



**Australian Government**

**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

# **Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities**

**Submission from the Australian Institute of Family  
Studies**

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The Australian Institute of Family Studies is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities. The Institute's submission is focused on the Committee's third Term of Reference:

(c) the health, welfare, education and security of children in regional and remote Indigenous communities.

In considering the research that the Institute has conducted on a range of matters relating to regional and remote Indigenous communities, we will highlight the following issues:

- the evaluation of Indigenous community development projects funded by the Telstra Foundation;
- issues and “promising practices” in relation to out-of-home care for Indigenous children and young people; and
- key themes from national and international literature on child safety and wellbeing in Indigenous communities.

These projects and literature reviews highlight the diverse needs and issues faced by both regional and remote communities, as well as some innovative community-identified innovations and solutions to problems that are being piloted in various parts of the country.

## ***Evaluation of Indigenous community development projects funded by the Telstra Foundation***

The Institute worked with the Telstra Foundation to document the process and qualitative outcomes of 14 different community development projects the Foundation was funding in various Indigenous communities across Australia (Higgins, 2005).

This project comprised a qualitative evaluation of community-identified initiatives in Indigenous communities that are creating positive opportunities for Indigenous children, and the development of culturally appropriate and effective solutions to meet their needs. The project involved individual interviews, focus groups and site visits.

The 14 projects featured in the report provided examples of what can—and has been—implemented to support Indigenous communities. The projects focused on themes such as:

- children's health, culture and wellbeing;
- young people's participation and leadership (particularly through education and employment programs); and
- the importance of schools, both as a method for delivery of specialist support services and as an opportunity for engaging Indigenous young people in innovative educational opportunities.

Of the 14 projects, nine were based in either regional or remote Indigenous communities. As the focus was addressing community-identified needs, the projects can be taken to be “snapshots” of some of the issues faced by regional and remote Indigenous communities, reflecting their experiences and aspirations. Particular projects focused on issues such as:

- asthma education;
- the re-invigoration of traditional Indigenous games as a way of preserving and promoting culture, as well as fostering physical health and fitness;
- awareness of nutritional needs of children (especially 0–5 year olds);
- literacy resources relevant to the local Indigenous language and culture;
- development of a multimedia cultural database—preserving and promoting culture while teaching transferable information technology skills;
- youth networking, mentoring, education/workforce training participation strategies, and programs that foster awareness and development of new career opportunities for Aboriginal young people; and
- creating appropriate cultural, social, educational and sporting strategies for young people.

All of the projects were aimed at supporting and strengthening families and communities and improving the wellbeing of children. For example, one of the projects profiled in the report was an Indigenous child health and nutrition program in remote communities in the Northern Territory called “Keeping Kids Healthy Makes a Better World”. This community-initiated project led to an increase in nutrition information and observations of families making “healthier” choices at the community store, as well as providing opportunities for better coordination with other organisations in the community to help families address issues such as violence and drug use.

The report highlighted process issues and key learnings from the implementation of the projects, particularly the importance of:

- trust;
- flexibility;
- leveraging project funds to build other opportunities for community development;
- Indigenous leadership; and
- building sustainability.

A community development approach to responding to issues such as child abuse and child wellbeing recognises that it takes time to get to know communities. As demonstrated by Burchill, Higgins, Ramsamy, and Taylor (2006), interventions are perceived as being more effective when they enhance the capacity of local Indigenous grassroots organisations and community groups, and build local knowledge and confidence. While local solutions are needed, it is equally important to have sustainable implementation—not just a series of pilots that raise expectations but end up contributing to a sense of helplessness when funding ends and the program is discontinued (Higgins, 2005a). The problem of “fly-in, fly-out” service models and the importance of culturally appropriate services (e.g., not being talked down to) were also key messages from informants interviewed for the project.

For a copy of the report, see: [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/telstra2/telstra2.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/telstra2/telstra2.html)

### ***Promising practices in Indigenous out-of-home care***

This project, commissioned by the then Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) on behalf of the Australian Council of Children and Parenting (ACCAP) in 2005–06, examined issues in out-of-home care for Indigenous children, young people and their carers. It identified the barriers and strengths to recruitment, retention, training and support of Indigenous carers, and the provision of culturally appropriate services to Indigenous children in care. As well as documenting the significant problems, the project

also identified a number of promising practices that were being developed across the country to address these (see Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005; available at [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/empirical/empirical.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/empirical/empirical.html)).

The project comprised in-depth interviews and focus groups with Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Associations and other key stakeholders; and Indigenous carers, children/young people in care, and care-leavers (see [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/research/menu.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/research/menu.html), then scroll down to “Indigenous Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) project”).

Following on from this initial project, the Institute published a series of papers with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) summarising the key themes that emerged in the study of promising practices in Indigenous out-of-home care. Within the booklets, a range of different initiatives are described that focus on addressing the communities’ need to identify, train and support more carers, so that children who need to be removed from the care of their parents have culturally appropriate placements. (The booklets are available at [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/promisingpractices/booklets/menu.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/promisingpractices/booklets/menu.html)).

For other examples, the SNAICC Resource Service (SRS), seeks to fill resource gaps identified across the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and children’s services sector and provide a central information-sharing hub (see <http://srs.snaicc.asn.au>).

### ***Literature on child safety and wellbeing in Indigenous communities***

As the Institute houses the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, one of our areas of focus is child abuse and neglect. As part of this work, we have undertaken a range of reviews of the relevant literature to understand issues relevant to child safety in Indigenous communities. We provide a brief overview of this work here.

### **Contextualising child protection issues in Indigenous communities**

Indigenous people across Australia face a range of economic and social disadvantages, and the risk factors for child abuse can therefore be more readily seen in these communities.

The demographic profile of Indigenous communities is different to many other parts of Australia. Indigenous Australians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) make up 2.4% of the total population. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), there were 454,796 Indigenous people living in Australia at 8 August 2006. Of all the states/territories, New South Wales had the largest Indigenous population, followed by Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory (NT). However, the NT had the highest *proportion* of Indigenous people (27.8%), and Victoria the lowest (0.6%) (see Table 1). While the majority of Indigenous people live in cities and towns, the Indigenous population is more widely dispersed across Australia than the non-Indigenous population (ABS, 2006).

**Table 1. Indigenous population in each state and territory**

Jurisdiction	Total population	Indigenous population	Proportion of population that is Indigenous
ACT	324,034	3,873	1.2%
NSW	6,549,179	138,504	2.1%
NT	192,899	53,663	27.8%
Qld	3,904,532	127,581	3.3%
SA	1,514,337	25,556	1.7%

Tas.	476,479	16,770	3.5%
Vic.	4,932,419	30,140	0.6%
WA	1,959,088	58,709	2.9%

Source: ABS Census, 2006

The Indigenous population is considerably younger than the non-Indigenous population. In 2001, 40% of Indigenous people were aged less than 15 years, compared with 21% of non-Indigenous people. Only 2.6% of the Indigenous population were aged 65 years or over, compared with 12% of the non-Indigenous population. Indigenous youths were more likely to be imprisoned than the general population, and the rate of suicides in police custody was high. Rates of unemployment, health problems and poverty were likewise higher for Indigenous Australians than the general population, and rates for school retention and university attendance were much lower than the general population (ABS, 2003).

According to the 2001 Census, Indigenous children (up to 14 years old) comprised 4.5% of the population of Australian children (Pieris-Caldwell, 2005). Indigenous families were larger—and younger—than non-Indigenous families; in fact, half of the Indigenous population was aged 19 or under (Gray, 2006). The average household size across all Australians in 2002 was 2.6 people, but for Indigenous households it was 3.5. Similarly, the total fertility rate in 2003 was estimated at 1.76 babies per woman, but was 2.15 for Indigenous women (Gray, 2006).

Indigenous children suffer from more preventable illnesses, malnutrition, communicable diseases, mental health and substance abuse, and have poorer access to medical and mental health services than non-Indigenous children. Many Indigenous communities live in substandard housing (overcrowding, inadequate water and washing facilities, poor sanitation and limited food storage). Indigenous young people have lower levels of participation and completion in formal education, and consequently poorer educational outcomes. These issues have been well documented in the Productivity Commission report, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2007* (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGSP], 2007).

Many other factors affect Indigenous communities: Indigenous children are over-represented in child protection systems—including out-of-home care—in all jurisdictions, including the Northern Territory. They are 6.5 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be in foster, kinship or residential out-of-home care.

The pattern of substantiated abuse and neglect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children differs from the pattern for other children. Indigenous children are more likely than non-Indigenous children to be reported to child protection authorities because of neglect or sexual abuse, rather than emotional or physical abuse (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2004). In 2003–04, Indigenous children were much more likely to be the subject of a substantiation of neglect than other children. For example, in Western Australia, 43% of Indigenous children in substantiated cases were the subjects of a substantiation of neglect, compared with 27% of other children. In the Northern Territory, the corresponding percentages were 40% and 26% respectively.

### Impact of colonisation

From a public health perspective, understanding the causes of a phenomenon such as violence in Aboriginal communities is essential to putting in place appropriate interventions to reduce and prevent violence and its impact on individuals and families. In order to understand the current issues facing Indigenous communities, it is vital to

understand the history of colonisation—oppression, dispossession and marginalisation—and its impact on all aspects of the lives, culture, mores and spirituality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see Burchill & Higgins, 2005). Understanding the impact of colonisation does *not* excuse the behaviour of individual perpetrators of child abuse, but it does point to ways of trying to prevent the problem by understanding some of the systemic drivers.

Approximately one-third of the Indigenous population have a relative who as a child was removed from their family (Gray, 2006). In Western Australia, 35.3% of Indigenous children were living in a household where either their parent or grandparent were forcibly separated from their natural family—but there were significant regional variations, with the highest rate of separation recorded in Broome (Silburn et al., 2006). They demonstrated statistically that children from these families were more than twice as likely to have clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties—particularly where both their primary carer, and the primary carer’s mother had been forcibly separated from their families.

Westerman (1997a, 1997b) described a range of government policies that have had a significant impact on Aboriginal people, particularly the assimilationist policies of the 1940s to 1960s. Many authors have argued how intergenerational trauma from the Stolen Generations and other aspects of cultural dislocation resonates in every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person (Atkinson, 2002). Past policies of child removal have damaged culture, family ties, and modelling of parental and cultural roles (for example, see Dodson & Hunter, 2006, and Silburn et al., 2006, for an overview of the evidence on the impact of forced separation and relocation on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people in Western Australia).

Aboriginal families who are not able to provide basic love and nurturing may not have had the opportunity themselves to grow up in a strong, healthy family and community where they could learn to look after children and understand safe and sustainable childrearing practices. The removal policies and other legislation were based on the assumption that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were incapable and not competent to raise their children, despite the fact that within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the simple practice of having many mothers, fathers and grandparents to care for kin is acceptable. However, the close cultural kinship ties that existed previously within Indigenous communities across Australia have been eroded (Burchill & Higgins, 2005).

The *Bringing Them Home* report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 1997) documented the impact of past policies of forced removal and cultural assimilation, and since then, there has been little evidence of any reduction in the rate of removal of Indigenous children into out-of-home care (see Burchill & Higgins, 2005). The combined effects of the intergenerational impact of past “welfare” practices and current levels of social and economic disadvantage are two key factors identified in the shortage of Indigenous carers available to care for Indigenous children in the out-of-home care systems across Australia (Bromfield, Higgins, Higgins, & Richardson, 2007).

### **Cultural safety**

Central to Indigenous perspectives on child protection and child safety is to “understand the important role culture can play in developing resilience for Aboriginal children” (Higgins & Butler, 2007, p. 12).

“Cultural safety” is a term developed in New Zealand to describe circumstances where there is no assault on a person’s identity (Williams, 1999). Williams argued that the

people most able or equipped to provide a culturally safe atmosphere are people from the same culture. Williams (1999) claimed “culturally safe environments for Indigenous peoples are rare, in any area of service delivery”. She provided an outline of the basic principles of cultural safety, starting with the overarching one of respect for culture, knowledge, experience and obligations. It involves the ability to feel safe expressing one’s culture, and feeling “listened to”. Zon, Lindeman, Williams, Hayes, Ross, and Furber (2004) applied the concept of “cultural safety” specifically to the context of child protection, describing some of the challenges that emerge in applying the concept to casework in Alice Springs. In particular, they highlighted the importance of having shared understandings of cultural safety across organisations.

Cultural safety needs to be embedded in understandings of risk assessment, approaches to strengthening families, statutory child protection work, and out-of-home care. For example, in a study that the Institute conducted on issues for Indigenous children in out-of-home care and their carers, the young people who participated in a focus group raised three key issues that they saw as important:

- connection to family;
- connection to community; and
- connection to culture (Higgins, Bromfield, Higgins, & Richardson, 2006).

For these young people, their desire to maintain their connections to family, community and culture was articulated, rather than notions of “keep me safe”. They wanted help for their parents (e.g., to stop drinking), so that they could return home. Cultural safety involves ensuring these young people are culturally safe while they are placed away from the care of their immediate family, but it also ensures taking all necessary steps to provide the best chance of reunification with family (Higgins et al., 2006).

### **Risk factors identified in the child abuse literature**

In attempting to explain why child maltreatment occurs, researchers began by focusing on single causal factors. However, the socio-cultural context of child maltreatment is now well recognised, and this emphasises the importance of viewing child abuse and neglect within the context of the child, family, their local community and society. Child maltreatment is often a part of broader family problems such as unemployment, mental illness or substance abuse. In addition, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s experiences of social dislocation, while closely associated with poverty, are also connected with experiences of colonisation. Poverty is also a crucial factor associated with family breakdown, child neglect and child removal: “impoverished communities raise impoverished children” (Cadd, 2002, p. 1).

Although in some cases a single factor can lead to an increased propensity for maltreatment, in other cases it is a range of risk factors acting in interaction with whatever protective factors (“resiliency”) are available to the family that determine increases in the probability of abuse or neglect. It is important to note, however, that the *presence* of an indicator or sign does not always indicate that a child *is* being abused. Nor does the *absence* of a sign indicate that the child is *not* being abused.

At present, *poverty*, *unemployment* and *incapacitated caregivers* are particular risks for child maltreatment (often because of factors such as substance abuse, mental illness or an intellectual disability) that are creating significant difficulties for child protection and family support agencies. Difficulties in dealing with such families are exacerbated by the lack of universal services (primary prevention), although this is improving. There is also a significant lack of services for those families who are “at risk” of maltreating their child (secondary prevention), and for whom effective service provision may reduce the risk of

actual harm (see Bromfield & Holzer, 2008). This is particularly problematic in remote communities, where service of any kind is made more difficult due to distance and low population density.

One of the issues commonly raised by commentators in relation to Indigenous communities and the risk of abuse is that of “overcrowding”. This relates to two of the empirically demonstrated risk factors—poverty, and number of children in the household.

The relationship of Indigenous communities to the broader society (racism, disadvantage, social exclusion) needs to be considered as a risk factor for abuse. This ties in with the empirical evidence for “social exclusion” as a risk factor for child maltreatment. Indigenous people across Australia face a range of economic and social disadvantages, and the risk factors for child abuse can therefore be more readily seen in these communities. For an overview of risk factors for child abuse and neglect, see the bibliography on risk factors on the National Child Protection Clearinghouse website ([www.aifs.gov.au/nch/bib/risk.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/bib/risk.html)).

### **Child maltreatment and disadvantage**

A simple examination of the statistics showing an over-representation of Indigenous children and young people in the child protection and out-of-home care systems does not answer *why* this occurs. Such correlational data need to be examined in detail to see whether there is something inherent in Indigenous populations, in the policies and procedures of authorities (such as overt or covert racism, which may mean that problems in Indigenous families are more likely to be observed and come to the attention of authorities), or whether such overrepresentation can be explained by some other underlying causes (e.g., socio-economic disadvantage).

Canada is a useful point of comparison due to its common colonial history, its past assimilationist practices, and its similar province-based child protection systems. Using data from the 1998 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, Gough, Trocmé, Brown, Knoke, & Blackstock (2005) found that differences in rates of out-of-home care (i.e., where child abuse is severe enough for children not to be able to remain safely within the care of their parent/s) could be accounted for by the socio-economic conditions of families, and parental problems such as drug and alcohol use. They concluded that the “rates of placement for Aboriginal children were similar to the rates for non-Aboriginal children in families facing similar difficulties” (Gough et al., 2005, p. 2). These difficulties that parents/families face, which account for the differences observed in their analysis, included:

- welfare dependence;
- unsafe housing;
- multiple moves;
- previous child protection notifications (particularly neglect);
- parental drug/alcohol abuse;
- parental criminal activity;
- parental cognitive impairment;
- parental history of maltreatment during childhood;
- two-parent blended or single-parent families; and
- lack of social support (Gough et al., 2005).



Regardless of whether families were Indigenous or not, children had a higher chance of being placed in out-of-home care when they had two or more behavioural concerns, as well as the characteristics identified above.

From an Indigenous perspective, the key messages in relation to child protection appear to be: (a) recognise the importance of local community “ownership” of processes and programs; and (b) ensure “cultural safety” in all activities. In this report, we have highlighted broader structural issues that Indigenous communities face. The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection and out-of-home care statistics is a reflection of the wider problems of economic disadvantage, lower education and employment levels, poorer health outcomes and shorter life expectancies experienced by Indigenous Australians (ABS, 2003). The material disadvantage and trauma associated with past welfare practices, such as the removal of children from their parents, also need to be considered in developing strategies for addressing the safety and wellbeing needs of children (Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005).

## Conclusion

In this submission, we have drawn attention to a range of research studies conducted at the Institute that shows both the challenges and some innovative community-led solutions to the issues faced by Indigenous Australians living in regional and remote areas. We draw the attention of the Committee to these reports, and are happy to assist with any further information that may be requested concerning these projects.

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