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AIFS conference

*Sustaining Families in Challenging
Times*

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**Indigenous
families & their
engagement
with the child
support system**

Improving the lives of Australians



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Outline

- Background
- Research questions
- Scope & methodology
- Findings
- Summary
- Implications
- Questions



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Background

- Indigenous families under-represented in CSA population
- Lack of knowledge of Indigenous families interaction with Child Support Agency (CSA)
- Need to understand how Indigenous people arrange care children of separated parents
- Explore how cultural & other factors influence engagement with government services



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Background

- Complex Indigenous family arrangements
 - More likely to be multi-family households: 5% Indigenous families, 1% general population
 - Less likely to be lone person households: 14% compared with 25%
 - Households are larger: 3.4 people compared with 2.6
- Social & economic disadvantage disproportionately affects Indigenous families
- Families in very remote areas are the most disadvantaged



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CSA Customers

- June 2008: 58 000 CSA parents identified as Indigenous
- Indigenous paying parents more likely to be unemployed & pay lower child support
- Indigenous paying parents
 - 9% have \$0 annual liability
 - 43% have \$0-339 annual liability
- Indigenous receiving parents
 - 9% assessed to receive \$0
 - 39% assessed to receive \$0-339 annually



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Why we consulted?

- Build on previous CSA study which
 - Had limited numbers
 - Results may have been biased by the announcement of the NT emergency response
- Aims of consultations
 - Expand knowledge about Indigenous families experience of the CSA
 - Improve knowledge of cultural practices supporting children whose parents live apart



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Key Questions

How do separated/separating Indigenous families experience the Child Support Scheme?

What are the cultural practices that support children after relationship breakdown?



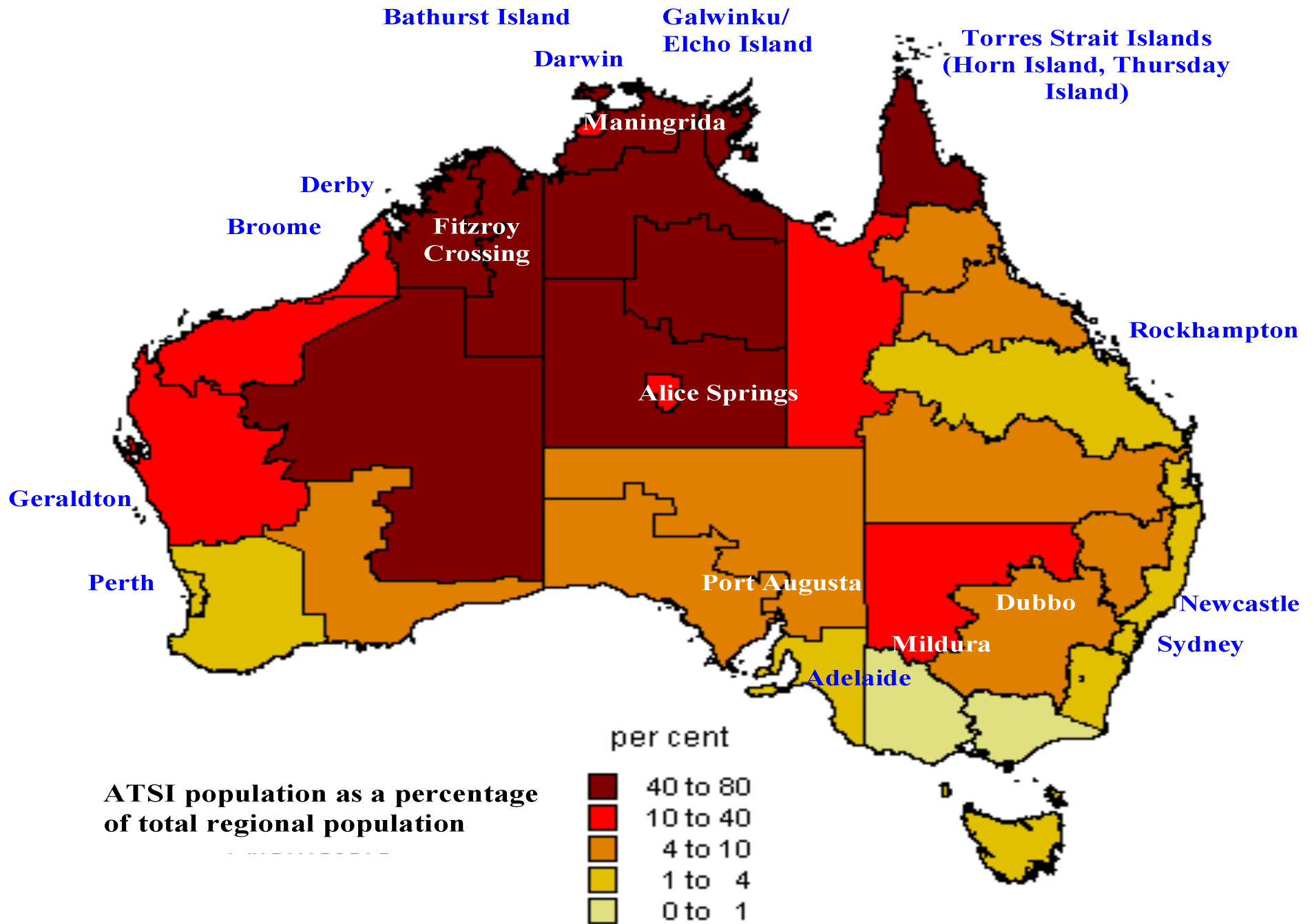
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Scope and Methodology

Qualitative study

- Informal, semi-structured interviews
- Community and government agencies (n=75)
- Indigenous-specific & mainstream services
- Location: urban, regional & remote areas
- 15 locations
- Interviews conducted in 2008





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Findings

Findings were grouped to six main areas

- Family care & arrangements
- Financial support
- Child support & interaction with government agencies
- Violence, drugs & alcohol
- Dispute resolution
- Demographic factors



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Findings

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Family care & arrangements

Care is informal and shared – in all families

When a child is born, it is passed around women as a symbol of shared responsibility. Women traditionally have the role of feeding the whole family and caring for children.

Aboriginal Healing Project (Perth-based) Geraldton, WA



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Family care & arrangements

Care is informal and shared – in all families

Lots of families who are separated and kids being brought up by aunties, grandparents and sisters – it is culturally acceptable for this to happen.

Sometimes if parents have too many kids they will give some kids to someone to raise.

Nguiu Health Centre, Tiwi Islands



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Family care & arrangements

Language for relationships & care is different

***Separation – we don't use the word separation –
instead, 'split up', 'finish'***

Horn Island Childcare, Horn Island, TSI



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Family care & arrangements

Language for relationships & care is different

Getting together is regarded as married - people will refer to each other as husband and wife or at times partners

Centrelink Agent for Looma Community Derby, WA



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Family care & arrangements

Cultural practice affect actions after separation

Many women partnered in traditional way are reluctant to fight their husbands because they were promised to them. Many would not pursue child support because of fear to cause shame to the family or conflict. They may cause shame to initiated men or husbands and shame to their own families

Port Augusta Hospital Port Augusta, SA



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Family care & arrangements

Care is also shared after separation

When people separate they don't usually live far [from] their own children. Cultural obligation for extended family to help with support. People don't see separation as a big problem because of the extended family support network... Extended family will assess the situation and decide who looks after the children

Centrelink Darwin, NT



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Family care & arrangements

Who provides care? Mother's or father's family?

Child support arrangements ... are made informally and involve sharing care. Usually children, particularly girls, stay with mother or mother's side. Before initiation, boys stay with mother or maternal grandmother, then they'll be classified as adult. Key members of the extended family will be involved in arrangements. Care is much dispersed and fluid but grannies and aunties take much of the caring role.

Centrelink Alice Springs, NT



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Family care & arrangements

Who provides care? Mother's or father's family?

Children always go with the mother but father will have contact with children – more safe with the mother. It is culturally expected that children will go with mother, so fathers don't fight for custody.

Yalu Marngithinyaraw Nurturing Centre Galiwinku Elco Island,
NT



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Family care & arrangements

Who provides care? Mother's or father's family?

Passing on children – on family lines e.g. mother's sister or father's line. Kinship care/ extended family responsibility to children – must occur along skin and family lines.

Maningrida Child Safety Service Maningrida, NT



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Family care & arrangements

Grandmother care is very important

It is common for grannies (maternal) to be looking after children of separated parents – they become grandmother’s children – they would call granny mum.

Horn Island Childcare Horn Island, TSI



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Family care & arrangements

Grandmother care is very important

***Circumstances in which grannies will step in:
alcohol and drug addiction, changing behaviour
of kids e.g. mixing with wrong group, death in
the family, domestic violence.***

Broome Family Violence Prevention Legal Service Unit
Broome, WA



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Family care & arrangements

Strength of culture in Tiwi Islands

Separation is not a problem in this community. Culture is very strong ... parents have to stay together and support. ... If separation occurs the daughter often go her parents with the children- the father can come and see the children. If families are experiencing problems they go and see the elders for advice who often talk about culture that keeps families together. Traditionally there is no separation or divorce – people were married for life. Culture keeps families strong

Tiwi Islands Shire Council – Tiwi Islands



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Interaction with government agencies

Poor communication with government agencies

Language problems in accessing mainstream family and child support services – in some communities English is not even a second language.

Yorgum Aboriginal Corporation Perth, WA



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Interaction with government agencies

Poor communication with government agencies

***Complete lack of knowledge what CSA does.
Sometimes people view CSA as an agency wanting
to take away their children. Brochures are generic
rather than culturally specific.***

Child Support Agency Darwin, NT



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Interaction with government agencies

Poor communication with government agencies

English/language is a main barrier. Assessments are mostly inaccurate because of language barriers and cultural sensitivities.

Centrelink Darwin, NT



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Interaction with government agencies

Cultural gap

Proof of parentage – a huge problem ... some people don't have birth certificate esp. babies born in the bush. They are 'long grass babies.' People don't understand the importance of naming fathers of babies. Men can acknowledge that they are fathers when they are not biological fathers but culturally they are fathers. Who is the biological father?

Child Support Agency Darwin, NT



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Interaction with government agencies

Lack of the knowledge of child support scheme

There is not a lot of awareness about the Child Support Scheme. People that do know about the Scheme, generally only do so because of the link with Centrelink. A lot of women don't want the Child Support money anyway (they would rather the other parent take the children for a holiday).

Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Corporation Chippendale Sydney, NSW



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Interaction with government agencies

Fear of government agencies

Some grannies who know that they claim family payment don't do it because they don't want to ... cause problems that will bring the authorities to take away the kids.

Men's Outreach Centre Broome, WA



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Interaction with government agencies

Fear of government agencies

Lots of people confuse CSA with DoCS.

Child Support Agency Dubbo, NSW



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Interaction with government agencies

Fear of government agencies

Many grandmothers are extremely worried that their grandchildren will be placed in care where they will have no access.

Northern Carers Network Adelaide, SA



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Interaction with government agencies

Suggestions to improve services

- Simplify messages
- Spend time in communities, building trust with elders & families
- Recognise the importance of face-to-face contact
- Employ Indigenous workers
- Be flexible & responsive



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Summary

Preliminary investigation about Indigenous families

- Experience of the child support
- Cultural practices that support caring for children

Findings

- Indigenous families are complex & fluid
- Importance of 'grannies' in care
- Reluctance to engage & access government services
- Complex families & issues will need more than money



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Implications

Policy implications

- Recognise fluid family & care arrangements

Service delivery implications

- Service delivery reform
- Communication & collaboration

Research implications

- Location-based needs
- Needs of third-party carers
- Indigenous concepts of 'shared care'



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Questions and Discussion





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