Background information regarding Victoria’s Indigenous communities

This report provides a brief overview of some general historic and contemporary factors impacting on Indigenous communities. Within this, there is a focus on the information that provides a context for the experience of Indigenous children, young people, families and communities.

The report presents some snapshot information which helps to illustrate the ongoing disadvantage that Indigenous children, young people and families experience across the areas of education, employment, rates of child protection notifications and substantiations, juvenile justice, housing and homelessness, and health and wellbeing. It draws from community-controlled research that also explains the strengthening and protective factors in many Aboriginal children’s and young people’s lives.

The information provided is not exhaustive, but is intended to provide an overview and context for the experience of Indigenous children and young people. For further detailed and more comprehensive information, refer to the range of reports listed at the end of this document.
The gap between the numbers of our people who live and the number who should be alive is one measure of the inequality we have endured. The gap between the numbers living a health, socially-functional life and those living a life of pain, humiliation and dysfunction is another measure. They are both measure of how loss of elementary human rights.

There should be no mistake that the state of Indigenous health in this country is an abuse of human rights. A decent standard of health and life expectancy equivalent to other Australians is not a favour asked by our peoples. It is our right – simply because we too are human.”

Mick Dodson, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner

Connection to culture, land and experiences of dispossession and removal

Connection to family, culture and land are very important strengthening factors in the lives of Indigenous peoples.

The evidence from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2002 highlights that historic dispossession from land has clearly had a profound impact on children and young people in Victoria in terms of connection to country, creating a continued dispossession in contemporary Australia.

Another significant causal factor for the disadvantage faced by Koori young people today lies in the history of intervention and disruption of family networks by the state, a major impact of which has been the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, now termed the Stolen Generation. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report described the continuing impact of this legacy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, children and young people:

The history of disruption, intervention and institutionalisation to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children have been subject has left many of those families confronting severe difficulties in securing the adequate care and control of their children; has seen juvenile crime develop into a major social problem; and has seen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander juveniles grossly over represented at all levels of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Dispossession from lands and the fragmentation of Indigenous family networks, combined with racism and a lack of cultural sensitivity in policy and service delivery also contribute to high levels of socio-economic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

It is important to note that many Indigenous people who are parents today have had fractured experiences of parenthood themselves. As such, specific strategies and programs need to be put in place to provide them with the particular support and assistance they need to care for their children.
Further, in recognising and responding most effectively to this trauma it is critical to integrate a healing framework across all policy and program responses.

**Wellbeing**

The history of Indigenous Victorians since invasion and colonisation has been one of disempowerment and marginalisation. This has resulted in significant multi-layered disadvantage across all measures of wellbeing.

*We have all heard them – the figures of death, and of disability… Every few years, (the) figures are repeated and excite attention. But I suspect that most Australians accept them as being almost inevitable. A certain kind of industrial deafness has developed. The human element in this is not recognised. The meaning of these figures is not heard – or felt.*

*The statistics of infant and perinatal mortality are our babies and children who die in our arms… The statistics of shortened life expectancy are our mothers and fathers, uncles, aunties and elders who live diminished lives and die before their gifts of knowledge and experience are passed on. We die silently under these statistics*”

*Mick Dodson*⁴

This disadvantage is evident for Indigenous children and young people: they have poorer health status – for example one in ten Indigenous children under 15 years old report having ear/hearing problems, about three times the rate of non-Indigenous children;¹ lower birth weights, higher infant mortality, lower immunisation rates, lower use of Maternal and Child Health Services, higher rates of mental illness, lower levels of education attainment (retention rate to Year 12 38% Indigenous, 81% non-Indigenous) and employment (unemployment rate: 15% Indigenous, 5% non-Indigenous), and are over-represented in child protection, being 9.8% more likely to be the subject of substantiations.⁵

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¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4715.0 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey, 2004–05, 2006.
The Indigenous Victorian population more broadly also has higher public hospital admissions, higher rates of chronic disease such as diabetes, higher imprisonment rates, and lower life expectancy than the general population.\(^6\)

It is important to note however, that despite this level of disadvantage, there are many strengths in Aboriginal communities. One of the great strengths of Aboriginal communities is that sense of being community. And many Indigenous Victorians make a significant contribution to their families and communities, and to the broader Victorian community.

Addressing this disadvantage in a holistic way is of fundamental importance when developing policies and programs to promote the wellbeing of Indigenous Victorians and their communities. In doing so, any approach to supporting and promoting the wellbeing of Indigenous children and their families must be rights based, culture based and strengths based,\(^7\) and incorporate healing into all elements.

**Population – age and mortality**

The Indigenous community in Victoria is made up of a number of distinct local communities across the state based on location, language and cultural groups, and extended family networks.\(^8\)

Victoria’s Indigenous population is relatively small, making up 0.54% of Victoria’s population as a whole, or 25,078 people, and 6.1% of the total Australian Indigenous population.\(^9\) It is important to note that the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) uses the ABS experimental estimates which adjust for the undercounting and unknown Indigenous status that the ABS acknowledges occurs. This brings the total Victorian Indigenous population to 28,000 people. The number of Indigenous peoples living in regional areas is higher at 1% (13,000 people) with some local government areas having larger Indigenous populations.\(^10\) 52.1% of the Indigenous population live in regional areas, compared to 27.1% of the non-Indigenous population.
Local Government Areas with the highest percentage of Indigenous people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campaspe</td>
<td>1.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Gippsland</td>
<td>2.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gannawarra</td>
<td>1.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenelg</td>
<td>1.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Shepparton</td>
<td>2.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horsham</td>
<td>1.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaTrobe</td>
<td>1.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mildura</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robinvale</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swan Hill</td>
<td>4.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrnambool</td>
<td>1.09%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age structure

The age structure of Indigenous Victorians contrasts significantly with that of non-Indigenous Victorians, being dominated by a very high number of children and young people. Children and young people make up the largest demographic of the population age structure within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population both on a National level and in Victoria. This contrasts significantly with the age structure of non-Indigenous Victorians.

Indigenous Victorians are much younger, with 38.8% under the age of 15 years (compared to 20.3% of non-Indigenous), 57% under the age of 25 years (compared with 34.1% of non-Indigenous), and 2.9% over the age of 65 years (compared with 12.6% of non-Indigenous).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Indigenous population</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous population</th>
<th>Not Stated</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total persons</td>
<td>25,078</td>
<td>4,397,599</td>
<td>189,420</td>
<td>4,612,097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 - 4 years</td>
<td>3,186</td>
<td>280,007</td>
<td>16,422</td>
<td>299,615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - 14 years</td>
<td>6,555</td>
<td>613,808</td>
<td>23,735</td>
<td>644,098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 - 24 years</td>
<td>4,570</td>
<td>605,291</td>
<td>23,282</td>
<td>633,143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 - 44 years</td>
<td>6,971</td>
<td>1,346,091</td>
<td>46,883</td>
<td>1,399,945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 - 64 years</td>
<td>3,050</td>
<td>1,009,952</td>
<td>36,702</td>
<td>1,1049,704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 years +</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>542,450</td>
<td>42,396</td>
<td>585,592</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2003, the national report prepared by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services, *How young Indigenous People are Faring*, warned that:

> It is important to note the different age structure of the Indigenous population (median age of 20 compared with 35 for the non-Indigenous population) and the significant growth in this segment of the population. For example, it is estimated that Indigenous children (aged 0-14) will increase from 4.7% in 2002 up to 7.6% in 2022. While Indigenous people aged between 15 – 24
now form 3.2 per cent of all young people this will at least double over the next twenty years.\textsuperscript{12}

The recent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner’s \textit{Social Justice Report 2005}, noted that the high numbers of children and young people in the Indigenous community pointed to the need for increased service responses to ensure existing disadvantage isn’t further entrenched in the future. The Social Justice Commissioner highlighted the need for more investment to ensure improved outcomes for Indigenous children and young people:

\textit{(T)he young age structure of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population means that the scope of the issues currently being faced is expected to increase in the coming decades. The increase in absolute terms of the size of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth population will require significant increases in services and programs simply to keep pace with demand and maintain the status quo, yet alone to achieve a reduction in existing health inequality. (Chapter 2 – overview)}

The difference in age structure between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Victorians is a reflection of a number of factors, including higher fertility rates, higher mortality, a lower life expectancy and reduced wellbeing.\textsuperscript{13}

There are a range of significant policy implications flowing from the differing age profile between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Victorians. For the non-Indigenous population there is an increasing focus on the needs of an ageing population, which contrasts to needs of a predominately young Indigenous population.\textsuperscript{14} The very high number of young people within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community means not only a need for investment in children, young people and families in the immediate context, but will also have acute implications for the future of communities and for policy and service planning. It should also be noted that given the lack current support for children and young people, a continued focus on secondary and tertiary level services is required.

\textbf{Mortality Rates}

Indigenous Victorians have a significantly higher mortality rate than non-Indigenous Victorians. Life expectancy for Indigenous males is 56.1 years (20.9 years lower than non-Indigenous males) and for indigenous females is 63.5 years (18.5 years less than non-Indigenous females).

In relation to infants, Indigenous communities experience double the total perinatal rate of deaths.

\textbf{Aboriginal-controlled Organisations}

Aboriginal-controlled organisations play an important role in Victoria’s community, both in promoting the wellbeing of Aboriginal communities and in providing direct services. The roles and services of Aboriginal-controlled organisations have evolved and adapted to meet the challenges of today and ensure relevance.
Much of the work of Aboriginal-controlled organisations features strong collaboration with a range of service agencies and partnerships with Government. Aboriginal-controlled organisations increase the reach and efficiency for development and planning of Government initiatives.

Aboriginal-controlled organisations need to be able to provide both services for their own community and ensure that they work closely with generalist (mainstream) services to enable them to be more culturally appropriate. Research demonstrates that most Aboriginal people prefer services provided by Aboriginal-controlled organisations. Some Indigenous people prefer to use mainstream services. This shows there is a need for both an Aboriginal-controlled and non-indigenous service sector.

In the MAC Indigenous Working Group discussions with a range of people it was noted that all small agencies suffer from the lack of economies of scale, but in addition to this, Aboriginal-controlled organisations have additional specific issues including:

- Level of disadvantage in the Aboriginal community
- The representational role of both individuals and agencies
- High and/or unrealistic community expectations
- The skill base available for Boards and staff

**Research and data regarding Indigenous children, young people and families**

It is important to note that available information sources, data and research generally provide a sketchy picture at best of the wellbeing and experiences of Indigenous children, young people and families.

In an analysis of *Research priorities for Indigenous Children and Youth* the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) found that:

> '(w)hilst there is a plethora of information available nationally and internationally in regards to children and young people, in fact there is not a great deal of national research which has been undertaken in regards to Indigenous children and youth in Australia. There is, it seems, even less research relating to Indigenous young people on a state-wide or regional basis.

SNAICC highlight a basic tension in producing research that focuses specifically on Indigenous children and young people when they state that:

> In fact the task of identifying research priorities for Indigenous children and youth is a challenge in itself, given that Indigenous communities generally do not individualise focus on children and young people, but see them rather as members of family and community.

In a report produced by the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service on *the Strengths of Young Kooris* a community member explained that:

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3 *ibid.*
In Koori communities that I know of, kids play a big part in adult life. Kids and adults are not separated.\(^4\)

Given this information, it is very important to be aware of the limitations of non-Aboriginal community controlled research and information available to develop an accurate picture of the experiences and needs of Indigenous children and young people. Further, there are currently very large gaps in the collection of information, particularly in terms of culturally sensitive information.

Key publications

- Muriel Bamblett, Koorie high risk adolescents: Responding to their needs – culture and connection, Presentation to the Aboriginal Human Services Forum, March 2006.
- Victorian Department of Justice, Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement, Department of Justice, Victoria, 2000.
- Victorian Department of Justice, Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 2 (AJA2), State of Victoria, 2006.
APPENDIX 1 - SELF-DETERMINATION

According to UN Human Rights Covenants, self-determination is a collective right exercised by peoples. Professor Daes suggests that “Indigenous groups are ‘peoples’ in every political, social, cultural and ethnological meaning of this term.”

Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) defines the right of self-determination as involving the free choice of political status and the freedom to pursue economic, social and cultural development. The ICCPR is binding on Australia.

There are a range of possible forms of self-determination from self-government or regional autonomy or integration into an existing nation. Professor Daes notes that self-determination for Indigenous peoples,

‘... means that the existing State has the duty to accommodate the aspirations of Indigenous peoples through institutional reforms designed to share power democratically. It also means that Indigenous peoples have the duty to try to reach an agreement, in good faith, on sharing power within the existing State, and to exercise the right to self-determination by this means and other peaceful ways, to the extent possible ... Furthermore, the right of self-determination of indigenous peoples should ordinarily be interpreted as the right to negotiate freely their status and representation in the State in which they live.’

Prior to the election of the Coalition in 1996, Australia, in discussions on the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, defined its understanding of self-determination as meaning

Aboriginal control over the decision-making process as well as control over the ultimate decision about a wide range of matters including political status, and economic, social and cultural development. It means Aboriginal people having the resources and capacity to control the future of their own communities within the legal structure common to all Australians… Indigenous peoples, like all other peoples in independent states with representative government, do not have a right of secession, although they do have a right of self-determination.

Self-determination is recognised internationally as a fundamental human right for individuals and distinct peoples, including Indigenous peoples. Self-determination is also fundamental to restoring the capacity of Victorian Aboriginal communities to overcome disadvantage. We should acknowledge the sovereign rights of Aboriginal peoples as the owners and custodians of their traditional lands and waters. Community-controlled Aboriginal organisations are critical organs for self-determination and locations for communities to meet ensuring that communities have

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7 As quoted by Iorns, 1996 on p. 15
a voice in policy development and directions; and that programs and services are culturally sensitive and appropriately targeted.

The forms of self-determination which Aboriginal communities express include:

- sovereignty - which acknowledges the traditional owners and custodians of the land and waters who have never ceded their sovereign rights;
- the self-determination of Aboriginal peoples who have been forcibly removed from their traditional lands but are still 'peoples', as defined by international human rights conventions;
- self-determination as expressed in community controlled organisations and agencies.
REFERENCES


6...

7 Muriel Bamblett, A Fairer Victoria for Koorie children and families: Is there any chance?


11 Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2001, Catalogue No 4705.0

