

Acting on the recommendation of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the Federal Government allocated funds to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to conduct a national survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The survey commenced design in 1992 and went into the field during early 1994. The first publication from that survey, released in February 1995, reveals some interesting information about families and service usage (ABS 1995).

It is perhaps important for readers to know whether the survey 'worked' – whether it succeeded in both its design and its questions to reflect and capture accurately the cultural patterns of those who answered. The Acting Australian Statistician (ABS 1995) commented that a 'close cooperative relationship between ABS and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people led to a survey that was sympathetic to their cultural values and priorities', and his statement appears to be reflected by other evidence. The response rate to the survey was extremely good and the ABS used wide consultation and advice as it went about the task of collecting useable information.

Households and Families

According to the ABS survey, there are now an estimated 86,400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households containing 76,400 families.

Households

Compared with the Australian picture generally, indigenous households are more likely to be family based, and multi-family.

Family-based households

Indigenous households are less than half as likely as non-indigenous households to contain no family. (A family is defined as a couple with or without children, or a sole parent with children.) In the indigenous population in 1994, 12 per cent of households were non-family households, compared with approximately 29 per cent of non-indigenous households in 1992. In 1991 in Tennant Creek Town, 29 per cent of households were non-family households; in Tennant Creek Balance, by comparison, only 8 per cent of households did not contain family.

Multi-family households

Indigenous families are more than five times as likely as non-indigenous families to be sharing with other families in the same



National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey 1994

During the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in the early 1990s, the paucity of comparative national data about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was recognised. As a result, Recommendation 49 of that enquiry called for a 'special national survey covering a range of social, demographic, health and economic characteristics of the Aboriginal population'.

household – 9 per cent of indigenous family households were sharing, compared with around 1.5 per cent of non-indigenous family households. In Tennant Creek Town in 1991, 10 per

CHRISTINE KILMARTIN discusses of some of the findings of the resulting 1994 survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

cent of family households were sharing with another family; in Tennant Creek Balance, 23 per cent of family households were two or three family households.

Characteristics

Compared with the Australian picture generally, indigenous households are more likely to contain dependent children, be living outside the capital cities, be headed by one parent, have unemployed parents, be living in crowded conditions, have limited access to transport, and make less frequent use of formal child care.

Contain dependent children

Children are a central and important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life. Seven in ten indigenous families contain dependent children, compared with five in ten non-indigenous families. Partly as a result of higher birth rates and of higher death rates, more than half of the indigenous population is aged less than 20 years; in the general population, by comparison, fewer than one in three is aged less than 20 years.

Living outside the capital cities

Two thirds of indigenous people live outside the capital cities, compared with around one third of non-indigenous people. In the 1991 Census, twice the percentage of indigenous people (32 per cent) compared with non-indigenous people (15 per cent) were living in rural areas with population centres of less than 1000 people.

Headed by one parent

Approximately 29 per cent of indigenous families with dependent children were one-parent families, compared with around 18 per cent of non-indigenous families. However, there were regional variations: in the ATSI region of Rockhampton, 15 per cent of indigenous families were headed by one parent, while in Broome and Alice Springs the figure was 40 per cent, and in Adelaide 47 per cent.

Have unemployed parents

Children in indigenous two-parent families are approximately three times as likely as children in non-indigenous two-parent families to have neither parent working (around three in ten indigenous children compared with around one in ten non-indigenous

children). Almost eight in ten children in indigenous one-parent families did not have a parent working, compared with around six in ten children in non-indigenous one-parent families.

Living in crowded conditions

As suggested by the (above) figures referring to families sharing with other families, indigenous households are likely to be larger than non-indigenous households. In the ABS survey, 14 per cent of indigenous households living in the capital cities had six or more residents; in the other urban areas, 20 per cent of indigenous households had six or more residents, and in the rural areas, one third of indigenous households had six or more residents.

Limited access to transport

While there are no data to allow a comparison to be drawn with the non-indigenous community, the issue of access to transport was one which came up frequently in the survey, particularly for rural communities.

Less frequent use of formal child care

Indigenous children aged under 13 years are less than half as likely to be using formal child care as the general population of children of the same age. Most likely, this reflects a lower use of pre-schools as well as of other formal long- or part-day child care. Family and friends were by far the major sources of child care other than a parent. There was some expressed need for further child care, particularly after school care, family day care and occasional care but the overwhelming majority (80 per cent) of those parents who did not currently use any formal child care preferred to keep it that way.

Health Issues

Generally, the indigenous population saw themselves as in good to excellent health, with only 12 per cent saying that their health was poor or only fair. The rates of poor health reporting are somewhat higher than in the community generally; for instance, in the age range 25–44 years, 21 per cent of the indigenous population described their health as fair to poor, compared with 12 per cent of the population generally.

Breastfeeding

Enormous differences were shown to exist in frequency of breastfeeding of children

currently aged less than 12 years. In some of the more remote areas like Derby, Jabiru, Mount Isa and Broome, breastfeeding was extremely common, with nine in ten children under 12 having been nourished in this way. In Tennant Creek, almost every child was estimated to have been breastfed. In other areas, such as Bourke and Wagga Wagga, figures for breastfeeding were around four in ten; in Ballarat, Adelaide and the Torres Strait area, around five in ten children under 12 had been breastfed. Given the links with prevention of childhood illness, the figures in the more remote areas indicate at least some protection being offered to children who may have restricted access to standard medical services.

Smoking

One in two indigenous people aged 13 and over is a smoker. There is far less regional variation in this pattern than in, say, patterns of breastfeeding (with the exception of Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Townsville, where only about one third of persons aged 13 and over smoked). This overall rate is higher than that for the Australian population generally, where about one in three (aged 18 and over) smokes.

Alcohol and drug consumption

Three quarters of the population saw alcohol abuse as a problem, and one in two saw marijuana abuse as a problem for the indigenous community. By comparison, petrol and glue sniffing were seen by one in seven as a problem. Almost half of the women and a third of the men said that they did not drink alcohol, but of those who did drink, most had had one or more drinks in the previous week. Alcohol and drug problems were seen to be highest in the regional cities and towns rather than in the capital cities or the rural and remote areas. However, the percentage in the indigenous community who had drunk alcohol in the previous week was similar to the percentage in the community generally, despite perceptions to the contrary.

Health services

The survey found very high levels of satisfaction with health services (eight in ten said they were happy with local health services) and a high reporting of good health (almost nine in ten reported their health as good, very good or excellent). These findings seem to contradict somewhat a host of other studies reporting extremely poor health conditions for numbers of indigenous people. It seems apparent from this survey that the links between health and alcohol abuse are greater in the minds of the indigenous community than are the links between health and the performance of a local health service. Supporting the indigenous communities as they attempt to address the issue of alcohol abuse is a prime policy focus suggested by the survey.

As is well known, successful strategies have already been designed and implemented by local communities. In Tennant Creek, for instance, the idea of a night patrol originated to allow the local indigenous community to take care of their own members rather than having them caught in the web of law enforcement. In the Australian Living

Standards Study conducted in the town, alcohol was seen as *the* major problem for families in the town by both the service providers and the families who took part in the study. Over half of the responding providers said that a great many families were affected and 43 per cent of families saw it as a major problem. The manager of the alcohol treatment centre in Tennant Creek was quoted as saying of the Aboriginal people using the centre: 'They need skills and work as an option to drinking' (*Bulletin*, 17 May 1994). The town has several alcohol programs in operation, including *Living with Alcohol*, and the general response of the providers interviewed was that support for such programs was crucial to the rehabilitation of those affected and that more support was necessary.

Family Violence

There was greater uncertainty in people's answers to questions about family violence than there was to questions about general violence or crime, suggesting that such family issues are often seen to be in the private domain and not for general comment or intrusion. Despite this, though, almost half of all indigenous people (45 per cent) said that family violence was a problem. Only a quarter said it was not a problem, although almost a third did not know.

When asked whether the police did a

good job in dealing with family violence, over a third said they did not know but around one in five said that the police either did not understand the culture, were too slow to respond, did not investigate fully or other such reasons. On the other hand, four in ten said the police did, or sometimes did, a good job. In general, the indigenous community did not seem to think that police relations had improved over the previous five years, for although one in five thought that relations had improved, one in five thought that relations had deteriorated.

Culture and Language

The ABS survey provided some rich information about cultural life and practices. For instance, over the previous year, three in four had attended at least one indigenous cultural activity. Funerals were the most frequent form of ceremony attended, particularly in the rural areas. This reflects both the cultural significance of the mourning period and the



higher death rates within the community. About four in ten people had also attended a festival in the previous 12 months, and the figure was similar for those in the capital cities, the other urban areas and the rural areas.

More than eight in ten saw the role of elders as important. Three quarters said that they had a particular area which they identified as their homelands, and three in ten were living on their homelands at the time of the interview. No questions were asked about the numbers who had been removed from their original tribal lands onto reserves, but the practice was widespread and gives these figures even more significance. Six in ten identified with a clan, tribal or language group and more than a third had a place where they could meet for cultural activities, regardless of whether that place was a building or an open space. All of these indicators point to a strength of culture, even though one in ten of those aged 25 or older had been taken away as children, either to live in hostels such as Cootamundra /Kempsey /Retta Dixon or to be adopted by non-indigenous parents.

Eight in ten said that their main language was English, but in the rural areas, where patterns of living were not so disturbed by early settlement of non-indigenous arrivals, that figure dropped to six in ten. In the capital cities, almost no-one identified Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander lan-

guages as their main form of communication, although one in ten said that they had difficulties with English. In the rural areas, two in ten said that they had difficulties with English, and one in three identified an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language as their main language. (As well, some spoke Aboriginal English or kriol.)

In the rural areas, most of those who said that they had difficulties with English also said that they would use an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander interpreter service if it were available.

Employment and Other Sources of Income

Just under six in ten of all indigenous people aged 15 or over were in the workforce at the time of the survey. This is quite similar to the figure for the non-indigenous community. What differs between the two communities most is the rate of unemployment (that is, people who are in the workforce but cannot find a job). And regional variations in unemployment reflect some of the differing opportunities for employment of Indigenous workers. Overall, of all people wanting to work, almost four in ten were unemployed at the time of the survey and of those out of work, almost half had been unable to find a job for 12 months or longer. Western Australia and Victoria were the States with the highest long-term unemployment rates

but in specific regions such as Tamworth, Perth, Kalgoorlie, Jabiru and Wagga Wagga, over three in ten of the indigenous workforce had been unable to find work for at least 12 months.

In the 1980s, Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) were established to enable local communities to generate employment using voluntary participation in the scheme. The aim of such projects was to assist more remote communities to have access to jobs which benefited the local areas and to create a pool of income which the community could manage as a replacement for other benefits which might have been received by individuals. CDEP schemes have been in operation in various communities for several years now, and at the time of the survey, approximately a quarter of all employed persons was working in a CDEP scheme.

This meant that for a quarter of the population, their main source of income was from wages or salaries not associated with CDEP, for a further one in eleven, their main source of income was derived from CDEP earnings, while half the indigenous community derived their income mainly from government payments. More than one in ten of all indigenous people aged 15 or more had no source of income at all.

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In this article, the general data used for comparison with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data are not included in the Detailed Findings, but are drawn from the other ABS publications listed as references. The term 'indigenous' is used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and families.

For more information on the results of the survey, phone (free call) 1800 633 216.

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Picture: Howard Birnstihl