

The Guardian



Horror rates of sexual violence and abuse in West Cairns and Aurukun revealed

Report shows Aurukun's average annual rate of sexual offences 6.6 times higher than the rest of Queensland

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The lead author of a report into horrific rates of youth sexual violence and abuse in West Cairns and Aurukun, Prof Stephen Smallbone, has said he asked the Queensland government "to take great care in how and when it made those findings public".

The report, commissioned by the then premier, Anna Bligh, in 2011 and delivered to the former premier Campbell Newman in 2013, was only made public by the current Queensland premier, Anastacia Palaszczuk, on Saturday.

It details alarming levels abuse in the region, with Aurukun's average annual rate of sexual offences 6.6 times higher than the rest of Queensland, while the rate of reported sexual offences in West Cairns was 2.2 times higher than the Queensland average.

In Aurukan, 85% of victims were aged under 17, while 71% were female and 94% were Indigenous, the report found.

“Youth relationships in Aurukun are often based on sexual contact, rather than friendship or romantic attachments,” the report says. “Casual sex is very common and highly organised (e.g. often involving messages delivered by third parties), but dating behaviour is largely absent.

“Most children in the community appear to have become sexually involved, usually with peers and adolescents but also sometimes with adults, by age 10-12. Much of this involves varying degrees of peer pressure, coercion and sexual teasing. Some incidents involve serious violence, including with weapons and other objects.”

The comprehensive report also found it was not uncommon for children in the region to witness adults having sex, due to domestic overcrowding and a lack of private spaces.

Guardian Australia understands that the delay in releasing the report was to allow the communities involved a chance to respond to its findings and to work with the government and services to address the problems identified. It was also important to protect the victims of abuse from retaliatory attacks, Guardian Australia understands.

In an opinion piece published in the Courier Mail on Sunday, Smallbone said the report was an attempt to measure the scope, dimensions and dynamics of what was usually “a deeply hidden problem”.

“The two communities named in our report are not the only communities in which such problems exist,” Smallbone said.

“There are undoubtedly other places in Australia, and in many other parts of the world, where there are serious problems with sexual violence and abuse. The notable thing about the two north Queensland communities is that the people in these communities have shown the courage to allow us to look closely into the problems, and then to work with us to find effective local solutions.”

Though the report had only just been made public, Smallbone said Griffith University had been working closely with local community members, local service providers, local, state and federal government agencies, international prevention experts and other concerned groups since 2013 to address the problems.

“Because of the unusually sensitive nature of the problem and our specific findings, and because presenting the findings necessarily involved identifying the communities concerned, we asked the government of the time to take great care in how and when it made those findings public,” said Smallbone, one of Australia’s leading experts on child safety.

“These problems are complex and can seem overwhelming and impossible to solve. Frankly, they have confounded governments of all levels and of all political persuasions for decades, in Australia and around the world. In Australia, the difficulty has not been a lack of concern. Nor has it been a lack of resources or commitment. The biggest barrier has been not knowing quite what to do.”

However, researchers had been working with the communities affected to deliver a locally tailored, evidence-informed, properly targeted approach, he said.

The state’s minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partnerships, Curtis Pitt, said efforts to date hadn’t gone far enough.

“We may receive some criticism for releasing the report and I accept that, but I want to front foot this so Queenslanders know what’s occurring in our communities and understand that we

all have a role to play,” he said.

“We of course have got to be very aware that while this report deals with Aurukun and West Cairns, this issue is not isolated to those two communities. It is, of course, something we expect will go further afield than that. The discussion around whether some form of this report should be released publicly has been a very important topic of discussion. But the report itself, I think, demonstrates the seriousness of this issue.”

A steering committee headed by Stanley Jones QC and involving Indigenous service providers and local community members has been established to implement the report recommendations, he said.

Guardian Australia has contacted the office of the social justice commissioner, Mick Gooda, for comment on the report.

A spokesman for the Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, said Scullion was “highly concerned” by the report’s findings, which he said outlined “completely unacceptable levels of sexual abuse, particularly of young people”.

“The minister looks forward to receiving more detail on what the Queensland government will do to drive change on the ground,” the spokesman said.

Through the Indigenous advancement strategy, the Australian Government had provided funding for Griffith University to work with experts and community leaders in Aurukun and West Cairns to identify trouble spots, assist police, and work with children to lessen the likelihood of sexual abuse, he said. CCTV cameras were also being installed and community buildings, including the PCYC, refurbished, he said.

The shadow minister for Indigenous affairs, Shayne Neumann, told the ABC on Sunday that the report detailed “a tragic situation”.

“This report is very disturbing and the Queensland government and the federal government should be looking to act upon that report and see what we can do in terms of partnering with local Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander communities to address this issue,” he said.

“This is a tragedy for the individuals concerned and for local communities. We can’t find it in any way at all acceptable that young women and young boys and whole communities are at risk of sexual abuse and this is obviously endemic in some of these communities.

“We need to address the issues of overcrowding, inadequate housing, substance abuse and employment opportunities as well. Once we support families in these communities and individuals, that’s when we can really address this issue.”

. On 14 March 2016 the caption of this article was amended. A previous version wrongly placed Aurukun in the Northern Territory.

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