

Crime and criminal justice research at the University of Sydney

Research brief 4

At the University of Sydney we're conducting exciting research into diverse crime and criminal justice issues.

This is the fourth in a series of briefing papers showcasing some of our projects and introducing you to our research staff. It looks at the work we're doing in mental health and domestic violence, child sexual assault, and health and wellbeing for Indigenous Australians.

Enhancing collaboration between mental health and domestic violence service providers

How can we improve outcomes for people affected by domestic violence? What are the barriers to collaboration?

Healthcare providers tend to address undetected domestic violence issues by introducing training to help their staff better identify possible victims. However, to respond effectively to the victims, there also needs to be collaboration between health services and government, non-government, legal and housing services outside the health sector.

Given the links between mental illness and domestic violence, **Emeritus Professor Jude Irwin, Honorary Associate Professor Lesley Laing and Senior Researcher Cherie Toivonen** from the Sydney School of Education and Social Work conducted research to provide guidance on how to improve collaboration between sectors.

Using focus groups with domestic violence and mental health practitioners, they discovered that collaboration between the sectors is often hindered by their different histories, knowledge bases and organisational cultures. Despite this, they identified the following factors that improved collaboration:

a commitment to improve collaboration from both sectors, particularly at the management level; a shared sense of purpose; both sectors recognising each other's efforts to improve collaboration; fostering personal relationships between members of each sector; understanding the constraints each sector faces; taking ownership of the collaboration; and recognising that women dealing with domestic violence and mental health issues have benefitted from the collaboration. They also found that the action research process was an important way to create a structure for facilitating the collaboration.

Find out more about Emeritus Professor Irwin, Honorary Associate Professor Laing and Senior Researcher Toivonen and their work:

http://sydney.edu.au/education_social_work/about/staff/profiles/jude.irwin.php

<http://fdp.edsw.usyd.edu.au/users/llaing>

<http://fdp.edsw.usyd.edu.au/users/cherie>

Improving the experience of child sexual assault victims

How can we reduce attrition rates of child sexual offences in the courts? What can be done to support child victims of sexual abuse when they have contact with the criminal justice system?

Child victims of sexual abuse are extremely vulnerable, and there are high attrition rates of sexual assault matters in the criminal justice system particularly when the complainant witness is a child. The attrition rates have in part been attributed to the limited services available to children to access the support they need at each part of the process – from initially talking to police, through to giving evidence to the court. To address this problem, in March 2016 a pilot program was introduced in NSW to reduce the stress and duration of court proceedings for child witnesses, while also maintaining the defendant's rights to a fair trial. The main features of the pilot include the introduction of witness intermediaries during police investigatory interviews with the child

and also at trial, the appointment of specialist District Court judges with expertise in child sexual assault matters, and an expanded use of pre-recorded evidence to include cross-examination.

Professor Judith Cashmore and **Associate Professor Rita Shackel** from the University of Sydney Law School, in collaboration with the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, have been engaged to evaluate the success of these new initiatives in a two-stage process: an initial process evaluation, which they completed in July 2017, and a final outcome evaluation, which they will conduct in 2018. The process evaluation aimed to see if the pilot was on track to achieve its aims, and whether anything has hindered or supported successful implementation. The professionals involved who were consulted supported what the pilot is trying to achieve, and highlighted the value of witness intermediaries when children are questioned by the police and at court. While the design and implementation of all aspects of the pilot were perceived as effective, external resource constraints were considered a primary risk to its broader implementation. There were concerns about the use of recording technology – its image and clarity could vary depending on location, which can adversely affect the quality of the evidence. Furthermore, describing witness intermediaries as ‘Children’s Champions’ in the legislation was viewed warily, as it belies the neutral role these people hold in the court processes.

Find out more about Professor Cashmore and her work:

<http://sydney.edu.au/law/about/people/profiles/judith.cashmore.php>

Find out more about Associate Professor Shackel and her work:

<http://sydney.edu.au/law/about/people/profiles/rita.shackel.php>

Enhancing health and wellbeing outcomes for Indigenous Australians who have been incarcerated

Spotlight on Professor Juanita Sherwood

Professor Juanita Sherwood from the National Centre for Cultural Competence at Sydney University is a registered nurse, teacher, lecturer, researcher and manager with over 30 years of experience in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and education. Her research frequently explores social and criminal justice issues, with the capacity to approach the issues via an Indigenous health and wellbeing perspective.

Juanita has collaborated on numerous research projects that examined the experiences of Indigenous Australians who have been incarcerated by using collaborative, Indigenous-informed research methods. These projects included: investigating how to improve the health outcomes of incarcerated Aboriginal mothers and carers; identifying best practice in primary health care when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people leave prison; and determining whether being pregnant while imprisoned affects pregnancy and birth outcomes for mothers and babies from Indigenous Australian backgrounds.

Recently, Juanita partnered with researchers from across Australia and the United States to determine if Australian Indigenous cultural identity and engagement could be a protective factor against violent offending and recidivism. After interviewing 122 Indigenous prisoners in Victoria, they found that cultural engagement – but not cultural identity – had a significant association with delaying violent recidivism. However, cultural engagement was only significant if participants also reported a strong Indigenous cultural identity.

Find out more about Professor Sherwood and her work:

<http://sydney.edu.au/nccc/people/profiles/juanita.sherwood.php>

For more information on these or other crime and criminal justice work at the University of Sydney, contact Dr Garner Clancey: garner.clancey@sydney.edu.au