



## Assessing family and community life through the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey: An evaluation

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This paper provides an overview of a major new survey of Indigenous

Australians, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, and describes the key measures of family and community in the survey.

**W**ell-functioning families are vital to the wellbeing of individuals, their immediate communities, and broader societal groups. At the same time, the ability of families to function well depends not only on their individual members, but also on their physical and social contexts, including the communities in which they live.

In relation to Indigenous families and the communities in which they live, the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) survey has the potential for assisting here, for it is one of the few nationally representative surveys that provides information on family and community life of the Indigenous population. This survey is the second large-scale social survey undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, with the first being conducted in 1994 (called the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey or NATSIS).

This article describes and critically evaluates a selection of key measures of family and community used in the 2002 NATSISS, and then examines in greater depth the utility of two of these measures (child care use and the incidence of “stolen generation”). It also suggests aspects of family and community life that may be valuable additions to future social surveys of the Indigenous population.

At the outset, it is important to keep in mind that virtually all measures examined in the 2002 NATSISS that relate to living standards or wellbeing are highly relevant to family and community life. Personal health status and health risk behaviours are prime examples, since family and community wellbeing is

strongly linked with the wellbeing of individual family members. Likewise, housing quality is clearly relevant to family and community wellbeing. As Taylor and Kinfu (2005) indicate, family needs represent one of the most commonly mentioned reasons for moving that respondents provided in the 2002 NATSISS. The fact that 52 per cent of respondents lived in houses needing ‘more bedrooms’ reveals the inadequate living conditions experienced by many Indigenous families (see Sanders, 2005). Nonetheless, we have attempted to focus on the more direct measures, but inevitably the choice is somewhat arbitrary.

### *Family and community life domains*

Given the close interdependence between families and their communities, some measures in the 2002 NATSISS can be treated as indicators of either family or community life. The choice seems arbitrary at times, so this section refers to measures covering either or both of these two domains.

#### *Household and family type*

The 2002 NATSISS provides detailed information on household type, family type and marital status. Information on all the people living in the household was collected from a responsible adult. The survey excluded visitors to the dwelling, with those who stayed in the dwelling the previous night being defined as visitors if they would be staying for less than one month. An important feature of many Indigenous households, however, is that there is a significant amount of mobility through the household, resulting in very complex and dynamic household structures (Morphy, 2004; Smith, 2000). While such dynamics would clearly affect family

and community life, the 2002 NATSISS survey provides virtually no information on this matter. This is understandable, for it is difficult (and perhaps not feasible) to collect information on the dynamics of household composition in a cross-sectional survey, especially for households that have a high turnover of people.

The categories and terms used in the NATSISS interview schedule to describe kin relationships are those that apply to the standard Anglo-Celtic system. Although the standard Anglo-Celtic system will be clearly understood and relevant for much of the Indigenous population, as Frances Morphy points out in this edition of *Family Matters*, many traditionally-oriented Aboriginal people have kinship systems that differ markedly in their structure to the Anglo-Celtic system. For many of these respondents, the 2002 NATSISS questions very likely resulted in a failure of translation and “incoherent and uninterpretable data” (p. 23-31).

While the complex familial structures of Indigenous societies are most pronounced in ‘traditionally-oriented’ communities, Smith (2000) has shown that they persist in ‘settled’ Australia. Martin, Morphy, Sanders and Taylor (2004) concluded that, when this household information is used to construct measures of family type, the resulting ‘family types’ do not coincide with those found in many Indigenous communities (Martin et al., 2004, p. 95). A further issue is that the 2002 NATSISS survey does not provide any information on linked households, yet linkages between households represent an important feature of Indigenous family and community life.

The main point to be taken from this discussion is that care needs to be exercised when interpreting the household composition, family type and marital status information from the 2002 NATSISS given that, for a proportion of the sample, this information will have little relationship to the family circumstances in which the respondent lives. A detailed discussion of these issues is provided by Martin et al. (2004).

Information on the relationships among people in the family or household is obtained by asking the reference person (the person providing information on all household members) the relationship of everybody else in the household to him or herself. Although the reference person model works well for simpler household and family structures, it only provides a very partial and potentially misleading picture for more complex family arrangements (particularly multi-generational families), which are so common in Indigenous Australia.

An important issue in studying Indigenous families concerns ‘mixed families’ and ‘mixed households’. These are families or households in which not all members are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin. One strength of the 2002 NATSISS survey is that it allows mixed families to be identified and outcomes for these Indigenous families to be compared to those of families comprised solely of Indigenous people.

### ***Fertility and child survival***

Female respondents were asked to indicate how many children they had given birth to, how many were living with them, and how many were living elsewhere. These measures enable an estimate of the number of children who had not survived, although there will be some error in this derived variable (see Kinfu, 2005). While a direct question on child mortality can be extremely stressful for those who have experienced this event, it is noteworthy that such a question was introduced in wave 5 of the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA) survey, conducted in 2005. (The HILDA survey is funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, FaCSIA).

### ***Removal from natural family***

Given that questions on removal from family could be highly stressful for respondents, interviewers first asked respondents whether it was ‘alright’ to ask questions on this issue. In total, four per cent of respondents declined to answer these questions (nine per cent in remote areas and three per cent in non-remote areas). All other respondents were asked, firstly, whether they had been taken away from their natural family by a mission, the government or welfare, and secondly, whether any of their relatives had had such an experience. Those who indicated that one or more relatives had been removed from their natural family were asked to indicate which relative(s) experienced this. Once again, the terms used to indicate kin relationships were those applicable to the standard Anglo-Celtic kinship system (for example, parents, aunts, uncles, brothers or sisters, children). As indicated earlier, the resulting data must therefore be interpreted with caution.

### ***Child care***

Although there are some differences in child care questions between the non-remote and remote area questionnaires, the questions are broadly comparable. These questions were restricted to respondents who had the main caring responsibility for any child living in the household who was aged 12 years or less.

Respondents living in non-remote areas were asked whether they had used formal child care in the previous four weeks and, if so, the different types of formal care they had used: before and/or after school care, long day care, family day care, occasional care, pre-school kindergarten (excluding NSW or ACT), or other formal care apart from vacation care. Respondents were also asked whether they needed any or additional formal child care during this four-week period. Those who answered in the affirmative were asked to indicate the main reason for not having used such (additional) care. Finally, respondents who had not wanted to make any (or additional) use of formal child care in the previous four weeks were asked to indicate the main reason for their answer.

An important difference between the child care data collected using the remote and non-remote questionnaires is that, in remote areas, respondents

were asked whether there was a child care service in the community and, if there was not, whether they would use a service were it available. Those in remote areas in which such a service was available were asked questions about their use of this service in the previous four weeks, aspirations regarding usage, and reasons for not having wanted to use the service or for having experienced unmet aspirations regarding service use. (These questions were essentially the same as those asked of respondents in non-remote areas about the use of formal child care).

A key difference between the data collected in the 2002 NATSISS on child care and many other surveys is that the 2002 NATSISS questions are based on the person primarily responsible for the child(ren) in the household (that is, an adult) whereas other surveys provide information on the use of child care for each child (or the study child) (for example, the ABS Child Care Surveys and the HILDA survey). Caution clearly needs to be exercised in comparing the information on child care from NATSISS with estimates from child-based surveys.

### **Support in times of crisis**

This question tapped respondents' perceptions of their ability to ask for support from people outside their household in times of crisis and the sources of any such support. The sources included individual acquaintances (for example, friend, neighbour, family member, work colleague), as well as organisations, professionals and local council or other government services. (Respondents in non-remote areas were shown a list of types of support (for example, emotional support, provide emergency accommodation, advise on what to do), whereas those in remote areas were simply asked whether they could ask somebody who does not live with them for help if they were having 'serious problems'.)

It is important to note that, while some potential sources of support are more 'approachable' than others, some people are more confident than others in requesting assistance. Furthermore, some people may be prepared to approach family members and friends, but consider professionals or organisations as 'out of bounds', while the opposite may apply to other people. In other words, reports on support should not be treated as objective measures of the social environment, but rather as perceptions that are likely to be shaped not only by the existence and characteristics of potential sources of support but also by characteristics of the respondents themselves. Nevertheless, a sense of social support is an important aspect of personal wellbeing, and has obvious flow-on effects for the family and community.

### **Stressors experienced**

Respondents were asked about whether they, or a close family member or friend, had experienced various stressful events over the previous 12 months. For respondents in non-remote areas, the events were subdivided into three groups:

- health issues (serious illness – including mental illness, accident, death of family member or close friend, or serious disability);

- relationship breakdown, employment problems and 'risky' behaviour (alcohol or drug-related activities, witness to violence, abuse or violent crime, trouble with the police or a gambling problem); and
- imprisonment, overcrowding at home, pressure to fulfill cultural responsibilities, and discrimination or racism.

The nature and ordering of some items differed slightly for those in remote and non-remote areas. The main question – whether the issues have been a problem for the respondents, or for their family or close friends – does not fit well with some of the actual problems listed for those in remote areas (for example, 'member of your family sent to jail or in jail'). In non-remote areas, respondents were asked about 'member of family sent to jail/currently in jail'. In other words, such respondents could include such events in the lives of their close friends' families. This adds to the difficulty of comparing the experiences of respondents in remote and non-remote areas.

It is also important to point out that, given that "one person's cup is another's poison", the 'population' of stressful events is huge, and any sample from this population is likely to be an inadequate representation of potential stressors in a person's life. Furthermore, non-events can be extremely stressful but there is no attempt to measure these (for example, failure to obtain the expected promotion, failure to see one's child achieve some strong ambition, failure to establish an intimate relationship with a much admired potential suitor, and so on).

Another difficulty with this measure is that it relates not only to personal experience of events that are typically seen as stressful, but also to the exposure of family or friends to such experiences. Although difficulties faced by other people can be personally stressful, it would have been useful to be able to identify whether the experience applied to the respondent, a close family member, or a friend.

It would also have been useful to identify the stressfulness of such events for the respondents. For instance, it appears that, compared with men, women tend to be more emotionally involved in the lives of those around them, more reactive to the moods and experiences of other family members and close friends, and more prone to mention interpersonal difficulties, including family-related concerns, in response to questions about the problems in their lives (see Cross & Madson, 1997; Larson & Richards, 1994; Thoits, 1995). Under these circumstances, disruptive events experienced by close family and friends may tend to have a greater impact on women than men. The experience of disruptive events may also have a greater impact in some cultures than others, leading to difficulties in interpreting results that might be derived for two different cultures.

Nevertheless, it would have been useful to compare the experiences of Indigenous respondents regarding the events listed with those of the non-Indigenous population. The ABS General Social Survey (GSS) is designed to be comparable to parts of the 2002 NATSISS. Unfortunately, while the GSS asks about stressors, the questions in the latter survey focus on

stressors experienced by respondents or 'anyone else' close to him or her rather than 'close family member or friend' as is asked in the 2002 NATSISS. This difference may contribute to any systematic variation in reporting that may appear. Despite this difficulty, it will be possible to compare differences in reports within the Indigenous population – for example, men versus women, those with lower versus higher educational attainment, and, where the stressful events described are identical in the two questionnaires, those in remote versus non-remote areas.

### **Neighbourhood problems**

Respondents were asked about the existence of a series of neighbourhood problems, mainly covering property theft or damage, assault/violence, and neighbourhood conflict. (One item in the list is 'Level of personal safety day or night'. This does not seem to fit well with the others that refer to specific problems such as theft, gangs, vandals, assault. Perhaps this item should be rephrased, for example, 'Concerns about personal safety day or night').

These measures refer to respondents' perceptions and should not be interpreted as objective measures of problems in the neighbourhood. They are relevant to a personal sense of safety and security and views about the safety of family members and others living in the locality – issues that are clearly important aspects of individual, family and community wellbeing.

Given that positive wellbeing is more than the absence of ill-being, it would also be useful to include perceptions of neighbourhood strengths, for example, beliefs about the extent to which people in the neighbourhood are trustworthy, vigilant about each other's wellbeing and property, and generally willing to help each other out.

### **Voluntary work**

Voluntary work represents an important indicator of engagement with society as well as a contribution to community life. It is worth noting, however, that the question focuses on work with organisations and does not capture more informal activities, such as helping an elderly neighbour or friend.

The question elicits information about the type of organisations and number of different organisations to which respondents contribute on a voluntary basis. It should be noted that some respondents may contribute a great deal of time to one organisation or to several organisations of the same type (for example, welfare/community), while others may contribute time to several organisations. Caution needs to be taken that those who work voluntarily for several organisations are not seen as spending more time in voluntary activities than those whose activities target one or more organisations of the same type.

These two issues outlined above point to the fact that the breadth and amount of voluntary community work are not tapped in this questionnaire.

## **Two illustrations of the value of the 2002 NATSISS data**

In this section, the value of the 2002 NATSISS data for two markedly different areas of family life is illustrated: child care and the experience of having been removed, or having had a relative removed, from the natural family.

### **Child care**

Given the minimal data previously available on the use of child care by the Indigenous population, little is known about the extent to which patterns of child care needs and use are different for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Thus the 2002 NATSISS survey is a particularly valuable source of information on the use and needs of the Indigenous population regarding child care, differences from other surveys, notwithstanding. (The Census of Child Care Services, funded by the Australian Government through FaCSIA, provides important comparative information regarding the use of child



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care by the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. However, this Census restricts attention to services that are approved and funded by the Australian Government and does not obtain the breadth of socioeconomic information derived in the 2002 NATSISS.)

As discussed above, the 2002 NATSISS survey contains questions on the use of child care in the previous four weeks by respondents who had the main responsibility for children in the household aged 12 years or under. These people are described as "primary carers".

Table 1 summarises patterns of child care use by Indigenous primary carers, according to their employment status and region of residence (remote compared to non-remote). For this analysis, comparable estimates for the total Australian population in non-remote areas of Australia were constructed using the HILDA survey. Although the HILDA estimates are for non-remote areas, given that only a small proportion of Australian children live in these areas, there would be relatively little difference between the non-remote and the total Australian estimates.

Of the Indigenous primary carers, child care was used by a lower proportion of those who lived in remote rather than non-remote areas (57 per cent versus 70 per cent). It is interesting to note that Indigenous use of child care in non-remote areas is greater than non-Indigenous use, with 56 per cent of the non-Indigenous population using child care. While similar proportions of the Indigenous population in remote and non-remote areas used informal care (40–41 per cent), those in remote areas were less likely than their counterparts in non-remote areas to have used formal services (16 per cent versus 29 per cent).

**Table 1 Use of child care by persons with primary responsibility for children according to employment status, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, 2002**

	Indigenous (NATSISS 2002)		Australian population (HILDA 2002)
	Remote %	Non-remote %	Non-remote %
<b>Primary carer employed</b>			
Used child care	63.1	80.8	70.2
Formal	19.5	37.9	35.4
Informal only	42.4	42.9	34.8
Did not use child care	36.9	19.2	29.8
<b>Primary carer not employed</b>			
Used child care	50.4	64.2	37.9
Formal	12.4	24.4	20.9
Informal only	37.1	39.9	16.9
Did not use child care	49.6	35.8	62.1
<b>Total</b>			
Used child care	56.7	69.9	55.6
Formal	15.9	28.9	28.8
Informal only	39.7	40.9	26.7
Did not use child care	43.3	30.1	44.4

a. For the Indigenous population, the estimates include persons with primary responsibility for children aged 12 years or under who did not state the kind of child care used. The figures for formal care may include persons who also used informal child care. The total proportions who used child care were derived by subtracting the proportions who did not use child care from 100. For remote areas, the latter estimates differ from those derived by summing the proportions who used either formal or informal care.

Sources: ABS (2004: Table 17) and HILDA Wave 2.

**Table 2 Removal from natural family**

	Remote %	Non-remote %	Total %
<b>Removal of respondent from natural family</b>			
Respondent removed	6.0	9.4	8.4
Respondent was not removed	85.0	88.0	87.2
Didn't want to answer	9.1	2.6	4.4
<b>Removal of relative(s) from natural family</b>			
Relative(s) removed	28.1	38.5	35.6
Relatives were not removed	52.8	41.2	44.4
Didn't know	10.0	17.3	15.3
Didn't want to answer	9.2	3.0	4.7

Source: ABS (2004: Table 12)

Differences are apparent between the non-remote Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in their patterns of use of informal care. While for both these populations, the rate of use of formal care was around 29 per cent, the non-remote Indigenous population was more likely than the non-Indigenous population to have used informal care exclusively (41 per cent versus 27 per cent).

The lower use of child care by Indigenous primary carers in remote than non-remote areas applied to both those who were employed and those who were not employed. However, the difference was particularly marked for those who were employed: 63 per cent of employed Indigenous primary carers in remote areas and 81 per cent of their counterparts in non-remote areas used child care. This is probably a consequence of the higher rates of part-time "CDEP-related" employment in remote areas (Altman, Gray, & Levitus, 2005).<sup>1</sup>

Among the total Australian population in non-remote areas, 70 per cent of employed primary carers used child care. While formal care use patterns by employed Indigenous and non-Indigenous carers in non-remote areas were similar (35–38 per cent), the Indigenous carers were more likely to use informal care compared with their non-Indigenous counterparts (43 per cent versus 35 per cent).

There was a large difference in the use of child care by non-employed Indigenous and non-Indigenous primary carers. For example, in non-remote areas, 64 per cent of non-employed Indigenous carers used child care compared with just 38 per cent of their non-Indigenous counterparts. This difference is largely due to a higher rate of use of informal care by Indigenous than non-Indigenous populations (40 per cent versus 17 per cent). This is a reflection of the extensive kin-based networks that many Indigenous people have.

Lack of access to formal child care is often discussed as an issue for remote areas of Australia. It is interesting that, according to the NATSISS 2002, the majority of people in remote areas who had primary responsibility for children indicated that they had access to child care if needed (69 per cent). In other words, just under one-third reported that they did not have access (ABS, 2004).

### Removal from natural family

The 1994 NATSIS and the 2002 NATSISS datasets yield very similar estimates of the proportion of the Indigenous population who had been taken away from their family. Both surveys suggested that eight per cent of the population aged 15 or more years (at the time of each survey) had been removed. Furthermore, the 1994 survey suggested that 10 per cent aged 25 years or more had been removed. This proportion is the same as that derived in the 2002 survey for those aged 35 years or more (who would have represented roughly the same cohort). (These statistics are derived from ABS, 2004).

To measure the number of Indigenous people potentially affected by the removal of children from their families, the 2002 NATSISS asked Indigenous

people aged 15 years or more whether they or any of their relatives had been removed from their natural families. As noted above, about eight per cent of Indigenous people reported that they themselves had been removed (see Table 2).

Perhaps the most significant point to be taken from these figures is that, even though a relatively small proportion of the Indigenous population were removed from their natural family, about one-third had a relative removed. Indeed, 38 per cent indicated that they and/or at least one of their relatives had been taken from their family (ABS, 2004 p.6).

When interpreting the data from the question on removal of relatives from their natural family, it is important to note that the question had a high rate of 'not known' and 'not stated' responses (20 per cent) (ABS, 2004, p.58). This is not surprising given the sensitivity of this issue to some families. If a disproportionately high number of respondents who did not want to discuss this issue had relatives removed, then the results would under-estimate the rate of such removal experiences.

### Concluding comments

Family and community life is multi-dimensional and complex, and therefore very difficult to measure. Collecting such information in surveys is always a challenge but is particularly so for some sections of the Indigenous population, as outlined above.

Overall, the 2002 NATSISS does a good job in measuring a range of aspects of family and community life, given that these domains are only two of many domains that a general social survey of the Indigenous population needs to cover. This article refers to a selection of key measures of family and community life included in the survey and highlights issues that need to be taken into account in the analysis of the relevant data.

The measures focus on the individual, with no information gathered on the quality of relationships, parenting behaviour, family functioning, and so on. Given the crucial importance of such issues for wellbeing, the derivation of information on these issues should be considered for future surveys. The *Growing Up in Australia*, the longitudinal study of Australian children, funded by the Australian Government through FaCSIA, may provide a useful source of questions on some of these issues.

Secondly, the measures of household structure and composition are problematic for a proportion of the Indigenous population, given the complex and multi-generational nature of many households. The use of a household grid (which derives information on the relationships between each household member to all other household members) is therefore worth considering (see Brandon, 2004). While the HILDA survey adopts this approach, it can be quite time-consuming for the collection of information in large and complex households. Furthermore, this approach would use kin relationship concepts that, as noted above, would be inappropriate for some Indigenous people.

Despite these suggestions for improvement to the NATSISS, the ABS is to be commended for initiating this important survey. It is now up to the research community to interrogate the data and disseminate their findings, thereby enhancing the understanding of factors affecting the wellbeing of Indigenous people, their families, and communities, and suggesting ways forward in the shaping of effective and timely policy.

### Endnote

1 CDEP refers to "Community Development Employment Projects". These are designed to provide Indigenous people with employment opportunities as an alternative to receiving unemployment benefits and to provide skills that will assist in the achievement of non-CDEP forms of employment.

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