



## Impact of a Community-Controlled Adult Literacy Campaign on Crime and Justice Outcomes in Remote Australian Aboriginal Communities

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### **Abstract**

Using qualitative self-reported and observational evidence combined with a quantitative breakdown of linked administrative justice system data, this before-and-after study demonstrates the beneficial impacts of a First Nations community-controlled adult literacy campaign in six rural and remote communities in New South Wales, Australia. The most significant quantitative finding is a 50% reduction in reported serious offences in a sample of 162 campaign participants. Qualitative data from interviews found an increased use of legal assistance services following the campaign. These findings are contextualised through the lived experiences and perceptions of First Nations campaign staff and participants, community leaders and government and non-government agency personnel.

### **Keywords**

Adult literacy programs; Indigenous criminology; social determinants; community-controlled programs.

## Introduction

In 2009, a group of Australian First Nations leaders from the health and education sectors agreed on the need to mount a national First Nations community-controlled adult literacy campaign. Since then, the campaign, called *Yes, I Can!* (YIC), has run in 12 communities around the country. This study examines this campaign's contributions to reducing negative justice system outcomes in six of these communities in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW). Using qualitative and quantitative evidence gathered through a mixed-method longitudinal evaluation, we demonstrate that the campaign has reduced negative justice outcomes and improved individual and community relationships with the law and justice system.

The study was undertaken with two national First Nations organisations, the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF), which is the lead agency for the campaign, and the Lowitja Institute. The chairpersons of these organisations are co-authors of the study. The other authors are non-Indigenous university-based academics from The University of New England and the University of New South Wales (UNSW), which have partnered with these two First Nations organisations.

We begin with a summary of previous studies of First Nations justice system interactions and their relationship to low levels of education and, in particular, low adult literacy. In the next two sections, we describe the literacy campaign and summarise qualitative evidence from a longitudinal participatory action research evaluation of the campaign, which has been operating since 2012. We then present quantitative evidence derived from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) data on campaign participants from 2017 to 2019 who consented to their data being linked (96% of the participants). These data provide additional objective evidence for the efficacy of this intervention in reducing negative interactions between Indigenous people and the justice system. Finally, we discuss probable reasons for this intervention producing the observed effects and options for future policy and research.

## Previous Studies

A substantial body of research reports correlations between low levels of adult literacy and poorer health (OECD 2019) and social outcomes. These outcomes include employment, income, civic engagement (OECD 2019), post-secondary school training (Grotluschen et al. 2016) and crime (Parsons 2002). In Australia, the most recent estimates available (2011 to 2012) suggest that 44% of all adults aged 15 to 74 years have low or very low levels of English literacy, defined as literacy at Level 2 or below, according to the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (ABS 2013). Literacy levels by Indigeneity are not available from PIAAC. The last attempt to measure national Indigenous adult literacy levels in Australia was the 1996 Survey of Aspects of Literacy (SAL), which estimated that 41% to 47% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had low literacy (ABS 1997). However, the SAL purposefully excluded people living in remote areas, where other studies have found a much higher prevalence of low English literacy (Kral and Schwab 2003; Lin et al. 2020; Shalley and Stewart 2017).

Lower levels of English literacy are considered one of many factors contributing to continued inequalities in health and social outcomes for Indigenous peoples (Boughton 2009; NACCHO 2021). One major area of inequality is crime and justice. Systemic issues with racism and discriminatory policies have occurred at all government levels across multiple sectors and over generations. These systematic issues have contributed to significantly higher rates of negative interactions with police and courts and higher rates of incarceration for Indigenous Australians than non-Indigenous Australians (SCRGSP 2020). For many Indigenous people, entry into the judicial system is through minor, non-violent offences such as traffic infringements (McGaughey et al. 2018), due, in part, to Indigenous people lacking the sufficient literacy skills needed to pass the written licensing exam (Cullen et al. 2016). Low levels of English literacy also impact an individual's ability to understand their legal rights, seek legal counsel and read official legal documentation such as court appearance notifications (Pleasence et al. 2014). Non-appearance in court proceedings can result in additional charges being laid. Convictions for these minor offences mean the

individual has a criminal record, which can hinder employment prospects, exacerbating other factors that impact health and social wellbeing and perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Raising adult literacy levels in First Nations' communities can, therefore, reduce negative justice outcomes, including incarceration (Just Reinvest NSW 2021).

Studies and reports examining relationships between education, literacy and crime-related outcomes are plentiful (see, for example, AIHW 2013; CDJSC 2010; HRSCATSIA 2011; Putniņš 1999); however, few measure the impact of participation in adult literacy programs on crime and justice outcomes. For example, previous reviews and evaluations of Australian adult literacy programs have not measured crime and justice outcomes (ACIL Allen Consulting 2015; DEST 2005). Reviews of international adult literacy programs have tended to focus on benefits to health or outcomes relating to the labour market or self-confidence (Bingman 2011; Chadha and Wadha 2018; Maclachlan et al. 2011; McDonald and Scollay 2011; Trudell and Cheffy 2019). Further, many studies are cross-sectional in design and thus, can only provide correlational evidence, and some studies use levels of education or completed schooling as the variable of interest rather than literacy itself (Machin et al. 2011; Parsons 2002). We found that the association between completed schooling and literacy ability is weak in rural and remote Indigenous populations (Lin et al. 2020). Evidence regarding a linkage between education and crime and justice outcomes is mainly from studies that evaluate the impact of prison education programs on reducing recidivism (e.g., Callan and Gardner 2007; Giles 2016).

A notable exception is a study by Wise et al., which examined the effect participation in the YIC literacy campaign had on participants' encounters with the criminal justice system in two western NSW communities (Wise et al. 2018a, 2018b). Based on 22 interviews with key study participants, including campaign staff and criminal justice system employees, the study found the Indigenous participants benefitted from the campaign in several ways including reduced contact with the criminal justice system, enhanced relationships with criminal justice practitioners, particularly in reducing illegal driving practices, reduced non-compliance with official documentation and improved interactions with law enforcement officials. The study also used administrative court and police data, but these were obtained at a population level (local government area jurisdiction) for the whole community, including residents who did not participate in the campaign. The authors concluded that the relationship between adult literacy programs and interactions with the criminal justice system warranted further attention from policymakers and recommended that future studies use de-identified data linked to police and court records to measure the before-and-after effects of literacy campaign participation.

### **The Yes, I Can! Adult Literacy Campaign**

YIC is a version of a mass campaign model for raising adult literacy rates. This model, which takes a whole-of-community rather than individual approach, was originally established in developing countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa and Oceania, where significant proportions of the adult population have minimal literacy (Arnove and Graf 2008; Hanemann 2015). YIC is implemented in three interrelated phases: phase 1 involves up to six months of preparatory work, socialising and mobilising the community and its resources around the issue of low adult English literacy and its impacts; phase 2 consists of three months of basic literacy lessons, delivered by trained and supported local community members; and phase 3, or 'post literacy' provides a further three months of structured applied literacy activities. The YIC campaign was first delivered in a remote western NSW community in 2012 (Boughton et al. 2013). A distinguishing feature of the model, compared with previous attempts to raise First Nations adult literacy levels, is its high degree of community ownership and control. Community control includes management by a Campaign Working Group (CWG) of local First Nations leaders and employment of local First Nations staff in key campaign delivery roles. Since 2012, 13 communities have taken part in this campaign across NSW, Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Each campaign includes a participatory action research evaluation coordinated by evaluators from university partners, including six authors of the current study. Working with LFLF and its partner

organisations in the community, the evaluators collect information through observing participant lessons, staff training sessions, CWG meetings and other activities; examining of campaign documentation, including attendance and assessment records; interviews and talking with individual community leaders; and conducting focus groups and workshops with classroom participants, staff and community leaders. The role of the Aboriginal community-controlled organisation is instrumental in the delivery of the campaign and in enabling a robust evaluation. LFLF guides researchers and works in partnership with communities to build trust, allowing researchers to obtain informed consent for the collection of highly sensitive data, including justice and health outcomes. This partnership approach to conducting research activities with First Nation communities aligns with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN General Assembly 2007). Previous research has documented a range of benefits for Indigenous people, including measurable literacy improvements, improved self-confidence and self-control, reduction in alcohol and drug use, reduced aggression and an increased sense of community and community cohesion (Boughton et al. 2013; Boughton and Williamson 2019; Durnan and Boughton 2018; Lin et al. 2020; Ratcliffe and Boughton 2019; Williamson et al. 2020; Williamson and Boughton 2020).

## **Methodology**

In 2017, the Australian Research Council funded a three-year longitudinal study of the impact of the YIC campaign on the health and wellbeing of six participating communities in western NSW. The present study forms one part of that larger project, focusing on the impacts on justice-related outcomes, which are crucial to overall health and wellbeing (SCRGSP 2020). The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining findings from qualitative interviews, focus groups and participant observation with quantitative data from an administrative justice dataset.

The qualitative analysis draws on interview transcripts and observer's reports, and field notes from previous evaluation work. With approval from the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee, we re-analysed 30 individual and group interview transcripts from students, 30 transcripts from local or national staff and 40 transcripts from community leaders and other stakeholders, all obtained from these six communities. We also reviewed annual evaluation reports for each of the communities. The aim of this re-analysis was to extract self-reported and observer-reported data directly relevant to the issue of individual and community interactions with the law and justice system, including police, courts, probation and parole, and legal assistance services<sup>1</sup>.

The quantitative analysis uses administrative data from NSW BOCSAR, with linkage facilitated by the NSW Centre for Health Record Linkage, for individuals from six communities who had consented to take part. In total, 162 of 169 participants (96%) who completed the literacy campaign in the communities of interest gave consent for their de-identified BOCSAR data to be provided to the researchers, increasing confidence that the data reported in this study are representative of campaign graduates. Data for the 12 months before and after campaign participation were examined. As the campaign was sequentially delivered in most communities between 2012 and 2016, the data included in the study ranged from 2011 to 2017. The study purpose and consent process were explained in plain language by local community research assistants and the research team. Ethics approval for the data linkage was provided by the NSW Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council,<sup>2</sup> the NSW Population and Health Service Research Ethics Committee<sup>3</sup> and the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee.<sup>4</sup>

To our knowledge, this is the first study of its kind internationally that uses objective linked administrative data to corroborate self-reported and observer-reported outcomes to measure the impact of adult literacy programs on First Nations crime and justice-related outcomes.

## Findings

### *Qualitative Data*

In this section, we present a narrative of the communities and the participants based on the research team's observations, interviews and discussions from 2012 to 2019. This narrative provides a context for understanding the quantitative findings from the justice system administrative data that follows. Our focus is on the interactions that participants and their communities have with the justice system, as described by the participants themselves, the literacy campaign staff and other informants at different times over the period.

### *The Communities and the Campaign Participants*

Each of these six First Nations communities (Wilcannia, Enngonia, Bourke, Brewarrina, Boggabilla and Toomelah) are geographically located in very small towns and settlements in remote parts of the state, hundreds of kilometres from any city or major town. The total populations of these towns are less than 2,000 people, and the proportions of First Nations people range from 30% in the largest town to over 80% in the smallest. The combination of small size and distance from major centres means there is limited access to many of the services available in less remote and larger towns. In some locations, the only full-time government presence is a primary school and a police station. As a result of a decades-long rural recession, these communities experience very high rates of long-term unemployment and consequent heavy dependence on government income support (Vinson et al. 2015). Very few First Nations adults in these communities have completed secondary education, and while there are some households where this is not the case, the literacy campaign operates in parts of the community characterised by major overcrowding, very high unemployment, very low household and individual incomes and where most if not all adults have low to very low English literacy (Lin et al. 2020).

### *Drivers' Licences*

The most frequent example that people cite of how low literacy causes them problems with the justice system is that they have been unable to obtain a driver's licence. Despite not having licences, many people still drive as there are either no public or community transport services or transport services operate on an extremely limited basis. As one young man told us: 'I need to drive to do shopping in town (100 km away), take my son to the doctor, take him on holidays. In the past, I had to do that without a licence. The police got involved, I got charged and fined—it's not a good thing.'

Further, this driving is often in unregistered vehicles. While such drivers may not always be apprehended, because they use unpatrolled back roads, eventually many of them, especially young men, are pulled over, charged, convicted and fined. Since this does not alter their situation, it happens again, leading to larger fines and, in some cases, imprisonment. For example, by the time the young man quoted above joined the campaign, he had accumulated fines that he estimated would take a couple of years to pay. Moreover, once a certain level of fines has been accumulated, it is also not possible to obtain a licence. As a court official reported: 'A lot of young fellows drive while unlicensed and get big fines and then [end] up not being able to get their licence later on because they've got these massive fines.'

This situation compounds disadvantage. A driver's licence, or at least the capacity to obtain one, can often be a criterion for finding employment. One community member, interviewed in 2016, asked: 'How do you come back from that if you're driver disqualified until 2026 and you've got a young kid that needs to get to school every day? It's a predicament.'

This predicament is common in these six communities. Many participants came to the literacy campaign with no licence and accumulated unpaid fines, and a significant number were already on probation or parole as a result of this and other encounters with the justice system.



### *Substance Abuse and Violence*

Another example that participants and other informants raise is problems that people with low literacy have with drug and alcohol abuse, which bring them into conflict with the law. As one community leader stated: 'Sometimes, people that can't read and write—they're so disempowered by that [that] they get into drugs and alcohol.'

This dynamic is most often associated with arrests, charges and convictions for violence-related offences. People are also charged with drug offences. In the communities where the literacy campaign has been implemented, alcohol remains the most commonly abused drug; however, there have been several participants with a history of other drug abuse, including illicit drugs such as methamphetamine and marijuana and prescription drugs like oxycodone.

The pathways into drug and alcohol dependence can be complex. In one case, a female campaign participant who was dependent on prescription drugs had been prescribed Panadeine Forte (paracetamol and codeine) because she had serious dental problems, and there was a wait of several months for an appointment with the visiting dentist. Having become dependent on the drug, she then stole from others to pay for 'black-market' drugs, leading to her arrest. In literacy classes, participants often talk about drinking alcohol because they are bored and say that the class provides them with an alternative. At other times, people say their substance abuse is a response to grief and stress.

### *Debt and Homelessness*

Most people who join the literacy campaign are long-term unemployed and dependent on income support. This support has often been associated with a 'mutual-obligation' requirement, such as regular check-ins with a job agency or attendance at work-based welfare activities. Non-compliance with these requirements sees people regularly 'breached' and their income, already at or below the poverty line, reduced even further. Reductions can result in people being unable to meet their basic needs such as food, rent and utilities. A further consequence is that people turn to payday lenders and other sources of loan finance with very high interest rates, adding to the cycle of indebtedness and the associated distress. Consumer debt and concomitant legal issues stemming from poor financial literacy have been reported in Aboriginal communities elsewhere (Cunneen and Schwartz 2009).

Debt and income problems also lead to experiences of insecure housing, overcrowding and homelessness. Many participants spend much time on the streets, in parks and other public spaces, such as along the riverbanks, where they also regularly come to the attention of police for a range of reasons. Relationships with the police are often hostile on both sides, increasing the risk of participants being arrested and charged.

### *Court Appearances and Legal Assistance*

Analysis of non-attendance in literacy classes showed that court appearances, whether for the participant or a family member or friend, were a common occurrence in the six communities. Court appearances require prior consultations with legal practitioners. Literacy campaign staff reported frequent requests from participants for help obtaining legal assistance and for letters of support for when they appeared before a magistrate to be sentenced. In only one of the communities was there a permanently staffed Legal Aid Commission office, but even there, the campaign participants used this service only with the encouragement and support of a staff member. As one local leader explained, low literacy directly impacts people's ability to understand their rights:

Even around guys that are with fines, or a letter to appear at the court or whatever—they're getting the notices but not able to read [them], so then the continued overflow effect of 'he's not adhering to the court appearance'; an instant warrant is put out for his arrest, or her, and then they end up—what's the story? But not one would ever make an admission that he couldn't read the [notice]—even to the magistrate. Because there's a bit of a shame, that stigma,

so just nod your head, that's all. I've seen it—just nod your head—it's nodding to something that they shouldn't be nodding to.

### *Probation and Parole*

A corollary of the high proportion of literacy campaign participants having court appearances is the number of participants under probation and parole supervision orders. As with compliance in other areas of their lives, any failure to fulfil the conditions of these orders, including, for example, attending interviews, leads to additional problems. As with court appearances, non-compliance can be for a reason as simple as not having received a phone call or letter or not having understood a specific requirement.

In summary, the qualitative data illustrates the range of issues and problems experienced by many First Nations people with low English literacy, contributing directly and indirectly to negative justice system outcomes. These include unlicensed driving; housing insecurity and homelessness; job and income insecurity; drug and alcohol problems; community conflicts internally and with police; legal assistance access barriers; the challenges of court processes; unpaid fines and other debts; prison experiences; child and family welfare problems; and probation and parole supervision issues. There is no simple direct causal relationship between low literacy and any one of these problems. Rather, when people have low literacy, they are at increased risk of experiencing one or more of the other problems, and the more of these they have, the more likely they are to find that their low literacy exacerbates the situation, further increasing the risk of a negative outcome such as those described previously.

### *The Impact of the Literacy Campaign*

Evidence from qualitative data points to the role of the literacy campaign and improved literacy in reducing the frequency and nature of justice system interactions. This effect occurs by raising individual literacy levels and providing a sustained program of collective learning in which participants build networks of solidarity and support, leading to individual and group empowerment. As a community leader observed:

I've seen a change where the guys in particular that were part of the program [YIC]—I saw a difference in the change, the empowerment they received, being able to now read letters. So, if there's anything around that justice system, they're confident to read it, or confident enough to say, 'I can't understand this word, I'll go and get someone to help me understand this word'.

This leader went on to explain:

They're [YIC participants] actually talking more ... about going to ALS [Aboriginal Legal Service] and actually understanding what the ALS solicitor is saying, and they're actually grasping more of what's going on, especially within the court system and things like that, and, like I said, it all comes down to being able to read and write and understand words that normally they wouldn't understand.

These reported positive changes in literacy campaign participants have also been met with changes in the attitudes of local police and magistrates. A local police commander reported:

Many of those people in the program at least had a period of non-offending or a lack of interaction or fewer interactions, perhaps while they were involved in the programs there, 100 per cent. It goes further than that because, as I say, I would go down there and I'd talk to the people in their homes or whilst they were at the program, and you could see in their demeanour, walking tall, their shoulders are back, they're getting out of bed... The people that maybe we've had—traditionally—we've had very confrontational, adversarial relationships with, they get involved in this, and then they interact with the police at a different level. Then they're a lot easier to deal with and resolve conflicts with because they're more open-minded to other points of view, I suppose.

Literacy campaign participants and staff also reported the view that magistrates have looked more favourably on defendants who provided evidence that they were enrolled in the literacy campaign. For example, a 21-year-old male participant who left school after finishing Year 8 and did three years in juvenile detention before joining the campaign went before the court on several charges. Campaign staff organised legal assistance for him and wrote reference letters, and he was released on bail, provided he attended literacy classes. In an interview, he explained: ‘The magistrate gave me a chance. She could see I was trying. I would have gone straight to jail otherwise.’

In the next section of this study, we consider whether these perceptions of informants reported above are supported by any changes in quantitative justice system indicators.

### *Quantitative Data*

Of the 169 participants who completed the literacy campaign in the six study communities, 162 (96%) gave informed consent to access their justice system data. The frequency of legal representation and the frequency and type of offence in the 12 months before the campaign was completed were compared to the frequencies and types of offence in the 12 months after the campaign was completed. Serious offences were those with an Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification (ABS, 2011) 4-digit code ending in ‘11’. These included murder; serious assault causing injury; aggravated sexual assault; driving under the influence of alcohol or other substance; abduction and kidnapping; aggravated robbery; unlawful entry with intent/burglary, breaking and entering; theft of a motor vehicle; obtaining benefit by deception; importing illicit drugs; importing or exporting prohibited weapons/explosives; property damage by fire or explosion; trespassing; driving while license disqualified or suspended; escaping custody offences; defamation and libel.

At the time of data extraction, the BOCSAR dataset had complete records available until the end of December 2018. The majority (88%) of consenting participants had completed the YIC campaign before Dec 2017. Therefore, the pre- and post-exposure period was limited to 12 months to maximise the sample size. Of the 162 consenting participants, 92 (60 women and 32 men) had at least one record in the 12 months before or after campaign completion and formed the main study group. This proportion represented 57% of the sample recording an offence in 12 months. By comparison, 13,378 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders, or 7% of the general NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population aged 10 years and over, were proceeded against by police in 2019–2020 (ABS 2021). This comparison of 57% of the literacy campaign participants with 7% of the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population aged 10 and over in NSW further highlights the correlation between low adult literacy and contacts with the police.

The total number of offences and severe offences were lower in the 12 months after the completion of the literacy campaign. The total offences recorded declined from 71 to 48, with a halving in the number of offences recorded for women (see Table 1). The largest reductions in offences related to traffic (–50%, from 14 to 7), public order (–56%, from 9 to 4) and theft (from 5 to 0). The total number of assault offences reduced by more than half in women, from 12 to 5, but increased from 5 to 14 in men. Serious assault offences in men remained unchanged, and serious assault offences in women declined.



**Table 1. Number of total and serious offences by Indigenous adult literacy campaign participants one year before compared to one year after the campaign in selected NSW communities, 2011 to 2018**

Offence type	Male + Female (n = 92)		Male (n = 32)		Female (n = 60)	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
	n	n	n	n	n	n
<b>All offence types</b>						
Assault	17	19	5	14	12	5
Abduction, harassment, etc.	1	0	0	0	1	0
Burglary, break and enter	3	0	1	0	2	0
Theft	5	0	4	0	1	0
Fraud	1	0	0	0	1	0
Illicit drugs	1	3	0	1	1	2
Property damage	3	0	2	0	1	0
Public order	9	4	5	3	4	1
Traffic	14	7	7	2	7	5
Justice procedures	17	15	7	8	10	7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Serious offences only</b>						
Assault	8	5	4	4	4	1
Abduction, harassment, etc.	0	0	0	0	0	0
Burglary, break and enter	3	0	1	0	2	0
Theft	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fraud	0	0	0	0	0	0
Illicit drugs	0	0	0	0	0	0
Property damage	0	0	0	0	0	0
Public order	3	1	1	1	2	0
Traffic	2	0	2	0	0	0
Justice procedures	1	0	0	0	1	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>

## Discussion

The analyses above suggest that, in the short term, participation in an adult literacy campaign had some positive impacts on justice-related outcomes, as follows:

### *Total and Serious Offences*

Reductions in the average number of total reported offences, especially those related to traffic and justice procedures, were observed in the 12 months after the completion of the literacy campaign. Serious offences were halved in our study group, especially in women and in relation to assault. Previous research into the impacts of the literacy campaign pointed to improvements in self-control (Williamson and Boughton 2020). One female participant reported the change in herself, saying: 'Before the class, I woulda gone there and busted myself. At the class, I learned how to speak to people.'

The more substantial reduction in female than male offending may reflect a true decline in offending behaviour but may also reflect changes in policing practice—either due to improved relationships between police and community or for reasons internal to the Local Area Commands. Another relevant dynamic is

that the majority of the literacy campaign staff in the communities were women and were more able to support other women in the campaign in changing risky behaviours than men. Additionally, many of the community services that help support people in behaviour change (e.g., health and children's services) are more likely to be staffed by women than men.

### *Assault Offences*

Total assault-related offences in men increased from 5 to 14 in the 12 months after the literacy campaign was completed. It is worth noting that assaults cover a very wide range of touching *and* threats of imminent touching, including towards police. However, serious assault in men remained unchanged, which might indicate a movement from more serious assaults to less serious assaults—a reduction in the seriousness of the offence, if not the frequency of the offence. The latter outcome should still be considered a positive finding. Again, this may result from greater restraint, as reported in the qualitative evidence. For example, an older male told us: 'I can control myself now. Before, I never, you know? If people owe me money, I don't worry about goin' after them, smash em' up or anything. I can control that now.'

This change was observed in others but needs to be understood against a backdrop of ingrained patterns of reactive behaviours, as this reflection by a local campaign coordinator showed:

One of the students shared with me how she ignored and walked away from an argument with her family member, which was very unusual for her to do because this person was one that could never walk away; it was always about getting revenge and fighting and hitting back because that is how we always have done it.

These qualitative reflections are, in a sense, weightier than the quantitative findings. The small numbers in the cohort group mean that the shifts of numbers between assault to other categories, and small increases or decreases in offences may be explicable in several ways, all of which are necessarily speculative. However, the observations of students and campaign coordinators are telling. They indicate the positive impact of the program on participants' experiences of their own lives and their interpersonal relationships.

### *Study Strengths and Weaknesses*

The numerical evidence from the justice system data suggests that the benefits of the literacy campaign, as described by informants, flow through into improvements in outcomes. This study is one of the few to examine quantitative and qualitative outcomes of Indigenous literacy programs. However, there are some limitations. The small and highly selected sample, due to purposeful targeting of the most marginalised residents in the included communities, and the voluntary participation in the literacy program, indicate that findings should not be interpreted beyond this context. The short duration of comparison periods in the study (12 months pre- and post-campaign) limits the ability to observe longer-term changes in participants. Further, few participants consented to data linkage if they did not complete the campaign, perhaps because they were less engaged with the campaign and research staff. Thus, there was no control group, and it was not possible to compare those who did not participate or did not complete the adult literacy program with those who completed it. Evidence from local community leaders and participants strongly suggests that the literacy campaign contributes significantly to an observable and measurable reduction in negative justice system experiences and outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates the potential benefits of an adult literacy campaign in reducing the incidence of negative justice system outcomes in rural and remote NSW Indigenous communities with low levels of English literacy. By drawing on linked administrative data to corroborate self-reported and observer-reported data, this study has shown that participation in a community-controlled Aboriginal adult literacy campaign correlates with reductions in the average number of total offences, especially those related to traffic and justice procedures. Of particular note, serious offences were halved in our study group,

especially in women and in relation to assault. Our analysis of qualitative data indicates that improved literacy may lead to greater degrees of self-control, among other positive impacts. If efforts to reduce the overrepresentation of Indigenous adults in the criminal justice system are to be successful, further research into and resourcing of adult literacy interventions is urgently required. Such research can assist in moving beyond simplistic law-and-order agendas by acknowledging that ‘building of positive futures for communities relies on building a foundation of well addressed non-criminal needs’ (Schwartz and Cunneen 2009, p. 7).

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<sup>1</sup> On the advice of Just Reinvest NSW, we use the generic term ‘legal assistance’ to refer to legal support and advice services provided by either the Legal Aid Commission or Aboriginal Legal Services.

<sup>2</sup> Approval number 1360/18.

<sup>3</sup> Approval number 2019/ETH00376

<sup>4</sup> Approval number HE17-212

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