginal people experience sorry business, which adversely impacts their psychological, emotional and spiritual health and wellbeing.

In fact, some studies have acknowledged that intergenerational trauma, or members of the second generation of individuals that have experienced traumatic events, may or will, live aspects of the parents' trauma as if it were their own (Atkinson, 1999; Weiss & Weiss, 2000). Weiss and Weiss (2000) explain, children have learned to think and behave in disturbed ways by emulating their parents. They claim that this does not necessarily mean the trauma itself has been transmitted, but due to the trauma having affected them so completely, their parenting skills are affected, and in turn, this 'parental weakness' affects their children.

In terms of the significance of the life phase, Erikson's (PageWise, Inc., 2002) work on psychosocial development has identified this period in the adolescent's life as one of identity and identity confusion. He has explained that at this time, adolescents attempt to develop a sense of their own identity and ideas about their weaknesses, strengths, goals, occupations, sexual identity and gender roles. That is to say, this is a time when thoughts about who one is and how one wants to live life becomes

important. This can be a difficult period in one's life, and the adolescent may experience constant confusion, which appears relevant to the findings in this research.

Adding to that, are the findings of *Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia* (National Crime Prevention, 1999) report, which found that some life phases, such as the one of interest in this research, may reveal the girls' accumulations of 'a backlog of successes and failures', 'coping with the actions of others', 'being compared by teachers or peers with a range of other children'.

Murphy's (2004) work maintains that responses to Aboriginal education predominately sensitise the learning environment without actually addressing the complexity of factors that Aboriginal students bring into the school. He argues, particularly, that history and Aboriginal experience appears largely irrelevant in the policy responses adopted by government. Murphy (2004, p.6) argues:

> The model [within the eduction system] to be attained may operate under the rhetoric of equality, but the only equality offered belongs to mainstream Australia.

The *Pathways to Prevention* (National Crime Prevention, 1999) report goes on to explain:

> Some transitions may be managed well, others will be mucked up. These often contribute to a sense of confidence or determination, or to a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety. They contribute also to our being able to build up a large or small variable repertoire of strategies for dealing with particular kinds of situations. Relevant also is the extent to which the social context provides assistance in making a transition. That assistance may stem from several sources: from one's immediate or extended family, from peers, school teachers, healthcare workers, neighbours… Family support, for example, is proposed as a form of assistance that is relevant at all parts of a child's life.

COMMON THEMES & FACTORS

This section of the report identifies common themes and factors in the circumstances in which young Aboriginal females are reported missing.

Given that this section of the report is interested in reporting common themes and factors in the circumstances in which young Aboriginal females are reported, the information contained below is based on consultations with families, friends and communities or those reporting the incidence of disappearance to Police.

Pathway to Reporting

The qualitative framework employed to collect information from the families, friends and communities of young Aboriginal females, aged 12-15, enabled us to identify a pathway that families, friends and communities generally take in making an official report to Police regarding the disappearance of a loved one. The figure below comprises three stages that were identified in the pathway to reporting a loved one missing to Police.

Figure 6. Pathway to Reporting to Police.

Stage one, the first point of call, refers to a non-Police tracing group, which comprises families, friends and communities of the missing girl. In this stage, families, friends and communities of the girl were asked whether they had seen or heard of her whereabouts. Here, the term

communities include Aboriginal people who were working with and or had connections to Aboriginal service providers. The consultations found that biological parents were not necessarily the first to discover that their daughters were missing. In some cases, the first person/s to notice the absence of the girl were the extended family, friend or community member. Given that Aboriginal families tend to share care for the rearing of each other's children, this is not surprising. It was only when the missing girl's whereabouts remained unknown, that stage two in the pathways to reporting to Police was employed.

Stage two, the second point of call, refers to another non-Police tracing system, the Internet (with its networks). In this stage, families, friends and or communities used Internet contacts to locate the missing girl. Those searching for the missing girl would make contact with someone who had access to the Internet. While that person would generally be one who worked in an office, it was not the case that the person with Internet access was employed in an area relating to missing persons. One of those attending a focus group meeting reported an incident in which she had had some involvement in the search to locate the missing girl.

> No one knew where she was, and she'd never done a runner before. Everyone was real worried and they [mother and aunt] came to see me at my work, and asked me to put it out through my networks. So I sent it out.

Further discussions indicated that the information on the missing girl was initially sent to at least 'thirty to forty people'. From there, it was understood that each individual was asked to forward it through his or her networks. It was only when the missing girl's whereabouts were not located through Internet networks that stage three in the pathways to reporting to Police was employed.

Stage three, the third point of call, refers to contact made with Police networks. Given that Aboriginal families tend to share care for the rearing of each other's children, it is not surprising to find that extended family

members might have lodged an official report with Police. Further, the consultations revealed three separate circumstances in which the girls might be reported missing to Police. These include, (1) failure to locate the missing girl; (2) breach of law; and (3) threat of the unknown.

In terms of failure to locate the missing girl, the consultations found that families, friends and communities made official reports only after they had exhausted all other avenues. In other words, reports to Police were made after stages one and two had failed to locate the missing girl or identify her whereabouts.

In terms of breach of law, the consultations found:

(i)   That it was predominately the mothers of the girls who were missing that made the reports to Police; and

(ii)   That the parents of the missing girls were separated or divorced, or in that process, and that there was a belief or knowledge that the girl's biological father and or the father's family and friends were involved in the girl's disappearance.

Sharing stories on breach of law, one mother explained:

> I went to pick two of them [her children] up [from school], the school had a court order to say that no one could take my kids, only the people who were down on the list, but the kids weren't there. I asked around and one of my niece's at the school said she saw her uncle [the children's biological father] and his woman [girlfriend] out front of the school and he just drove off with them. I rang his number. I knew it was a breach of the order. I had legal custody and this order to say he could not come near them [the children]. But he took them anyway and the school didn't do anything to stop him. So, I went to the cops [Police].

The mother reporting this information disclosed that she had discovered that the children's biological father had sexually abused two of her female children, which may have contributed to her lodging an official report to Police. Indeed, many of those involved in the consultations stated that their

reasons for lodging an official report with Police were based on the threat of the unknown.

Many of those attending the focus group meetings acknowledged threats presented to the girls in the broader, general community. News reports from the media, particularly (free-to-air) television and Aboriginal radio, appeared to play a significant role in peoples' perceptions of the potential dangers and threats posed to children and youth by paedophiles. One community member reported:

> You gotta watch out for most of them [males]. Used to be, you never hear about this, but these days. What about that young one from up North?

Another person explained:

> Some of 'em go to our kids, give 'em money, twenty bucks [dollars] or something like that, and they take 'em away and abuse 'em.

Another person in attendance at the meeting added:

> Yep, and it's even some of our own selling our kids.

Further, a number of those attending the focus group meetings revealed a common understanding that there was a required 24-hour waiting period for reports on missing persons to be actioned. Some of those in attendance maintained that they knew of people who had approached Police for assistance, and that they reported being informed that the 24-hour waiting period applied. A community elder stated:

> 24 hours waiting. That's the danger period. We call that 'the danger period'.

In commenting on her experiences during the lodging of a report to Police on the disappearance of her child, a woman commented:

> The first police officer wouldn't believe us. When he went out there [a site that the mother had identified as a location where

the child might be being held] he started getting agro [aggressive], the same police officer that dealt with my son. He thought I was just joking. I wasn't joking; I told him when I say my child is missing you gotta listen to the parent.

Circumstances for Not Reporting

Although we were working from Police data, consultations with families, friends and communities identified the dark figure of missing persons; referring to those figures not reported to Police. In other words, there were a number of Aboriginal females who were missing or absent from their family home that were not officially reported missing to Police.

Some maintained that they did not wish to come forward due to a fear of Police (that is: through experiences with family members in prison; past poor experiences with Police violence; lack of understanding of Aboriginal people; and issues of racism). One woman who reported her daughter missing to Police explained:

> I thought it wasn't fair because me being an Aboriginal woman I thought I would be entitled to Aboriginal police. We had to have the white people, where we could have relaxed and talked to each other freely. They ['white' police] said they knew what they were doing, but when a white police officer speaks to an Aboriginal woman or man they [Aboriginal woman or man] don't want to talk. They clam up, because white don't know what really Aboriginal people go through. They don't know what they are talking about.

In terms of poor past experiences when dealing with Police, another person maintained:

> The blacker you are the more likely not to be trusted. And the paler you are the more likely to have your Aboriginality questioned.

Another person stated a reason for not making an official complaint was due to the possibility of someone being charged in relation to filing a

missing persons' report with Police. In other words, some in attendance at different focus group meetings were concerned that asking for an official investigation into the disappearance of a missing person may result in a charge being laid against the missing person and or charges being laid against the family who lodged the initial report.

> She was located tied up in mud at my ex's [husband] property. And when he [police officer] was bringing her home, they handcuffed her but she hadn't done a crime. And when I asked them [police officers] why, they said two reasons, she looked like person that would do something and she didn't have any money in her pocket. She was a 12 year old; a small child.

SUMMARY

This section of the report provides a short summary of findings.

Some Findings

Examining all missing Aboriginal females by age revealed that one age group, the 12 to 15 year olds, comprised the majority of missing cases. Once the age group with the highest frequency of reported missing cases became the focus of the analysis, the Southern region was identified as the location most relevant for further investigation, with Wagga Wagga, Lake Illawarra and Shoalhaven accounting for almost of quarter (23.1%) of all 12 to 15 year olds reported missing in NSW.

According to information provided by the NSW Police, eleven LACs make up the Southern Region. The report provided a regional-specific profile on each of those LACs, including: Albury; Cootamundra; Deniliquin; Far South Coast; Goulburn; Griffith; Lake Illawarra; Monaro; Shoalhaven; Wagga Wagga; and Wollongong. This profile presented information on population, types of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous services available and some information from local councils. Unfortunately, we were unable to access information on the numbers of Police servicing those LACs. Further, we were not able to obtain information on the numbers of Aboriginal Police Officers and or Aboriginal Police Liaison Officers in those areas.

We found that each of the LACs in the Southern Region provided a variety and range of support services catering to the needs of the general population. While we noted that some LACs did not offer services catering specifically to Aboriginal peoples, we did find that most LACs in the

Region had some Aboriginal service organisations. For instance, we found Aboriginal Land Councils in each of the LACs. We also found that Link Up provides services to the area.

However, we found that the Aboriginal service providers in operation in and around the Southern Region did not specifically cater to the needs of Aboriginal girls in the age bracket under investigation. For instance, while Link Up provides services in that Region, their organisation works to reunite families who were forcibly removed from their families, and not girls reported missing (to Police). Further, we found that while some service providers offered programs catering to the 12 to 15 year age bracket, many of those programs were unsuccessful in securing on-going funding.

In addition, we found that a number of Councils in the Southern Region had neglected to implement the Local Government General Regulation 1998 legislation pertaining to equity and social and community plans, and, where implemented, that many of the Councils had failed to conduct evaluations of those plans.

In terms of our qualitative research, we found that most of those consulted understood that in most cases the girls were voluntarily missing. Perceptions documented across the interviews with girls as to reasons for separation found an equally significant number of problems at home (violence, sexual abuse, alcohol abuse, safety) and at school (learning, racism and bullying). It was also found that those problems could be witnessed or experienced in isolation or concurrently, and that most girls had witnessed and or experienced more than one of those problems. Thus, home and school problems were interrelated, and the girls identified both as reasons for separation.

Perceptions documents across each of the five focus groups with family, friends and communities as to the reasons for separation related to problems at home (violence, alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, safety, abduction

by non-custodial parent) and at school (school life). Further, it was found that many Aboriginal families, friends and communities perceive the girls to be runaways but not necessarily missing. Although it was found that many of the girls ran to family and friends, there was an expectation that these girls might become homeless at some time during their separation.

Further, the research identified a number of reasons why 12 to 15 year olds make up such a high proportion of Aboriginal females reported missing to Police. We found that separating from the family may result from difficulty in coping with home and school life, a desire to own one's body and protect siblings, and an understanding that one is able to care for oneself in the broader, general community. The girls at this age revealed a certain level of confidence, whether rationale or not, in being streetwise, in being able to run and being able to defend themselves. In addition, many of the girls revealed that they regretted separating from their families, but at the time they felt they had no one to talk to about their problems. Finally, a number of girls expressed their desire to return home during their missing period but were concerned about the consequences of their actions.

The research also identified a number of common themes and factors in the circumstances in which young Aboriginal females were reported missing. The qualitative methodology used to gather information allowed for identification of a pathway that families, friends and communities usually took in filing an official report to Police regarding the disappearance of a loved one. Three stages were identified:

(1) Stage one, a non-Police tracing group, referred to inquires made to families, friends and communities as to the whereabouts of the missing person;

(2) Stage two, a non-tracing Police system, referred to requests made of people with access to the Internet. Requests were made to email

contacts asking whether anyone had seen or heard of the missing person;[23] and

(3) Stage three referred to the lodging of an official complaint with Police. Further, three separate circumstances in which the girls might be reported missing to Police were identified; (i) failure to locate the missing girl; (ii) breach of law; and (iii) threat of the unknown.

Although we were working from Police data, consultations with families, friends and communities identified (1) Police were not the main agency used to locate a missing person, and (2) the dark figure of missing persons; referring to those figures not reported to Police. A key reason for not reporting to Police was fear of Police. Another reason given was the potential for charges to be laid against either the missing person and or the family member filing the report to Police. Further, a number of those attending the focus group meetings revealed a common (mis)understanding that there was a required 24-hour waiting period for reports on missing persons to be actioned.

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[23] Note: Given the reach and complexity of the individual's networks, it is beyond the scope of this report to estimate the number of people informed or involved in the Internet search for a single missing person. It is also beyond the scope of this report to identify how effective those Internet networks were in locating, and or reuniting, girls with their families. However, it was revealed that a number of those receiving the information would have been of non-Indigenous background.

WHICH WAY FOR PREVENTION & SERVICE

This section of the report provides recommendations from the research findings that (a) identify preventative strategies to reduce the incidence and (b) identify service delivery gaps.

Preventative Strategies

Designing, developing and delivering programs that target risk factors in the home

It is recommended that a variety of programs targeting family violence, alcohol dependency, sexual abuse and parenting skills be designed, developed and delivered. It is recommended that those programs be designed, developed and delivered in partnership with Aboriginal communities. This should ensure that programs target the unique needs of Aboriginal peoples, with the appropriate resources being available. Further, attention needs to be given to programs:

- Aimed at the culturally specific role of the mother in the family home. For instance, females are seen to be the primary carers and nurtures in the home and family, which means it will be necessary to provide programs that support females (and particularly mothers) to effectively and positively parent. Elders, particularly female Elders, who are culturally responsible for children, particularly girls, are involved in the initial design, development and delivery of programs, as well as ongoing evaluations;

- Aimed at the culturally specific role of the father in the family home. It is equally essential that programs be designed, developed and delivered to fathers, to teach them effective and positive ways of parenting. Here, it would be of benefit to involve male Elders in initial design, development and delivery of programs, and in ongoing evaluations, to ensure the program caters to the unique needs of males; and

- Aimed at girls who have separated or are at risk of separating. These programs should address the real life experiences of girls and look to enhance their abilities to deal with stress, effectively cope with problems, protect themselves and seek help. Further, such programs might consider offering art, sport, dance, culture, life skills, anger management and other self-esteem building activities.

Developing and strengthening partnerships with Aboriginal community representatives and the education sector, particularly local schools, to impact the organisational culture of schools

It is recommended that attention be directed to the:

- Design, development and implementation of strategies for promoting respect for Aboriginal cultures and peoples as the first, original inhabitants of Australia. For example: schools might work in partnership with Aboriginal communities to identify the traditional land owners on the grounds on which schools' sit, and place acknowledgement of that group/s in school receptions, halls and other main traffic areas. Schools might also consider the benefits of acknowledging local Aboriginal heritage and cultural sites, celebrations of days of significance to Aboriginal peoples, and so on;

- Numbers of Aboriginal staff in schools to ensure that they reflect an equal ratio of Aboriginal teaching, administration and

counselling staff to the numbers of Aboriginal students at a particular school. For example: develop strategies to increase the numbers of identified positions, where needed;

- Provision of appropriate cultural awareness training to members of the school community, including: teaching, administrative and counselling staff, students and families and friends of school communities. Such training should enlist the aid of Aboriginal community representatives from the local area to support in understanding and to increase the participation and input of Aboriginal people into their local schools;

- Development and implementation of auditing systems to ensure that court orders regarding custody of children and youth are monitored and adhered to during school hours;

- Increased programs that engage community support for youth in schools to reinforce their cultural, social and gender identity. Further, their needs to be an increase in community education counsellors and youth support workers with expertise in dealing with problems;

- Development of programs to redress racism in schools. Attention to follow up of incidents needs to be undertaken; and

- Develop a process that enforces a system of investigation and attention to claims of racism in schools.

Developing and implementing school-based programs that target risk factors at school

It is recommended that attention be directed to the:

- Availability and accessibility of tutoring and remedial programs for girls with learning needs. Those programs must be based on an understanding of the unique literacy and numeracy needs of Aboriginal students and strategically delivered to ensure that those attending are not *shamed* because of learning deficiencies; and

- Design, development and delivery of a series of anti-bullying programs, life skills programs, anger management programs and esteem building programs to support the girls in coping with everyday school life.

Undertake further research

Further research needs to be conducted to gain a better understanding of the complex factors that result in young Aboriginal females reported missing to Police. It would be of benefit to:

- Conduct longitudinal research to understand how to prevent repeat incidence of becoming a missing person, the numbers of those located, the length of time missing, and so on;
- Conduct research that evaluates existing services to support in identifying gaps in service delivery;
- Conduct research to identify the impact on families, friends and communities when an Aboriginal person goes missing;
- Conduct research to understand the prevalence of abduction of missing girls by non-custodial parents and or their families and friends;
- Conduct research into the potential of the Internet as a non-Police tracing agent;
- Conduct research into the prevalence of racism experienced by 12 to 15 year old Aboriginal females in schools;
- Undertake a mapping of existing services across NSW to address the needs of young Aboriginal females between 12 to 15 years to identify gaps in service delivery and program availability for this specific age bracket; and
- Undertake a mapping of existing Aboriginal service providers that cater to those 12 to 15 years to identify how many have long-term funding.

Service Delivery

The following recommendations are offered to improve service delivery when dealing with missing Aboriginal females. It is important to note that the following recommendations are intended as a guide and do not claim to be exhaustive. Furthermore, interpreting and or adapting recommendations for implementation should reflect the collective voices of the FFMPU, AJAC, the NSW Police (and other regions where required), the NMPU, government and education bodies and service providers, the media, Aboriginal communities, and other relevant stakeholders.

Enhance Police response to Aboriginal missing persons

- Develop and strengthen partnerships between local Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal agencies, government bodies and relevant others for a collaborative and shared approach to service delivery for missing persons;
- Build and strengthen relationships with Aboriginal Elders and communities with the aim of promoting mutual understanding and respect for one another;
- Establish and adapt an adopt-a-cop program to attend local Aboriginal community meetings to share information on missing persons issues, practices, regulations, and so on;
- Examine and evaluate the numbers of Aboriginal people in the services of Police to ensure those numbers reflect an equal ratio of Aboriginal Police Officers and Aboriginal Police Liaison Officers to the Aboriginal population at each of the LACs in the Southern Region. Develop strategies to increase the numbers of identified positions, where needed;
- Evaluate existing professional development in terms of providing appropriate cultural awareness training to those in the employ of the Police. Such training should enlist the aid of Aboriginal community representatives from the local area to support in

interpretation and understanding, and to increase the participation and input of Aboriginal people in their local Police area; and

- Conduct evaluation of existing reporting and recording systems. Where necessary, design, develop and implement strategies to improve data collection systems, tracking systems, case histories, incidence of recidivisms, and so on.

Providing ongoing, long-term funding to non-government organisations to provide support services to facilitate a coordinated approach to addressing the impacts of missing persons

- Providing funding for a variety of preventative and more effective intervention programs that address the many factors that contribute to girls going missing;
- Conduct evaluation of existing services;
- Establish services for missing persons, where needed. Look at strategies to ensure funding is ongoing and long term;
- Set up emergency accommodation and shelter that specifically caters to the 12 to 15 year bracket; and
- Develop strategies to equip individuals in organisations with the expertise to respond to missing person cases.

Establishing and strengthening inter-agency consultations and engagement across government and non-government agencies

- Ensure Aboriginal representation on Police Consultative Groups, Police Missing Persons Units, The National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons, and other relevant bodies;
- Develop strategies to evaluate and improve current information sharing arrangements across government and non-government missing persons' agencies. This should be a formalised service, with a shared database for easy access of information on missing persons; and

- Examine strategies to use the Internet as a cross-agency tracing mechanism.

Evaluating and reviewing legislative and other reforms

- Support local councils in the Southern Region to evaluate their implementation of The Local Government General Regulation 1998. Ensure councils' compliance with the spirit of the Act;
- Investigate issues of custody, Domestic Violence Orders and so on to identify strategies to improve current system and provide greater protection to children at risk of being abducted (particularly, while at school); and
- Attention to claims of racism in schools, including review of the current system of investigation and evaluation of follow-up procedures.

Developing and distributing quality, culturally specific services and products to assist Aboriginal families and communities of missing persons

- Develop and distribute resources that specifically meet the needs of Aboriginal missing persons;
- Establish and maintain an Aboriginal Kids Help Line providing 24-hour strategic, culturally accessible and supportive advice and referral;
- Develop and distribute a range of information sheets and pamphlets with key missing person information;
- Design a media campaign to impact the organisational culture of schools;
- Design a media campaign (particularly using Aboriginal and free-to-air services) to provide accurate information of missing persons (that is, as a means of dispelling myths associated with missing persons reports, including the 24 hour 'danger period' and that being missing is not a crime);

- Look at potential for posting missing persons information on electronic billboards;
- Ensure ongoing, regular and timely updates to missing persons' websites; and
- Explore the possibilities of developing an electronic database for missing persons' cases across government and non-government agencies. Look at the possibility for developing an electronic alert system to draw attention of online users to missing cases.

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ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN MISSING PERSONS

Missing Persons' Service Provision in NSW

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) was established in September 2000, under an amendment to the Victims Rights Act 1996, to co-ordinate support services to the families and friends of missing persons. This role is a new and discrete function for the Victims of Crime Bureau. The FFMPU works closely with both Police and non-Police tracing services to provide a range of services relating to missing persons' cases.

Services provided by the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit include:
- Administering of funding to non-government organisations to provide support services to the families and friends of missing persons;
- Establishment and maintenance of Inter-agency Forum across government and non-government agencies;
- Development of relevant policies;
- Promotion of administrative, legislative and other reforms;
- Production of high quality products to assist families and friends of missing persons, including: a free and confidential counselling service; an e-newsletter and other publications; e-news, links to other agencies that may be able to assist in searching for a missing person; development of the Someone is Missing website; in partnership with the Mental Health Association NSW inc, that focuses on the mental health needs of families and friends of missing persons. The address for this website is www.missingpersons.org.au; and
- Liaison with the National Missing Persons Unit.

The National Missing Persons Unit (NMPU), at the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence in Canberra, represents the partnership with Police, non-government tracing organisations, community agencies, the business community and families and friends of missing people. Through this partnership the NMPU co-ordinates and promotes a national integrated approach to reduce the incidence and impact of missing persons in Australia, and brings together two national committees:
- The Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons involves Officers in Charge of the jurisdictional Police Missing Persons Units and works to improve Police response to reported missing persons; and

- The National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons includes representatives from Police, the Salvation Army, The Australian Red Cross, International Social Service, Kids Help Line, the Victorian and NSW Missing Persons Committees.
- The NMPU has three main objectives.
- To assist Police and non-government tracing organisations in locating missing persons.
- To facilitate a coordinated approach to addressing the social and economic impacts of missing persons.
- To develop effective preventative action.

The NSW Police Missing Persons Unit is highly respected and coordinates inquiries within Australia and overseas. They assist in the coordination of all missing persons inquiries. NSW Police successfully locates 99% of all persons reported missing. They investigate every reported case. MPUs undertake thorough and extensive investigations where there are serious concerns for a missing person. Searches are coordinated on a national basis as required.

Organisations Supporting Missing Persons

Internet Services

Australian Missing Children Website
http://au.missingkids.com

Australian Red Cross NSW Tracing And Refugee Services
http://www.redcross.org.au/default.asp

Commonwealth AG's - International Child Abduction
http://www.ag.gov.au

Family Court - Child Abduction
http://www.familycourt.gove.au./missing/

Kids Help Line
http://www.kidshelp.com.au/

NSW Dept of Community Services (DOCS)
http://www.community.nsw.gov.au

NSW Police
http://www.Police.nsw.gov.au/

NSW Police Missing Persons Unit
Telephone: (02) 9689 7388 or 1800 025 091 (toll free)

NSW Office of Drug Policy

http://www.druginfo.nsw.gov.au

Someone is Missing
http://ww.missingpersons.org.au

The National Missing Persons Unit
http://www.missingpersons.gov.au

Victims of Crime Bureau
http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/voc

Youth NSW
http://www.youth.nsw.gov.au

Telephone Services

Crimestoppers
1800 333 000 (National Toll Number)

Kids Help Line
1800 55 1800

Victims Support Line 24 hours a day 7days a week.
Phone Sydney metro area: (02) 9374 3000 or
Phone NSW: 1800 633 063 (toll free)
TTY: 9374 3175 (for people who use a TTY machine)

Youth Accommodation Association - provides a 24 hour phone listing of
accommodation services and assistance with placement into youth
accommodation. Office phone: (02) 9698 5833

Youth Emergency Accommodation Line
Phone: Sydney Metro: (02) 9318 1531, Rural areas: 1800 424 830