

# 1. The Indigenous lifecourse: Introduction and overview

## Introduction

Across almost all standard indicators including employment, education, housing, income and health, the Indigenous population has worse outcomes than the non-Indigenous population (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) 2009). In his apology to the stolen generations in early 2008, Australia's then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd outlined a 'new partnership on closing the gap'. The focus of this partnership, from the government's point of view, was a number of explicit targets aimed at eliminating or at least substantially reducing these disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The statistics on Indigenous disadvantage are well-known by both researchers and policy-makers. Furthermore, keen attention is paid to how the relevant outcomes are trending through time with a major report to parliament every two years on 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage' (SCRGSP 2009) as well as a smaller report every year that documents progress made against the six Closing the Gap targets (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) 2009). Despite the abundance of statistics and a plethora of government reports on the degree of disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians, there is very little information on how Indigenous disadvantage accumulates or is mitigated through time at the individual level. Particular outcomes for the Indigenous population as a whole may be getting better or worse through time, but whether this represents substantial change for individual Indigenous Australians is not known. Furthermore, research on other population groups would suggest a correlation between disadvantaged circumstances as a child and poor outcomes as an adult. However, the extent to which this holds for the Indigenous population is unclear. It is perhaps not surprising that there is a dearth of research on these issues, as the longitudinal data sets that are increasingly being mined for such information on the total population do not contain a sufficient sample for detailed analysis of the Indigenous population. The Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children

both have small Indigenous samples.<sup>1</sup> The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children has the potential to provide some information on the developmental pathways of two cohorts of children aged 6–18 months and 3½–4½ years respectively. However this study is only in its infancy, with the most relevant longitudinal information still a number of years away.

Although a relative lack of longitudinal information on the Indigenous population precludes answering a number of key research questions, there is much that can still be learned from a detailed analysis of single or repeated cross-sections. In particular, by focusing on the current age distribution of outcomes, it is possible to gain insight into the timing of key life stages and the extent to which they differ for the Indigenous compared to the non-Indigenous population. Furthermore, by looking at the demographic and socioeconomic correlates of these outcomes and whether they vary by age and/or Indigenous status, it may be possible to identify key points of policy intervention across the Indigenous lifecourse.

## Analysis of the lifecourse

In all human societies, individuals occupy a multitude of interlinked but chronologically overlapping roles. Defining the lifecourse as ‘a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time’ (Giele and Elder 1998: 22), there are a number of common pathways that a person might take. Within the economic sphere in a modern Western society, an individual might start off as a dependent child, enter preschool, complete infants or primary then secondary school, undertake some post-compulsory training or study, enter the workforce, and eventually retire. Parallel to their economic life, the same person might get married, have children, then become grandparents. While this description may seem typical, it is far from universal, with the details and timing of major life events and roles varying substantially. In terms of education, some people will have minimal interaction with post-compulsory schooling, where others will spend their late teens and early twenties undertaking university study. Another group will engage with formal education as a mature-age student only. The different permutations with regards to marriage, fertility decisions and child-rearing are greater still.

There are a number of factors that impact on the specifics of a person’s lifecourse. The most obvious source of variation is gender. While there has been considerable convergence in terms of lifetime employment over the last few decades (Daly 2000), the impact of childbirth and family formation is still

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on these surveys go to <http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/> and <http://www.aifs.gov.au/growingup/> respectively.

much stronger on average for females compared to males. More females leave the labour force after becoming parents and a greater proportion undertake part-time work on their return (Baxter 2005). Another source of variation in the lifecourse is socioeconomic background or social class. By definition, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds start off their lives in households with access to fewer resources and poorer employment opportunities. However, when those children themselves grow up, they are more likely to have children at a relatively young age, are less likely to undertake and complete post-compulsory education, and have more precarious employment and income (Caldas 1993). Clearly, there is no single lifecourse. Rather, there are multiple events and experiences that, when combined, define the particular path that each individual's life takes. A lifecourse framework thus provides a perspective for looking at individual experiences, how different factors influence variation in these experiences, as well as the institutional and policy frameworks that shape a person's constraints and opportunities.

The idea of cumulative advantage and disadvantage makes the life course a useful framework for helping to determine the influence of earlier life events on later life and the interconnectedness of the various stages (O'Rand 1996). Some of these variations across individuals such as socioeconomic status prevail over the life time. There are four key insights from lifecourse analysis that are of particular relevance for this study – history, linked lives, institutions and human agency. While they may seem obvious, they are often overlooked when analysing Indigenous disadvantage and setting Indigenous policy.

Firstly, people's lives are shaped by the social and environment conditions in which they are born and exposed to (Elder 1994). It is clear that the circumstances of a person's childhood matters for the options and constraints that they face in adolescence and adulthood. Even at birth, an Indigenous infant already faces different circumstances. They are more likely to have low birth weight and face higher risks of mortality (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2008). They are also less likely to participate in early childhood education (Biddle 2010). These factors combined are likely to have long-term impacts over the lifecourse. The individual life course reflects the times in which the individuals live. The most obvious example is the labeling of birth cohorts such as baby boomers or generation Y to reflect the sort of labour market, social norms and lifestyles individuals in the respective birth cohorts are born into. Another example is the changing gender roles in society and the workplace.

Secondly, lifecourse analysis reinforces the fact that individual lives and the subdomains within their lives are inexplicably linked. This is most obvious when one considers the influence of a parent's lifecourse on that of their children, but it is also true when it comes to siblings, peers and neighbours (Edwards 2005). Putting these two together, it is not surprising that Héroult and Kalb (2009) find

a significant correlation between parental and child employment in Australia (especially for males), even after controlling for the intergenerational education correlation. The 'linked lives' perspective is one that is particularly pertinent to the Indigenous population, given the social structures and kinship networks within Indigenous societies which provide an important source of support and care giving. The interconnectedness between the domains of work and education, family formation and health at the individual level is also reflected in the life course concept. The timing and ordering of the transitions between these domains produce differences in life pathways for the individual within a birth cohort. Early parenthood for Indigenous mothers for instance inevitably alters the course of education to work transition as well as their later life status

The third insight from lifecourse analysis is that institutions and policies can shape trajectories. A particularly relevant example of this for the Indigenous population is the forcible removal of children from their parents – known as the Stolen Generation in Australia (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997).<sup>2</sup> These policies have been shown to have long-lasting negative effects on the outcomes of those who were impacted directly, as well as their families. On the other hand, the provision of high quality public preschooling has been shown to have enduring, positive effects on the behavioural outcomes of those who attend (Schweinhart et al. 2005). More recently, the policy of increasing minimum school-leaving age in several jurisdictions could potentially alter education and work patterns.

The final insight from lifecourse analysis is the continued importance of human agency. While acknowledging the impact of early childhood, family and institutions, individuals continue to make decisions that have long-lasting impacts. Fertility, education and migration decisions can all shape a person's lifecourse (Elder 1999), as evidenced by falling fertility rates over the last two decades alongside increases in women's participation in education.

## **An Indigenous lifecourse?**

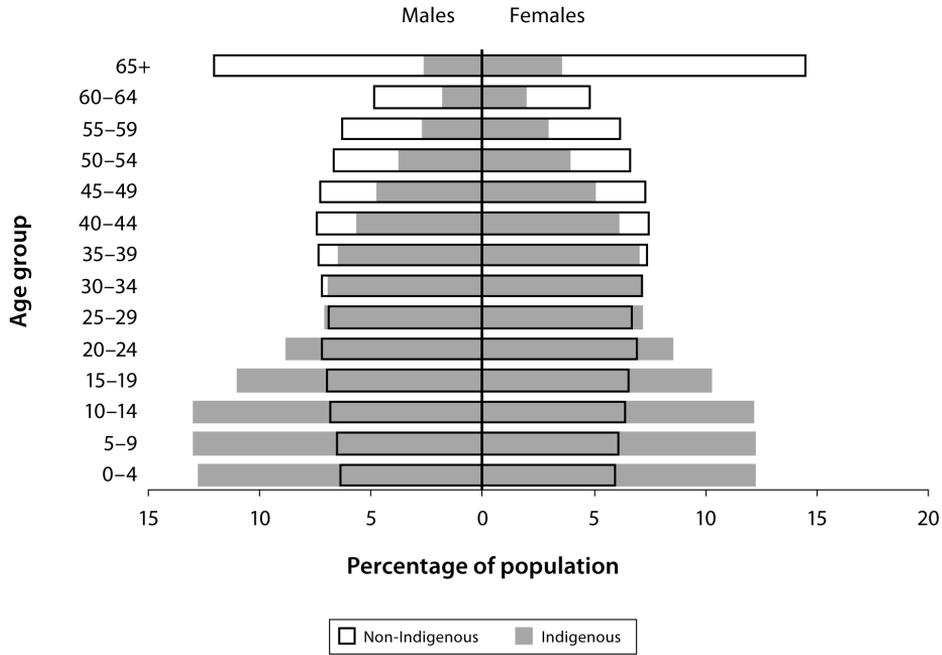
While the implications of an ageing population have been researched widely, very little is known about the experiences of the Indigenous lifecourse. Research devoted to the lifecourse of Indigenous Australians is particularly important not only because of the public policy focus on this population but also because of its relatively young age profile compared to the rest of the population. This is

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<sup>2</sup> Cooke and McWhirter (2008) observe that Residential Schools in North America was a similar situation for the Canadian First Nations population.

demonstrated in Fig. 1.1, which gives the percentage of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population by sex in each five-year age group (with all those 65 years and over grouped together).

**Fig. 1.1 Age distribution of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, 2006**



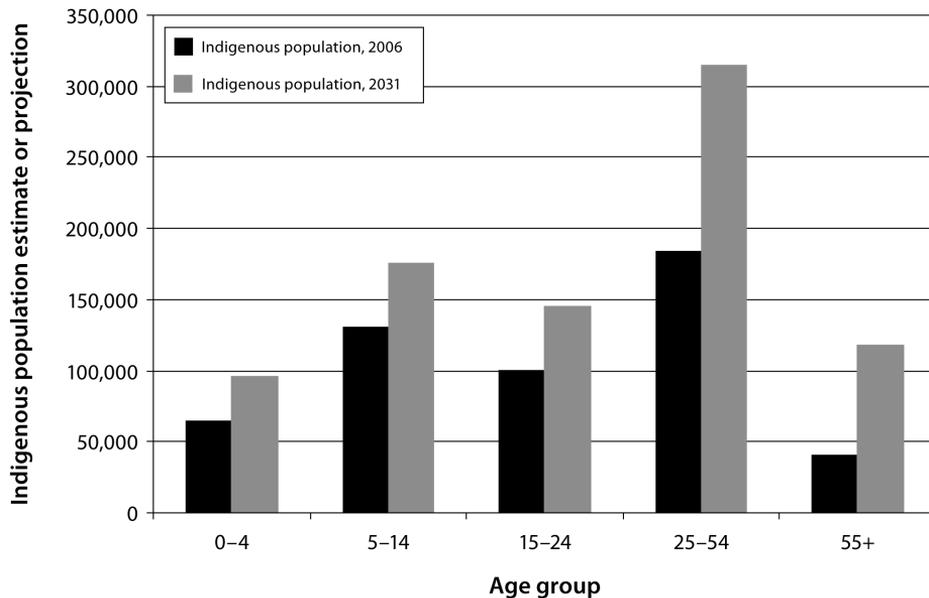
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2008b

For both males and females, each of the first four age groups contain 10 per cent or more of the Indigenous population. Putting these groups together with those aged 20–24 years, 56.9 per cent of the Indigenous population in 2006 is aged under 25 years. On the other hand, only 11.6 per cent of the Indigenous population is aged 50 years and over. Compared to this, the non-Indigenous population of Australia is highly skewed towards the upper end of the age distribution. Only 32.9 per cent of the population is aged under 25 years, compared to 31 per cent of the population aged 50 years and over.

The age distributions summarised in Fig. 1.1 highlight a potential gap in the focus and purpose of social and economic policy between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. For the non-Indigenous population, policy is increasingly concerned with the effects and implications of ageing and retirement funding, as outlined in detail in the most recent Intergenerational Report (Commonwealth Treasury 2010). For Indigenous Australians on the other hand, the focus of social and economic policy remains fixed on the provision of education, training and entry into employment (SCRGSP 2009). Ultimately, the

extent to which the outcomes of the young Indigenous population are brought into line with that of the non-Indigenous population will determine to a large degree the need for more expensive policy interventions and catch-up into the future. Those looking for work and raising children in 15–25 years time will be those in preschool, primary and secondary school now. This is made abundantly clear when one considers the population projections provided in Biddle and Taylor (2009). These are summarised in Fig. 1.2, which shows the Indigenous population in 2006, the projected population in 2031 and, in Fig. 1.3, the percentage of the total population that are projected to identify as being Indigenous in those two years. Results are presented separately for five policy-relevant age groups.

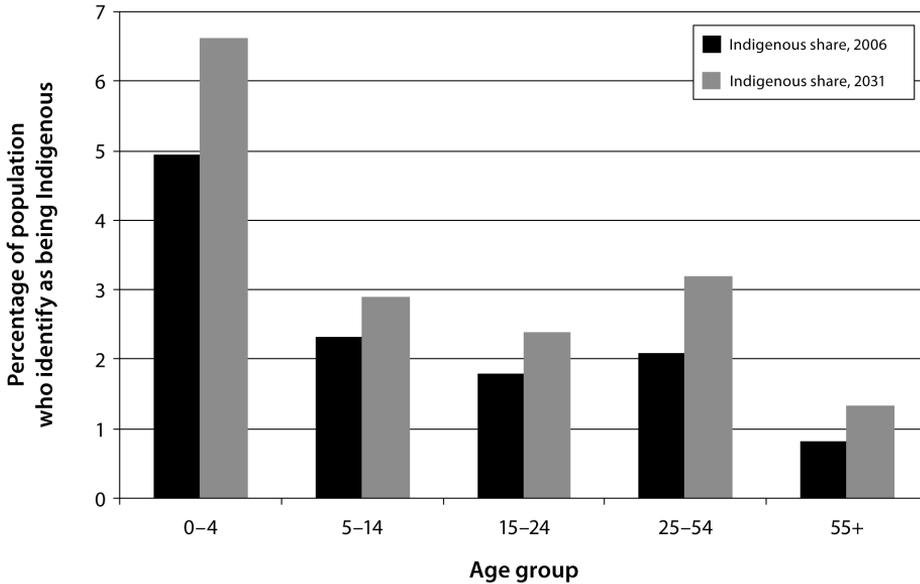
**Fig. 1.2 Indigenous population, 2006 and 2031 (projection)**



Source: Biddle and Taylor (2009)

Within a total projected increase for the Indigenous population as a whole from around 517 000 in 2006 to around 848 000 in 2031, Biddle and Taylor (2009) project large increases in the Indigenous population for all age groups. In raw terms and as a percentage of the total population, the entire Indigenous population is projected to grow rapidly over the period. However, particular age groups are projected to grow at a faster rate than others. The population of prime working age (25–54 years old) is projected to increase from around 183 000 in 2006 to around 315 000 in 2031. The population that are around retirement age or older (55 years and above) is projected to grow even faster still, almost tripling from around 40 000 in 2006 to around 118 000 in 2031.

**Fig. 1.3 Share of total population who identify as being Indigenous, 2006 and 2031 (projection)**



Source: Biddle and Taylor (2009)

While there is substantial diversity within the Indigenous population (as shown throughout this volume), it is clear that for most standard socioeconomic measures, the Indigenous population has worse outcomes than the non-Indigenous population (SCRGSP 2009). The question posed in this study is whether there are particular characteristics of the lifecourse that explain or are explained by this disadvantage. We know, for example, that Indigenous Australians are less likely to attend and complete education: the question is whether those who do undertake education do so at different stages in their lives. Similarly, we know that Indigenous Australians are less likely to be employed than the non-Indigenous population: the question is whether this difference is greater or smaller at particular life stages.

One key difference historically between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is the importance placed on chronological age as a social marker. While birth year locates a person in time, social age locates roles within the social structure (Elder and Rockwell 1979). For the Indigenous population, lifecourse stages are events and transitions in life through which cultural obligations are met and rituals carried out. For example, at a period in life where Western education expects attendance at school and training to progress from primary through secondary, Aboriginal boys progress in stages to manhood with potentially quite different priorities and expectations (Taylor 2009: 122).

In addition, it is not uncommon for young Aboriginal females to experience motherhood during their teenage years, which means that their transition from school to work is often interrupted.

Another difference between the Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous population is the particular familial and kinship structures. While the nuclear family of two parents and their children is cemented in Western European history and current government policy, a more fluid and contingent system continues to prevail in Indigenous culture and society (Morphy 2006). Indigenous households tend to consist of multiple generations and are compositionally complex in terms of who is considered kin (Finlayson, Daly and Smith 2000). Extended kin relations provide significant social support in childcare arrangements, providing care for their children as well as children of families within the network. Parallel to that, being a part of an extensive network means there are obligations and expectations of sharing of resources, both economic and social which underpin Aboriginal families and communities (Schwab and Liddle 1997).

There is diversity in which the Indigenous lifecourse is experienced. Human agency or the right to pursue the life which the individual desires plays an important role in the trajectories which the individual faces. While the individual is an active agent in the process shaping their lifecourse, cultural norms and expectations often bound the processes. Morphy (2007) gives the example of a youth who has to fulfil obligations expected of him as ritual expert and yet aspires to gain further Western educational qualifications. This is evidence of a constant conflict between cultural obligations and individual aspirations as Indigenous people move along their life pathways.

Geography also shapes the kind of lifecourse an individual faces. In Canada, findings suggest that the transition experiences of First Nations youth living on-reserve are markedly different to those living off-reserve (Taylor and Steinhauer 2008). Like in Canada, the majority of the Australia Indigenous population lives in cities and other large urban centres (Biddle 2009a). However, compared to the non-Indigenous population, Indigenous Australians are much more likely to reside in remote Australia. This is demonstrated in Fig. 1.4, which shows the percentage of the population across Australia who identify as being Indigenous (through the shading on the map) as well as the percentage of the total Indigenous population who live in that region (in brackets after the region name). Results are given for 37 Indigenous Regions, the least disaggregated level



homogeneous Indigenous lifecourse is also unrealistic. As this paper will show, there is significant variation within the Indigenous population, just as there is between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Nonetheless, this paper will also show that there are a number of policy-relevant patterns that are common for a number of Indigenous Australians.

A similar lifecourse approach has been used to look at Indigenous populations in Canada. Cooke and McWhirter (2008) investigated the applicability and usefulness of the lifecourse as a research framework for understanding Aboriginal inequality in Canada. Their findings suggest that Aboriginal peoples experience different events, with different timing and sequences from those experienced by the general Canadian population. They observed a pattern of increasing disadvantage over the lifecourse for Aboriginal Canadians, in particular in health status and the probability of having low income. This was largely attributed to the low levels of accumulation of human, social and financial resources. In Australia, the idea of using a lifecourse approach to analyse Indigenous inequality has not been explored to the extent it has been in Canada. However, the policies and frameworks which have been developed to reduce Indigenous disadvantage recognise at least implicitly the impact of cumulative disadvantage and the importance of key life stages and transitions. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Closing the Gap agenda, for example, has policies ranging from early childhood education and student participation to transition to employment and life expectancy. The Productivity Commission's Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Framework (SCRGSP 2009) more explicitly utilises a lifecourse perspective by considering outcomes from birth to adulthood across a range of indicators. All this in essence points to the usefulness of looking at the development of Indigenous lives using a lifecourse framework.

Longitudinal data allows the researcher to follow the processes in which individuals live their lives. Cross sectional data, on the other hand, can only point to age specific probabilities within a domain or set of domains. So, while the monograph highlights difference between a 30–34 year old and a 50–54 year old in 2006 (for example), how the characteristics of an individual Indigenous Australian changed over a 20-year period is not known. While the research is limited in that aspect, we make recommendations on how the current data collection mechanisms could be extended to allow the experience of various similar age cohorts to be compared over time. Nonetheless, the life course framework provides a useful starting point for connecting together the various stages in the life span with the view that advantage and disadvantage is cumulative and that earlier life events affect later life outcomes. In this

monograph, analysis of cross section data across the age groups therefore serves as an initial framework of examining the timing of life events and how they differ across age, gender and ethnicity.

## Overview

The aim of this monograph is to analyse the timing of key stages and events across the Indigenous lifecourse. The analysis utilises data from the ABS 2006 5% Census Sample File (CSF), hereafter referred to as the '5% CSF'. As outlined in the following chapter, this dataset allows for analysis of the individual outcomes of 22 437 Indigenous Australians and 913 262 non-Indigenous Australians – a much larger sample size than any dataset previously available to researchers outside the ABS.

Chapter 2 also outlines a methodological approach that consists of identifying a number of dependent variables across seven broad topics. By utilising a regression-style approach using individual data, it is possible to answer the following specific research questions for each of the dependent variables:

- How does the probability of having that dependent variable vary across the lifecourse?
- Does this probability vary by sex?
- Is there any difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the probability after controlling for age and sex?
- Is there still variation across the lifecourse after controlling for geography and other socioeconomic outcomes?
- Is there still a significant difference between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population after controlling for these characteristics in addition to variation across the lifecourse?
- Do the patterns across the lifecourse and associations with the other demographic, geographic and socioeconomic characteristics hold for the Indigenous population in isolation?

Chapters 3–9 of the monograph look at one or more dependent variables from each of the topics outlined below.

In Chapter 3 we examine two major events that occur across a number of people's lifecourse – getting married and/or having children. We begin with an analysis of the probability of being in a registered or de facto marriage, and then move on to consider the factors associated with the number of children that a female has ever given birth to, as well as whether or not a person provided unpaid child care. Chapter 4 deals with migration and mobility. There is a widely held view

that Indigenous Australians are highly mobile. In this chapter we consider the factors associated with residential and temporary mobility. While on average more Indigenous Australians changed usual residence in the years that preceded the census or were away from their place of usual residence on census night, there is also substantial variation across the lifecourse for both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population in terms of residential and temporary mobility.

Chapter 5 is concerned with participation in education. For many people, formal education is a defining feature of their lifecourse. Those who complete secondary school have generally undertaken 12–13 years of schooling, with post-school education adding a number of additional years of study for a sizeable proportion of the population. Furthermore, those who complete additional years of education tend to have better outcomes across a range of areas including employment, income and health. There are a number of important aspects of education that are not observable on the census including attendance, grades, and literacy and numeracy outcomes. However, it is possible to observe whether or not a person is a student at the time of the census, and in this chapter we consider the factors associated with education participation across adulthood, as well as the education sector in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous school students typically participate.

Chapter 6 recognises that across much of Australia, employment remains one of the key protective factors against poverty and social exclusion. However, even during the most recent period of rapid economic growth (when the last census was undertaken) many individuals were still struggling to find and maintain stable, well-paid employment. On the other hand, there are a number of times across the lifecourse when mainstream employment, and full-time employment in particular, is not the preferred option. This includes during full-time study, during times of childbearing and rearing, after retirement and, especially for the Indigenous population, whilst participating in activities in the customary economy. In this chapter we consider the factors associated with employment, part-time as opposed to full-time employment, and occupational status. Furthermore, we present for the first time results that analyse participation in voluntary work and unpaid domestic work across the lifecourse for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians separately.

One of the most disruptive influences on a person being able to lead the lives that they desire is a lack of access to adequate shelter and housing. Dwellings that are overcrowded are likely to contribute to poor health and also make it difficult for children living there to undertake education. However, the ability of individuals to take control of their own housing situation is determined by their current tenure situation. In Chapter 7 we consider two aspects of housing across the lifecourse – tenure type (including owner occupied, private rental and community or government rental), and household overcrowding. One of

the most common measures of the average lifecourse is life expectancy, although it is not always thought of that way. Estimates of life expectancy are generally constructed as the number of years that a child born today would expect to live based on the current age distribution of deaths. In other words, how long their lifecourse might expect to be. Although life expectancy estimates are not based on census data only, one of the key features of the Indigenous lifecourse is a shorter than average duration, and in Chapter 8 we consider how survival probabilities vary across the lifecourse for the Indigenous compared to the non-Indigenous population. Although the measure is far from perfect, we also consider the factors associated with an individual in the census reporting a need for assistance in undertaking a 'core activity'.

In the final section of results presented in the monograph, Chapter 9 returns to the analysis of the typical Indigenous childhood. In particular, we focus on three potential aspects of the childhood experience that have been shown to have an effect on long-term outcomes. These are living in a single-parent family, living in a 'low education' household and living in a 'jobless' household. We consider these aspects of childhood in isolation, as well as the intersection and interaction between them. Chapter 10 summarises the main results from this analysis and draws out a number of policy implications. The final section of Chapter 10 outlines a research agenda on the Indigenous lifecourse, based on either international comparisons or new data that will progressively become available.