

1. Towards a broader understanding of Indigenous disadvantage

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Indigenous policy is a diverse and complex domain motivated by a range of social, cultural, political and economic issues. One central component of current Indigenous policy is the Australian Government's stated aim to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes. This focus on Indigenous disadvantage is not new and has a considerable pre-history. Under the Hawke government in the 1980s there was considerable concentration on 'statistical equality'. The Howard government placed more emphasis on 'practical reconciliation', which focuses on employment, which he juxtaposed with 'symbolic reconciliation' that was claimed to have been excessively emphasised in the recent past. The 'closing the gaps' agenda is the latest manifestation of the desire to understand Indigenous disadvantage in terms of clear, well defined and measurable outcomes that can inform and, in some sense, is amenable to policy actions.

The language of closing the gap was first used to describe Maori disadvantage in New Zealand in 1999, but it is not entirely clear that gaps have closed substantially in that country (Comer 2008). One issue is that there was a tendency to measure what could be measured rather than what should be measured. That is, rather than understanding and acting where possible, on the processes that lead to the outcomes, the focus has been on small changes in relative outcomes of Maori and other New Zealanders.

The term has a much shorter history in the Australian context. In 2005, Tom Calma called for the governments of Australia to commit to achieving equality for Indigenous people in the areas of health and life expectancy within a generation or 25 years (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2005). This call was manifested in the National Indigenous Health Equality Campaign in 2006 with the 'Close the gap' campaign being formally launched in April 2007. Within a year, Council of Australian Governments (COAG) committed to closing the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. However, the agenda has expanded considerably since this initial focus on life expectancy and now includes these six 'Closing the Gap' targets (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2010):

1. Close the life expectancy gap within a generation
2. Halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade

3. Ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities within five years
4. Halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade
5. Halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020, and
6. Halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

As the name suggests, one of the objectives of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) is to analyse and inform Indigenous policy in Australia and hence the COAG framework is central to its research. CAEPR research informs the debate about the prospects for closing the gaps as well as analysing what policy setting are best able to address the needs of Indigenous Australians (Altman, Biddle and Hunter 2008). On 11–12 April 2011 CAEPR, in conjunction with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), organised a conference at The Australian National University (ANU) called ‘Social Science Perspectives on the 2008 National and Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Social Survey’, or the National and Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) Conference, for short.¹

We chose the 2008 NATSISS as the basis for the conference as it is the only large quantitative survey in Australia (and indeed the world) that has information on a range of topics designed by and for the Indigenous population for a large nationally representative sample across all ages. In total, there were around 7 800 respondents aged 15 years and over alongside 5 484 respondents aged 0–14 years.

Data for the NATSISS was collected using face-to-face interviews, with enumeration taking place between August 2008 and April 2009. Topics in the survey include language and culture; social networks and support; health; education; labour force status; housing; and financial stress.

There are a number of limitations of the NATSISS which were discussed at the conference. However, as editors and conference organisers, our main aim was to initiate a conversation between stakeholders and academics about data and the research required to enhance the social science evidence base around Indigenous wellbeing and socioeconomic disadvantage. This monograph collates many of the papers presented to that conference.

¹ The conference was co-sponsored by ANU, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and The Economic Society of Australia.

We asked potential contributors to aim to achieve three goals:

- generate new scientific findings (i.e. new understandings)
- demonstrate how the data source utilised advances in social science and informs Indigenous policy making, and
- where possible, offer specific suggestions for how best to implement policy changes based on the findings (i.e. to identify international 'best practice').

Meeting these goals was an essential part of the conference because one of the primary audiences was policy makers with responsibility for the carriage of Indigenous policy. There is a need for a robust debate to understand how meaningful improvement in Indigenous outcomes might be achieved. It is also important to document socioeconomic processes facing non-Indigenous Australians (as several papers do), as well as documenting Indigenous disadvantage, as it is difficult to conceptualise what keeps a gap open if both sides of the gap are not understood.

The conference, which included presentations by some of Australia's leading researchers into Indigenous disadvantage, covered a wide range of topics including: child development, crime and justice, culture, the customary economy, demography, education, employment, fertility, health, housing, income and financial stress, mobility, poverty, social exclusion, substance abuse and, last but not least, wellbeing. The structure of the monograph closely follows the order of proceedings at the conference with some of the more complex multi-disciplinary topics being kept to the end of the conference after outlining key demographic and socioeconomic contexts.

While our preference was for shorter reflective papers that combine a rigorous treatment of the data with a strong narrative, we tolerated considerable diversity in the contributions as not all policy domains can be reasonably described to a concise and simplified terms.

Before providing an integrated discussion of the contents of the monograph, it is necessary to understand some of the history of Indigenous survey evidence. Apart from census data that focuses on broad population issues, the history of evidence with a national scope is relatively short. Some survey data were collected from the 1960s and beyond, but this tended to have a highly specific regional focus. For example, Charles Rowley (1970, 1982) initially collected information on 183 Aboriginal households from New South Wales in 1965 (later a sample from regional South Australia was added). In the 1980s, Russell Ross (1988) collected labour force data on Aboriginals in non-metropolitan New South Wales. The urgent need for a national survey of Indigenous Australians culminated in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody recommending a large scale nationally representative survey that could credibly

document the complex nature of Indigenous disadvantage identified in the testimony given to the Commission (Commonwealth of Australia 1991). This recommendation was realised in the form of the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS) conducted by the ABS.

This book is the fourth in a series of monographs that reflects on the national surveys of Indigenous Australians. The first contribution resulted from a Academy of Social Sciences/CAEPR workshop that was held in the design phase of the original NATSIS (Altman 1992). All the contributors to that book identified the key areas of Indigenous disadvantage that needed to be measured and analysed. Even though the urgent data shortfalls were identified, support for a national Indigenous survey was not necessarily unanimous as some thought that alternative approaches may be more cost effective – such as augmenting Indigenous sample in special surveys and creatively using administrative data. Notwithstanding such reservations, the proposal for NATSIS was developed and debated through the pages of that monograph (Sims 1992).

Asking clear and well-defined questions is crucial to any empirical analysis as interpretation depends on the theoretical framework/question that is being addressed. It is one of the great strengths, therefore, of Altman and his fellow contributors that they attempted to focus on policy-relevant questions. Methodological issues tended to dominate in the end though, as the 1994 NATSIS was unique given nothing of that scope had been attempted before (Altman 1992).

After the NATSIS was collected another research monograph was published to explore the findings and future prospects of that survey (Altman and Taylor 1996). Inevitably, the contributors to that volume focused largely on the inadequacies of the 1994 NATSIS data and the methodological issues arising when measuring a small, dispersed population with distinct cultural perspective and unique historical context. The introductory and concluding chapters asked some important questions, mostly revolving around political economy of Indigenous statistics and the ability of the data to improve policy-making. The contributions to that monograph was disseminated to ABS staff and their clients and it is likely to have informed the design of the follow up survey to the NATSIS, the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS).

The immediate successor to the 1996 monograph was Hunter (2006), which self-consciously attempted to get contributors to document the reliability of NATSISS estimates. In particular, an attempt was made to build the capacity of researchers to estimate standard errors so that readers could gain an appreciation of the information contained in the data. The initial release of the 1994 NATSIS only provided approximate estimators of reliability and hence it was difficult to

identify which results constituted evidence unless the researcher was conversant with sampling theory. Unfortunately, it was relatively rare in the Indigenous policy field to have the necessary statistical skills so some rudimentary capacity-building exercise was warranted (Biddle and Hunter 2006). Luckily, the recent re-release of reweighted 1994 NATSIS data accessed under the Remote Access Data Laboratory (RADL), allows researchers to relatively easily estimate standard errors accurately using replicate weight methodology (i.e. also enabled in the later releases of the NATSISS under the RADL). While the contributors to Hunter (2006) motivated their research in terms of a similar set of questions to those addressed in Altman (1992) and Altman and Taylor (1996), the main issues identified involved data quality and the intrinsic methodological issues involved when using and interpreting Indigenous data.

Clearly the earlier contributions did ask important questions that could be addressed with national Indigenous data, however the focus almost inevitably strayed towards the data quality and reliability issues. In this present monograph, the authors have been encouraged to ask and, if possible, answer questions that are based on their research experience and knowledge of issues that motivate policy-makers and Indigenous communities. Obviously it is not possible for authors to completely divorce themselves from intractable methodological issues and attendant data quality concerns, but the contributors to this volume have in general attempted to 'structure' their analysis so that it provides evidence for particular propositions. Please note that none of the analysis can really make claims about causality as cross-sectional data such as the 2008 NATSISS have well-known limitations in this regard (i.e. compared to randomised trials or arguably longitudinal data).

The audience for the current monograph is primarily researchers and policy makers. However, we as editors feel that many of the results and much of the discussion is of relevance to the wider national debate and, in particular, Indigenous communities and organisations. With this in mind, the monograph is implicitly divided into three sections. The first section examines both key questions on Indigenous demography and health, while the second section focuses on socioeconomic processes. The final section looks at broader complex social issues and cultural factors such as housing, crime and culture. Clearly this demarcation is arbitrary in that all these more complex outcomes feedback into demography, health and socioeconomic outcomes – a point that is made by most of the authors in parts 1 and 2. For example, Chapter 9 by Altman, Biddle and Buchanan is inextricably linked to culture, but hunting and gathering also clearly have an economic dimension providing goods and services, if not income, to Indigenous family and communities (see Chapter 10 by Hunter on Indigenous poverty). Similarly, Chapter 6 by Carrington and Zubrick acknowledges the likely interactions between cultural identity and child development. Given that

the policy implications of the analysis in this monograph are likely to involve complex interactions between Indigenous social/cultural life and the closing the gaps outcomes, it is fitting that Part 3 of the monograph finishes with an integrated policy analysis in Chapter 14 from Matthew Gray.

Questions and answers?

The future direction of Indigenous data collections depends on what research questions can be answered by extant surveys including, but not limited to, the 2008 NATSISS. Many contributors to this monograph triangulate the evidence on Indigenous disadvantage using several sources of information from census or other surveys. Given the policy emphasis on closing the gaps, general Australian surveys are often used to identify what is happening in the Australian community; where those surveys have credible information on Indigenous status, the comparison group is non-Indigenous Australians – unfortunately, all too often such information is not available and the comparator is often the total Australian population.

The first question that needs to be addressed in an Indigenous survey is ‘What constitutes an Indigenous households and how should analysts characterise the mobility of Indigenous people over time?’ Indigenous people self-identified as Indigenous and Indigenous households are defined in a mechanical sense by the presence of at least one Indigenous adult in a dwelling. As Morphy (2006) points out, the nuclear family structure is not a ‘natural’ outcome of Australian Aboriginal kinships systems and this has profound implications for the measurement, analysis, and interpretation of Indigenous households. The focus on households defined in terms of dwellings is an operational expedience for most surveys, but it is not something that can be assumed to reflect the social reality of Indigenous families. Indigenous people tend to be relatively mobile among dwellings, but the specific nature of Indigenous social networks, and the renowned connection to country experienced within Indigenous culture, mean that tracking Indigenous people and households will have its own unique issues that will have to be taken into account.

John Taylor and Martin Bell address these questions and more in Chapter 2, which explores household structure and mobility. They argue that population is a complex phenomenon with explicit time and spatial dimensions that are difficult to capture in a cross-sectional survey such as NATSISS. However, mobility is central to the closing the gaps policy as it conditions opportunities for Indigenous development, not least of which is proximity to existing infrastructure, education, employment and other socioeconomic opportunities.

Fertility and demography are also crucial aspects of the prospects for Indigenous development and the ability to close the gaps. For example, declines in fertility and mortality will lead to ongoing changes in the composition of the Indigenous population – a process sometimes called the ‘demographic transition’ – that will potentially change the economic opportunities of the Indigenous adult population in the near future, especially in the context of substantial ageing in Australia’s overall population (Taylor, Biddle and Hunter 2011). Anne Evans and Kim Johnstone explore what the NATSISS 2008 can tell us about the fertility and demography of Indigenous peoples in Australia (Chapter 3). Unfortunately, the answer is that the 2008 survey was a lost opportunity because it failed to include a question on fertility. The whole thrust of demographic transition theory is that the economic and social opportunities change with the changes in number of children born to Indigenous women. Labour supply will be affected directly as the time out of the workforce is likely to be reduced and hence labour market experience enhanced. Evans and Johnstone were forced to rely on other data, but the omission of fertility from the 2008 NATSISS means that our ability to understand Indigenous development is circumscribed and that researchers will have to rely on other data and take into account demographic factors in a rudimentary fashion (i.e. by controlling for age and sex of respondents).

In contrast to the 2002 NATSISS, the latest NATSISS does not include information on substance abuse. Tanya Chikritzhs from the National Drug Research Institute explores one of the other crucial risk factors for Indigenous development, alcohol abuse (Chapter 4). She triangulates the 2008 NATSISS data on alcohol using sophisticated techniques and other data known to be associated with higher death rates and chronic heavy alcohol use (alcoholic liver cirrhosis and alcohol dependence). The main conclusion is that NATSISS substantially underestimates the actual prevalence of high risk drinking in the Indigenous Australian population.

These first chapters provide crucial background to users of the 2008 NATSISS, but they are of arguably limited interest to policy makers because they necessarily highlight data omissions and data quality issues. While the remaining chapters also address such issues (where relevant), the main focus is on policy issues and questions, especially as they pertain to closing the gaps.

The original closing the gap target focused on life expectancy and the analysis by Nicholas Biddle on health is clearly relevant here (Chapter 5). By definition, health is ‘not only the absence of infirmity and disease, but also refers to a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing’. The central question is ‘What makes Indigenous health Indigenous?’ Are there Indigenous specific determinants of Indigenous health that support a policy focus beyond the standard socioeconomic determinants? Biddle exploits the omnibus nature of the 2008 NATSISS to incorporate social and cultural factors that go well beyond the mainstream

determinants of health. Not only is one's own health and wellbeing important, but so too is the wellbeing of the community in which one lives. There is clearly an empirical link between physical health and subjective wellbeing which this contribution develops and explores. This has considerable resonance with a later chapter by Mike Dockery.

Indigenous policy's ability to close the gap between Indigenous and other Australians crucially depends on human capacities and child development. While there are some important data omissions from the 2008 NATSISS, it was the first nationally representative Indigenous survey to include a substantial sample of children under 15 years old, and hence it provides a unique opportunity to address child development and benchmark other important studies – such as the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) that has been in the field since 2008. While it is intrinsically difficult to test questions about child development using cross sectional data, Steve Zubrick and Carrington Sheppard from the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research do an admirable job in documenting how stress and discrimination are a relatively common feature of children's lives from an early age with human capital tending to be low in the families with children (Chapter 6). Both of these risk factors pose particular challenges for policy-makers, but it is clear that many Indigenous families with children need considerable support.

Nicholas Biddle and Timothy Cameron ask two important and related questions in Chapter 7: 'What are the benefits of Indigenous education?' and 'Are Indigenous students happy at school?' The answer to the latter question will be crucial in understanding the extent of Indigenous engagement with the education system, and to gain an appreciation of what may be done to optimise participation and maximise the benefits of education. While education is crucial to closing the gap in many of the outcomes nominated in COAG, the benefits clearly go beyond the substantial economic returns and include a range of social benefits often identified for both the individual concerned and the broader community at large. Biddle and Cameron finish with a discussion of a creative proposal to link NATSISS data with other surveys in a way that allows for some longitudinal dimensions to be analysed. Clearly longitudinal analysis is important for definitively identifying the benefits of education, but such analysis is likely to be crucial for almost all of the themes of the following chapters. Policy-makers should seriously consider supporting this proposal.

Education is commonly referred to by economists and policy-makers as human capital (a very utilitarian concept), and in some circles the two terms are almost synonymous. Education is very useful in that it clearly does enhance an individual's employment outcomes in terms of job prospects, wage levels and the types of jobs that are viable, and in enhancing a general sense of control over the working environment (inter alia, by increasing one's market value

within the firm). In Chapter 8, Prem Thapa, Qasim Shah and Shafiq Ahmad from FaHCSIA investigate the determinants of Indigenous labour force status and hourly earnings. The creative application of techniques yields insight that previous studies could not provide, largely because of concerns about the veracity of interpreting income data in terms of wages.

Jon Altman, Nicholas Biddle and Geoff Buchanan reflect on the customary sector of the Indigenous economy and speculate about the data, policy and political implications of such data (Chapter 9). The NATSISS is the only official survey instrument that currently provides information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander harvesting and cultural production. The customary sector, that includes hunting gathering and cultural activities, is obviously Indigenous by definition. Furthermore, the intensity and extent of these non-market activities varies significantly between remote and non-remote Australia. This analysis highlights the diversity of styles and content of the customary economy and includes a rather confronting image that illustrates the specific Indigenous skill involved and the visceral nature of some activities. There are less confronting illustrations in many art galleries, including the relatively new permanent Indigenous exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia.

The question of whether Indigenous poverty is different from other poverty is addressed by Boyd Hunter (Chapter 10). The answer is a resounding ‘yes’ in that Indigenous poverty differs from other Australian poverty in both the extent of financial stress and the nature of poverty and disadvantage experienced. Measurement error in household income and the equivalence scales that are used to identify poor households, are likely to explain some of this observation. However, another important observation is that non-market activities from the customary sector – such as hunting and gathering – allows for some income substitution in terms of goods and services that Indigenous households would otherwise have to buy.

Don Weatherburn and Lucy Snowball from the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research provide an excellent example of what this monograph aspires to achieve: they systematically identify the theories of Indigenous violence and use the 2008 NATSISS to test the propositions identified in those theories (Chapter 11). They found strong support for lifestyle/routine activity theories, moderate support for social disorganisation and social deprivation theories, but little support for cultural theories of Indigenous violence. This chapter attempts to provide a stronger test of cultural theories of Indigenous violence than was possible in Snowball and Weatherburn (2008).

Paul Memmott and Kelly Greenop from the University of Queensland scrutinise the embedded assumptions that underlie extant measures of household utilisation and crowding (Chapter 12). Their chapter does not examine an

explicit hypothesis about behaviour, but it does ensure that analysis that is informed by this contribution should not provide misleading conclusions that are inconsistent with the reality of Indigenous lives. Indigenous housing is best understood through a cross-cultural lens that acknowledges that many Indigenous people understand the world in relational, rather than transactional terms. Accordingly, it is important NOT to presume a particular world view (with the associated ontological, epistemological or even cosmological assumptions). The chapter is rather long but takes the reader on a fascinating journey through cultural differences. Housing clearly plays an important role in the gaps identified in the COAG targets – for example, it is hard to be healthy and function in a community unless the dwelling is meeting your basic needs.

The Memmott and Greenop chapter resonates with the other chapters that highlight cultural difference. The need to acknowledge the inter-cultural aspects of the gap being closed is applicable to all COAG targets irrespective of whether policy-makers or researchers explicitly acknowledge the issue.

Mike Dockery from Curtin University explicitly examines inter-cultural issues in the penultimate chapter, interrogating the link between traditional culture and wellbeing. The quantitative methodology applied is clearly Western in origins – and somewhat technical – but it identifies several arguably distinct dimensions of culture (participation in cultural events and activities, cultural identity, language and participation in traditional economic activities) and asks whether these aspects of culture effect Indigenous outcomes in health, education, employment, interaction with the criminal justice system and alcohol abuse. In general, positive effects of cultural attachment on mainstream socioeconomic indicators are confirmed. Indigenous Australians who identify more strongly with their traditional culture are happier and display better mental health, but at the same time experience more psychological stress due to stronger feelings of discrimination. Policy-makers will ignore the role of Indigenous culture at their peril – indeed, they may run the risk of undermining the goal of closing the gaps in the various domains.

Matthew Gray draws together the themes of the monograph in the final chapter. One of the central conclusions is that researchers and policy makers need to work together if the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are to be closed. Researchers provide intellectual consistency and rigour to the analysis, while policy makers are across the detail of the policy and have a better sense of the political dynamics that may undermine or support any initiative in question. Obviously researchers and policy makers have different comparative advantages and they could work separately; however both skill sets are imperative for establishing a credible policy relevant analysis. The lack of good quality, independent evaluations in Australia relative to the United States, undermine the evidence base on effective policy options. Before

and after studies are one underutilised evaluation method in the Indigenous context, although some argue that randomised control trials or experiments are the gold standards of evaluations (Leigh 2009). Such experiments may encounter instrumental difficulties in the Indigenous communities, but at the very least evaluations would benefit from systematic collection of benchmarks from affected groups so that credible claims may be made about what would have happened in the absence of a given program. The analysis of the 2008 NATSISS in this monograph does not focus on individual policies; however it does provide invaluable background that our expectations for such benchmarks can be compared against. Moreover the answers to the questions raised throughout this monograph provide useful information on the social and economic processes that policies are designed to address.

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