

Speaking out about wellbeing

Policy brief, December 2010

Aboriginal children and young people speak out about families

"A loving, caring family is what everyone needs." girl 9

What do children and young people say about family?

In 2009 the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA undertook researchⁱ to investigate children and young people's views on what was important to their wellbeing. Consistently, children and young people reported that a supportive and loving family was fundamental to their wellbeing. As part of the research, an online survey of more than five hundred 10 to 17 year-olds found that family was the most important thing in their lives. Fifty-five per cent of the children and young people surveyed said they would like to spend more time with their families – 6.4 per cent of whom were Aboriginal children and young people mostly from the Kimberley Wheatbelt and metropolitan Perth.ⁱⁱ

"Family things [are important because they give you] good memories, role models, a safe home...and support." girl 15

"Good parents are what every kid needs." boy 16

What do Aboriginal children and young people value most about family?

Family, including extended family and elders, is very important to Aboriginal children and young people and they enjoy being in the company of their family. The Aboriginal children and young people surveyed in the Commissioner's research said their parents and family were there to help and support them. They also said that they would rather talk to family than friends about things that concerned them.

"The family are the people that you love most in this world...my family comes first." girl 16

[I like] living on the beach and going on a boat at One Arm Point [with my family]." girl 7

In a longitudinal study of Aboriginal children published by the Australian Government in 2009, 84 per cent of parents said their family was strong and 'almost' or 'most times' helped each other.ⁱⁱⁱ More than half (52%) of the 15 year-old Aboriginal students in a 2009 Australian Government report on Australia's young people said their parents spent time 'just talking' to them more than once a week.^{iv}

The children and young people who participated in the Commissioner's research said family was also a source of stress. Aboriginal children and young people reported being affected by family conflict, particularly related to alcohol, as well as the death of family members or the loss of them to imprisonment. Many said they were frightened about losing more relatives in the future. Children described themselves as 'feeling sad', 'upset and unsafe' and 'not feeling well' during times of funerals.

"Half of my family have passed away and last week my mum had to go to a funeral for her aunty and before that we had to go to a funeral for my aunty." boy 10



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia



Past policies and practices of the removal of Aboriginal children and young people from their families have had a destructive and continuing impact on the lives of Aboriginal people. Despite this, however, there are great strengths in Aboriginal family life with most children having a childhood rich in culture and spirituality.^v Many Aboriginal children and young people in the Commissioner's research spoke about their strong family bond and the time they spent with grandparents, who taught them about Aboriginal culture. They also said they enjoyed time spent with elders, such as camping and fishing.

Extended family members – including grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins – are actively involved in caring for Aboriginal children and young people. While Western influences have changed the way Aboriginal families function, traditional belief systems and values, especially around the importance of family, are still strong.^{vi}

"I have a good time playing backyard cricket with my dad and big brothers and cousins and all that." boy 16

"[I like] swimming, fishing, hunting and goanna shooting [with my family]." boy 14

How many Aboriginal families are there in Western Australia?

There were 77,928 Aboriginal people – or 3.8 per cent of the general population – in Western Australia in 2006.^{vii} In the same year, WA had the third largest Aboriginal population in Australia (14%).^{viii}

More than half (56%) of the Aboriginal population in WA is less than 25 years of age and there is an average of 3.5 people per household.^{ix} About one third of the population lives in the Perth metropolitan area, 22.9 per cent lives in regional areas and 45.6 per cent resides in remote areas.^x

Households in remote areas are more likely to contain a greater number of children. In 2008, 57 per cent of Aboriginal households in remote areas included children aged less than 15 years, with an average of 2.5 children per household. In regional areas and major cities, there were fewer Aboriginal households with children aged 15 years and under and a smaller number of children per household (51% and 48% respectively).^{xi}

How do historical and social factors affect Aboriginal families?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child^{xii} identifies the family as fundamental to the growth and wellbeing of the child and states families need to be supported to provide the right environment for this to occur.

In the Commissioner's research, children and young people said their parents were the most significant factor in influencing their health and wellbeing.

"[Parents] help you through the tough times so you don't get hurt." girl 10

"I think that with kids, parents are the most important thing." boy 15

Good outcomes for children are generally associated with sound family functioning. The Centre for Community Child Health has identified a number of early childhood risk factors that contribute to poor developmental outcomes. These factors relate to "...the quality of the care-giving environment and are influenced by characteristics of the parents, socioeconomic determinants, the level of stress and support experienced by the family, the level and intensity of early learning experiences the child has, parenting style, family functioning and parental mental health."^{xiii}

A number of factors contribute to poor family functioning among Aboriginal people, including poverty and poor health. The life expectancy of parents is shorter than that of non-Aboriginal parents (10 years shorter for women and 12 years shorter for men),^{xiv} with the result that Aboriginal people are more likely to be left without at least one parent later in life.

Aboriginal people experience higher levels of unemployment than non-Aboriginal people and are more likely to live in crowded homes, putting pressure on the household budget. In 2006, Shelter WA reported that 2,615 Aboriginal households (16% of the Aboriginal population in Western Australia) were overcrowded.^{xv}

Many Aboriginal families, due to transgenerational trauma and loss, continue to experience high levels of anxiety and a sense of hopelessness. Mental health issues are more prevalent among Aboriginal people and between 2005 and 2007 Aboriginal Australians were hospitalised for mental and behavioural disorders at almost twice the rate of non-Aboriginal Australians, with alcohol and other drug use a significant factor.^{xvi}

The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey in 2005 found that almost one quarter (24%) of Aboriginal children and young people aged between four and 17 years were at high risk of clinically significant emotional and behavioural difficulties. This was considerably higher than the 15 per cent of four to 17 year-olds in the general population who were at risk.^{xvii}

Aboriginal children and young people are taken into the care of the WA Department for Child Protection at 10 times the rate of non-Aboriginal children and young people – accounting for almost half (45%) of the children in care.^{xviii} Many of them are being raised by other family members – in particular grandmothers who are generally younger and less healthy than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.^{xix}

Carers of Aboriginal children and young people generally have lower levels of education than non-Aboriginal carers and are more likely to experience financial hardship, unemployment and lower level paid employment.^{xx} Many are not likely to be homeowners, with 76.6 per cent of Aboriginal people rental tenants.^{xxi}

In Western Australia, Aboriginal adult males make up 38.5 per cent of the prison population. This high prison rate has resulted in a lack of role models for some Aboriginal children and young people, in particular for those whose mothers are also prisoners. An Aboriginal young person is four times more likely to be in detention on an average day than an Aboriginal young person in Victoria, and five times more likely to be in detention some time during the year.^{xxii} Some of these young males are fathers themselves.^{xxiii}

The Commissioner's research found that Aboriginal children and young people, particularly those in the Kimberley, had at some time been deprived of basic necessities, such as food, or knew of others who were struggling to provide for their children and extended families.

[There is] no money and you're that hungry, no food at home.' boys aged 10 and 11

'It's bad when no-one buys a feed; then we're starving – sad, angry and starving.' boy and girl aged 8 and 9

Promoting quality parenting for Aboriginal children and young people

The importance of parenting throughout the course of any child's life should be widely promoted in the community. It is essential that there is easy access to universal services that can monitor children's wellbeing, identify issues of concern and provide support to parents to develop strong, nurturing relationships with their children.

For Aboriginal families, there needs to be a range of universal and targeted strategies that recognise not only cultural and geographical diversity, but also socio-economic circumstances. For instance, the support required for parents raising children in metropolitan areas will vary greatly to those living in remote areas whose choices are more limited and who may experience greater social and economic disadvantage.^{xxiv}



Some research suggests that Aboriginal families face barriers in accessing programs and services because of a lack of cultural awareness and cultural competency among workers. Aboriginal medical services in Western Australia also report that adapting mainstream services to meet Aboriginal needs can result in over-servicing some families at the expense of others.^{xxv}

Barriers to accessing family and health services can contribute to poor health among Aboriginal people^{xxvi}. Therefore, mainstream providers need to work in partnership with Aboriginal organisations to provide quality and culturally appropriate services.^{xxvii}

Targeting those at greater risk

The COAG National Indigenous Reform Agreement states that *“For an equal start in life, Indigenous children need early learning, development and socialisation opportunities. Access to quality early childhood education and care services, including pre-school, child care and family support services, such as parenting programs and supports, is critical.”*^{xxviii}

Aboriginal children and young people are at greater risk of poor life and developmental outcomes than children and young people in the general population. The COAG and Overcoming Disadvantage strategies have identified targets and key headline indicators that must improve to close the gap in living standards between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and young people and their families.^{xxix}

The Aboriginal population in Western Australia is young compared to the general population. The fertility rate of Aboriginal women is higher than that of the total female population of WA^{xxx}, with Aboriginal births accounting for 7.8 per cent of all births in WA in 2009.^{xxxi} While non-Aboriginal households are getting smaller, the composition of the Aboriginal household remains substantially large. If living standards among Aboriginal people continue to decline, these factors will put further pressure on existing services and programs.^{xxxii}

Priorities for policy and program development

There is a strong association between the health and wellbeing of an Aboriginal person and the health and resilience of the community in which they live. Therefore, there is a pressing need for government policy and programs to focus on broad Aboriginal social and economic disadvantage.^{xxxiii} Any intervention that aims to deliver good outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people must address the community’s social, environmental, economical and cultural needs.

Policy frameworks and service models also need to take into consideration the differences between urban, regional and remote Aboriginal communities, including such things as language, access and availability of culturally appropriate services, education levels and socioeconomic circumstances. Until this occurs, programs and services will continue to be “systematically and structurally geared towards fixing the ‘Aboriginal problem’, rather than dealing with Aboriginal people’s problems.”^{xxxiv}

Service delivery must be integrated to ensure better access and availability, and early intervention is needed to address the underlying cause of disadvantage and dysfunction in some Aboriginal communities. This will require considerable resources and infrastructure. Building the capacity of Aboriginal communities and drawing on the skills and knowledge of their members will aid community-controlled development and provide long-term benefits in the delivery of services.

Importantly, these outcomes can only be achieved with the involvement of Aboriginal people themselves. Aboriginal families, including children and young people, must have a say in the design of services and programs to ensure they meet their needs.



- ⁱ Commissioner for Children and Young People (2010) *Speaking Out about Wellbeing: The views of Western Australian children and young people*. <http://www.ccp.wa.gov.au>
- ⁱⁱ Approximately 1000 children and young people participated in the research, 10% were Aboriginal children and young people.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Department of Family, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) Australian Government, *Longitudinal Study Footprints in Time – 2009*. <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/prgoser/famchild/lsc/Pages/default.aspx>
- ^{iv} Australian Government, Office for Youth 2009, , *State of Australia's Young People, A Report on the social, economic, health and family lives of young people*, p.70
- ^v SNAICC Discussion paper: '*Children and Young People Living in Safe and Strong Communities*', November 2009, <http://www.snaicc.asn.au>
- ^{vi} Associate Professor Dawn Bessarab, Curtin University, December 2006, Doctorate thesis: *A Study Into the Meanings of Gender By Aboriginal People Living in Urban (Perth) and Regional (Broome) Settings*.
- ^{vii} Western Australia Government, Department of Indigenous Affairs, *Facts at a glance*, July 2010 <http://www.dia.wa.gov.au/Information/Research-capability>
- ^{viii} Ibid, July 2010
- ^{ix} Australian Bureau of Statistics, May 2010, Catalogue No.4713.5.55.001 Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Western Australia, 2006 <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/PrimaryMainFeatures>
- ^x Shelter WA, 2009, Indigenous Housing http://www.shelterwa.org.au/info_sheet
- ^{xi} Australian Bureau of Statistic. Australian Social Trends September 2010, Catalogue No.4102.0 *The City and the Bush: Indigenous wellbeing across remoteness area*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/socialtrends>
- ^{xii} United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child <http://www.ohchr.org>
- ^{xiii} Department of Family, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) Australian Government, Occasional paper No.15 '*The 'growing up' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: a literature review.*' Footprints in time, A longitudinal study. 2006 <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/about/publicationsarticle/research/occasional/Document>
- ^{xiv} Australian Government, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicator Report 2009*, .Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. The Productivity Commission.
- ^{xv} Shelter WA Indigenous Housing. http://www.shelterwa.org.au/info_sheet
- ^{xvi} National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Council 2010, (NIDAC) A Report prepared for the Australian National Council on Drugs – '*Indigenous specific and other drug intervention, continuity of change and areas greatest need*', p.26 http://www.nidac.org.au/images/PDFs/rp20_indigenous
- ^{xvii} Zubrick, S, et al 2005, The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey Vol.2: '*The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal children and Young People*,' Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Perth, p.25
- ^{xviii} Western Australian Government, Department for Child Protection Annual Report 2009-10. <http://www.dcp.wa.gov.au/Resources/Document>
- ^{xix} Centre for Community Health, Policy Brief No.19 2010, '*The Changing Roles of Grandparents*'. Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne <http://www.rch.org.au/ccch/resources>
- ^{xx} Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WACCHS) Vol.4: '*Strengthening the Capacity of Aboriginal Children, Families and Communities*', 2006. Telethon Institute for Child Health Research and Curtin University of Technology
- ^{xxi} Shelter WA, 2009 Indigenous Housing. http://www.shelterwa.org.au/info_sheet>
- ^{xxii} Western Australian Government, Department for Corrective Services Weekly Offender Report on line data base. <http://www.correctiveservices.wa.gov.au/about-us/statistics-publications/statistics/default.aspx>
- ^{xxiii} Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009. *Juvenile justice in Australia 2007–08*. Juvenile justice series no. 5. Cat. no. JUV 5. Canberra: AIHW. p.60 <http://www.aihw.gov.au>
- ^{xxiv} Associate Professor Dr Dawn Bessarab, Curtin University December 2006, Thesis: *A Study Into the Meanings of Gender by Aboriginal People Living in Urban (Perth) and Regional (Broome) Settings*, pp.213-219
- ^{xxv} Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia, March 2010, *Aboriginal Maternal and Child Project Strengths and Needs Analysis*, Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health, A. Larson & R. Bradley.
- ^{xxvi} Ibid, 2010
- ^{xxvii} Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Discussion Paper Series No.5 *Health Care Access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in Urban Area, and Related Research Issues: A Review of the Literature*, M & D Scrimgeour, May 2008, http://www.crcah.org.au/view/publications_list
- ^{xxviii} Council of Australian Governments (COAG), *Indigenous Expenditure Report 2009*, Productivity Commission 2009a, p. 6
- ^{xxix} Council of Australian Governments (COAG) '*Closing the Gap' and Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicator Report 2009*
- ^{xxx} Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Births Australia 2009, cat no.3301.0 www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@nsf/Lookup/3301.0Main+Features12009?OpenDocument
- ^{xxxi} Aboriginal births are births where at least one parent identifies as being Aboriginal. Ibid.
- ^{xxxii} Australian National University, CAEPR Discussion Paper No.287/2008 '*How Realistic are the Prospect for 'Closing the Gaps' In Socioeconomic Outcomes for Indigenous Australians?*' J.C. Altman, N.Biddle and B.H. Hunter. <http://www.caep.anu.edu.au/>
- ^{xxxiii} Australian Children's Commissioners and Guardians, Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, '*Inquiry into the high levels of involvement of Indigenous juveniles and young adults in the justice system.*' February 2010
- ^{xxxiv} Blagg, H, '*Zero Tolerance or Community Justice*'. Presentation at University of Western Australia, 22 April, 2009

NB: all children and young people's quotes in this report are from the Commissioner's research into children and young people's views on wellbeing. The report on this research is available at www.ccp.wa.gov.au