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## Which Way From Here? An Exploration of Local Perspectives on Strengths, Needs and Goals in the Aurukun Community

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## Which Way From Here? An Exploration of Local Perspectives on Strengths, Needs and Goals in the Aurukun Community

### Abstract

Aurukun is a small Aboriginal community located in remote Cape York, Far North Queensland. This study explores local perspectives on the goals, strengths and areas of need in the community, and perceptions of the role of a man in Aurukun. Seventeen individuals from the Aurukun community were informally interviewed. The sample comprised eight community elders (four female, four male) and nine community members (six male, three female). A reference group comprising local community members and elders guided the research project. Results indicated that the communities' main strength was their connection to culture, the areas most needing improvement were violence, alcohol use, over incarceration, poor support for mental health and a lack of employment opportunities. Participants saw the best way forward as being through more employment and better communication. The interconnectedness of these themes as well as their implications for successful program development and evaluation are discussed.

### Acknowledgements

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### Keywords

Wellbeing, Indigenous, Aboriginal, Australian, Men, Male, remote

## Introduction

It is well known that there has been a history of poor practice in respect to how research has been conducted with Indigenous people (Smith, 2005). Over time, Australian research has made significant changes in developing and implementing Indigenous Research Methodologies that promote equity, ethical behaviour and the promoting and privileging of Indigenous voices and knowledge (Gilroy et al., 2018). There is a need for local Indigenous people to take the lead in decision making when it comes to research regarding their community (Biles et al., 2022). Empowerment is seen as a key factor in improving the wellbeing of Australian Indigenous people (Dudgeon et al., 2014), and empowerment through research is one way in which this can be achieved.

Aurukun is a remote Indigenous community located on Cape York's west coast about 800km Northwest of Cairns with a population of approximately 1200 (Aurukun Shire Council [ASC], 2019). The Aurukun community was originally established by the Presbyterian church as the Archer River Mission Settlement in 1904 (ASC, 2019). Multiple cultural groups were forcibly relocated to the mission from the surrounding lands of Western Cape York, including the Wik, Wik Way and Kugu peoples. These groups comprised five spiritual clan groups, Apalech, Winchanam, Wanam, Chara and Puutch (ASC, 2019). There are multiple dialects used in Aurukun, and the main language spoken is Wik Muungkan.

Aurukun experiences significant social problems often drawing negative media attention (Kim, 2020; Skelton, 2007; van Tiggelen, 2008). Numerous interventions and programs have been funded in Aurukun, yet there has been limited improvement in the quality of life for local people (Koch & Evans, 2020). The purpose of this study is to amplify and privilege local voices in the community of Aurukun to better understand their perspectives relating to their community needs and goals. In seeking to understand the needs and goals of the community, a base criterion can then be established to allow for evaluations to be conducted of any program being run or developed for this community. This approach to an evaluation seeks to assess the successful development and implementation of a program by using the views of local people as the criteria by which success is

measured. The intention is to prioritise local voices to allow the community to determine their own direction and how they achieve their goals.

There is a significant need for holistic interventions to address the needs of Indigenous men (Hanley & Marchetti, 2020; Prehn & Ezzy, 2020). In the past there have been difficulties in designing and implementing appropriate, accessible, and inviting programs to support this population. Indigenous men have often been presented with poorly designed programs that do not create feelings of safety or acceptance; instead, they have led to feelings of negative judgement and criticism (Mitchell & Chapman, 2010). Community-driven assessments of programs aimed at supporting Indigenous men are critical to allow for effective programs to be developed, refined and made more broadly available (Langton et al., 2020).

## **Aim**

This study is the first part of a larger project to conduct such a community-driven assessment in the Aurukun community. The initial direction for the project given by the community, via a community reference group, was to gain a collective understanding of what the community wanted and what they saw as a priority. It was also determined by the reference group that seeking a collective definition of the role of a man in Aurukun would be beneficial for the community and would help guide later stages of the assessment. This study therefore aims to explore the self-determined goals, strengths and areas of need in the Aurukun community, and the perceptions of a man's role in Aurukun.

This idea of measuring a program's value by its ability to meet the needs of the local community, as nominated, and defined by that community, is a part of the process of decolonising methodologies. It is acknowledged that there has been a history of poor practice and unethical use of Indigenous people and their knowledge through Western empirical research (Battiste, 2008; Smith, 2005). Rather than measuring the success of a program against the goals of those external to the community, using the goals as defined by the community allows the community to use its own knowledge without external judgement or validation. This approach recognises that Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding

are unique and valid in their own right, whether or not they conform to the empirically based definition of knowledge in Western academia (Smith, 2005).

### **Method**

The methodology utilised in this study emulates previous Indigenous Research Methodology utilised in studies such as Gilroy et al. (2018) which were conducted in remote Indigenous communities in Central Australia. The focus is on conducting research in a manner that is community controlled to ensure that external or Western academic biases or values are not overshadowing or hampering Indigenous voices and knowledge. This approach recognises that Indigenous people are experts in their own lives, needs and challenges and as such are the best source for conceptualising methods of addressing those needs and challenges (Gilroy et al., 2018). To this end, significant decisions in the research design and conceptualisation process were made by a local reference group comprised of community members and elders. The reference group was provided with training in respect to qualitative data collection methods and the process of thematic analysis, so as to ensure there was a sound understanding of the process to be undertaken. The reference group oversaw the construction of the questions to be used for interview, the selection of interviewer, confirmation of themes emerging from the data, approval of any potential publications and any necessary translation of documents. The reference group was involved at all decision-making points throughout the project. The approach utilised draws from the Indigenist Research framework wherein the priority is to privilege the voices of Indigenous people and contribute towards Indigenous self-determination (Rigney, 1999).

### **Research Design**

Qualitative data was gathered via semi-structured interviews conducted in the Aurukun community. Interviews were audio recorded with the consent of participants and thematic analysis was performed on transcribed interviews using NVivo version 12 to identify common themes. Thematic analysis was inductive due to the exploratory nature of this research. Inductive analysis allows for the data to be analysed without being impacted by

pre-conceived ideas of what may be present and is recommended as the preferred method in this context (Terry et al., 2017).

### **Recruitment**

Participants for the study were recruited in Aurukun via word of mouth, direction and suggestions made by reference group members and suggestions made by other participants (i.e. snowball sampling). The purpose of the study was discussed with potential participants who were provided with an information sheet and consent form either in English or Wik Muungkan as requested. Participants were advised that all information provided would be confidential and that no identifiable information would be published.

### **Participants**

There were 17 participants in the study. Eight participants were Aurukun community elders (four male and four female), defined as those aged over 50. Nine participants were Aurukun community members aged between 18 and 50 (six male and three female).

### **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted in a quiet location chosen by each participant and took between 10 to 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English or Wik Muungkan as requested. Oral data collection incorporating narrative style interviews has been identified as a preferred methodology for promoting and amplifying Indigenous voices in the research process (Winch & Hayward, 1999). This type of investigation allows Indigenous knowledge to exist in its own right for the use of Indigenous people and communities without the risk of incorrect translation, deconstruction or judgement from a Western perspective (Atkinson, 2008). Interviews were conducted with the goal of the interviewer engaging in open and respectful listening, as has been successfully employed in previous research with Indigenous populations (Stronach & Adair, 2014). Following interviews, debriefing occurred with participants and they were provided with the contact details of local support services and the research team should they feel any form of distress as a result of participating in the study or have any follow-up questions they wished to ask. Debriefing was conducted by a Clinical Psychologist with extensive experience working in the Aurukun community.

## **Ethical Approval and Data Management**

This project was granted approval by the James Cook University (JCU) Human Research Ethics Committee (Application ID: H8284). This application included a data management plan in compliance with the universities' data management and security policy.

## **Indigeneity**

The authors of this study do not identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. This research project is undertaken with the understanding that the process of decolonising academia is something that non-Indigenous academics can also work towards (Krusz et al., 2020). Four key themes have been highlighted as being necessary for non-Indigenous researchers to engage effectively in this type of project (Kilian et al., 2019). First, there must be a strong existing relationship between the researcher and the community, second, there must be a consistent application of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge frameworks, third, the research must be guided by those with expert knowledge and institutional ethical guidelines, and fourth, the researcher must recognise that they are not experts in local ways of knowing and doing. In conforming to these themes, the research was able to be conducted from a decentred perspective (Olsen, 2018), wherein the community, not the researchers, were the ones who guided the process.

Between them, the authors have an approximate 41 years' professional experience researching, working and living in Cape York, including in Aurukun. One of the authors (T.W.) speaks Wik Muungkan with a high level of proficiency. The research plan was developed with the input of an Aboriginal academic from an external institution as an expert in the field. The research proposal was further subject to critique and subsequent approval by the JCU Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ethics Advisor, prior to being submitted to the JCU Human Research Ethics Committee.

## **Results**

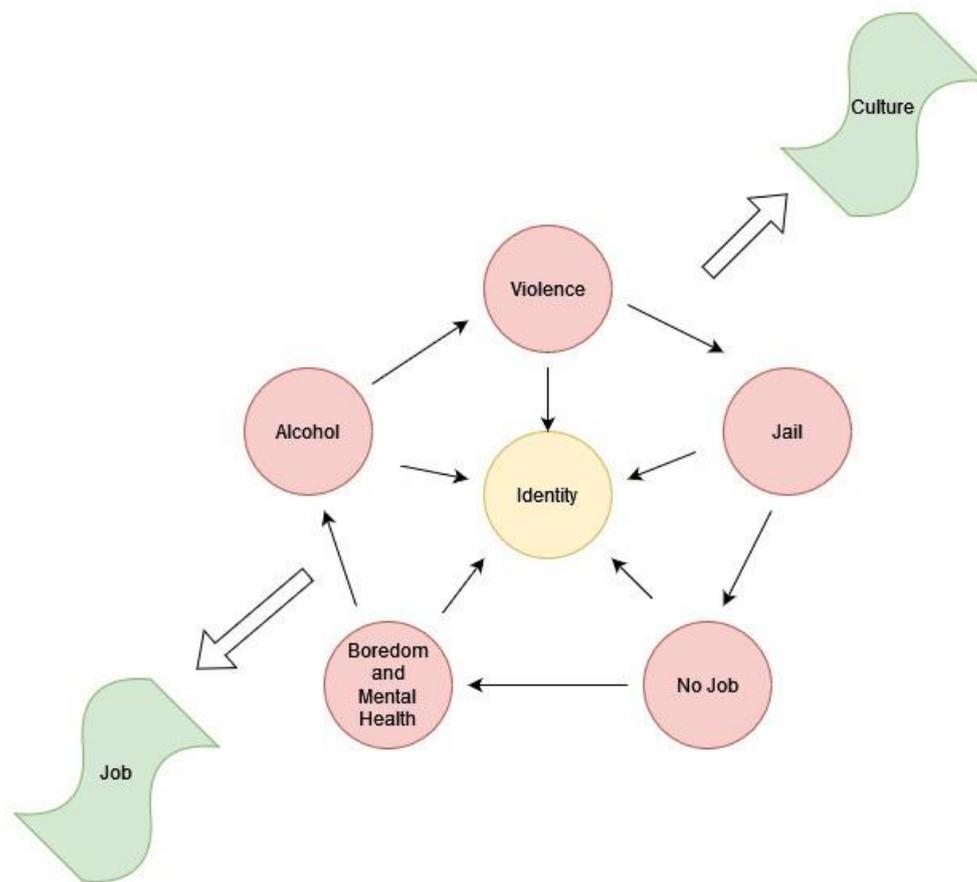
The goal of this study was to better understand how local people in Aurukun feel about their community in terms of what they see as strengths, what they feel could be improved and what their goals are. By being able to directly outline what local people want to

be improved and the mechanisms that they see to be contributing to these problems, a true community driven program evaluation can then be conducted.

Interviews revealed an interconnected pattern of themes that were seen by participants to both be caused by and then cause each other. The factors raised by the community which they see as contributing to violence include a lack of employment or any meaningful way to spend time and gain positive reinforcement, a lack of mentoring and connection to kinship and culture, and the use of alcohol; these are all also seen as consequences of violence. It was noted that a significant factor contributing to alcohol and drug use was lack of employment; additionally, employment was seen as a protective factor against violence. When violence occurs, perpetrators are frequently removed from their community and family to be incarcerated. This incarceration is seen as causing further damage to the community, and in particular to children, because of the loss of connection with the incarcerated person, often a father. The father also loses connection with the community by being taken away. This reinforces several of the contributing factors to violence; that is, a lack of connection with culture and kinship and a lack of mentoring for younger people. Additionally, it makes it difficult for the incarcerated person to then seek employment due to their criminal history. A lack of employment is seen to increase the likelihood that they will engage in alcohol use and violence as well as making them more susceptible to family obligations towards fighting. Participants saw that people who are incarcerated receive little support to change their patterns of behaviour or improve their mental health while in prison or in community. Thus, the factors raised by the community in relation to violence seem to form a cyclical relationship with meaningful employment and a strong connection to culture being seen as means of escaping the cycle. Each area of need raised by the community, including alcohol use, violence, incarceration, unemployment and boredom were seen to negatively impact the identity of the individual, thus increasing their vulnerability to remaining in the cycle (see Figure 1). The remainder of this section will discuss individual themes in more detail.

**Figure 1.**

*The relationships between themes raised by participants*



## **Strengths**

### ***Cultural Practices***

Participants believed that their connection to culture was their greatest strength. Younger generations were seen as having less exposure to culture and learning less about it, a loss which is fuelling violent behaviour. Part of this reduced exposure was seen to be because of people leaving community, including to attend high school (as there is no local high school). There was a strong desire to pass on cultural knowledge to younger people and a concern about how this will occur.

The good things living in Aurukun, the best part fishing and camping, we used to camp that side where the point, me and my elder sister, we were looking after juveniles, boys and girls. She was staying at the place called Whitel, we used to take them for fishing, a long walk

out there, we used to talk, we would take them, they enjoyed it the boys and girls. (Female Elder)

Aurukun I think, fishing, hunting, go out on ships with the old people, for festivals, dancing, corroboree, going out with relatives or families when they pass away, getting the boys to go out and go hunting for the food. For meat and whatever needs to be prepared for the family, kup murri, proper bush food. (Male Community Member)

My community is not a bad place, I love my hometown, there's a bit of things going on, and sometimes it's good, sometimes bad. But you can see that outside of the circle, it is a great place to live in. you can go out on Country, go fishing or camping. It is a great place; I love my hometown. (Female Community Member)

Because we shouldn't discuss the fighting, who started it, it needs to be about how do we want to live in community, how do we want the future to continue for the next generation. Because when we are all gone, who is going to continue to preserve that, we need that preservation and family connections, culture identity, tradition and knowledge from the Country, the bush, the resources that we have, to take care of Aurukun plus our homelands. (Female Elder)

The good thing about living in Aurukun is good fishing spot, we know where to get our bush foods, because we grew up here, we know, it's our Wik and Kugu land. (Female Elder)

I want to teach my own younger people, not only my family but the rest of the family too. With the paint of the culture, we want to learn, not to lose the culture, to stay in Aurukun for our new generations. (Female Elder)

Cultural practices included speaking local language, knowing how to care for the land, how to live off the land, what is gained from being on Country, knowing how to obtain and prepare traditional food, dancing, singing, and knowledge of kinship and familial connections. Participants described these practices as giving strength and identity to individuals and the community. They identified that the strength provided was at risk if culture was not passed down from older to younger generations and there was a strong desire for cultural practices to continue.

### **Areas to Improve**

Community members raised five distinct themes during interviews in respect to issues they thought could be improved in Aurukun. These were alcohol and drug use, violence, incarceration, mental health and lack of employment. While distinct, these themes were raised both individually and as a collective problem whereby each facet was fuelled by, and subsequently fuelled, each other facet. The overall message was that focusing on any one individual aspect of this collective problem would be ineffective without addressing each other facet concurrently. The overarching concern raised was for the impact of these issues on children and young people in the community and the threat to the community's future.

### ***Alcohol Use***

Alcohol use was raised as an area needing improvement by 9 of 17 participants. Participants stated that when community members consume alcohol, there is a significantly increased likelihood of domestic, family and community violence. Alcohol was seen to be a threat to the safety of individuals in community as well as a threat to overall community cohesion. Individuals are injured physically and emotionally because of alcohol fuelled violence and additionally community members are jailed. The loss of community members to

jail was seen as an additional alcohol related harm to the community and families. The effect on children was also raised; participants stated that children should not be witnessing adults consuming alcohol as this is negative role modelling for them and will influence them towards alcohol consumption and destructive behaviours when they are older. The financial impact of alcohol was seen to cause harm. Due to Aurukun being a dry community, the cost of alcohol is inflated, thus when a person purchases alcohol they may have no money left over to pay for basic necessities such as food, power cards (for their electricity) or clothing. This loss of financial security was seen to impact on children in the family more than adults.

The disturbance, the fighting, the alcohol gets around. Causes a lot of drama, that passes on to the younger ones. They see what the older people are doing, what they do, they see it with their own eyes, then from that they start grow up, they probably be doing the same thing, become like them, but that's not the way, young kids shouldn't be looking at violence, there shouldn't be no violence at all. (Male Community Member)

### ***Drug Use***

Although illicit drug use was raised by less participants than alcohol, 4 of 17, it was also viewed to be having a negative impact on the community. In particular, regular cannabis use was seen by participants to cause or promote lethargy in younger community members. That is, younger people would use cannabis as a result of feeling that they had nothing better to do (boredom) and as a result they would lose any existing motivation to pursue other activities or avenues such as employment.

What I think, you know, I see it, what is happening in Aurukun.

People, young people, they don't interest in work, some are interested. There is too many grog coming in, too much drugs, young people smoke. Sometimes it's good, but it's not good to me, it's bad.

(Male Elder)

## **Violence**

Violence was the most common community problem raised by participants (16 of 17) and was articulated as the most significant threat to community wellbeing. Violence encompassed a number of different facets; it included community violence between families or clan groups, family violence between family members, domestic violence as well as other forms of violence including damaging property and stealing vehicles.

Participants believed that a number of factors contributed to violence happening in their community, but also framed it as self-perpetuating. Violence was seen to create further violence through the reverberating impacts of incarceration and separated families. Alcohol consumption was seen to be one of the biggest contributing factors to violent events. Other significant factors raised by participants included loss of culture and kinship connection, lack of respect for elders, family obligation and a lack of positive outlets for youth. It was suggested that a lack of viable employment opportunities, a lack of strong male role-models, sources of positive self-esteem and not having the opportunity to provide for their family were all motivating factors contributing to excessive alcohol consumption and the resulting violence. One community elder offered the following observation:

To me I can say now, it is not livening up, people looking sick, helpless, they don't know what to do. That is why they, people haven't got the joy of going and doing these things, going on Country, staying on Country, working. (Male Elder)

Participants stated that many community members, particularly the younger generations, had lost their understanding of culture and kinship connections which they saw as contributing to fighting between family and clan groups. In the past there had been a greater acknowledgement of connections between family and clan groups whereas now there was more focus on division. It was suggested that in the past, younger people respected and listened to guidance from their elders, however this was no longer the case. Younger community members were seen as being more demanding and less respectful of their elders which contributed to their willingness to engage in violence. Elders who were

interviewed stated that they frequently tried to talk younger family members out of fighting but did not feel as if they were listened to.

There is a strong family obligation to engage in inter-family or inter-clan violence. Men feel as if they need to fight for their group or they will be seen as letting the family or clan down. One man described the pressure this placed on him and the difficulties this caused in other areas of his life:

Mostly it's the families, trying to work and your family fighting on the side, makes it hard when you're working. ... your family is fighting and you're working, those other people are going to turn back and push you. (Male Community Member)

Some participants stated that there were limited opportunities for young people in terms of recreation, employment and education in Aurukun. This was thought to contribute to violent behaviour among younger community members including teenagers.

The effect of violence was also discussed. Most notably the effect on the development of children in the community. There was significant concern about children witnessing violence and as a result becoming violent when they were older. Other concerns for children included being unable to sleep due to violence and associated noise, thus causing them to miss out on school and education, and children losing their fathers to incarceration, thus causing them to lose connection. Violence was seen to bring sadness to the community as a collective whole; it was seen to result in the separation of families due to the incarceration of the communities' men.

Because some of the boys and men go to prison through domestic violence see. ... if there is a problem at home with their partner or their missus, they need to go sit with a family members to calm down then return when everything is calm in the house, do good things, tell good stories, and to the little ones as well so they showing the young ones in that household that it's not being carried on and then there will be family breaking up, which is not right, we want them to be

together to grow up their young ones. Both parents is good, mother and father raising the little one. (Female Elder)

Three key themes were raised in respect to how community members believed violence could be reduced. The most notable of these was through meaningful employment opportunities. Participants believed that having meaningful employment would support community members, particularly younger men, to keep out of violence as they would have somewhere safe to go, something to do with their time and a source of positive self-esteem.

I haven't done what I've been doing here with [employer], going out doing the digging, I haven't jumped on a big machine before. But I think it's something different and I find it interesting, it makes me confident that this job is one hundred percent my responsibility. (Male Community Member)

In respect to employment, there was a strong suggestion during interviews that there was a lack of suitable employment opportunities for men in Aurukun. Community members believed that employers needed to make allowances for locally employed persons to have time off when required to deal with family problems, such as calming down fighting or anger. Being unable to attend employment due to family fighting was also raised as a barrier to employment. Employment was seen as a method to improve relationships and communication between different families and clans, to increase a sense of connection within the community. One elder articulated an ideal interaction between employee and employer:

If there's family fighting, family member there working, 'Hey go to the office there, hey there's blues going on with family member or tribe, you want a couple of days off?' 'Oh yeh I have to'. Then I have a reason to be able to come back, I have to say 'yes', because I have to go and take over, take control of my family, tell them to stop. It is my priority, my way of speaking up to my family, telling them the rules and regulations as well, I have to put a stop to that, the

fighting, we got a big thing coming here for our land. You can't fight with another traditional tribal clan, that same clan, he's gotta know, stop fighting with them, he has to come here, he is part of us too. I have to give him a job, he has his own family, although he is from a different clan, but he is still an Aurukun person. I have to share this place, the work especially. (Male Elder)

The second theme raised was the need for more communication within Aurukun and the belief that this would reduce violence. Community members stated that there needed to be more discourse between clan groups, families and elders, and that there needed to be safe space for this to occur. The third theme was of a need for leadership and desire for strong people in the community to be positive role models and provide direction for others in community. The themes of leadership and communication were interconnected in that it was suggested that Aurukun needed leaders to bring people together to start communicating more.

Behaviour of community people, from the five clan groups, in the perspective of social issues in community, how we can try and better understand each other. That is what's lost after moving forward from past ancestors that did things together. So that has changed over the years, there's lost communication culture and tradition. With family groups and kinship relationship that's already passed because we have all these issues in community where things are dragged on from old, passed issues, that reignite. (Female Elder)

Further to the theme of communication, community members believed that closer kinship ties between families would lead to a more united Aurukun, which in turn would reduce violence and increase knowledge of culture. People across the different clan groups being employed together was seen to play a role in this.

### ***Incarceration***

There is a cycle of violence which results in men being incarcerated and re-incarcerated, causing children and families to miss out on building connection with them and vice versa. Employment in Aurukun (in this instance the Kapani, now operating as 'Reset', employment program) was seen as giving people returning from prison an opportunity to make changes in their lives and stop their cycle of violence.

Yeh, Kapani is good people..., we thank god that they here in Aurukun. There's heaps of them, one or two or three or four, then all of a sudden, we see big mob of them working. So they know that they are not going back to prison but they are doing good things in our own community, which is good. There is freedom out here, in the jail there is no freedom, after a day's work then locked up, but here they free. (Female Elder)

### ***Mental Health***

Boredom was seen as a major cause of poor mental health. People have nothing to do with their time, so they have no means to generate self-worth and self-esteem and are more likely to engage in alcohol and drug use. Alcohol and drug use further reduce motivation to pursue any type of employment, which is often already difficult to find. There are no effective services available to support mental health, particularly for men returning from prison to make meaningful changes in their lives, as they tend to repeat old dysfunctional patterns. Poor mental health is seen to be a significant contributing factor to alcohol use and violence in community.

But boredom is a big part, not providing support in mental health, have proper support in different areas. Yeh its big, not enough, there's only three female and maybe two in Apunipima maybe three with Queensland Health. But for men and woman that come out of incarceration, is the biggest problem. Because they fall back into the drinking then the fighting, because a father in his early 30's comes

out of prison and then because of boredom and drinking, he falls back into the cycle then he's back in prison and he's spent ten or twelve years in prison, then he's gone back, never see his son grow up, so he's lost all that. We need more mental health support (Female Elder)

### **Mechanisms for Improvement**

Community members raised three major themes in terms of how they believed the difficulties they perceived in Aurukun could be addressed. These were better communication between local families and clan groups, better leadership and more opportunities for employment in a suitable and appropriate workplace.

#### ***Talking to Community/Government***

Community members expressed that Aurukun needed leadership and strong people who could communicate effectively across familial and clan groups to bring people together. The goal being to increase connection and understanding between people so that the community can become more future focused.

Make sure you talk to other families around, young fellas doing silly things, not doing the right thing, following other people's opinion, but by making the wrong choice instead of the right choice. Getting opinion from older people like us. How they going to make their community develop in a good way, keep our community clean, away from grog and violence (Male Community Member)

Participants also raised that they felt support from government was lacking and that this had caused further obstacles for locals.

Block between white cards, blue cards, criminal history. Local people, what they have done in the past, because of our change in when government, took over and no support. (Male Community Member)

I can't say too much, but I think there needs to be more efficiency, to come and see what where and how to do things in Aurukun to help

better support all these problems, yes, we can fix it ourselves because we know our own people, but then how to help those services in the areas and then sit down talk about our issues, I think that is where the gap is. (Female Elder)

### **Employment**

Sources of meaningful and suitable employment for local people were seen overwhelmingly as a priority in addressing the needs of the community, with 13 of 17 participants raising it as a solution. There were multiple mechanisms identified as routes by which employment could improve circumstances in Aurukun.

Having regular employment was seen by participants as being integral to being able to fulfil the male role in Aurukun. It was noted that being able to provide for your family, to put food on the table, was very important for a man to be able to do and seemed to form a core component of male identity.

To be a good man, he has to work very hard for his families. Getting a good job like that see, he will understand and the kids they might understand (Male Elder)

A man to do good is to work, to put food on the table (Female Elder)

I think a man just needs to provide for their family. Man needs to provide and protect, that's about it (Male Community Member)

Employment was seen as a source of opportunities not just for the employed person but also for their children and future generations.

Community needs to change, the people out here they always starting violence, they need to step up and look forward. Look for job, to look after their kids and get pass on good knowledge for your kids so your kids can pass on to generation to generation. (Male Community Member)

Further themes raised relating to male role or identity included being a leader, helping the community, being a teacher, being a role-model or showing the way, being a support to other men, being a protector and a good father.

The role of a man, he can be a leader, to show others what they can do for the future, like a role-model. (Male Elder)

Teach, stand up, take pride in how you were raised, where you're from, about what you were taught, family, connection, the importance of it, and their grandparents in that generation way back, how he was taught. I think the men need to take more of a lead role in community. (Female Elder)

Well, my friend, the role is helping. Helping this place, this Aurukun. (Male Elder)

If your man and you got your own kids and family, and your other family. You have to work for your kids or, your married up, you have to work, supporting other people. (Male Community Member)

It was also suggested, in a similar vein to the themes relating to mental health and boredom, that employment would keep people busy and reduce stress, thus reducing the opportunity for violence to occur.

From the age of sixteen and up to even up to forty years old to join up, because we need them to be busy on work, that will slow down the violence in the community. A lot of hard work and a lot of jobs and we will be ok. ... sometimes they are a bit worried because there's no jobs, no employers that they could get money wise, planning to get a job like Kapani [employer] is helping them step by step. The boys I see coming back from prison joining up with Kapani, which is good

that's a good step, Kapani is doing good right now. To make it happen more we need our ones, the local people from this community to pass on, tell them the good news. What Kapani is doing to them, they change their lives, that's how I see it. (Female Elder)

Participants also believed that more employment in Aurukun would result in individuals from various clan groups working together which would serve to increase a sense of community and teamwork. While actively improving the local area would serve to improve the connection between individuals and their Country. It was believed that both changes would reduce levels of violence in community, particularly fighting between different clans.

I want to see more locals from that clan or that clan, and even the long-time residential persons for so many years, I want to see them as well, ... work together as a team. For the rest of our lives. Aurukun is our place; we need more locals from different clans. This is our home, we belong here, born and raised (Male Elder)

Participants also raised barriers to finding employment including criminal history checks and Blue Card (Working with Children) checks. Additionally, it was suggested that for employment to be realistic in the longer term, there needed to be an environment that allowed local people, both male and female, to feel safe and supported. This meant that supervisors or employers needed to be able to establish good supportive relationships with employees and the community, be able to motivate individuals and navigate the dynamic relationships between family and clan groups. It also meant that employers needed to be understanding and flexible in meeting employees' needs in respect to cultural matters and interpersonal or familial difficulties. Employers needed to recognise that at times family had to take priority over work and employees should not be punished for this.

## **Goals**

Participants raised a number of goals that they had for their community that they felt Aurukun should work towards. These goals were more employment opportunities for local people, more housing availability, keeping cultural knowledge and language strong, reducing

the number of people being taken away from community, improving relationships between family and clan groups and cleaning up Aurukun.

We want to see the place got to be more bigger, more houses, dongas, for married, single, who wants to work really strong, strong hearted person, whether she or he, jobs there, opened up for every people from Aurukun, everyone. (Male Elder)

I would like the community to be in the future, still speaking our language, still going to festivals far and wide, but they need to come and to see, our elders, sit together and yarn, do cultural songs together, that I want that to be passed on way there from the beginning to the top, so they can move in both worlds. (Female Elder)

Participants also raised personal goals, the main themes raised were wanting to gain or maintain employment, having a strong support network and being able to do cultural activities or art.

This place have to be nice, and clean, but its not happening. ...

There's no goal I think. Some people got goal, I got goal, I am doing my art, that's my goal. Going to exhibition and stuff, that's my goal, learning something new that's my goal, here with this art, that's what I'm doing. We need kids to come here, We need to learn them our culture. After that they can go to school, they can talk English, when they come out they can talk Wik. (Male Elder)

My life I'm just going to work, work till I retire ... Come back here and have a good feed, after then call it a day, just go home, next day put your PPE [personal protective equipment] on and start all over again, a fresh day. I want to just work and save up, I want to try and get married up, change my life, get a fresh life. Stay here, just working,

married get a good life, move along and just work, reach the goals.

(Male Community Member)

### **Discussion**

This study was exploratory in nature; it sought to understand the strengths and needs of the Aurukun community, the goals of the community and potential means by which those goals might be achieved. This information could then be used to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of programs being run in, or developed for, the community.

The most important strength for local people was their connection to culture and Country. This included knowing their cultural practices, speaking their language, knowing how to care for and live off the land, and being on Country. Areas for improvement in the community were violence, alcohol use, incarceration, and lack of mental health support. Methods for meeting these areas of need were to increase employment opportunities in Aurukun and to improve communication and leadership within the community. The goals raised for the community were to have more employment opportunities for local people, more housing availability, having stronger connection to culture, having less people removed from community, improving relationships between family and clan groups, and cleaning up the community.

Although these findings are unique, in that no previous information has been gathered from Aurukun, they do mirror findings from studies in other Australian Aboriginal communities. One previous study similarly found a strong link between employment opportunities, wellbeing, and identity in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia (Schultz et al., 2017). The conclusion drawn was that employment could provide meaningful activity to undertake, which positively reinforced personal identity and connection to culture. These outcomes led to personal empowerment, reduced levels of violence, reduced levels of reincarceration and reduced alcohol consumption. Another study found that Aboriginal men from remote communities reported a strong need to be able to provide for their family (Atkinson, 2008). When they were unemployed this negatively impacted their wellbeing and caused them to experience

boredom during the day due to having no routine; this boredom then led to alcohol use. The idea of boredom leading to alcohol use and violence is consistent with the present study. The importance of meaningful work in promoting mental health and a positive sense of identity has been widely discussed in the literature (Martela & Pessi, 2018) and seems to be relevant in remote Aboriginal communities.

The intersection of employment and male identity in disadvantaged communities has been discussed in both African (Silberschmidt, 2001) and African American (Panuccio, 2017) male populations. In both cases a lack of employment, particularly due to complications arising from incarceration, contributed to a loss of male identity, reduced social value, reduced self-esteem, frustration, and increased levels of violence. In Aurukun, a significant emphasis is placed on the capacity for a man to materially provide for his family; this is seen as his role, and thus the impact of being unemployed may be similar to those outlined in other communities. Aboriginal men in Aurukun have lost the role they used to fill in their society, and along with this their sense of identity has been weakened, which is directly linked to their wellbeing, self-esteem, and mental health (Durie et al., 2009; Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Salmon et al., 2019). These impacts can contribute to an individual becoming reliant on alcohol or other drugs (Trucco et al, 2007) or being aggressive (Burnette, 2015; Lawal et al., 2019; Otte et al., 2019). Another facet to the male role outlined by participants is being a father, as it was articulated that men should be providing for and raising or teaching their children. There is evidence to suggest that being able to confidently fill the father role strongly improves well-being and mental health among Aboriginal men (Reilly & Reese, 2018). This link seems to support the notion that paid employment can significantly contribute to improved mental health and well-being among Aboriginal men through consistent and meaningful work.

Participants in the present study highlighted the link between employment, good mental health, and cultural and kinship connection. By working on Country, a person was able to give back to, and improve, their community while simultaneously improving their relationships with other members of the community, particularly those from other familial or

clan groups with whom they may not normally socialise. Improved communication and cultural connection were seen to be a means to reduce violence and alcohol use in Aurukun. Likewise, Adams et al. (2017) and Shepherd (2019) have both illustrated links between cultural and kinship connection and improved mental health, reduced violence and reduced substance use in Aboriginal communities.

While the suggestion of work as a key factor in addressing the needs of the Aurukun community seems simple, there are significant complexities involved. As was raised during interviews, it is a requirement of any successful means of employment in a remote community that there be a reasonable degree of flexibility to allow employees the time and freedom to exercise their caring responsibilities and cultural obligations without the threat of losing employment (Jordan et al., 2016). Participants in Aurukun believed that the characteristics of individual facilitators or employers was critical for the success of any workplace or program. Individuals in these roles needed to be able to establish rapport with local people and with the community. Further, they needed to be able to navigate the complex interconnections between the distinct clan groups in Aurukun. While the Western assumption in such a scenario is that the organisational or therapeutic model is of paramount importance, in remote Aboriginal communities, it is the relationships and trust built with individuals that more so dictates the success or failure of a venture (Moss & Lee, 2017).

Another complexity is the trauma experienced by community members. It has been argued that issues in Aboriginal communities, such as high rates of violence and suicide, are linked to compounded trauma, including historical trauma (or intergenerational trauma) and individual traumatic experiences (Ralph et al., 2006). Historical trauma is defined as 'the subjective experiencing and remembering of events in the mind of an individual or the life of a community, passed from adults to children in cyclic processes as collective emotional and psychological injury over the life span and across generations' (Muid, 2006, p. 36). Historical trauma can relate to the loss of land, loss of culture, loss of language, genocide, loss of children and family, racism, injustice or degradation experienced by Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander people as a result of colonisation. Individual trauma can often be caused by personal experiences of violence, whether as the victim or a witness. Both historical trauma and individual trauma contribute to an environment where violence is more prevalent, social and emotional wellbeing are reduced, and physical health behaviours and outcomes are negatively impacted (Burnette, 2015; Dudgeon et al., 2014; Hunter, 2007; Thurber et al., 2021). The presence of a trauma history potentially has a negative impact on an individual's employment functioning and success (Sansone et al., 2012; Zielinski, 2009). Given the prevalence of historical trauma, individual trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in remote Aboriginal communities (Atkinson, 2004), any potential employer in Aurukun must structure their organisation, workforce and model of operation in a trauma-informed way so as to provide a workspace that is safe and appropriate for their employees (Rittberger & Monczunski, 2020).

The idea of promoting sustainable, meaningful, and suitable employment for men in Aurukun as a means of addressing some of the identified issues in the community is a strengths-based approach. The goal being to empower men in the role of a provider, protector, role-model and teacher. These concepts align with those outlined by participants as constituting the male role in Aurukun. Strengths-based approaches have been suggested to be more beneficial in improving health and well-being in Aboriginal communities as compared with more traditional deficit focused approaches (Fogarty et al., 2018).

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study suggest several areas that people in Aurukun consider to be a priority for improvement; it also identifies their greatest strength as being their connection to culture, and their primary conception for how to address issues in their community being sustainable, meaningful, and locally available employment opportunities. Employment is seen as a means by which local men can fulfil the male role of protector, provider, and role-model, thus improving their own sense of wellbeing. Employment is seen to create routine, which will reduce boredom and therefore reduce alcohol consumption and violence.

Community based employment is also viewed as a safe space for members of different

family and clan groups to come together, as another means of reducing violence and building cultural and kinship connection. While employment opportunities may seem like an effective strengths-based solution to social issues in Aurukun, there are several complex factors involved which need to be considered and addressed. This understanding of what is important to the people of Aurukun, and what they see as a priority, can be used as a framework for evaluating the effectiveness and appropriateness of programs operating within the community. The knowledge gained through this study has been provided back to the Aurukun community for the community's use and benefit.

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