

# Regulating Legal Substances: Volatile Substance Misuse in the Alice Springs Town Camps

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## Background

•Volatile substances (VS) are:

- Volatile solvents
- Aerosols
- Gases
- Nitrates



Aromatic paints

•The regulation of legal substances such as VS is a contentious issue:

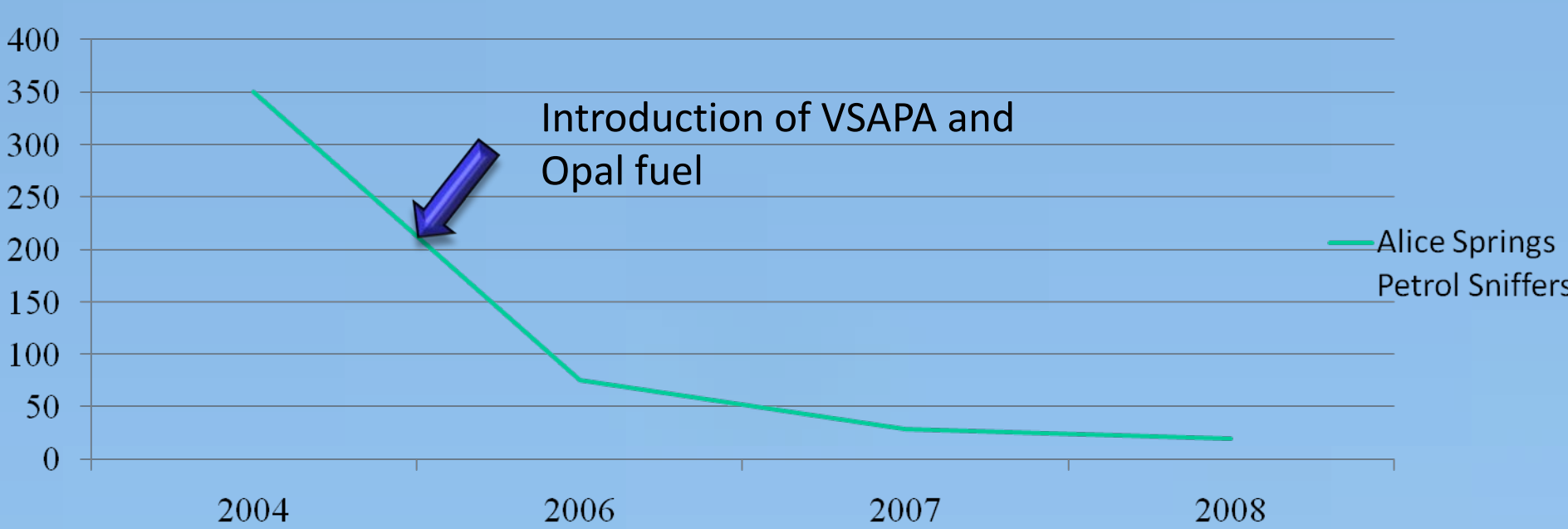
- The misuse of VS is not a criminal act
- There is a genuine need for domestic products in the general population
- Therefore can't simply prohibit use

•Since 2002 new legislation has given police greater powers for responding to volatile substance misuse (VSM).

•In 2005 the prevalence of petrol sniffing began to decline because:

- New volatile substance legislation was introduced: the *Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act* (2005) (NT)
- Low aromatic Opal fuel was rolled out across Central Australia

Figure 1: Estimates of Petrol Sniffing in Alice Springs, 2004-2008



•Given the importance of VSM and the negative consequences for individual users and communities, successful harm minimisation programs are crucial, particularly for Indigenous communities, due to the low cost, ease of accessibility and availability of VS.

## Aim

To identify existing programs for VS misusers in Alice Springs and to examine what factors (such as community empowerment) can affect the success of these programs.

## Method

### Design

Qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with police, policy makers / key informants, community members and community workers, as well as five weeks of observation.

### Interview

A semi-structured interview was administered to all participants. The interview addressed demographics, policy frameworks, views of police, relationships between agencies and how the new legislation worked in practice.

### Participants

The respondents (n = 34) were police, policy makers / key informants, community workers, community members from Alice Springs and Darwin.

### Observation

Five weeks were spent on observation. This included observation in town camps, remote communities, and agency board meetings.



Ilpurla Outstation, approximately 260 kilometres from Alice Springs

## Results and Discussion

•What is the impact of the new legislation?

- Courts can mandate treatment for individuals 'at risk' of severe harm into appropriate programs



Volatile Substances in an Alice Springs supermarket

•In Alice Springs there are four main programs set up to respond to volatile substance misuse:

Table 1: Primary responding programs in Alice Springs and their main roles

Programs	Main Roles
Central Australian Youth Link Up Service (CAYLUS), in Alice Springs	• Individual case management, supply reduction and parliamentary lobbying
BushMob, in Alice Springs	• Acute treatment
Ilpurla Outstation (260 km from Alice Springs)	• Family run treatment • Focus on detox and work program
Mt Theo, in Yuendumu (350km north west of Alice Springs)	• Outstation and Jaru Pirrjirdi (youth program). Mentoring, career pathways, holiday programs, women's groups, other diversionary activities

• Although court orders for all programs are based on health assessments, there are no adversarial consequences if a person leaves a program.

• This system promotes individual empowerment and responsibility, encouraging VS misusers to participate in their own recovery. However, the geographical location of program outstations means that community coercion often plays a role in treatment, and individuals often can't leave even if they would like to.

Table 2: Forms of Intervention Offered at the Program Sites

	CAYLUS	BushMob	Ilpurla	Mt Theo
Prevention	Yes	No	No	Yes
Treatment	Refers clients to treatment	Yes	Yes	Yes
Aftercare	Yes (casework)	Limited	No	Yes
Empowerment	Yes	Yes	No	Yes (Jaru Pirrjirdi) No (Outstation)

## Responses:

### 1. CAYLUS

- Instrumental in the rollout of Opal fuel across Central Australia
- Works with individual case management and retailer supply reduction in Alice Springs
- Lobbies parliament on behalf of remote communities
- CAYLUS actively empowers communities and assists VS misusers in finding their voices through case management and parliamentary lobbying.

### 2. BushMob

- An acute responding agency
- Allows VS misusers to have a say in their choice of treatment, their length of treatment and its delivery
- Allows substance users to leave the program at any time
- This seems to restore individual empowerment and responsibility in their own treatment and recovery.

### 3. Ilpurla

- Detox work program
- Teaches new employment skills
- Constrains individual responsibility and self-determination, depending on their levels of engagement with the program.

### 4. Mt Theo

- A community driven outstation program located near Yuendumu (350 km north west of Alice Springs)
- Developed by community members in the early 1990's, and petrol sniffing and other inhalant use has been effectively eradicated in Yuendumu as a result

Two main elements to the Mt Theo program:

a) Mt Theo Outstation (a reactive treatment program) 140 kilometers from Yuendumu

- Caters for 'at risk' Warlpiri individuals, who spend time reconnecting with the land, learning Indigenous culture, kinship connections and stories. There is also total lack of supply
- VS users are often coerced by the Yuendumu community and family groups to attend treatment at the outstation
- Accepts those from Yuendumu, Alice Springs, Lajamanu, Nyirripi and Willowra



Mt Theo program head office at Yuendumu, 2008

b) Jaru Pirrjirdi ('Strong Voices') located in Yuendumu

- Mentoring, youth program, careers pathways, school holiday programs, sports, bush trips and other diversionary activities
- Jaru Pirrjirdi promotes empowerment through giving ex-substance misusers roles of responsibility in the community
- BUT... Also promotes passivity through community coercion to attend treatment at the Mt Theo outstation

## Conclusion

- For the most part, the current regulatory approach to VS in Alice Springs and Central Australia is a success story.
- Since the introduction of Opal Fuel and the VSAPA, petrol sniffing and other inhalant use has seen a significant reduction.
- VS programs that empower individuals are more likely to be effective, as they are designed for the community, and are community driven and owned.
- The importance of community ownership and empowerment cannot be overstated, as community members should be actively engaged, self determined agents who are involved in the regulatory process and not just passive recipients of public policy.
- But there are some problems such as:
  - Location of treatment programs
  - Lack of follow-up care and community support in Alice Springs
- Indigenous policy should be based on the assumption that its regulatory subjects are active, empowered, responsible agents. This speaks to the way Indigenous policy should be approached across Australia.

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