

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Stores Licensing Scheme in remote Indigenous communities of the Northern

Australia, of which 70% are living on their ancestral lands in areas considered as remote as access to goods and services is highly restricted [9, 10]. Logistical challenges with food provisioning such as limited freight deliveries, seasonal weather disruptions, and extensive food mileage are often experienced in these communities [11].

The retail landscape of remote communities is unique compared to non-remote settings. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have shaped the rise and development of a remote food retail landscape. Over one third (n = 86) of the approximate 233 stores in Aboriginal and

knowledge, however, there is yet to be a comprehensive meta-evaluation of Stores Licensing.

This review aims to examine evaluations of Stores Licensing under the NTER and SFNT Acts. With a focus on the overall outcomes of Stores Licensing and the barriers and enablers to achieving its aims and goals of food security, this review provides the opportunity to inform the next iteration of Stores Licensing under the NT Government (the NT Remote Stores Program) and the National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities [25].

Methods

A qualitative meta-evaluative approach [26] was utilised to capture all primary research reports related to Stores Licensing under the NTER and SFNT Acts. The Preferred Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis guidelines were adhered to. [27] Our methodology was also guided by the methods used in a grey literature systematic review by Godin et al. (2015) [28]. Our meta-evaluation aimed to understand the outcomes and perceived barriers and enablers of Stores Licensing for remote stores in the NT under both the NTER and SFNT Acts.

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria are outlined in Table 1. Inclusion criteria pertain to the Stores Licensing components of both Acts; NTER and the SFNT [17, 23]. All other schemes related to both Acts were excluded from this review. Despite Income Management being closely interconnected with Stores Licensing, this review focussed on evaluations related specifically to Stores Licensing.

Search resources

Three search strategies were utilised to systematically capture all relevant grey literature: database search, Google search, and targeted website search. Search terms

were developed using a Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes (PICO) format in conjunction with referring to known relevant texts on the research topic (Table 2).

Database search

Trove was selected for this review. Trove is the Australian National Library Database that is based on the Australian National Bibliographic Database. The search terms were as follows: “community store*” + licens* + (Emergency OR Stronger). The term ‘community store’ was chosen over other terms representing population as this terminology is used in both Acts [17, 23]. The term represents a store located in the prescribed area whose main purpose is the “provision of grocery items and drinks” [17].

Table 2 Search terms

^a truncation/wildcard symbols may vary between search engines/databases

NT Northern Territory, NTER Northern Territory National Emergency Response, MeSH Medical Subject Heading

OR Stronger)], using a private search mode to avoid contamination of results. The first ten pages (representing ~ 100 results) were screened, referring to the title and the preview text. Where the title and/or preview text did not provide sufficient context, the executive summary or table of contents was screened to determine eligibility.

This method was re-run prior to publication in August 2024 to ensure the dataset reflects the most relevant and up-to-date literature.

Targeted websites

Targeted websites relevant to the NTER and SFNT Acts were identified by completing a Google search on the name of each Act and Stores Licensing. The search was conducted on the 13th of December 2023 by one author (SH), utilising key words from the inclusion criteria in the search bar of each website. Keywords used for each specific website were documented in a separate Google Sheets spreadsheet for reference. The first ten pages of results were screened, following the same process as the Google search method aforementioned [28].

Contacting content experts

To ensure that all evaluations had been captured in the above search techniques, contact was made with a key expert in the Stores Licensing area of the Australian Government. An email was sent by the senior author (JB) to the identified expert outlining the purpose of this review, eligibility criteria, and a list of the current documents included in the review, asking if they were aware of any additional documents that may answer the research question. One additional document was identified and screened by two authors (SH, EvB), before being added to the final dataset.

Study selection

All documents from the three search strategies were uploaded into Covidence (Melbourne, Australia). Screening was conducted in two stages. After removal of duplicates, documents were screened by two authors (SH, EvB). Due to the nature of grey literature, abstracts were not available in most texts for screening. Documents were screened based on their title and executive summary (where applicable), or contents table for potential eligibility. Caution was taken in this approach, and when it was unclear if a source was relevant to the search

questions it was included for full text screening. Conflicts between authors were resolved via discussion and consultation with the senior author. Two authors (SH, EvB) conducted full text screening against inclusion criteria, and uncertain reports were discussed with the author team. Pearling references during full text screening was also conducted to ensure a maximised coverage of the data set. For texts that had evaluated multiple elements of the Acts (e.g., income management, alcohol restriction), the section titled 'store licensing' or 'community stores' or 'food security' was reviewed.

Data extraction

A purpose-designed template table in Google Sheets was developed to capture the Act being evaluated and to extract data on: organisation completing the evaluation, commissioner of the study, study aims, study design, sampling, community engagement, region involved, participant characteristics, strengths, and limitations (as reported), key outcomes and reported future directions. Data extraction was carried out by one author (SH) and questions were taken to the author team who met regularly for further input and clarification.

Quality assessment

The AACODS (Accuracy, Authority, Coverage, Objectivity, Date, Significance) checklist was utilised for quality assessment of the included evaluations [29]. This tool was selected due to its design specifically for critical appraisal of grey literature. Two authors (SH, EvB) independently appraised three evaluations and resolved discrepancies via discussion. One author (EvB) independently appraised the remainder of evaluations. Data related to the questions in the AACODS checklist were extracted into a separate Google Sheets document for reference.

Data synthesis and analysis

Utilising NVivo software [30], a 'coding reliability' thematic analysis approach [31] was conducted to identify perceived barriers and enablers to Stores Licensing. First, SH read through one evaluation and identified preliminary codes. Data were coded against the two parent codes (barriers and enablers) and child nodes were inductively generated and matched with the corresponding parent code. This formed an initial codebook, and definitions were refined and discussed with the author team. Next, three texts were independently coded by two authors (SH, SC). After each coded evaluation, authors discussed inconsistencies to ensure adherence to the codebook. Inter-rater reliability was determined using Cohen's Kappa. Substantial agreement was found with inter-rater correlation of 0.76, 0.76 and 0.79 for the three evaluations respectively

[32]. SH coded the remaining texts independently with application of the codebook. The author team were consulted when new codes were generated. Thematic analysis was conducted by SH and themes were discussed with the author team.

An inductive approach was utilised to capture the outcomes of Stores Licensing as reported in the evaluations to allow for consistent interpretation. 'Key outcomes' were categorised into five domains based on the aims and objectives of the Acts: quality of groceries, promotion and availability of healthy food and drink, financial structures, retail practices, and governance.

Results

Evaluation selection

After initial screening and removal of duplicates, 120 texts were identified for potential eligibility (Fig. 1). Twenty-seven texts underwent full text screening, including one document identified through pearling. Eighteen results were further excluded, mostly due to reporting on other outcomes related to the Acts (e.g., income management). Nine reports were included in the final dataset.

Study characteristics

Nine evaluations included in this review [33–41] were published from the year 2008 to 2016 (Table 3). Six reports focussed on the NTER Act [35–38, 40, 41], three reports specifically evaluated the SFNT Act [33, 34, 39], and seven were commissioned by the Australian Government [33–35, 37–40]. Six aimed to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of Stores Licensing, under either the NTER or SFNT Act [17, 23], in the context of food security [34, 35, 37, 39–41]. Three reports focussed on a broader aim of seeking to understand the perspectives and opinions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in relation to the Acts [33, 36, 38]. Most reports [34–37, 39, 41] adopted a multi-methods approach, utilising quantitative data obtained from stores assessments [37], government sources [36], or via survey [35, 41], in addition to collecting qualitative data via interviews [34–37, 39, 41]. (Table 3) An exclusively qualitative methodology was conducted in three reports via extensive community consultation with semi-structured interviews and community meetings [33, 38, 40]. All except two reports [35, 39] involved community consultation. Communities from all regions in the NT were included in six of the reports [33, 36–38, 40, 41], however, specific communities were unable to be determined in the remaining three reports [34, 35, 39] as this was not disclosed or applicable. A range of stakeholders were consulted across the nine evaluations including community store staff, Indigenous and non-Indigenous

Table 3 Overview of study characteristics

Evaluation Title	Methods	Sampling	Community engagement (Y/N), Region involved, Number of Communities	Communities involved	Sample size, n	Demographics of participants (community members, store managers, board members etc.) age, gender	Reported Strengths	Reported Limitations
<p>A Community-based Review of the Northern Territory Emergency Response [41]</p> <p>Multi-method Quantitative - Survey instrument Qualitative - Interviews</p>	<p>Purposive sampling of communities based on: - land tenure system, - governance system, - social and cultural a lia tions, - population number, - economic profile, - distance from major service centre</p>	<p>Y Katherine East 4 communities 5 outstations</p>	<p>Communities: Barunga, Eva Valley, Kalano, Wugularr Outstations: Weemol, Emu Springs, Weirrenbun, Gorge Camp, Rockhole</p>	<p>Survey instrument: - 118 Interviews: - Unable to determine</p>	<p>Survey: - 69 women, 49 men (21 youth, 85 adults, 13 pensioners) Interview: - Aboriginal community members - Non-Aboriginal people employed in communities (managers, nurses, teachers, sports o ceas) - Townspeople in Katherine (tourist operators, hotel sta , doctors, nurses) - Intensive study' focus group with five Katherine women (ages 41–75 years)</p>	<p>Nil reported</p>	<p>Risk of bias; Unequal distribution of age and gender from sample; Small sample size for outstation communi ties</p>	

Table 3 (continued)

Evaluation Title	Methods	Sampling	Community engagement (Y/N), Region involved, Number of Communities	Communities involved	Sample size, n	Demographics of participants (community members, store managers, board members etc.) age, gender	Reported Strengths	Reported Limitations
Northern Territory Emergency Response: Perspectives from Six Communities [36]	<p>Multi-method</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantitative Survey Analysis of Australian Government sources Qualitative Semi-structured interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purposive sampling based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> tenure arrangement size of communities economic profile, availability of researchers date welfare quarantine-ing was due in community distance from service centre language and cultural a lia tions 	<p>Y</p> <p>Central</p> <p>6 communities</p>	<p>Ali Curung, Hermannsburg, Kintore, Papunya, Titjikala, Yuen-dumu</p>	<p>Survey instrument: - 141</p> <p>Interviews: - 51</p>	<p>Survey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aboriginal residents Employees from community-based agencies (Council CEO, store manager) 60% women, 40% men 77% of participants aged 30–64 years <p>Interview:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employees from community-based agencies (Council CEO, store manager) Government agencies GBMs 	<p>Nil reported</p>	<p>Age of survey participants skewed towards older adults: Lack of structure to review due to lack of publicly available policy frame-work: Short time period which limited scope and sample size</p>

Table 3 (continued)

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Evaluation Title	Methods	Sampling	Community engagement (Y/N), Region involved, Number of Communities	Communities involved	Sample size; n	Demographics of participants (community members, store managers, board members etc.) age, gender	Reported Strengths	Reported Limitations
<p>Evaluation of the Community Stores Licensing Program [37]</p> <p>Multi-method 3 Parts: Quantitative: - Part 1: Data analysis of store assessment data Qualitative: - Part 2: site visits - Part 3: In-depth interviews</p>	<p>Part 1: stratified random sampling based on: - Location - population size of the community - distance to a regional centre - license type; Part 2 & 3: stratified sampling based on: - ownership model - location - community size</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>Widespread (Part 2 & 3); 5 communities</p>	<p>(Shires involved): West Arnhem, Barkly, Central Desert, East Arnhem, MacDonnell, Tiwi Islands, Victoria Daly, Roper Gulf - Specific communities not outlined for privacy</p>	<p>Analysis of assessment data (part 1): - 32 stores Site visits (part 2): - 4–5 interviews per community (~ 25 total) In depth interviews (part 3): - 15</p>	<p>Stores assessment (part 1): - Assessment reports for the Stores Licensing: gathered information on the assessable matters (quality and range of food, promotion of nutrition, retail management, finances, governance) Site visits (part 2): - Government store owners/managers, community representatives, committee members - Included 2 Indigenous owned Stores, 2 OBS-managed stores, and 1 ALPA store In-depth interviews (part 3): - a range of stakeholders from key organisations such as FaHCSIA, Outback Stores, ALPA, ORIC, ASIC, Remoie Retail Services Gender and age not reported</p>	<p>Nil reported</p>	<p>Assessment report formatting has changed over time—difficult to accurately measure changes over time: Small sample size (of assessment reports); ALPA and OBS also included in samples (who have nutrition policies)—difficult to ascertain the impact of licensing alone</p>	

Table 3 (continued)

Evaluation Title	Methods	Sampling	Community engagement (Y/N), Region involved, Number of Communities	Communities involved	Sample size, n	Demographics of participants (community members, store managers, board members etc.) age, gender	Reported Strengths	Reported Limitations
Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities [34]	Multi-method: Quantitative: - analysis of pre-collected data - examined information and documents held by the department Qualitative - Interviews - site visits	CD	Y CD CD	CD	CD	Interviews: - representatives from the Australian Government, representatives from remote store management companies, community store owners and managers, other key stakeholders Site visits: - community stakeholders Gender and age not reported	Nil reported	Nil reported
Review of the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act (2012) [39]	Multi-method: Quantitative: - primarily desk-top analysis of existing reports Qualitative: - Interviews	CD	N N/A N/A	N/A	N/A	Interviews: - Australian and NT Government officials Gender and age not reported	Nil reported	Limited access to quantitative datasets for analysis due to both absence of data and lack of access to existing data

CD cannot determine, N no, Y yes, N/A not applicable, NT Northern Territory, GBMs GdNo1 00 m uTj EMC (both)Tj /2 us11(0)M214 T1.214 Td [(boan)9Tj /T1_0 1 Tf -0OBStw [(G)-5(o)7n Ttutb(o)S_-3 s

Table 4 Overview of Included Studies

Reference	Organisation completing review	Year published	Act being evaluated	Commissioner	Reported Purpose of the Evaluation/Aims	Reported Outcomes in Reports of Stores Licensing	Future Directions (as reported)
A community based review of the Northern Territory Emergency Response [41]	Institute of Advanced Study for Humanity	2015	EMCOrgence of				

Table 4 (continued)

Reference	Organisation completing review	Year published	Act being evaluated	Commissioner	Reported Purpose of the Evaluation/Aims	Reported Outcomes in Reports of Stores Licensing	Future Directions (as reported)
Survey of government business managers relating to the impact of the Northern Territory Emergency Response [35]	TNS Social Research	2008	NTER	Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination Group (OIPC)			

Table 4 (continued)

Reference	Organisation completing review	Year published	Act being evaluated	Commissioner	Reported Purpose of the Evaluation/Aims	Reported Outcomes
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commissioning or authoring the included reports were deemed reputable and had authority in the field in relation to Stores Licensing. Three of the included reports did not provide reference lists [33, 35, 37].

Reported outcomes

Food security has been defined by several remote Indigenous communities as “when the food of our ancestors is protected and always there for us...It is when we can easily access and afford the right non-traditional food... [and] when...we can provide, share and fulfil our responsibilities, we can choose good food knowing how to make choices and how to prepare and use it” [15]. All of the reported outcomes from this review relate to this defini-

Concerns were raised in three reports about the future role of the store committee [33, 37, 38]. It was found that in some stores there were no clearly defined roles between management and the store committee, which in some cases led to dominance of the store manager [33, 37, 38]. Issues were also highlighted in relation to inconsistent assessment and monitoring. The ANAO evaluation found that only two-thirds of the required monitoring visits occurred, highlighting a discordance in the quality of assessment of the Act [34]. Conversely, positive examples of governance were presented in one evaluation, with some stores collaborating with retail consultants and having highly engaged store committees [37].

Enablers and barriers

Based on thematic analysis, four predominant themes were identified in relation to the barriers and enablers of Stores Licensing meeting its aims and goals. The major theme identified as an enabler was reliable management of stores. Three themes were generated as barriers, including governance (such as fear of Government tak

capabilities of the manager, provide incentive for store managers to adhere to these requirements.

“Licensing has been a good thing because you can’t get bad shopkeepers who just want to make money and don’t care about the quality.” [38] (Community Member)

Barriers

High food cost

The high cost of food in community stores was a strong theme that was identified. In community consultation, it was often described that prices remained too high even with Stores Licensing, or no beneficial changes to the price of food had been observed. This meant that for many community members, healthy food was still too expensive and unaffordable at community stores.

This was a key discussion point across multiple evaluations, suggesting that in many communities making food more affordable may have been an expectation of the initiative in supporting food security, despite it not being an objective of the legislation. Despite the reported improvements to the provision of more variety and stock in stores, for many it was implied that this had no great impact due to the lack of financial accessibility. A consistent recommendation described in the data was a call to the Australian Government to consider subsidising food in community stores.

“Food is too expensive, especially meat and vegetables. Community members are doing shopping in other places but many people have no vehicle to shop elsewhere.” [33] (Community Stakeholder)

Governance

A barrier to Stores Licensing was governance structures that lacked opportunity for community participation.

This impacted community members

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Policy Implications

the manager of the store. This is likely attributed to the legislation assessment of the store manager 'character'. This finding is supported in an inquiry to the Australian Government where it was described that the attitudes of the store manager play a significant role in determining quality, pricing, and supply of goods stocked in the store [13]. Long before the introduction of Stores Licensing, similar patterns had been documented [53]. One study in the 1990s associated greater nutritional intake in Aboriginal communities with a store manager committed and interested in Aboriginal health [53]. A recent evaluation of a remote store health initiative also found a strong sense of social purpose of store managers and business owners to underpin commitment of a store organisation to health improvement [54]. Thus, monitoring this aspect of community stores can be seen as a strength of the legislation and reduces the likelihood of poor management practices occurring.

However, our meta-evaluation suggests that there was little benefit from Stores Licensing for stores perceived as already operating at a satisfactory level. Given the profound influence that managers can have on the successful operation of a store, those who were operating with integrity and skilled practices prior to the legislation were perceived as already meeting the 'measurable' elements of the scheme. This may explain the little or no change to the operations of some community stores observed in our results. In this review, this was particularly relevant for stores operating under Outback Stores. The overarching nutrition purpose guiding Outback Stores operations is "to ensure nutritious, affordable and quality food supply" [55]. With strong foundational policies, it is reasonable to deduce that for Outback Stores the measurable elements for management and retail practices had little incentive or obligation to change the current processes. Whilst this is not a criticism of Stores Licensing, it does suggest that despite the scheme's objective of improving food security, it is perhaps more pitched at bringing stores up to a baseline standard, rather than widespread improvement. As reflected in the revised SFNT Act, the risk-based approach to assessment (a scoring system where stores deemed as higher risk are monitored more frequently) further illustrates the scheme targeting stores that are less likely up to standard. Future iterations of Stores Licensing may benefit from measures that take a targeted approach based on the unique circumstances of the community store to incentivise all stores and lift the benchmark for higher performing stores.

Governance training

Our meta-evaluation revealed an inconsistency in communication and decision making of store operations

between management, the store committee and community. Issues related to governance of community stores has previously been documented as an area for improvement [13, 42, 43]. In 2016 a tailored program to encourage capacity building in remote community stores was established by the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations in conjunction with the National Indigenous Australians Agency and the NT Government [43]. However, this program ceased in 2018 due to a decreased demand, and now only a 'basic, entry level' governance training is offered. There has been discussion around the difficulties of ongoing governance training for Store Committee members due to the perceived complexity of governance training and language barriers [43]. The Store Committee are directly responsible for the business operations of the store and also represent their community. Committee members are usually Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and leaders, speaking a number of languages with a range of differing skill levels and with in-depth insight in to their community [13]. This may suggest that the current governance training structures are insufficient in supporting skill development and indeed may lead to the perceived unequal governance hierarchy described in some stores. Capacity building is defined by the United Nations as "strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that...communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world" [56]. This is an integral component in policy development and commitment to Closing the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Therefore, future iterations of Stores Licensing should consider a more rigorous approach to governance training with a tailored, culturally safe approach and one that truly recognises the committee as the decision-making authority for their store. This may act as the catalyst to increasing employment opportunities for Indigenous Peoples and encourage more transparency in the operations of the store.

Abbreviations

NTER	Northern Territory National Emergency Response
SFNT	Stronger Futures Northern Territory
NT	Northern Territory
ALPA	The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation
ANAO	The Australian National Audit Office

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-19970-0>.

Supplementary Material 1.

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Authors' contributions

Conceptualization SH, JB, EvB, MF, BC; Methodology JB, EvB, SH, MF, BC; Data curation SH, SC; Formal Analysis SH; Investigation SH; Writing – original draft SH; Writing – review and editing SH, EvB, MF, SC, BC, JB; funding acquisition JB; Supervision JB. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript. We thank the stakeholders from the Australian Government for their contributions to finalising the dataset.

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Data availability

Data is provided within the manuscript or supplementary information files.

Availability of data and materials

All data generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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