

## Addressing Kimberley's Alcohol Epidemic: A Call for Innovative Solutions and a Break from the Cycle of Dysfunction

**Thurs 1<sup>st</sup> February 2024**

The Wunan Foundation has expressed deep concern following the release of *"Secret Police Files: Broome Hospital Senior Doctor Describes Alcohol Abuse in The Kimberley as 'Genocide'"* - by Sarah Crawford on January 8th, 2024, focusing on the alcohol epidemic, which has resulted in catastrophic social consequences in the Kimberley.

The article *'Secret Police Files: Broome Hospital Senior Doctor Describes Alcohol Abuse in The Kimberley as 'Genocide'* states alcoholism is having a severe impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, leading to suicide, family violence, poverty, unemployment, and child neglect.

Wunan Foundation noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the East Kimberley confront a staggering 44% long-term risk of harm from alcohol, surpassing the state average by 17%.

The article also emphasised that generations of adults with fetal alcohol syndrome have been affected, leading to poor coping skills and a low threshold for violence, perpetuating a cycle of dysfunction.

Wunan Foundation spokesperson said that the “deeply disturbing findings in the article indicate Traditional Aboriginal family structures have broken down, leading to a cycle of hopelessness and dysfunction, exacerbated by alcohol and welfare dependency.”

With a staggering 69% of Kimberley offenses attributed to alcohol and a distressing 85% of severe family assaults linked to its influence, Wunan Foundation is urgently seeking comprehensive, long-term solutions to combat alcohol-related harm.

“The epidemic requires new thinking and concerted efforts to move families out of the crisis, with a focus on addressing various contributing factors such as housing, unemployment, lack of education and antisocial behaviour.”

The per capita annual alcohol consumption in the region stands at 16.1 litres well above the national average of 9.7 litres. These statistics were highlighted in the *Alcohol Inquiry* submission by Empowered Communities East Kimberley and Binarri-binyja yarrowoo.

In January 2023, the Kimberley Regional Governance Group, which includes Wunan Foundation as a key stakeholder, identified alcohol reform as a top priority. The Regional Alcohol Action Plan was proposed as an initiative under the Partnership Agreement for Kimberley Aboriginal Youth Wellbeing 2023-32 to the Western Australian government.

In light of recent statistics from Kununurra Hospital, the data reveals a stark reality: indicating that the incidence of all alcohol-related conditions occurs at a rate more than four times higher than the rest of Western Australia.

Wunan Foundation, in collaboration with various stakeholders, is taking proactive measures by establishing a Low Medical Withdrawal Unit. This six-bed facility is designed to address critical gaps identified by the community.

Scheduled to open in July 2024, this unit will provide vital support and care for individuals grappling with drug and alcohol issues, addressing a pressing need in the community.

“Our aim is to strengthen and expand detoxification and rehabilitation services and ensure there are Aboriginal specific beds available when needed and services are culturally safe.”

“Our community's needs far exceed our current six-bed facility's capacity. In response to this critical situation, we are urgently appealing for increased investment, aimed at expanding our capacity to meet the estimated demand of patients annually.” said the Wunan Foundation spokesperson.

To promote self-reliance, health, and combat welfare dependency, Wunan Foundation provides vital services in East Kimberley, including Headspace, Children and Parents Centre, Wunan Health, Target 120, Kimberley Education Excellence Program, and Disability Advocacy, addressing diverse community needs.



“A collaborative approach is required to address the complexities of alcohol abuse in the East Kimberley, driven by local Aboriginal communities and accepted as best practice.” - Wunan Foundation Spokesperson

“We must partner with local organisations and Aboriginal communities to explore innovative solutions and codesign initiatives, with the goal of breaking the cycle of dysfunction.”

FOR MEDIA ENQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT [EXECUTIVE.ASSISTANT@WUNAN.ORG.AU](mailto:EXECUTIVE.ASSISTANT@WUNAN.ORG.AU)

*In 2016, Wunan Foundation also sought support from former Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett MLA to advocate for stricter liquor regulations in Kununurra. Collaborating with local agencies, the Foundation conducted thorough research that links high alcohol consumption to increased social harm in the region. Access the report here: [https://wunan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Wunan-Submission-to-Director-of-Liquor-Licensing\\_December-2016.pdf](https://wunan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Wunan-Submission-to-Director-of-Liquor-Licensing_December-2016.pdf)*