

Indigenous Australians with Mental Health Disorders and Cognitive Disabilities in the Criminal Justice System (IAMHDCD) Project

Newsletter no. 1, March 2011

Welcome to the first newsletter of the ARC Linkage Project *Indigenous Australians with Mental Health Disorders and Cognitive Disabilities in the Criminal Justice System* (IAMHDCD).

Aims and Research Questions

The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Indigenous Australians) with mental health disorders and cognitive disabilities (MHDCD) in Australian criminal justice systems (CJS) is a matter of utmost importance to Government, policy makers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This project brings an Indigenous informed mixed method research approach to the study of this issue. Qualitative interviews will afford new and in depth understandings from an Indigenous perspective and new school education and welfare data will be merged with our existing rich dataset (MHDCD Project Dataset). The MHDCD dataset comprises data on 2,731 persons who have been in prison from Police, Corrections, Justice Health and other health areas, Courts (BOSCAR), Juvenile Justice, Legal Aid, Disability, Housing and Community Services (being finalized) to allow a whole of life picture of institutional involvement. The dataset will be used to investigate the pathways Indigenous Australians with MHDCD take into, around and through the Human Service (HS) and CJS and their experiences of the systems and system interactions.

The aims of the IAMHDCD Project:

1. To answer new questions raised about Indigenous persons with MHDCD in the CJS using a new dataset created by adding data to the current MHDCD dataset and then mining it with a focus on Indigenous members of the cohort;
2. To use an Indigenous methodology framed by emancipatory and decolonising analyses in order to:

- develop a new understanding of how Indigenous persons with MHDCD who are or have been in the criminal justice system, experience and interpret the conglomeration of events and interventions in their lives through a qualitative investigation of the experiences of Indigenous men and women who have been in these circumstances;
 - gain a community and service perspective on this problem by interviewing those who hold senior positions in Indigenous communities and who work in relevant services; and
 - identify appropriate conceptualisations of disability and complex needs for this group, and effective interventions through linking this qualitative information with the pathway analyses;
3. To investigate the ways location in an urban, regional or remote area affect contact with and pathways into, around and through HS and CJ agencies;
 4. To map legislation, policy and service provision relevant to Indigenous persons with MHDCD in the CJS in NSW over the last 30 years; and
 5. To provide research training for Indigenous persons.

Research Team

Chief Investigators:

The Project's Chief Investigators are based at the University of New South Wales: Professor Eileen Baldry and Dr Leanne Dowse (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences), Associate Professor Julian Trollor (Faculty of Medicine, School of Psychiatry), Professor Patrick Dodson (Director, Indigenous Policy and Dialogue Research Unit).

Partner Investigator:

The Project's Partner Investigator, Dr Devon Indig, is the Head of Research at the Centre for Health Research in Criminal Justice (Justice Health NSW) and Conjoint Lecturer at UNSW.

Project Staff:

Melissa Clarence (UNSW) is the data manager for the IAMHDCD Project.

Peta MacGillivray (UNSW) has started as the part-time Research Assistant on the Project, and will be working with Ruth McCausland (UNSW, Phd candidate) to manage the Project.

We are delighted to confirm recent appointments to the project.

- Elizabeth McEntyre, Aboriginal Social Worker and Accredited Mental Health Social Worker is taking up the PhD scholarship for the project supported by the local Aboriginal community.

The Project will also benefit greatly from the extensive experience of two secondees:

- Debra Cole is the Assistant Regional Director (Metro Region) of the NSW Department of Human Services – Juvenile Justice and Adjunct Associate Lecturer at UNSW. Debra's work on the IAMHDCD Project will focus on Indigenous young people; and
- Jane Lloyd is an NHMRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Primary Health Care and Equity. As part of the IAMHDCD Project Jane will be investigating the primary health care needs of Aboriginal Australians transitioning from the criminal justice system back to the community.

Partner Organisations

Partner Organisations in a Linkage project contribute both cash and in-kind resources and participate directly in the research process. The IAMHDCD Project partner organizations are: Justice Health; Housing NSW; Ageing, Disability and Home Care; and Legal Aid. The Department of Human Services – Juvenile Justice joined the project at the beginning of 2011 as a contributing research partner.

Ethics

The Project has successfully secured ethics approval for phase 1 of the Project, which involves identifying, negotiating and overseeing the extraction of additional data such as NSW Public Guardian and Financial Management data. Ethics approval for the qualitative phase of the Project (phase 2) will be completed in 2011 to allow interviews to begin in 2012.

Cohort and Dataset

The cohort is not representative but purposive, drawn to investigate the pathways people with MHDCD in the CJS take in, out, through and returning to the system. It contains 676 Indigenous Australians. 86% of the Indigenous cohort is male, with the remaining 14% female. All but 9% of this Indigenous cohort has been identified as having MHDCD. A very large proportion of this group has complex needs (multiple diagnoses/disability); for example of those with mental health disorder 77% also have a history of substance abuse, with 36% of this group also having a cognitive disability.

NSW focus:

The data is drawn only from NSW because the two data collections, the 2001 NSW Inmate Health Survey and the NSW State-wide Disability Services of Corrective Services client database, are the richest sources of a suitable cohort in Australia that can be linked to and merged with data from other HS and CJ agencies; and because NSW imprisons well over one-third of Australian prisoners and over one-quarter of Indigenous prisoners. The project will though, in the qualitative phase, work with Indigenous communities in NSW, Alice Springs (NT) and the Kimberley (WA) adding an understanding of MHDCD in the CJS from Indigenous communities in these 2 other jurisdictions. Conversations with some leaders of these communities, facilitated by Indigenous members of the research team and advisory

group, are already underway and meetings with community members to discuss their interest in, ownership of knowledge generated and benefit from participating in the project will be held over the coming year.

Additional data:

Data from the NSW Public Guardian and Financial Management services will be merged with the existing criminal justice and human service agencies dataset. Discussions are underway with Centrelink and SAAP agencies regarding some form of data addition.

Meeting with Advisory Group

The IAMHDCCD Advisory Group will provide high level advice on the conduct and outcomes of the project to ensure its relevance and wide applicability to Indigenous communities and service agencies. The Advisory Group to date includes: Associate Professor Sue Green School of Social Sciences and International Relations, UNSW; Dr Juanita Sherwood Academic Director, Nura Gili, UNSW; Jim Simpson CID NSW; Corinne Henderson MH Coordinating Council; Glen Williams AHMRC; Damian Griffiths Aboriginal Disability Network; Patrick McGee, Office of the Public Advocate Victoria; Luke Grant NSW DCS; Scott Hawkins, Director, Aboriginal Services Legal Aid NSW.

The IAMHDCCD Advisory Group will meet with the Project Research Team in April/May.

Applications to access the Mental Health Disorders and Cognitive Disabilities dataset

A number of graduate students are interested in accessing information from the MHDCCD dataset to inform their research into a particular sub-set or issue relating to the cohort. In response, we have developed guidelines and an application form regarding future uses of the data set to assist the research team in assessing such applications.

Connecting to the IAMHDCCD Project

We are presently developing a Project website that will be used as a research and teaching tool. It will contain project publications, research documents and links to nested studies and partner organisation studies relevant to the IAMHDCCD Project.

If you would like to be added to the IAMHDCCD Project mailing list please email your details to mhdcd@unsw.edu.au