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MEDIA RELEASE

Factors underlying Indigenous arrest rates

Nearly one third of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) population of Australia have been arrested in the past five years according to a study carried out on behalf of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research by the Australian National University (ANU).

The study was carried out by Dr Boyd Hunter, a Fellow at the ANU's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy. It is the first national comparison of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are arrested with those who are not.

Indigenous Australians who are unemployed, drink alcohol or have been physically attacked or verbally threatened are much more likely to be arrested by police compared with other Indigenous Australians who are employed or do not drink alcohol or have not been physically attacked or verbally threatened.

These factors are also important predictors of the number of times an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander has been arrested in the past five years.

The Bureau study found that alcohol consumption is a particularly important risk factor, with the risk of arrest being about 13 percentage points higher for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander who drinks compared with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander comparable in all other relevant respects who does not drink.

Other significant factors which increased the risk of Indigenous arrest included being a male, living in a crowded household, being taken away from your natural family as a child, having had only a limited school education and sharing a house with other people who have been arrested.

Commenting on the study the Director of the Bureau, Dr Don Weatherburn, said that it highlighted the need to tackle the underlying causes of crime in Indigenous communities.

'Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system is in large measure a reflection of crime and social dysfunction within Indigenous communities. That, in turn, is a direct result of the social and economic disadvantage and alcohol abuse so characteristic of many of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.'

'If we want to reduce Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system we need to create jobs for Aboriginal people, improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and help Aboriginal communities overcome the problem of alcohol abuse'.

Further enquiries:

Dr Don Weatherburn: 02 9231 9190 (wk), 0419 494 408 (mob)