

TANGENTYERE COUNCIL

2008

# INTERVENTION

*EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS  
OF  
ALICE SPRINGS TOWN CAMP RESIDENTS OF  
THE NORTHERN TERRITORY EMERGENCY  
RESPONSE*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Tangentyere Council wishes to acknowledge Oxfam Australia and Caritas Australia for providing funding to make this research possible. The research was undertaken by Tangentyere Council's Research Hub.

Tangentyere Council would like to thank the researchers who worked on this report:; Audrey McCormack, Vanessa Davis, Dianne Impu, Tiara Foster, Denise Foster and Gillian Shaw, and to thank Vincent Lamberti who produced a DVD of many of the interviews which inform the research.

Tangentyere Council also wishes to thank all the town camp residents who contributed their thoughts and experiences on which both this report and the accompanying DVD are based.

Particular thanks to:

Agnes Abbott  
Amunda Gorey  
Audrey Mc Cormack  
Daniel Forrester  
Daniel Raggett  
Dianne Impu  
Dick Brown  
Frank Curtis  
George Robertson  
Jackie Baxter  
Maureen Mc Cormack  
Mervyn Franey  
Pamela Lynch  
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## **1. Executive Summary**

This submission presents the results of a research project conducted by the Tangentyere Research Hub over the last five months – from March to July 2008. Thirty nine residents of the town camps of Alice Springs have been interviewed regarding their experiences and opinions of the changes introduced by the NTER. The changes have been broken down into five domains that have had the most impact in Alice Springs – income management; alcohol consumption; changes in the behaviour of the Police, health checks and the placement of signs banning alcohol consumption and pornography on town camps. Tangentyere Council hopes that the results of this project contribute towards positive changes in the implementation of the NTER.

### **1.1 Income management**

#### **1.1.1 What works:**

- Town camps are perceived as safer for women and children because people have less cash to spend on alcohol and there are therefore fewer alcohol related fights;
- People are spending more money on food and clothes, and having more food more often;

#### **1.1.2 What doesn't:**

- People find shopping with cards forced on them through no choice of their own humiliating;
- Very long wait times and rude staff make getting the cards time consuming and unpleasant;
- Having substantially less cash means that big bills such as car registration, fines, loan repayments and children's activities such as sport are very difficult to pay and people are swapping cards for cash;
- Power cards, which are substantial expense, cannot be purchased with the cards, and therefore come out of 'cash money' every week, leaving families with still less cash;
- People without cars find it difficult to pay for taxis home from the shops when the shopping is too heavy to carry, and income management makes it harder to pay the bills associated with having a car. The result of this is that some people find it hard to access the money on their cards;
- Children too find shopping with cards humiliating, and many are angry that there is much less cash available for them to make their own purchases in the way they have been used to do.

#### **1.1.3 Solutions**

- Make income management voluntary, or contingent upon proven neglect of children and return to the food voucher service offered by Tangentyere Council;
- Employ and train local Aboriginal staff to work at Centrelink in Alice Springs;
- Force the big retailers to employ Aboriginal staff in recognition that they are making substantial profit out of Aboriginal people being forced to spend a large part of their income in their shops;
- Have dedicated 'store card' check out lanes in Kmart and Woolies to minimize embarrassment resulting from inconvenience to other shoppers;
- Have a swipe card system so that people can check how much is on their card before they shop;
- Get power cards sold at outlets at which store cards can be used.

## 1.2 Impact on alcohol consumption

### 1.2.1 What works:

- Having no drinking on the town camps makes them safer for women and kids – there are fewer men bashing their women;

### 1.2.2 What doesn't:

- It has taken away the right to drink from people who did drink responsibly, and obliterated the work of people who had taken steps to control drinking in their houses and camps;
- Not being allowed to drink at home or around the town means that people are drinking at the pubs, which means that there are a lot of fights as different language groups clash;
- People are drinking away outside the town limits, and then driving home drunk;
- People are drinking stronger spirits, and sharing it with fewer people, which means that they are actually drinking more alcohol; and
- The same people who used to drink a lot are still drinking a lot – just in a different place.

### 1.2.3 Solutions

- Decrease the number of alcohol outlets in Alice Springs – particularly the small ones located at milk bars and service stations; and
- Provide more and improved treatment services for people who want to change their drinking habits.

## 1.3 Changes in the relationship with the Police

### 1.3.1 What works

- Some people felt that more frequent police visits to the camps, and police coming more promptly when they are called for help has helped make the camps safer (however others felt that safer camps was a direct result of less alcohol in the camps);

### 1.3.2 What doesn't

- Police driving too fast in the camps and looking at everyone 'like we are criminals'; and
- Police acting disrespectfully towards people's person, privacy and possessions;

### 1.3.2 Solutions

- Police need to treat people with respect and ask 'How are you going? Everything all right here?';
- Police need to knock on people's door and take two steps back – then ask to come in.

## **1.4 Health Checks**

There was widespread support for the health checks, once it was realised that they were not compulsory, and not solely focused on the detection of child sexual abuse.

## **1.5 Signs**

The signs that were put up at each town camp proclaiming that alcohol and pornography could not be used have now been changed as a result of negotiations between Tangentyere Council and the Department of Families, Communities, Housing and Indigenous Affairs. However the initial signs, which were very large and dominating, were an important ingredient in many town campers negative reaction to the NTER, and we have therefore chosen to include the feedback in this report.

Most people interviewed found the signs 'absolutely disgusting', and very shaming; and interpreted them as the government 'trying to grind us into the dirt'. Many commented that they were the first things that tourists see when they come to Alice Springs, and create a very negative image of all Aboriginal people in the town.

## **1.6 Prioritisation of impacts into those perceived as the most important**

After 18 interviews had been conducted the findings were summarised and presented to the Tangentyere Executive, which is made up of representatives from each town camp. Members of the Executive were given five votes each to nominate which of the impacts they felt to be the most important. The results were that those impacts associated with how people felt about the NTER – the lack of consultation, the loss of dignity and the loss of control over people's lives were perceived as the most important impacts of the NTER. None of the positive impacts, such as people being safer, and having more food in their fridges and cupboards received votes during the exercise.

## **1.7 Discussion**

The findings of the research present a challenge to those who are reviewing the NTER. We found many reports of positive impacts, but also widespread humiliation and anger at the daily loss of individual dignity and control. We also found many reports of unintended negative impacts that result from the individual measures implemented through the NTER.

We believe that the way forward is through consultation. Discussion with people on the best ways to solve problems of high levels of alcohol related violence, child neglect and unemployment; and sustainable funding for the solutions identified will have a better long term impact than enforced control of people's lives by the State.

## 2 Introduction

This report focuses on the impact of the NTER in the town camps of Alice Springs. The project, which also incorporates a film of the interviews, has been funded by the Oxfam and Caritas organisations. It presents the findings of 30 interviews with residents of town camps. In these interviews residents give their opinions and experiences of the NTER. The interviews were conducted by researchers from the Tangentyere Council Research Hub, all of whom are also residents of the Alice Springs town camps.

Much of the media reporting of the impact of the NTER has been based around the experiences of remote communities. In considering the impact on residents of Alice Springs it is important to realise that the experience of the NTER for the residents of town camps in Alice Springs is very different to that of residents of remote communities. In remote communities all Aboriginal residents are affected; in Alice Springs, only town camp residents are immediately affected. So for a child attending school some of the children in the class are living with the rules of the NTER, and some are not. Some people shopping at Coles and Woolies are doing so with store cards, and some are not – and so on. This has created a sharp awareness of difference among people immediately impacted by the NTER. This perception of difference colours many of the perceptions presented in this submission. A common response is “Why us?”, and “Why all of us?” This question, and related questions about the process through which the NTER was implemented, is considered by many interviewees, and suggestions are given about ways to improve the process of change for Alice Springs town camps residents.

The impact of the NTER on individuals in Alice Springs is being played out under the public eye. People present their store cards at the same shops that the whole town use (and the people behind them in the line get impatient at the time the whole procedure takes). They queue at Centrelink in public. Many people in these interviews record that when they walk down the streets of Alice Springs they are aware that a lot of people in the town presume that they are neglecting their children, and that their children may be subject to sexual abuse. This has created enormous unease, shame and impotent anger, and these themes too are returned to again and again throughout the interviews.

However the interviews also present some positive perspectives on the impact of the NTER. Many people have reported that they don't like the overall NTER, and they wish things could return to the way it was before – but that they can see benefits. There are descriptions of people having more food, fewer women getting beaten and children playing more safely on town camps.

This submission presents a unique perspective on the NTER. People interviewed have talked freely to their own people, who are also experiencing the NTER. They have spoken in their own language, and have put forward their experiences and opinions with gusto. The researchers have taken great care to ask their questions in a balanced way, and most people interviewed have expressed both positive and negative experiences and opinions. It is the hope of the Tangentyere Research Hub that the experiences and opinions presented here can contribute to an understanding of the personal impacts of the NTER, and contribute to positive changes for the future.

### 3. Methodology

Tangentyere Council wanted to conduct a qualitative study which was able to show what town campers thought and felt about the intervention. The primary research question is 'What impact is the Northern Territory Emergency Response having on individual Aboriginal people living in Alice Springs town camps?' In answering this question we have interviewed 38 residents from 11 of the 18 town camps, and one homeless person. We used the Most Significant Change technique (Dart 2003) which is a two-stage, story-based approach which collects stories of change from people affected by the intervention, and then selects the most significant of these to illustrate the changes that have occurred. Tangentyere researchers underwent a two-day training course which covered aspects of the intervention and research training by experienced researchers. This technique relies upon a conversational interview style which encourages people to tell short stories of the change they have encountered. This proved quite difficult for many reasons, so the technique was refined to include more specific questions to direct the interviews.

An interview guide to ensure consistency across the interviews was developed at the start of the project. The interview guide broke the impacts of the NTER down into the following domains:

- Income management
- CDEP
- Alcohol restrictions
- Police
- Health Checks
- Signs (alcohol and pornography signs at the entrance to Alice Springs, and all town camps)
- Process of implementation

In each area interviewees were asked to speak about the impacts of the intervention on their lives, and were prompted by the following questions:

- What effect has this [domain of the NTER] had on your family?
- What is a good effect, and what is not so good? Why?
- What do you think needs to be done to help the problem? (eg alcohol)

Each interview was conducted by the Tangentyere researchers, with one person asking questions from the interview guide, and another researcher taking notes. Twenty four of the interviews were also filmed. Notes that were taken at interviews that were filmed, were then checked for completeness and accuracy against the films. After each interview all researchers contributed to checking the notes for completeness and accuracy.

Areas of the NTER that do not impact the town campers of Alice Springs, such as changes to permit arrangements and the licensing of stores, were omitted from the Interview Guide. The Guide is included as Attachment 1.

### 3.1 Sample Description

During the training researchers selected a sample that is approximately representative of the wider population of the Alice Springs town camps. People were recruited to the sample to provide a balance across the following characteristics:

- town camp they live in;
- Age;
- Gender;
- Marital status;
- Language group; and
- Lifestyle habits (drinker/non drinker)

The sample that is represented in this interim report has the following characteristics:

Table 1: Description of the sample of participants, April 2008

Variable	Description	Total
Gender	Male - 16 Female - 23	39
Marital Status	Married - 15 Single - 19 Widow/ers/s - 5	39
Drinking status*	Drinkers – 7 Social drinkers – 26 Non drinkers - 6	39
Age status**	Old – 12 Middle aged – 18 Young - 9	39

\* Drinking Status

Drinkers = Someone who drinks every time they have money;

Social drinker = Someone who drinks at parties or other social events, but not every time they have money

Non drinker = doesn't drink any alcohol

\*\* Age Status

Old = 40 years and over

Middle aged = 25 - 39 years

Young = 24 years and under

### 3.2 Analysis and prioritisation of findings

Once the interviews were completed we summarised the findings of the interviews, and asked representatives of each camp to nominate which findings under each domain of change, and asked each camp to nominate findings that they believe were the most significant. This is an adaptation of the 'Most Significant Change' methodology, and is intended to reflect not only concrete impacts of the subject of study, but also participants' views on the importance of those impacts.

The first 18 interviews undertaken were summarised and a compilation of sixty issues raised by the interviewees was created. No issue or perspective was omitted from this list, which therefore included descriptions of various impacts of, and opinions about the NTER. This list was judged too long to be used as an effective tool from which stakeholders could prioritise which impacts constitute the most significant changes brought about by the NTER. The list was therefore reduced to twenty four issues, with at least two issues regarding each domain of the NTER that impacts the Alice Springs Town Camps. Having arrived at this reduced list, we then carried out the second phase of the Most Significant Change methodology – to draw together a panel of stakeholders to prioritise the most significant changes from that list. A full Executive meeting of the Tangentyere Council was called for May 22, 2008. The Tangentyere Council is comprised of one member from each of the 18 Housing Associations, which are the governing bodies of Alice Springs Town Camps. The 15 people attending this meeting were asked to vote on the five most important changes for them. Each issue was attached to a wall and each person had five stick-on dots which they could allocate any way they wished. Some put all their votes on a single issue while others voted on five separate issues. Ranking of issues was then conducted on the basis of the number of votes received by each issue.

## **4. Results**

We have organised the results of our interviews into each domain covered by the interviews. However for this report we have omitted feedback on CDEP because CDEP has been partially re-instated at Tangentyere since most of the interviews were conducted. Similarly, although the signs on town camps promulgate the bans on alcohol and pornography have been changed since the interviews, however we have presented interviewees comments on them because the signs were seen by many as the embodiment of the way in which the NTER was introduced into town camps.

A wide range of views were given by the people interviewed, and we have presented their experiences and opinions in three categories for each domain: 'what works', 'what doesn't' and 'solutions'.

### **4.1 Income management**

The Income management element of the NTER provides for half of welfare payments to be quarantined so that recipients can only spend that money at Coles, Woolworths or Kmart, and may not use the funds to purchase alcohol or tobacco. There are reports that the range of shops able to be accessed by the cards is to be expanded, however this has not yet occurred in Alice Springs. The remaining 50% of the payment is received as cash ('cash money'). Fuel can be brought from Coles with a card, but not from Woolworths or Kmart. Food, clothes and some white goods can be bought from store cards. Expenses such as car repairs, paying off loans and fines, holiday travel, entertainment and sports goods have to be brought with cash. A common amount of cash per fortnight among interviewees was around \$200 a fortnight.

#### 4.1.1 What works

Interviewees put forward a wide range of impacts of the income management. Several people said that they spend their money differently as a result of it. The most common positive impact that was reported was that people now have more food more often:

My fridge is full all the time – and cupboard. Its helping me to save – there is some money left on the card and I go back and spend it at the shop – but I used to spend my cash money too easily. (Woman, aged 25yrs)

and

I don't get Quarantine - I still get my full pay, but all of my families are Quarantined. Its working for some of my families who drinks a lot. I see some changes with some members of my families' lifestyle - clean clothes and more food for them. It's not affecting me but it's working for my other families. (Woman, aged over 40 yrs)

And a slightly different slant:

Its really working for me because I got clothes all the time. For tucker I get the store cards and give it to my mother, so when I go home from drinking there's always food back home. With the little bit of money I get cash, I drink with it - but I share my grog with all my friends and family. Before the NTER I never had a lot of clothes or tucker, now I have clothes and I give half of my money to my mum for food. (Woman, aged 25 years)

This person's experience was balanced by another comment – “It hasn't changed the way young people abuse their families – they still spend their money, then come home and expect the food to be on the table.” (Woman, aged over 40 yrs)

One person who lives an itinerant lifestyle around the fringes of Alice Springs and used to drink a lot commented:

Not drinking much now because I've only got a little bit of money. (Man, aged 25 years)

#### 4.1.2 What doesn't work

Negative impacts of the income management were more widely reported than positive impacts. Here again, shame and embarrassment were commonly reported. The following vignette was typical:

I remember going in to [one of the store card shops], we got food, but we also stocked up on shampoos etc ... at check out the lady said “That's not what the cards are for” ...embarrassing ...

The most commonly reported negative impact is the inconvenience of the cards, with the main inconveniences being the time spent queuing, and the difficulty that older and more traditionally oriented people have in dealing with Centrelink. These difficulties place younger members of families under a lot of pressure to help, and some report going to Centrelink every day.

It's a big humbug – we waste a lot of time standing in ration card queue. It limits where you can shop – not everyone likes to buy everything from 1 – 2 shops. It means you can't

buy things that you see on special – unless you want to go and stand in the Centrelink queue again to get your ration re-allocated. There is only one outlet at Centrelink – you sometimes have to line up twice to get what you want – there is an awful lot of waiting. I tried to pay car rego – had to go from place to place to try to get the money. No one knew what was going on – I had to go backwards and forwards. People at the rego place didn't know what was going on, people at Centrelink didn't know what was going on. I was getting wild and frustrated. It hasn't been done very well. (Man, aged over 40 years)

Another reported negative consequence of the income management is that people are finding it difficult to pay big bills, such as car repairs, loan re-payments and fines, because of the reduced level of cash they have available:

I wanted to get car fixed but all the money is on store cards, so I had \$500 for Kmart and would spend it on stuff I would never have bought...it makes you spend more - not more, but where you don't need to spend it...cash I would prioritise. (Woman, aged 25 years)

and

My dad, he worried coz his traffic fine was going up [because he hadn't paid it], and he wanted cash to pay it. So he swapped his cards for cash to pay his fine – but he didn't get enough for them. (Woman, aged 25 years)

Another impact of having less cash is that some necessities for children, such as school uniforms, are proving difficult to pay for:

It's hard in a lot of ways for my kids at school. Now in schooling it is compulsory to have a school uniform and I can't afford that now. I had my daughter play hockey for 2 yrs but [she's] not playing anymore, because I can't keep up with her fees, it's affecting her sporting career. (Woman, aged 25 years and under)

Another comment on the impact of the income management on children is as follows:

I don't think the intervention is helping children. I think it's causing children to be angrier because they feel they can't spend the cash on things like any other kids. Some kids even know how to budget because they will hold money for food and drink or even new shoes, clothes from the sports store - it may be a bit expensive but it's what the next generation are up to. Kids these days feel ashamed with that card, thinking that they don't know how to use or hold cash. So if kids steal and get in trouble with the Police, straight away the Government presumes that it is neglect. Maybe children steal because of the Intervention not giving them the freedom to spend the money how they want to and when they want to. (Woman aged 25 – 39 years)

This comment could be interpreted as contributing towards an explanation of a “spike” in house break ins in Alice Springs. “Territory crime statistics reveal that in December, Alice Springs had a ..... a 17% jump in house break-ins.” (The Age newspaper, April 25, 2008.)

Another commonly reported difficulty was in the purchase of power cards. These cards are used to pre-purchase the electrical power used by families living on town camps. One of the interviewees reported that she spent approximately \$60 a fortnight on power cards for a house with 12 occupants. However power cards cannot be purchased at Coles, Woolworths or Kmart, which means that they must be purchased from recipient's 'cash money'. This means that many families are spending around 25% of their 'cash money' on power cards, which explains why so many people report not having enough 'cash money' left for expenses such as chemist items, school expenses and recreation.

Another thing that people used to spend cash on was giving money to children and family members who asked for it. This is an important expression of the inter-relationships and obligations that go to make up a functional family. However many people mentioned that they simply don't have enough cash to give to anyone:

Can't look after grandchildren properly..... When the mobile shop goes around the camp kids run up ask for money for lollies and drink price, but nowadays can't give them money because of the intervention changes. (Man, aged over 40 years)

The final area that does not work with income management is another impact of having substantially less cash in hand every fortnight. Most town campers do not own cars, and there is no public transport of any kind to any of the town camps. Most of the camps are at least 20 minutes walk away from the town centre, and many are much more. Residents therefore used to hire taxis when they had bought too much shopping to carry – which happens at least once a week because most people don't own refrigerators, and therefore need to shop often. The taxi fares to travel to and from the Alice Springs town centre are expensive, and having to go to an additional location to purchase a power card exacerbates this:

It's hard for them because most of our people don't have a car to go from here to there. Taxi fares for Coles to Ivy's [where power cards are most often purchased] is \$25, and the waiting time is extra because the meter is still running when they get off to purchase the power cards from the shop. By the time you get to home the total comes up to \$50 to \$60. That means there's no cash left for the following fortnight. (Woman, aged over 40 years)

Most people now try to organise a lift to and from the town centre, or they get to the town centre, shop, and then wait to see someone they know drive past, and get a lift home. This can take hours, and is often done with small children in tow. This places a great deal of stress on those people who do have cars, and takes an inordinate amount of time to organise for those who don't:

There is the vehicle issue - out of respect you have to take them to Centrelink, shopping, appointments with job networks - it's in my nature to help them to get their own money rather than let them have no money or food at all. You know it's using up your time and your fuel to help them, but you can't say no to them because they looked after you and now it's your time to look after them. (Woman, aged 25 – 39 years)

Finally, a small impact, but one that affects people nonetheless, is encapsulated in the following comment:

You want to come to Alice Springs – you'll see everyone walking round like twins!  
(Woman, over 40 years)

Everyone now does most of their clothes shopping at Kmart, and the range of clothes to choose from is quite small!

#### **4.1.3 Solutions**

The major suggestion put forward was that Income management not be applied to everybody. Many people made the point that they managed their income before the NTER. Some did this through Centrepay – a bill payment service offered by Centrelink. Many other town camp residents used the Tangentyere Council food voucher system, through which a proportion (nominated by the payment recipient) of their Centrelink payment was given as a food voucher that could be used at a specific shop. Prior to the implementation of the NTER there were 840 town camp residents using the food voucher system, and quarantining anywhere between 25 – 50% of their income. This is approximately half of all benefit recipients resident on town camps. Over the seven years the system operated there were over 2000 participants. The system allowed people to change the proportion they chose to quarantine – however most people kept a stable allocation. The system also allowed the flexibility for people to opt out of it for periods of time, and have the money allocated to their keycard so that they could access it while travelling. The staff who ran this service knew the town campers well, and encouraged heavy drinkers and others to become involved so that at least some of their money could be used for food. They also had rules that dis-allowed people to change their allocations while they were drunk.

Several concrete suggestions were put forward to improve the income management system. Some of these were relatively small changes, which would make a great deal easier for participants. These are:

- Introduce special lanes for people who use store cards at the shops (Coles has since done this, but Woolies and Kmart have not);
- Put a swipe machine at the big retailers so that people can swipe their cards and find out how much money they have before they shop – this will save them the embarrassment of trying to purchase more than they can afford;
- Get the power cards sold at the outlets where store cards can be used;
- Give local Aboriginal people jobs at Centrelink so that they can deal with their own people in a more sensitive way;
- Get the outlets that are profiting through the Income Management because of increased numbers of Aboriginal people spending a large part of their income at the store to employ Aboriginal staff in their shops and offer training for them. They should employ a group of people together so that they can support each other.

## 4.2 Alcohol

The 'Little Children are Sacred' report named alcohol consumption and drunkenness as the most crucial threat to the well being of Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory. Consequently the NTER contained provisions aimed at trying to reduce alcohol consumption – namely that the consumption of alcohol was banned on all Aboriginal land in the NT, and a system of heavy fines for bringing alcohol and possessing and consuming alcohol on such land. Drinking alcohol on town camps is therefore now illegal.

The feedback given on the impact of the NTER on alcohol consumption was extremely mixed. Some people reported that there was a general decrease in drinking on the town camps, however most seemed skeptical that individuals were drinking less than previously – the most common opinion was that people had simply shifted the location of their drinking. This perception is reinforced by Acting Superintendent Rob Burgoyne, who is reported as saying that many drinkers are now drinking in the 'nooks and crannies' of the town (Centralian Advocate, 1.8.08).

### 4.2.1 What works

Several people commented that there is less drinking on town camps, and that means that the camps are safer for women and children:

Camps are quieter – hardly no man bash their women any more. (Woman, aged over 40 years)  
and

It's a lot safer now – I can trust him [my 8 yr old son] to walk round the camp now.  
(Woman, aged under 25 years)

It was felt that some of the reduction in drinking on town camps was a result of the fact that visitors from remote communities are no longer congregating in town camps for drinking parties:

Its stopping visitors drink in town camps in an open way – so its allowed communities to control that a bit better. (Man, aged over 40 years)

This observation was slightly counteracted by other interviewees saying that more people are coming to Alice Springs from remote communities, and living in the town camps as uninvited guests:

There's a lot of people come to town now, sitting down here. (Man, aged over 40 years)

This was reinforced by some interviewees who have moved to Alice Springs since the NTER:

If you going to be quarantined you may as well be in town for the cheaper food - anyway CDEP was scrapped so there's no reason to stay in ST [name of a remote community],so I come into town. (Woman, aged under 25 years)

Several people interviewed who have a heavy drinking lifestyle spoke about the alcohol that they had purchased being poured on to the ground by Police. Some said that this happened in public places, before the alcohol had been taken on to a town camp – which does not comply with the current law.

It brings shame to us all. They tip grog out, and you've got people watching you. (Man, aged over 40 years)

Other people reported that police cars had followed their taxis from the takeaway outlet to the town camp, and as soon as the taxi stopped, the police confiscated the alcohol. This is clearly reducing the level of alcohol consumption in the town camps. However it appears not to be stopping some people continuing to spend all their available money on grog:

Everyone spends their all their money on grog. People are spending money - just for nothing [grog that gets tipped out]. A lot of people get fines. (Woman, aged over 40 years)

There were no reports from this group of any help being forthcoming to try to assist people to move away from the heavy drinking lifestyle and reach a point where they can consider spending their money on other things. Other people interviewed commented of this group that 'A lot of parents in this town are alcoholic – they forget to buy food for their kids because they're too much into drink.' These interviews would suggest that this group, who are the group that the NTER is essentially aiming at, haven't changed their purchasing patterns (even though they are not drinking a proportion of the alcohol they purchase). They are, however accruing fines for their purchase of alcohol. Acting Superintendent Rob Burgoyne reports that 1,175 Alcohol Infringements have been handed out by police officers in Alice Springs since July 2007. These Infringement Notices are accompanied by a \$100 on the spot fine, and consequently approximately \$120,000 in fines have been imposed – which are being paid out of people's 'cash' money (Centralian Advocate, *Dry town drinkers cop \$120,000 fines*, 1.8.08 from Police data).

#### **4.2.2 What doesn't**

The main objection made to the changes in legislation affecting drinking on town camps was that it was taking away the rights of people who drink responsibly. One woman commented 'it really hurts me to know that my kids have to go away from their own home to drink'.

Although there were several people commenting that people were drinking less on town camps, most people seemed to feel that the overall consumption of alcohol had remained at a similar level to before the NTER, but that drinking behaviour had simply re-located to pubs and to drinking camps outside, or in hidden areas within the town.

Not much seems to have changed. The same people still seem to drink a lot.  
(Man, aged over 40 years)

Some people reported that they were drinking more, because there is nothing else to do:

When on CDEP we used to clean our camp, now I am doing nothing and just drinking more.  
When on CDEP I used to drink only on weekends. When CDEP was on I used to be busy.  
(Woman, aged under 25 years)

and

I was working on CDEP staying out bush busy working, now CDEP [workers] all come into town, there is no work and we get sit down money from Centrelink. Now we're living in town we find it hard to get a job. So nothing to do - we just drink. (Man, aged 25 – 39 years)

There was also comment on the pattern of people's drinking changing:

People died because of the changes – [They used to ]drink 5L cask between 10 people when they share a box. But now people buy a 2L box of port because it is stronger – they drink it [by them]self, or share it with 2 others – so drinking more alcohol. (Woman, aged over 40 years)

Several other people commented that some people are responding to the ban on drinking at home with defiance – that they want to break the law, because they are angry that they have lost the right to drink in their own home:

Why should I be stopped from drinking. I know that I'm breaking the law – I want to break the law. (Woman, aged 25 – 39 years)

Others commented that they were worried that drinking was now happening away from the home which brings a number of risks:

People go out of town to drink outside of the town area, then drive back drunk – dangerous. (Man, aged over 40 years)

and

I mean it's up to the individual choice. People want to drink in their house its up to them and much safer. Now the big signs are up everywhere saying not to drink inside that boundary! You get different language groups mixing with each other then there's a big problem. There'll be arguments then fights and someone will end up being killed. Let them drink in their own homes and camps then there will be no problem, no killing. (Woman, aged 25 - 39 years)

Another person reinforced this:

Forcing people to drink at the pub isn't really a very good idea. It means they spend their money quicker. Maybe the pub isn't the best place to go and socialize. The pubs have always got their own trouble – a lot of fighting. You go out for a good time and land up getting caught up in it. Before you could choose to drink at home – but now no choice. (Man, aged over 40 years)

These last comments may go some way to explaining the reported 16% spike in the number of assaults — an average of 93 a month, for Alice Springs in the month of December, 2007 (R. Skelton, *NT NTER 'creating unrest' in big towns*, *The Age*, 24.4.08)

One interviewee pointed out the current contradiction in what is allowed for town camp residents, and for residents of the rest of the town:

There are a lot of mixed messages coming out of the Alcohol restrictions. Town camp residents believe that if they go home and drink they are doing the right thing, but in the eyes of the Governments it's not a right at all, it's now the law not to drink in your home. It's really confusing that there is one rule and one law for town campers not to drink in their homes, and there is one rule one law for residents of Alice Springs to drink in their homes. No wonder residents do it - it's a risk they are willing or going to take. (Woman, aged 25 – 39 years)

The other major issue raised by interviewees was that the Restrictions stop those people who were drinking responsibly from drinking in a normal way (ie at home); and obliterate the actions that individuals, families and communities had already taken for themselves to control alcohol consumption in their houses and communities. On the town camps in Alice Springs many families declared their houses alcohol free zones, and this was generally respected. However personal action on this level has been overtaken by the NTER – which is very discouraging for the people who went to the trouble of responding to alcohol issues in their own way.

#### **4.2.3 Solutions**

The main solution put forward by interviewees was that the Restrictions be over turned, and that people be allowed to drink in their own homes. Some people felt that a selective ban could be put on those who were known to abuse alcohol, rather than a blanket ban on everyone.

Several people suggested that the easiest solution to reduce harmful drinking on town camps was to close the bottle shops that are located at small service stations and other small outlets around Alice Springs. This suggestion has excellent support from the evidence based literature on the most effective means of reducing alcohol consumption. The National Drug Research Institute's recently published 'Restriction on the sale and supply of alcohol: Evidence and Outcomes' presents restrictions on the outlet density of licensed premises as having evidence for positive outcomes (NDRI, 2007).

The other suggestions put forward were based around changing the drinking behaviour of individuals. Here again the views put forward were very mixed. Some people suggested women's and men's alcohol programs as a solution to decrease the level of harmful drinking:

The Government could help by supporting what decisions Aboriginal people make. Producing more facilities like CAAAPU [residential AOD treatment centre in Alice Springs]. Turn real life people Aboriginal people who have success in beating alcoholism. Government should employ Aboriginal people who have kicked the habit and never looked back to become counselors,

educators or role models for their communities or town camps. Seeing another aboriginal person approaching them with the same issues will make them feel comfortable and not ashamed to open up. Families' say they want to give up but there is no one there to direct them in the right direction. (Woman, aged 25 – 39 years)

However most people interviewed had little faith in such programs. Several people stated the belief that 'Nobody can stop anyone from drinking', and 'Once they've started drinking, no one can stop them'.

### 4.3 Police

The changes introduced by the NTER to the NT Liquor Act (2007) give the police substantial powers to search for alcohol on town camps. The police can, without a warrant, search anywhere on Aboriginal land for alcohol, and on finding it they may either seize it, or tip it out. The Act specifies that they can do this both on a random basis, and in situations where they believe an offence against the Act is taking place. The Act also specifies that the police may use reasonable force to conduct these searches. These changes mean that the police behave according to a different set of rules than those they used before the NTER. This different behaviour has impacted the relationship between town campers and the police.

The NTER also received increased funding with which to employ police. **How many in Alice**

#### 4.3.1 What's working

The positive side of the increased police presence in town camps is that the camps are quieter. One woman commented:

They do help people – its safer and quieter. Hardly no man bash their woman anymore, cos once you report them, they'll get locked up. So its safer for women, and kids too.

Another woman said

'They do come when they're called now. You used to wait for an hour or so, if they came at all.'

Another perspective that was put forward on these reasons that the camps are now safer was that they are the result of the alcohol restrictions in town camps, rather than the increased police presence.

#### 4.3.2 What's not working

Feedback on changes in the relationship with the police that have resulted from the NTER was extremely consistent from all interviewees. Every single person resented the ability of the police to walk into their houses without their permission:

I don't like it, they walk right in to our camp – wake you up looking for people and grog. They wouldn't like it. (Woman, aged 25 – 39 years)

People go home and drink at home, and police just chase them like cattle, police go a lot of times when we don't call them, they go into houses without asking - they don't care. It's just like trespassing. (Man, aged 25 – 39 years)

Police talk cheeky way to us, Police just bust in our home any way, no warrant, search your bags for grog. (Woman, aged over 40 years)

Police just walk in to the houses looking for someone. When you say they don't live here and tell them that only mother and daughter living here ,they still go in to house and look in the cupboards and the fridge. They would not like it if we forced our way through their door and looked in their fridge and cupboard. What gives them the right to look in ours? (Woman, aged 25 – 39 years)

Police come in the house - search the house inside out. If the door closed they just walk/ break in the house. Don't show warrants to the owner the house, they even threw my tablets while they searched. I'm a sick lady. They broke the door at my house. (Woman, aged over 40 years)

They'll come round and walk inside your house – kick everything, tip out clothes pillow. Even if you're lying there, maybe with your partner, they'll pull the blanket off. Look in the fridge, poke your things with a stick. We've got no privacy at all. (Woman, aged over 40 years)

People reported particular incidents that have resulted in police entering people's houses without permission. One woman described the following incident which affected her 8 year old son:

One time me and my two sons and my partner, we was asleep in the house at 1.00am. The coppers came round banging on the door where we was asleep. When I opened the door they asked if a person was there. I told them he wasn't – but they just walked right in. They pulled the blanket off my son while he was asleep. He started to cry – he was really scared. I asked them why they did that, and they said they was looking for somebody. .... My son is really scared of the police now – he don't want to look at them. (Woman, aged under 25 years)

and

A little girl was sitting on the toilet and they banged on the door. She said 'Hang on, its only me in here.'" But they went in anyway – while that little girl was sitting on the toilet – to see if she was hiding her father behind the door. (Woman, aged over 40 years)

The interviews suggest that town campers' experiences of having their houses searched without their permission has created more anger than any other element of the NTER. Many interviewees commented along the lines that 'whitefellas wouldn't have it, so why should we. We are not being treated like humans at all'.

Another widely reported comment was resentment that police were asking children in the town camps whether or not people were drinking in their home. Some people commented that this was prompting kids to run away from the police:

Policeman coming up to little kids and asking them “Have you got this person here – are there people drinking in that house? Little kid looks up to police as their protection – but they run away now. (Woman, aged 25 – 39 years)

#### **4.3.3 Solutions**

The most commonly suggested solution was that the police should knock on the door of a house and take two steps back. Then they should ask permission to enter. When they drive through the town camps, they ‘Shouldn’t drive through and look and think everyone in town camp is a criminal’. They could say “Hello, how are you going? Is everything alright?” and then drive on.

### **4.4 Health Checks**

Another element of the NTER was to provide health checks for all Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory. These health checks have also been offered to residents of Alice Springs town camps.

#### **4.4.1 What works**

All of the interviewees who had been impacted by the Child Health Checks were very supportive of them. They were pleased that a bus came to pick them up, and that they didn’t have to make an appointment first:

The checks are a good thing – my son got checked in the last 2 weeks – Buses went round – we didn’t have to make an appointment. (Woman, aged under 25 years)

and

The health checks are going very well – the AHW’s come and look for kids – which they didn’t used to. (Woman, aged under 25 years)

#### **4.4.2 What doesn’t**

There was some indication that interviewees believed that the health checks were to check for evidence of sexual abuse, and this was not viewed positively:

Health checks are disgusting. The majority of parents are really good. (Woman, aged 25 – 29 years)

and

Health checks – all they want to do is check ears, throat, heartbeat – we heard it was sexual abuse, but its not. (Woman, aged over 40 years)

This same women commented that ‘Good for our kids to be checked out, good that mother has to be there – but it was there before at Congress [Aboriginal Medical Service in Alice Springs].’

### 4.4.3 Solutions

This was another area where people suggested a more thorough consultation process before the health checks were implemented:

We look after our kids anyway. But the second round are a good idea – by choice. The army version was ‘a bit heavy handed’. Need to consult. We’ve been asking for better health services for a long time – they could have done it better – not make it a shame job. Should be support, not force, with all of this. (Man, aged over 40 years)

## 4.5 Town Camp Signs

Claus 11 of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill 2007 provides that notices must be posted at customary access routes into a prescribed area explaining it is an offence to bring liquor into, to be in possession of, to consume or to sell liquor within a prescribed area. Possible penalties must also be specified in the notice. Claus 26 requires filters accredited by the Minister to be installed and maintained on publicly-funded computers within prescribed areas. Both of these requirements, and the ban on the use of pornography are on very large signs that are at the entrance of each town camp. These signs are also at the entrance to the town of Alice Springs (as well as on other roads in the Territory). These signs excited a great deal of comment from interviewees.

### 4.5.1 What works

Only one person had anything positive to say about the signs, and that was to the effect that the alcohol part of the sign was alright – however she too thought that the pornography element of the sign was ‘disgusting’:

It’s a good sign for alcohol – but the pornography – I’m disgusted by that – its’ not black people on the camera . (Woman, aged under 25 years)

### 4.5.2 What doesn’t

There were many negative reactions to the signs. Most interviewees felt that the whole idea of pornography was abhorrent – ‘I think that is downright disgusting.’ As well as that some people felt that the mechanism of having signs forbidding the use of pornography is ineffective in actually stopping its use:

Porn- I don’t know, its no good, some young men, kids and all, watch movies- they go to the pub and come back to the camp to drink - all ages , but mostly young men. Its no good it, it [the signs] doesn’t work. (Woman, aged 25 – 39 years)

There was also a great deal of anger at the mechanism of the signs (which are extremely large and dominating) being used as a means of publicizing and enforcing the law:

If there’s a problem in the community it should be solved in the community – not with big signs. Where is their respect for our people? (Woman, aged 25 – 39 years)

They are terrible – so big! (Man, aged over 40years)

The signs are stupid – trying to rub us down into the ground . (Woman, aged over 40 years)

Several people commented that a lot of people didn't know what the word 'pornography' meant – including children: 'My 11 year old son is asking "What is pornography?' (Woman, aged 25 – 39 years).

After negotiations between the Department for Families, Communities , Housing and Indigenous Affairs and Tangentyere Council the extremely large signs at town camps have been replaced with much smaller, and less offensive signs. However we have left this section in the report because of the depth of feeling the signs created.

## **5. Prioritisation of the impacts of the NTER**

This section presents the verdict of the Tangentyere Executive on what constitutes the eight most significant changes resulting from the NTER. The list is in the order of those changes that received the most votes, to those that received the least. Items that received no votes were not included in the list.

- 1. Police have more powers and search houses without a warrant, they barge in and search everywhere for grog and people; Police can walk in, be rude and tell lies; Kids scared of police now because they break into houses and ask kids to tell on their parents*
- 2. The whole NTER is racist; All Aboriginal people are painted with the same brush – bad with money, sexual abusers, neglecting kids*
- 3. We can't drink in our own homes – that is a basic right*
- 4. The big signs are downright disgusting (signs banning alcohol and pornography at the entrance to each camp)*
- 5. Communities and individuals should decide what works best for them, not governments*
- 6. Using store cards and queuing for them shames you; You can't spend the income managed funds on important things like care rego and power cards;*
- 7. No cash to share with family so we are letting family down*
- 8. We have to clean up the town camps ourselves – no camp cleanup through CDEP, the rubbish is building up, plus no childcare and cleaning up old people's places – all gone when CDEP finished.*

## 6. Discussion

It is clear from the results of the interviews that the changes introduced by the NTER have both positive and negative impacts on the lives of people in the Alice Springs town camps. The positive impacts appear to be what was intended by the NTER – some people have said in interviews that there is less drinking on town camps, the Police visit more often and people perceive that town camps are now safer for both women and children; fewer women are getting bashed; and people have more food throughout the week because of the income management system. People are also finding it easier to save money.

There are also significant negative impacts being reported, both materially and socially, which are the unintended impacts of the NTER. The most stressed negative impact is how people feel about their situation and the new system of income management. Many people reported feeling powerless, discriminated against, and embarrassed and ashamed on a regular basis, as people have to wait behind them in shopping queues, and they have alcohol that they have bought tipped out in public, and as people perceive them as child sexual predators, to name a few examples. Other negative impacts are the practical inconveniences of the income management system and the forced changes in drinking practices and the deterioration in the relationship between the Police and people living in town camps.

The township of Alice Springs creates a particular environment in which town campers experience these impacts. Remote communities are going through the NTER in relative privacy. However Alice Springs town campers are living the policies of the NTER in full public view. Shopping for food and alcohol, and queuing outside Centrelink for store cards take place, under the eyes of non Aboriginal people, many of whom have well established negative stereotypes about all Aboriginal people. The embarrassment and shame created by this run very deep. The prioritisation process makes it clear that participants in this research (who represent much of the diversity of town campers) have placed more emphasis on the negative aspects of the NTER than the positive aspects. The prioritisation process did not produce one single vote for a positive outcome of the NTER, although the positive impacts were nominated in the points to be voted upon.

Both the interviews and the prioritisation process made it clear that participants in this research are also angry over the lack of consultation which the NTER was implemented, and that the NTER measures only apply to Aboriginal people. They feel discriminated against and shamed. The anger generated by these factors over shadows the positive impacts of the NTER. Clearly many people currently value their independence and self esteem over the material changes produced by the NTER, even though the positive impacts are important – safety of women and children, and enough food to eat.

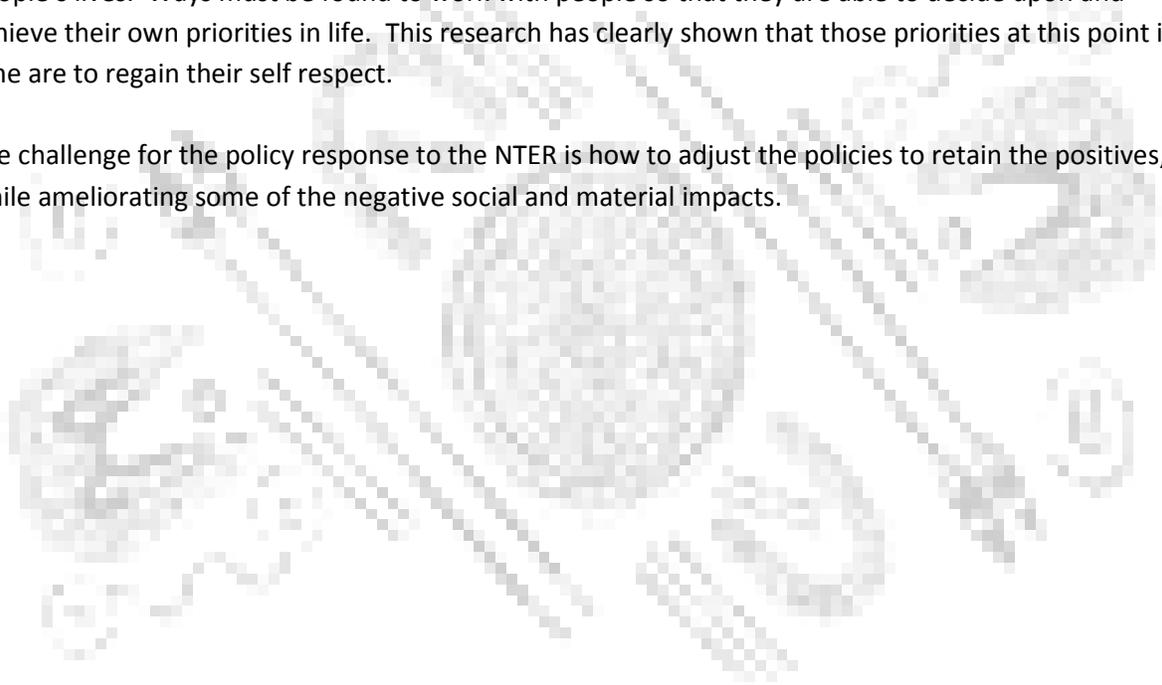
This creates a huge challenge for those concerned with whether to, and if so, how to, make any changes to the policies currently being implemented. Many people interviewed simply wanted everything to go back to the way it used to be. However this would lose the positive impacts, as well as the shame and anger. What can be done to preserve the considerable positive benefits, but to ameliorate the also considerable negative impacts experienced by people living under the policies of the NTER?

The solutions offered by the participants in this research are a good starting point. First and foremost, sit down and talk with people about how to achieve the aims of the NTER. This is time consuming, but it will result in better, more sustainable outcomes which have community support. Consultation at this point may function to reduce people's feeling of powerlessness, which evidently leaves them feeling so angry.

Secondly, take advice and act upon on how the implementation of the policies of the NTER can be improved upon. Many of the incidents described by participants as leaving them feeling shamed could be overcome by simple means, such as improving logistical difficulties with accessing and using store cards.

Thirdly, think in the long term. Paternalism such as this will not result in a sustainable improvement in people's lives. Ways must be found to work with people so that they are able to decide upon and achieve their own priorities in life. This research has clearly shown that those priorities at this point in time are to regain their self respect.

The challenge for the policy response to the NTER is how to adjust the policies to retain the positives, while ameliorating some of the negative social and material impacts.



## Attachment 1 – Interview Guide

**PART 1**

REMEMBER:                Consent Form  
                                   Film Release Form

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**WHO ARE YOU?**

- Tell us your story, name, where you were born, when and why you came to Alice?
  - What is your language?
- 

**INTERVENTION**

- Do you understand what the intervention is?
  - How did you find out about it?
  - Explain the government changes
    - QUARANTINING
    - CDEP
    - POLICE
    - SIGNS - ALCOHOL BANS
    - PORNOGRAPHY BANS
    - HEALTH CHECKS
  - **What is the biggest change in you and your family's life?**
- 

REMEMBER:                \* HAVE A NORMAL CONVERSATION ABOUT IT

- Follow what they say and ask questions about it
- Allow them to finish speaking, always leave some silence for them to speak more

---

When it feels this conversation is finished move on ...

## PART 2

### QUARANTINING

- Has anyone come to explain these changes to you?
  - Do you understand the changes?
  - \* Explain that it means that half your centrelink money goes on store cards
  - How has it changed you and your family's life?
  - Can you tell us a story about it? ( draw out a detailed description )
  - Why do you think the government made these changes?
  - \* Explain that it is to stop people spending money on grog and more on food for their kids
  - have the store cards helped you and your family and kids? How?
  - Is there a change in what you and your family spend money on?
  - Have the store cards changed drinking in your community? How?
  - Why do you think some people drink too much?
  - What would you like see government do to reduce drinking in Alice Springs and town camps?
- 

### CDEP

- Were you or anyone else in your family on CDEP?
  - What kind of changes have happened since CDEP stopped?
  - What did CDEP used to do on your camp?
  - Do more or less people have jobs now?
  - What effect have these changes had on people in your town camp?
  - What would you like see government do to help people get jobs?
- 

### POLICE

- Do you know the changes?
- \* EXPLAIN: police don't have more power but now they can use the 'dry town' laws on town camps. But they still need to show a warrant to come into your house looking for someone. They can only search someone if they really believe someone has grog or pornography.

- Have the police changed since the intervention started? How?
  - Can you tell us a story about police? (draw out details)
  - Do you and your family feel safer now? How?
  - Have the police changes been good or bad for your town camp?
  - How could government make town camps be made safer?
- 

#### SIGNS – ALCOHOL & PORNOGRAPHY BANS

- Do you know why those signs are there?
  - Do you understand what the signs say?
  - How do those signs make you feel?
  - How have the grog bans changed how people drink?
  - Can you tell us a story about this? ( draw out details)
  - How do you feel about not being able to drink on town camps?
  - How do you feel about not being able to have pornography?
  - Are these changes good or bad for your town camp?
- 

#### HEALTH CHECKS

- Has anyone come to explain about health checks for children?
  - Do you know why the government wants to do these health checks?
  - Can you tell us a story about health checks? ( draw out details )
  - What could the government do to improve town camp kid's health?
- 

#### FINAL QUESTIONS

- How does the intervention make you feel in your heart?
- How do you feel that the intervention is just for Aboriginal people on town camps and communities?
- Overall is the intervention good or bad for town camp people?
- What are the biggest issues facing town camp people?
- What can be done about this?
- What would you like to say to our government?