

## Pacific Youth Cultural Reconnection Project

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### Introduction:

The Pacific diaspora community is over-represented in the juvenile justice system in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. There is evidence of growing broader community concern about violent crime within this community, and growing recognition that cultural dislocation can be a major contributing factor. This talk is about a project at the Australian Museum to use its Pacific collections as part of a process to re-connect Pacific Islander men who have come to the attention of the juvenile justice system with their culture, and to help them to build a positive self-identity.

In 2009, the Australian Museum established a working partnership with the NSW Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), Fairfield Office, to enable “at risk” youth from Pacific communities to interact and reconnect with culturally significant artefacts.

As custodian of one of the world’s most significant Pacific cultural collections, our aim was to build cultural awareness among youth from Pacific communities in NSW and to challenge beliefs and perceptions that being a “warrior” is synonymous with being violent. The program uses creativity and imagination to build the self-esteem of the young men and motivate them to participate in programs to develop their social skills.

### The Australian Museum’s Program:

Collections Coordinator Dion Peita describes the characteristics of the Museum visits organised for juvenile offenders in conjunction with the Department of Juvenile Justice as follows:

- Dion ascertains the background and ethnicity of the juvenile offenders who will visit the Pacific collections at the Australian Museum, and prepares appropriate artefacts.
- Each group comprises 4–12 people (five preferred). They are accompanied by DJJ officers on their visit, which typically lasts one to two hours.
- Dion gives an introduction, explaining the depth and richness of the extensive Pacific collections, and then an explanation is given about the selected objects.
- Under close supervision and instruction, the young people are invited to handle objects that they have selected. **These close encounters have proven to be profound for participants, as it may be the first occasion they have had the opportunity to interact with their own historical material culture.**
- Dion then uses some trigger questions to elicit comment and reaction from the young people. Usually they are articulate and place their comments in a family context. It leads to a personal narrative, more general inquiry and dialogue.
- The group is returned to the DJJ officers for a debriefing session. Feedback is then supplied to Museum staff by DJJ officers, rather than the young participants.

Subsequent to the initiation of the program, the Museum contracted RMIT University to do a literature review on similar programs being done elsewhere, both here and overseas. Excerpts from that report are shown italicised. What they discovered was:

- *Literature is sparse on museums and justice interventions.*
- *Evaluation was not part of the design of programs.*
- *There has been only one documented example of young Pacific islanders in the juvenile justice system and their engagement with a museum. An important initiative with the Pacific islanders in NSW has been initiated by Mission Australia, a social justice organisation.*
- *A preliminary literature review across Australia, Canada, Fiji, UK and USA suggests that using collections to connect offenders with their culture is a promising approach for social and criminal justice intervention programs.*
- *Evaluating the program and providing rigorous ethnographic analysis of the effects on young offenders, their families and communities will add a new dimension to the field.*

*The literature covered Museums, Galleries and Social Justice Organisations working successfully with prisons/justice system and young people at risk, to create a deeper cultural engagement. The stories were of positive experiences from both offenders and institutions. There was an increase in self-esteem for young people at risk. Only two of the programs have been formally evaluated, finding a decrease in disciplinary actions and a lower recidivism rate. There are no case studies of cultural/museum programs with prisons/young offenders which have not worked.*

*Factors which strongly influenced the success of such programs were:*

- Programs where a joint initiative occurred arising from youth at risk, Museums/cultural organisations, and Juvenile Justice Agencies and their communities. The more successful programs were initiated by a number of the relevant parties (youth and/or cultural institutions and/or the justice system) rather than imposed by well-meaning institutions on reluctant clients.*
- The offenders chose to participate in the programs.*
- Museum officials worked with other professionals who have skills necessary to deal with difficult and troubled youths (e.g., youth and social workers, and juvenile justice officers).*
- An element of connecting with the environment was employed in some of the successful programs.*
- The youth were actively engaged in reshaping cultural and personal identity.*
- The programs accommodated low literacy levels.*
- Positive media coverage helped increase pride in cultural identity and achievements.*
- Official recognition of skills and knowledge gained were appreciated by offenders.*

*The outcomes were:*

- the empowerment of young people, their families, elders and their communities, through greater understanding of and pride in cultural identity*
- the Museum provided young people a new, safe and attractive public space*
- learning about cultural collections and how to care for them opens up the possibility of a future workplace or career option for the young people*
- greater cultural engagement could lead to decreased disciplinary actions, a lower recidivism rate and a greater involvement in formal education*

### **Pacific Youth in the NSW Juvenile Justice System:**

RMIT University also ascertained that:

*NSW is the state with the largest percentage of Pacific Islanders (over 80,000).<sup>1</sup> We know that Pacific Islanders in 2006 made up 1.1% of the New South Wales population but constituted 7% of juvenile offenders on community based orders (Department of Human Services (DHS), 2010). Those in custody or remand make up the highest level of violent offenders of any ethnic group in the juvenile justice system, are the third largest ethnic group in the system, and are predominantly male (DHS, 2010).*

*So they are not only comparatively over-represented in the system, they are more likely to be violent.*

*Pacific Islanders come to the attention of the juvenile justice system later than the rest of the population. Given their age and offending patterns they could be tried as adults (Mission Australia, 2009), which could lead to entrenchment in the criminal justice system and more severe sentencing.*

*Further, the offending motivation seems different as it relates to a “means to an end – usually to obtain money or material goods” (Mission Australia, 2009, p4), which is more consistent with adult rather than youth offending.*

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<sup>1</sup> ABS Census statistics from 2006

*Evidence on the Australian Indigenous population suggests that deeply rooted social disadvantage is a causative factor (Noetic Solutions, 2010) and it is reasonable to assume this could apply to Pacific Islanders. Social disadvantage in the Australian Indigenous population is also associated with loss of culture and associated matters such as loss of contact with traditional lands (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). While these speculations are reasonable as hypotheses, it is still far from clear how or why, if they are indeed factors, they translate into offending, especially given offending behaviour occurs at an older age and is sometimes violent.*

*Evidence about culture and family life in Pacific Islander populations suggests further possibilities.*

*Islander populations are typically collective in nature, with a strong emphasis on the roles of family, clan, religion, community and country (Mission Australia, 2009); and they have an emphasis on respect for others and identity which is embedded in the identity of broader groups.*

*There is, therefore, a strongly hierarchical aspect to these cultures. Family life reflects these elements:*

- *Child rearing is seen as a shared responsibility, and resources are pooled and shared not only within the family but outside.*
- *Family units are generally larger than the norm and households more crowded.*
- *There is a heavy emphasis on work and young people will frequently move into employment early in order to contribute to the family's finances.*
- *These, together with family obligations which may disrupt schooling, frequently result in less than ideal educational outcomes. Additionally high percentages of Pacific Islander children are suspended or expelled from school (Mission Australia, 2009). It is reasonable to assume that loss of culture, or cultural disintegration, is a factor in the over-representation of Pacific Islander young people in the juvenile justice system.*

*It is reasonable therefore to assume that a Museum-type strategy can make a contribution to reducing this over-representation. Given that over-representation is likely to be a multi-faceted phenomenon it would be unreasonable to place too-high expectations on a Museum strategy alone. One is also left with insufficient evidence about what the Museum should do. For example, should it target parents and arm them with the information they can share with their children? Should it target the young people? Should it target younger children before the ages at which they enter the juvenile system? Should it laud the warrior traditions of some of the Pacific Islander cultures? Or does the notion of 'warrior' need to be translated into terms which will be compatible with socially acceptable behaviour given the higher frequency with which Pacific Islander young people include violence in their crimes? And does the Museum need to explore the interface between collective cultures and more individualistic cultures? These are just a few of the questions for which, to date, we have limited evidence on which to base strategies.*

### **Design Attributes of the Australian Museum Program and Towards the Future:**

On the basis of much of this evidence, the Museum's program is now being re-designed. It will build on the strengths of our current program, while ensuring the integration of some of the success factors identified in the literature review. It will revolve around the needs of the juvenile offenders for cultural re-connection. It will also keep in mind the constraints and objectives of the Australian Museum and the DJJ, and allow them to answer government and media questions relating to the economic and social benefits of the program. Extended engagement with the cultural collections and Museum is clearly highly desirable. The program could be, for example:

- Within the resource constraints of the Australian Museum and the DJJ a program that includes three visits to the Museum:
  - The **first** will be similar to our current program, including young offenders, DJJ officers and a member of the Cultural Collections team.

- The **second** visit will be for associated family members and elders. This is essential, as young people had not responded as well if the family were present, but family and community connections are still critical to the program.
- The **third** visit involves connection with prominent Pacific leaders in NSW to talk about the collections and motivate the youthful participants.
- A curriculum framework will be developed, targeting cultural re-connection. Principles of a basic curriculum will be transferable to each cultural context.
- The number of participants in the plan will depend upon current community order requirements rather than ethnicity or other socio-economic factors. So we may include groups with mixed ethnicity.
- Timing of visits will need to be negotiated in relation to the beginning, middle or end of the young people's community orders.
- Young offenders assessed as a serious risk of committing violent acts will be excluded to protect the collections, DJJ staff and Museum staff.
- It is likely that participants will come from Fairfield and Petersham which has a large number of Pacific Islander people in the DJJ population. This will allow us to build on our existing relationships.
- Participants will be given material such as DVDs of part of the collections to extend their relationship with the Museum. Website access or video conferencing may also be used as outreach beyond the Museum visits.
- Participants will be given a certificate of recognition / participation.
- Links will be established with Pacific Islander community groups and relevant government programs/
- **An evolving and critical Community Reference Group will be established, comprising influential people in the PI community, representatives of the Museum and the DJJ. Terms of reference and composition of the group will be defined shortly.**
- The Program will also connect with high-level champions (e.g., in sports, the arts).
- Positive media coverage will be sought to build up self-esteem and inform as widely as possible about the program.
- The program will be designed to increase the possibility of transferability to other community groups.
- The Museum will also evaluate whether our hugely successful "Museum in a Box" (school program) can be adapted to engage youth in communities, and youth in detention centres.

A recent report referred to "protective factors [which] could be key in reducing or eliminating the onset of anti-social and offending behaviour if appropriately fostered. For example...a strong sense of attachment to their family and cultural community...team sports...spiritual activities" (Mission Australia, 2009 Report). Providing pathways for cultural connection can be a way to reduce anti-social behaviour and achieve greater safety for young people in this part of the population.

**Risks Associated with the Proposal:**

- Well-documented processes in place would mitigate the time and resource used in dealing with multiple stakeholders.
- Partnerships with appropriate government bodies and cultural groups who have the necessary expertise will mitigate the risk of dealing with those youth with anti-social behaviour.
- Duty of care for the collections, staff and clients must be integral.
- When funded, a full risk management assessment will be completed in consultation with our agency and community partners.
- Overall, this innovative and potentially cost-effective approach to dealing with criminal and anti-social behaviour in youth cannot be undertaken if the proposal is not adequately funded.

**Partnerships and Support:**

The key working partnership is between the Australian Museum and the Fairfield Office of DJJ, within the Department of Human Services NSW. We have collaborated to deliver six tours for the target group during the past 18 months.

The Museum's Strategic Plan for "Collection Management" not only identifies "community access" to collections as a key service, but also the objective of furthering the Museum's community connections through access to and use of our cultural and other collections for a variety of purposes. If we had greater resourcing we would:

- Provide youth with opportunities to access the Museum's Pacific collections, either physically or through our Virtual Museum of the Pacific (database), and not just "at-risk" individuals, but with school and other groups of Pacific Islander youth;
- Provide people who work with Pacific community juveniles with cultural awareness training;
- Create new avenues for artistic expression by Pacific Community members based around collection access, primarily through partnering with existing Pacific cultural festivals and events;
- Develop methodologies around the assessment of the impact of exposure to cultural activities organized through CRC Smart Services;
- Ensure programs include funding to explore the unique context and circumstances of their clients, and provide more and highly differentiated responses.
- Research could also be conducted into minority populations over-represented in the youth justice system to understand their unique situation and develop appropriate preventative and early intervention responses that can circumvent problem behaviour.

**The Australian Museum acknowledges the following sources:**

*Young people and the criminal justice system: New insights and promising responses* (Mission Australia: Snapshot, 2009).

*Juvenile Justice and Cultural Collections: Preliminary Report and Literature Review* (Smart Services CRC, RMIT University, 2010), commissioned by the Australian Museum.